

S.F. Schram & B. Caterino (eds.) (2006). *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*. New York: New York University Press

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In 2001, Bent Flyvbjerg, professor of planning in the Department of Development and Planning at Aalborg University, Denmark, published the widely acclaimed *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. I reviewed the book in this newsletter (June, 2001) when I was a student, and I was impressed and somewhat encouraged, for here was a book that promised that the kind of social science I was interested in – with significant inspiration from Aristotle’s practical philosophy – was the one that really mattered and could make a difference. Flyvbjerg’s book cut across endless debates about quantitative-qualitative methodology and argued that what is needed in social science is not primarily abstract and value neutral theory, but rather what Flyvbjerg called *phronetic social science*.

Now, approximately five years later, Flyvbjerg’s prospects for phronetic social science have been debated and implemented in certain areas, and a book has recently been published, taking its outset in “the Flyvbjerg debate” in political science. It is called *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method* and is edited by Sanford Schram, who teaches social theory at Bryn Mawr College, and Brian Caterino, who is a social theorist currently working in public television.

I will examine the book in greater detail below, but first it would perhaps be helpful to be reminded of the main tenets of the kind of phronetic social science laid out in *Making Social Science Matter* in 2001. The hero of the piece was Aristotle, who focused on the concrete lives of human beings in their communities (indeed, Martha Nussbaum has argued that Aristotle was a phenomenologist, always beginning his analyses with what appears – the *phainomena*), rather than Plato, who, in Flyvbjerg’s reading, espoused a much more theoretical and abstract understanding of human life.

In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle made a distinction between theoretical knowledge (*episteme* corresponding loosely to a kind of universal “scientific theory”) and practical knowledge (*techne* on the one hand, the pragmatic knowledge of how to produce things possessed by artists, doctors, and craftsmen, and *phronesis* on the other, practical-moral, context-dependent knowledge of how to act). Aristotle argued that while scientific theory was important in generating predictive knowledge of the unchangeable, it could not, in his view, contribute to an analysis of the goals and values of individuals and society. This, however, is what social science can do in Aristotle’s and Flyvbjerg’s eyes. *Phronesis* requires experience, and the person possessing this intellectual virtue knows how to judge and act concerning the

concrete, the practical, and the ethical. *Phronetic* knowledge has been largely ignored in our culture with its fascination of universal, abstract, means-end rationality.

According to Flyvbjerg, modern social science would fare well if it (re)learned how to work with concrete particulars rather than abstract generalities. An entire chapter in Flyvbjerg's book from 2001 was thus devoted to what he calls the power of example. He rejected five common misunderstandings about the nature of the case study as a research method and concluded that concrete, context-dependent knowledge obtained through case studies is more valuable to social science than general theoretical knowledge. Where natural science is weak and social science strong is when it comes to value-rational questions: "where are we going", "is this desirable", and finally "what should be done"? These questions are the point of departure for *phronetic* social science. If we compare the social and natural sciences on the basis of their *epistemic* qualities, social science fails, but if we include *phronesis*, it wins. This was the argument of the 2001-book, and Flyvbjerg cited Bourdieu and Bellah as exemplary *phronetic* scientists. Their research "focuses on values, the authors get close to the people and phenomena they study, they focus on the minutiae and practices that make up the basic concerns of life, they make extensive use of case studies in context, they use narrative as expository technique, and, finally, their work is dialogical, that is, it allows for other voices than those of the authors, both in relation to the people they study and in relation to society at large" (p. 63). This is the most important virtue of a reformed phronetic social science: it not only analyses practice but is a voice in an attempt to improve practice in dialogue with the agents themselves.

*Making Social Science Matter* has been called a manifesto for the "Perestroika Movement" that has emerged in the field of political science in recent years. The Perestroika Movement is in focus in several of the new book's chapters and its main focus is to make political science more relevant in relation to the problems faced by ordinary political actors in their lives. At the same time, as Caterino and Schram explain in their introduction to *Making Political Science Matter*, the movement is often wedded to an interpretative model of social science that takes seriously the actors' reasons for action and posit "that all social phenomena, including politics, are human practices mediated through language that requires both interpretation and explanation." (p. 4).

The chapters of the book are organized in three main sections: First on "The Flyvbjerg Debate", second on "Phronesis Reconsidered" and third on "Making Political Science Matter". The first section begins with a chapter by Schram that sees Flyvbjerg's 2001-book as a solid justification for the current Perestroika Movement. Then David Laitin, a professor of political science from Stanford, engages in a critical exposition of Flyvbjerg's phronetic social science. In short, the chapter is an attempt to defend statistics and more theoretical and "epistemic" (cf. Aristotle) models of political science, and Flyvbjerg's response immediately follows in the subsequent chapter, which provides good reading not just as a refutation of Laitin's critique (Flyvbjerg argues that he has been constructed as a straw man) but also as a quick way of learning what phronetic social science is all about. The exchange between Laitin and Flyvbjerg is the core of the book, and their chapters have previously been published as journal articles.

One thing that should have been done by the editors of the present book was to align the page number references with the new book chapters rather than the older journal articles. When Flyvbjerg answers Laitin, he refers concretely to his argument, but the reference is to the journal rather than the preceding chapter, which is quite annoying.

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, an assistant professor from the American University, follows up on Flyvbjerg's rejoinder to Laitin with more critique of Laitin's position, and next, Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl (from the University of Maryland and Bryn Mawr College, respectively) close the section of "the Flyvbjerg Debate" by applying the model of phronetic social science to a participatory action research project on low income home repair in Philadelphia.

The second section on "Phronesis Reconsidered" contains a number of interesting papers that centre on a discussion of phronesis. First, the philosopher Ted Schatzki from the University of Kentucky, who has been one of the leading forces in the recent "practice turn" in social theory, offers a review of *Making Social Science Matter*, and Brian Caterino, in the next chapter, defends the Habermasian position that Flyvbjerg sought to undermine through Aristotelian and Foucauldian arguments in the 2001-book. Mary Hawkesworth, a professor from Rutgers University, then charges Flyvbjerg with representing a caricature of the natural sciences, making his audience think that the social sciences are uniquely value-laden whereas the natural sciences are value-free. She believes that it is this kind of (false) opposition that generates the form of debate we have seen between Laitin and Flyvbjerg, and it would have been very interesting to learn how Flyvbjerg would respond to this form of internal (compared with Laitin's external) critique. This is one flaw of the book, in my eyes: It debates Flyvbjerg's position throughout the chapters, yet without letting the protagonist himself enter the debate after his own chapter three. Stuart Clegg, from the University of Technology in Sidney, further discusses the notion of power in the context of phronetic social science, and Leslie Paul Thiele, from the University of Florida, goes through the available evidence from (experimental) psychology that backs Aristotle's (and Flyvbjerg's) claims about phronesis as a non-rule based form of contextual practical reasoning.

The final section on "Making Political Science Matter" contains four papers: First, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea from the University of Utah discusses the notion of methodological pluralism, and next, Greg Kasza from Indiana University provides readers with a very useful guide to how they, as students, can get a fruitful and interesting education in an academic world dominated by "hard science". His bleak conclusion, unfortunately, is that "to become a scholar worthy of respect these days, to a great degree you will have to educate yourselves." (p. 233). David Kettler, from Bard College, New York, then (re)-discovers an earlier (pre-Flyvbjerg) phronetic scientist, viz. Franz Neumann (1900-1954), whose name was unfamiliar to me, and Timothy Luke from the State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, ends the book by arguing that in today's technified world, phronesis cannot (and should not) ignore techne, an argument he supports by writings from the field of science-and-technology studies. Again, it would have been interesting to have Flyvbjerg's voice represented in an answer.

All in all, this is a book with a number of very good chapters on significant topics in contemporary political science, but it can definitely also be read with profit by other social scientists. As such, I do not hesitate to recommend it to readers interested in phronetic social science and the Perestroika Movement, but it could have been even better with a more tight editing, e.g. by including a final concluding chapter, and it seems strange that Flyvbjerg's own words only appear in one early chapter of the book. Perhaps the editors have wanted to stay close to the topic instead of making a *Festschrift*, but I do believe that it would have been a better book with more inter-chapter-dialogue between the individual authors, not least Flyvbjerg himself.