

Dismantling the Science Wars – Making Social Science Matter

Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Translated by Steven Sampson. (200 pages.)

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The Science Wars

Bent Flyvbjerg, professor of planning at Aalborg University, begins his important new book by outlining what he calls The Science Wars. Alan Sokal, a mathematical physicist, feigned a reflection on the implications of modern physics for cultural studies, and his hoax article was published in the journal *Social Text* in 1996. Sokal revealed the hoax himself which led to world wide debate on the scientific character of social science as such. The “Sokal-affair” is but an extreme example of a general doubt in the academia and society at large of the scientific character of social science. The natural sciences have been extraordinarily successful during the last centuries due to their relatively cumulative nature. The social sciences, on the other hand, have not been able to produce lasting knowledge.

This is the context within which Flyvbjerg’s book is set. The author sets himself the task of making social science matter again. Very often social scientists are confronted by the “so what”-problem. Many laborious hours might have been invested in rigorous experiments or large surveys, but when the results are published, nobody really cares. Nothing is changed. Natural science with its relevance to technological development does not face the “so what”-problem in the same degree, at least not in today’s society preoccupied with technological rationality. Flyvbjerg’s main point in making social science matter concerns the fact that it is the very ambition of trying to emulate the natural sciences that lead the social sciences into blind alleys. He states that where the natural sciences are strongest, the social sciences are weakest – and vice versa. This, of course, is not a new idea. The theories of Dilthey or Weber are relevant here with the *erklären-verstehen* dichotomy known to every social scientist. But it is not from Dilthey or Weber that Flyvbjerg gets his ideas. He rather takes to Aristotle’s classical analysis of *phronesis*, which translates as prudence or practical reason, coupled with Foucault’s analyses of power. Flyvbjerg thus aims at outlining what he calls *phronetic* social science. It sounds like an extremely important idea – and it most certainly is.

Why Socrates was wrong

The Dreyfus model on the phenomenology of human learning is initially presented as support to the view that a theory of judgment and context is impossible. The conditions for the possibility of such a theory seems to be that experience can be translated into rules, but the Dreyfus model shows that experts’ behavior is intuitive, holistic and contextual. They do not follow rules, and in fact rule following is a characteristic of novices. That is why Socrates was wrong in seeing explicit, universal, and abstract rationality as the highest human accomplishment. Socrates always tried to get universal definitions from his interlocutors, which he could never

get. This led him to the well-known conclusion that people don't know anything, but at least he himself knew that he knew nothing. Now Flyvbjerg's message to Socrates (and the entire rationalist tradition) is: you do know something! A lot, actually!

The exposition of the Dreyfus model is clear and relevant, but is at the same time the only part of the book that has a certain repetitive air to it. Flyvbjerg goes on to discussing why social science can never be like natural science. On the one hand famous social scientists such as the young Marx and Freud are quoted as supporters of the view that ideally there should be no differences between the two branches of science. Social science ought to be like natural science. On the other hand a number of currently fashionable social scientists argue the other way round: the natural sciences are like the social sciences in being historically conditioned which implies a need for a universal hermeneutic. Not only the social but also the natural sciences are lacking in objectivity (this is Rorty's view among others). Flyvbjerg rejects both views. The two branches of inquiry are indeed different, and until we acknowledge this, the social sciences will continue their decline.

The main difference between the two branches of science, according to Flyvbjerg, is that the "facts" in the social sciences are not only determined by the researchers' interpretations of natural events (as in natural science), but the researcher must also take into account the interpretations of the people she studies. This is a basic hermeneutic argument that Flyvbjerg accepts, and he expands on it by arguing that the self-interpretations of the subjects are dependent on context. So if scientists attempt a context-free description of an action based on abstract rules, they can never be sure that this description is in accordance with the actors' concrete understandings. In Flyvbjerg's own words: "*a social science theory of the kind which imitates natural science, that is, a theory which makes possible explanation and prediction, requires that the concrete context of everyday human activity be excluded, but this very exclusion of context makes explanation and prediction impossible*" (p. 40). All this means that a social science can never be a "normal science" in the Kuhnian sense, characterized by accumulation of knowledge leading to stable theories, predictions, and verifications. But what then, can social science be?

Phronetic Social Science

Here Aristotle enters the picture. Aristotle thought that while scientific theory was important in generating predictive knowledge of the unchangeable, it could not, in his view, contribute to an analysis of goals and values in individual and society. This is what social science can do. Flyvbjerg espouses the Aristotelian triad of *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. *Episteme* is universal scientific knowledge, *techne* is pragmatic know-how oriented toward production, while *phronesis* is context dependent deliberation about values, oriented toward action. *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. The modern disenchanted world is concerned with rules and science. But, as Rorty says, the way to re-enchant the world is to stick to the concrete (p. 129).

Sticking to the concrete is exactly what *phronetic* social science does. An entire chapter in Flyvbjerg's book (one of the best chapters) is devoted to what he calls the power of example. He rejects five common misunderstandings about the nature of the case study as a research method and concludes that concrete, context-dependent knowledge obtained through case studies is more valuable to social science than general theoretical knowledge. Interestingly enough the case method has also worked extremely well for natural science (think of Galileo's famous rejection of Aristotelian physics by means of a single experiment from the leaning tower of Pisa)!

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 social and natural sciences on the basis of their *epistemic* qualities, social science fails, but if we include *phronesis*, it wins. Flyvbjerg cites 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 social science: it not only analyses practice but is a voice in an attempt to improve practice in dialogue with the agents themselves. At the end of the book we are provided with an illustrative example (a case study) based on Flyvbjerg's own research about power, rationality and democracy in Aalborg in relation to a city-planning project. It turns out that research conducted about this project actually improved significantly on the practice by disclosing hidden power relations and engaging in fruitful dialogue with the community, for example through public discussions in the mass media¹.

Phronesis and Power

In order to disclose power structures, an Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* is not enough for Flyvbjerg. He thus introduces his other major source of inspiration: Foucault. We are mainly introduced to Foucault through a critique of a universalist thinker, Habermas, who is categorized as an *epistemic* thinker, whereas Foucault is in the *phronetic* camp. I am not sure if this kind of opposition is fruitful, especially if we bear in mind that Habermas' and Foucault's works belong to entirely different domains. But Flyvbjerg is right to insist that Habermas approaches power and regulation from a universalistic theory of discourse, whereas Foucault "*seeks out a genealogical understanding of actual power relations in specific contexts*" (p. 102). Foucault's thinking is presented in the clearest possible manner, and his connections to Aristotelian-Machiavellian-Nietzschean thinking are laid out well. The pairing of Aristotle and Foucault never seems artificial as is often the case when ancient philosophers are modernized, which involves a risk of the classics becoming totally detached from their original contexts. Flyvbjerg remains faithful to both Aristotle and Foucault, except on one point: He neglects, I believe, the clearly Platonic heritage we find in Aristotle. Flyvbjerg presses us to see the differ-

ence between Plato the universalist and Aristotle, master of the exemplar, but plays down the fact that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* ends with the suggestion that contemplation is the highest form of activity for humans. In contemplation we concern ourselves with the unchangeable, and it is the only kind of activity that is appreciated for its own sake, according to Aristotle. Flyvbjerg himself is aware of this downplaying of the Platonic roots of Aristotle's thought, and these philosophical and historical matters are only of minor importance to the reformation of the social sciences that Flyvbjerg sets out to begin.

The book is important to all social scientists, and one can only hope that it will become a future classic. Sometimes I get the impression that the literature on social science methodology is almost as numerous as actual studies in social science. Flyvbjerg's book is mainly about methods and philosophy of science, that is true, but he never considers methodology in isolation from concrete applications and larger historical/societal conditions. He practices what he preaches in giving us exemplars, and thereby changing our views on what social science should be like. The book is well argued, is written in a clear and accessible language, and has a personal touch that constantly focuses the reader's attention. The book concludes that social science should be done in public for the public, focusing on values with an aim to improve practice. This is a high aspiration, but when it succeeds no one can say "so what". Flyvbjerg's book does succeed, and the reader is left with a strong motivation: let's get to work!

¹ The detailed results of this research can be found in Flyvbjerg's *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).