

Book Review

Sanford F. Schram, Brian Caterino (eds.) (2006):

Making political science matter –

Debating knowledge, research, and method

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Reviewed by Olav Eikeland

The book “Making political science matter” edited by Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino is conceived and designed as a critical reception of Bent Flyvbjerg’s book “Making Social Science Matter” from 2001. Regardless of whatever critiques the book might (and actually does) contain, to publish such an anthology of comments is, of course, to greatly honor Flyvbjerg’s contribution. As one who has been involved in both action research and Aristotelian studies for the last 25 years, I have a difficult time understanding why Flyvbjerg’s book in particular deserves this kind of attention. He encroaches upon the fields and history of action research without recognizing it at all, and he is so superficial in his reading of Aristotle that his so-called “phronetic social research” hardly resembles anything found in Aristotle, in spite of his use of Aristotle as its major justifier.

But still, Flyvbjerg seems to have hit the right button at the right time to re-trigger the discussions about the status, basis, and methods of social science, at least among the current “perestroikans” within American political science, where the receptive mood seems to have been ripe. As with the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder, who has managed to sell a youth-novel – *Sophie’s World* – without extraordinary literary qualities dealing with the history of philosophy in the millions world-wide, the questions about how it could happen bothers but few. It has happened, and here we are.

Another reason for my wonder at the effects of Flyvbjerg’s book might be that situations and constellations are different within the different academic disciplines in different countries and continents. It seems that emulating the

predictive and explanatory power of the natural sciences by means of formal models and statistics is still such a dominant tendency in American political science that it deserves the kind of attention the perestroikans give it and that Flyvbjerg invites. As suggested by Theodore Schatzki in his Chapter 6, however, this is not at all obvious in other disciplines in other countries. But as the “publish-in-American-journals-or-perish” hysteria is returning as public policy to dominate universities and research communities world-wide, and as consciousness of the 20th Century, mainly European discussions about the epistemological and methodological basis for the social sciences is waning, the challenges posed to the scientific American way of doing things seem to return as fresh as ever. Although some of us may have thought that this work has already been done several times, it may be all to the good to be re-awakened to see some old themes from a new and different point of view, as this anthology does for me. The truth is probably that the mainstream never changed its course at all, in spite of the different critiques raised against scientism in social research for decades.

So, although the whole Flyvbjerg controversy might seem somewhat out-dated from where some of us stand, the discussions about the relevance or irrelevance of natural science as a model for understanding cultures and societies need to be repeated over and over in order not to be forgotten, and, even more importantly, for the results of these discussions to be fully integrated into the practical craft of doing social research. Unfortunately, however, Gregory Kasza seems to capture the current sentiment in Chapter 12 when he says: “*Once upon a time, philosophers of social science thought they possessed a set of persuasive answers to the fundamental questions, but these have now proved unsustainable. In response, most practitioners of social science, rather than altering the way they conduct research, have simply dropped these questions from the curriculum*”. The prevalence of sentiments like this justifies repeating discussions like those in the present volume. Hence, the reason why the initial discussions appear somewhat old-fashioned is not really that they are out-dated. It is because the several rounds of discussions about the same or similar questions throughout the 20th century seem not to be clearly visible in this new “perestroikan” round.

But, then, this strangely old-fashioned impression derives primarily from reading the introduction, and the first three chapters, which focus too much on the mutual misunderstandings between the positions of David Laitin (Chapter 2) representing the mainstream scientists, and Bent Flyvbjerg. The impression improves considerably, however, when we reach the ensuing chapters by Jackson (Ch.4), Schatzki (Ch.6), Caterino (Ch.7), and also Hawkesworth (Ch.8) who points to the same deficiency herself. The later contributions all seem both more widely oriented and more critical of both Laitin's and Flyvbjerg's positions, incorporating the earlier discussions more adequately into their own. Chapter 13, by David Kettler, is even devoted fully to reviewing the action oriented theorizing of Franz Neumann in the 1940s and 1950s.

The challenge, at least for this reader, is to review the present anthology on its own terms rather than Flyvbjerg's original book. Flyvbjerg is a contributor here as well, however (Chapter 3). There is hardly any reason to oppose what seems to me to be the result of Flyvbjerg's efforts, and I am strongly in favor of learning from Aristotle about *phrónêsis* and other things. I only have great trouble seeing the originality or radicalism in what to me appears to be a rather conventional and widespread role of a "phronetic" consultant in deliberative processes, basing his or her contributions on equally widespread social research methods either qualitative or quantitative. Flyvbjerg's concrete work, documented in Volume 2 of his Danish book from the early 1990s, is definitely praiseworthy and interesting in many respects. But it hardly amounts to Aristotelian *phrónêsis*.

Even in his contribution in the anthology under review here, Flyvbjerg has to twist and bend his quotations from Aristotle to make them fit his intentions (p.74). To take but one example, inserting "people" instead of "young people" (*néoi*) in the quote from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1142a12-29) and taking it out of context, clearly alters its meaning. To take *phrónêsis* as a form of rationality deliberating about values and interests without discussing the large number of places where Aristotle emphasizes that *phrónêsis* and deliberation is about means, not about ends, is also simply to skip the real difficulties in the concept; hardly academically satisfactory. The misunderstandings, errors, and insufficiencies concerning the relationship between general and particular knowledge, the conflation of *epistêmê* and modern natural science, the under-

standing of experience, the contrast between *phrónêsis* and *epistêmê*, the neglect of several central intellectual virtues, including dialogue, and not the least the relationship between ends and means, are too many to deal with here. I have tried to present an alternative action-research-relevant interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of *phrónêsis* in Eikeland (2006; 2008) where these and other points are dealt with in detail.

The sad side of this is that *phrónêsis*, and Aristotle more generally, is highly relevant for a rather different discussion about action research, which Flyvbjerg could easily have connected to both in Scandinavia and internationally. Instead he ignores it or simply dismisses it. Although PAR is mentioned favorably by Sanford Schram in Chapter 1 (p.22), we receive no explanation why the project described in Chapter 5 is redefined from starting out as a participatory action research project (p.113, fn. 1) to becoming an example of "phronetic social science". In relation to the whole action research community, I think Flyvbjerg's neglect here may have initiated the right discussion but on the wrong foot, in the wrong way, in the wrong place. It encroaches upon action research, and simultaneously it excludes the more than 60 years of action research from the discussion without discussion; hardly academically satisfactory.

In my opinion, the *whole* philosophy of Aristotle – including *phrónêsis*, a more adequate conception of *epistêmê*, dialogue, experience, and more – is relevant for a considerably more radical critique of the institutionalization of modern social science where the expanding movement of practitioner research within many professions, and the transfer of advanced research and learning capacities from separate academic institutions to ordinary politics and work life plays the major role rather than the so-called "problem-driven" collaborative relations between old-fashioned practitioners and equally old-fashioned social researchers on the other side. This radical transformation – distributing the activities of learning and research socially – is institutional and sociological, but it is also founded in the basic self-critical and self-transcending capacity inherent in language-use as such, as emphasized adroitly by Caterino in Chapter 8 in his discussion of communicative power and strategic power. Some of us would like to see more attention and effort spent at understanding and promoting this transformation.

Generally, the quality of the contributions increase the further out you read in this book, and the more the contributors liberate themselves from the initial setting between Laitin and Flyvbjerg. The editorial wisdom in this ordering might be questioned considering who might be interested in reading a book like this. There is no general homogeneity to the contributions, however. While Hawkesworth in Chapter 9 is deeply skeptical to Flyvbjergs effort, others like Clegg in Chapter 10 seem to use occasional references to Flyvbjerg in order to explain his own emphasis on power, history and imagination as central to a research methodology he can recommend. The most interesting contributions stand on their own feet. They are mostly the most skeptical to Flyvbjerg, like for example Schatzki's in Chapter 6, Hawkesworth's in Chapter 9, Kasza's in Chapter 12, or Thiele's in Chapter 10 introducing the wide field of cognitive and neuro-psychological research, implicit learning, and tacit knowing to the discussion. These contributions are better, not because they are critical of Flyvbjerg, but because their horizons are wider and their arguments better positioned in the wider fields they delineate in their critiques of mainstream American political science.

The book as a whole is interesting and worth reading, but not primarily as a series of comments to Flyvbjerg, nor as an advanced and innovative contribution bringing radical new ideas into the discussions. The most interesting and promising aspect of the book is that it brings together contributions from a wide variety of approaches, something highly commendable in itself but actually occurring much too rarely. The critical pluralism however, promoted by Hawkesworth in Chapter 9 and Schwarz-Schea in Chapter 11 – with prospects of producing really transformative development – requires more critical dialogues like this.

Flyvbjerg must, of course, be praised for having been able to gather such interest around important questions, in spite of what I consider serious insufficiencies in his initial perspective. The contributions and the perestroika movement in American political science bear witness to a dismal situation where most critical perspectives seem to be marginalized. As such, the book is an eye-opener for those of us who might think the world has moved on, beyond all the critiques of "positivism" from phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, feminism, post-modernism etc. over the last century or so.

Apart from the insufficiencies in the position Flyvbjerg represents, the book's most serious deficiency is that action research is hardly represented. This is due at least partly to how the discussion was initiated by Flyvbjerg himself. The missing voice of action research is a pity for action research, of course, but even more, I think, for the discussions carried out in the book. Current action research and practitioner research represent radical perspectives and important movements that could have contributed importantly to the Flyvbjerg discussions. In spite of many interesting aspects brought together in the discussions, then, this missing voice of action research makes them all less interesting, poorer in perspective, and less tuned to the emerging socially distributed mode-2-kind of knowledge production than they ought to be. The collaborative model focused by Flyvbjerg represents the epistemologically least radical and a basically transitional action research model. Certain ways of doing practitioner research based on radical self-reflection represent the most radical alternatives, even better tuned to the new constellations of socially distributed research and learning.

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