BOOKS: SOCIAL SCIENCES

Empowering Aristotle

Clifford Geertz

Making Social Science Matter
Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again
by Bent Flyvbjerg
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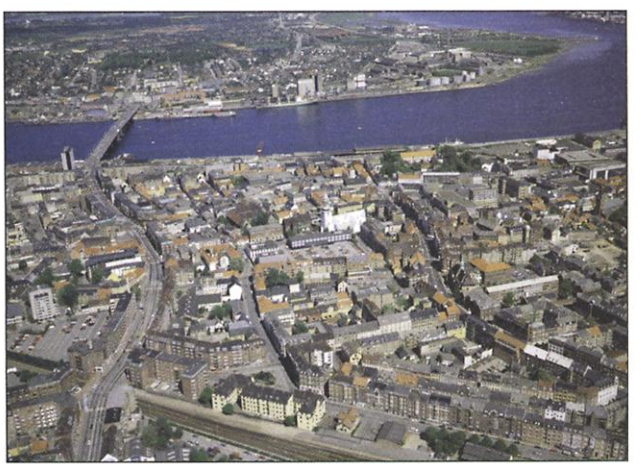
For the most part, "the science wars," trafficking in tribal jealousies and archaic fears, have produced more heat than light. But in one respect they have been useful. They have made it clear that using the term "science" to cover everything from string theory to psychoanalysis is not a happy idea, because doing so elides the difficult fact that the ways in which we try to understand and deal with the physical world and those in which we try to understand and deal with the social one are not altogether the same. The methods of research, the aims of inquiry, and the standards of judgment all differ, and nothing but confusion, scorn, and accusation—relativism! Platonism! reductionism! verbalism!—results from failing to see this.

Bent Flyvbjerg has been one of the leading figures in the now widespread movement against the idea that the social sciences should model themselves on the natural ones and measure their achievements (and their shortcomings) accordingly. He argues that the quests for general, abstract, situationally unconditioned theory; for precise predictability; and for universally applicable, "objectivist" method are misplaced in research designed to discover why it is that human beings think, feel, and act as they do. To discover how we learn, how we relate to one another, how we understand what happens to us, demands something more, or something other, than the size-up-and-solve mentality of the *soi-disant* "hard sciences."

Flyvbjerg is professor of planning at Aalborg University in Denmark and the author of a series of hands-on case studies of regional redevelopment in that country. His own work has been intensely practical, a matter of advising Danish politicians and civil servants about urban planning schemes and evaluating those schemes against the background of democratic ideals. ("I wanted Aalborg to be to my study what Florence was to Machiavelli...I wanted to write what Machiavelli calls the *verita effettuale*, effective truth, of democracy in Aalborg.") Thus, to provide a moral and methodological framework for the human sciences, he turns first to Aristotle's famous, and famously elusive, conception of *phronesis* ("prudence," "wisdom," "practical reason") and then to modern elaborations of that idea in the work of such contemporary philosophers and sociologists as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, Anthony Giddens, Robert Bellah, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Flyvbjerg wishes, he says, to construct a "phronetic social science," one focused less on "theories, analysis, and universals" and more on "context, practice, experience, common sense, intuition, and practical wisdom." Considering the domain where the social sciences are strongest, he comments:

> It is...as *phronesis* and *techne* ["know-how"] that the social sciences can provide a counterweight to...relativism and nihilism. This...makes attempts by social science to become a "real" theoretical science doubly unfortunate because such efforts draw attention and resources away from those areas where social science could make an impact and instead into areas where they do not have, never have had, and probably never will obtain any significance, that is, as genuinely normal and predictive sciences.



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Flyvbjerg's "Florence." The author has applied the methodology developed in his book to examine how power and rationality shape urban areas such as Aalborg.

The author then devotes the remainder, and the bulk, of the book to reviewing various contemporary efforts to "empower Aristotle" in the form of such phronetic science. To give body to his argument, Flyvbjerg marshals and connects the work of the Dreyfuses on human learning as the staged attainment of cognitive skill and expertise; Giddens's view that a "double hermeneutic" (self-reflexive interpretation) is characteristic of the human sciences, as opposed to the single, "view from nowhere" hermeneutic of the natural ones; Bourdieu's critique of structuralism as detached, schematic, and neglectful of context; and, most importantly, the power-knowledge critique of value neutrality advanced by Foucault. He completes this synthesis with a description of his own experiences in trying to reconcile the needs of motorists, bicyclists, pedestrians, moped cowboys, and bus-riders so as to free his Danish Florence from "the car is king" mentality of the local Chamber of Commerce, a description offered as a concrete, "narrativized" example of an engaged and realistic "critical case study" carried out along phronetic lines. Although the results were mixed ("power defined a reality in which the winners were the business community in downtown Aalborg...the losers...those citizens who live [and] work [there]"), something real was gained. "The debate...became much less polemical and confrontational and more dialogical," and the project survived to be corrected, imitated throughout Scandinavia, and awarded with a prize from the European Union for "democratic urban policy and planning."

Whether or not the tag "phronetic science" has a future—both its vagueness and its unfortunate homophony with "frenetic" would seem to be against it—Flyvbjerg clearly demonstrates that there are models more appropriate to the social sciences than those derived from molecular biology, high-energy physics, the mathematical theory of games, and other up-market, hard-fact enterprises. Which of them will develop into powerful and effective research traditions, "social sciences that matter," remains to be seen. But Flyvbjerg's suggestive, well-written little book both reviews most of the apparent possibilities and establishes standards (practical and political, ethical and methodological) by which to measure their progress.

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