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Moving Beyond the Science Wars?

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review of: **Bent Flyvbjerg (2001)** *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Science Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*. **Cambridge: Cambridge Univerity Press.**
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Making Social Science Matter is a book of particular significance, not only because of its contents, but also because of its timing. In the wake of the recent 'paradigm' and 'science' wars, a dispassionate and resolutely unorthodox book such as this is invaluable. Flyvbjerg first and foremost demonstrates an obvious close and passionate relationship with the book's aim and content. The book's contribution is evident right from its very start where key contemporary debates in the social sciences are engaged. Flyvbjerg also provides an interesting 'hook' for his readers by presenting a provocative argument that seems to suggest there is no room for theory (as we have come to know it) in the social sciences.

Flyvbjerg opens with a review of the science wars that have raged between the natural and social sciences since the mid 1990s. He discusses an incident in which Alan Sokal, a New York University mathematical physicist, was successful at having a bogus article published in a 1996 issue of the journal *Social Text*. The article feigned an earnest cultural studies reflection on the political and philosophical implications of recent physics research. Sokal revealed the hoax himself in order to discredit the *Social Text* editors. Needless to say, Sokal's hoax became a hotly contested debate throughout the world. The Noble prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg used the hoax to bring attention to what he saw as dangerous anti-rationalism and relativism in social science and cultural studies. While on the other side, social theorists countered by criticizing Sokal and Weinberg, calling them and "like minded natural scientist 'pre-Kantian shaman[s]' repeating the 'mantras of particle physicists', with their 'reductionist view of science'" (Flybjerg, 2001: 1). Flyvbjerg asserts that these wars are misguided, arguing that the "mudslinging of the science wars is unproductive" and has "undoubtedly served political and ideological purposes in the competition for research funds" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 2).

For some time now, critique of the natural sciences has been evident in paradigmatically oriented debates in the social science field. Since the publication of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) classic text *Sociological Paradigms and Organization Analysis*, numerous organization theorists (Jackson and Willmott, 1987; Reed, 1988) have debated the concept of 'paradigm incommensurability' (see also Hinings, Clegg, Child, Aldrich, Karpik and Donaldson, 1988). Of late, theorists appear to be making a direct call for paradigmatic wars to come to end: Langley (1999) and Pentland (1999) assert it is time to dispense with the positivists versus anti-positivists as well as the inductive versus deductive debates; Calas and Smircich (1999) suggest that it is time to dispense with the modern versus postmodern debate; Weick (1999) argues that in a discontinuous and discursively oriented world, rather than continue to fight we need to acknowledge multiple viewpoints and make sense of things the best way that we can. What differentiates Flyvbjerg's book from the work of these and other theorists however, is that he validates why it is time to move beyond the paradigm wars by drawing upon the work of 'heavyweights' such as Socrates, Aristotle, Weber, Nietzsche, Habermas and Foucault. Additionally, the novel way in which he challenges the role of theory in the social sciences will be seen by many, as representing an important turning point in the literature.

Flyvbjerg presents the book in two main parts. In part one his main argument is that social science "never has been, and probably never will be, able to develop the type of explanatory and predictive theory that is the ideal and hallmark of natural science" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 4). He argues that this is so because context and judgement are irreducibly central to understanding human action. In short, social science cannot produce reliable predictive theory because people do not exist in ideal settings, they cannot exist independent of context and time. By drawing upon the work of Hubert Dreyfus, Pierre Bourdieu, and Harold Garfinkel he is able to show, that to date the social sciences' emulation of the natural sciences is misguided and has simply led to a "cul-de-sac". He asserts, that in consequence "social theory and social science methodology stand in need of reorientation" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 4).

In part two, Flyvbjerg presents his attempt at such a reorientation. At the heart of his approach lies the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, which he believes offers a way out of the science wars. He defines phronesis as "prudence or practical wisdom" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 2). If one considers how the words 'prudence' and 'wisdom' are imbued with themes of time and politics, one can appreciate why Flyvbjerg sees phronesis as going beyond both analytical scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*). He sees phronesis involving "judgements and decisions made in a manner of virtuoso social and political actor" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 2). He argues that once phronesis is introduced to the discussion one can see "that social science has set itself and impossible task by emulating the natural sciences and attempting to produce explanatory and predictive theory" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 3). He suggests that the social and natural sciences have their respective strengths and weakness, but along fundamentally different dimensions, (the natural sciences being context independent and the social sciences being context dependent) "a point which Aristotle demonstrated but which has since been forgotten" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 3).

To give phronesis a more contemporary interpretation Flyvbjerg develops the concept on three fronts. First, he uses Aristotle's insights into the role of case knowledge in phronesis to clarify the important status and use of case studies in social science. Second, he attempts to enrich the concept of phronesis by introducing considerations on power, considerations that are not present in its classical conception. He expands the concept from one of values, in its classical form, to one of values and power. Third, Flyvbjerg refines the concept by developing a set of methodological guidelines for doing what he terms 'phronetic social science'. He then provides a number of empirical examples that illustrate his approach.

Flyvbjerg concludes his book by arguing that if we want to make social science matter we must: "drop the fruitless efforts to emulate the natural science's in their attempt to produce cumulative and predictive theory" (*episteme*); "we must take up problems that matter to local, national and global communities, and we must do it in ways that matter" and; "we must effectively communicate the results of our research to fellow citizens" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 166). He acknowledges that the science wars will probably continue as will the current dominance of the natural science approach to social science research. However, his 'phronetic social science' approach now offers an alternative. An alternative, in which the purpose is "not to develop theory, but to contribute to society's practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 167).

There are two points by way of critique, one in regard to how Flyvbjerg addresses legitimacy in his approach to power and the other in regard to how he addresses representation. It must be said before this critique is offered however, that Flyvbjerg's writings on power and representation, here and in his previous book *Rationality and Power* are considered first rate. Here in particular, his comparative analysis of the Habermasian and Foucauldian approaches to power provides the reader with an understanding on where theory and research into power currently stands, as well as an appreciation for how it has arrived at this point.

Flyvbjerg indirectly discusses legitimacy. This is evident when drawing on Foucault's work he states that "one must study discourses on two levels: (1) the level of their tactical productivity, where the question is, 'What reciprocal effects of power and knowledge [do] they ensure?' and (2) the level of strategic integration, where the question now becomes, What conjunction and what force relationship make it necessary to utilize discourses in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur?" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 124) However, a more direct approach may have enhanced the book by helping readers to both see and appreciate more fully the link between Foucauldian analytics and phronesis.

Flyvbjerg, while acknowledging the importance of historical analysis, appears to downplay the importance of the link between Foucault's archaeological and genealogical phases in genealogical studies. More specifically, how historically constituted codes of order both constrain and enable the way power is exercised in a social system appears to be of only secondary importance. It is asserted here however, that downplaying this effect, runs the risk of reverting the focus of analysis to 'what' happens, rather than 'how' and 'why' things come to happen as they do. A focus on

addressing 'how' questions as opposed to 'what' questions, as acknowledged by Flyvbjerg, is one of the hallmarks of genealogy. Flyvbjerg acknowledges the effect of codes of order when he writes: "Foucault's norms are contextually grounded" and, because of norms "people can not think or do just anything at anytime" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 99-100). 'Norms', in this sense seen as being synonymous with 'codes of order'. However, Flyvbjerg does not elaborate on how people use their knowledge of norms strategically. Said more simply, Flyvbjerg does not elaborate on how people use their knowledge of what authors such as Clegg (1989) term the 'rules of the game' (codes of order or norms) to legitimise their preferred course of action or outcome, while fully acknowledging, as does Flyvbjerg, that the "rules are not the game" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 42). That is, the rules of the game constrain but do not determine the nature and outcome of the game. One can supplement Flyvberg's account with that of Mark Haugaard's (1998) book *The Constitution of Power,* which provides an excellent account of how people use norms (or more accurately their social system's archaeology of order) strategically.

In regards to the second point of critique on representation, Flyvbjerg argues that dualisms "may facilitate thinking and writing, but they inhibit understanding by implying a neatness that is rarely found in lived life" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 49). To privilege one representation over another in a dualistic either-or framework "is to amputate one-side of understanding" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 49). He writes that "Rather than the 'either-or' we should develop a non-dualistic and pluralistic 'both-and'"(Flyvbjerg, 2001: 49). He adds that we should not criticize representational viewpoints rather we should criticize only the dominance of viewpoints over others.

Flyvbjerg draws on Nietzsche's comment that "there is a point in every philosophy when the philosopher's conviction appears on stage" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 93). While, Flyvbjerg may not see himself as a philosopher his conviction, somewhat contradictory to his call for the development of a non-dualistic 'both-and', does appear on stage. A conviction that clearly lends itself to the development a 'phronetic social science', which has little if any room for abstract theory. His main argument is based on an either/or dualism between the natural sciences and the social sciences, the natural science's being attuned to the promulgation of abstract theory – *episteme*, and the social sciences being attuned to the study of social practice – *phronesis*. By drawing upon the work of Aristotle and others, he establishes salient boundaries between theory (*episteme*), know-how (*techne*) and social practice (*phronesis*). In doing so however, he not only strengthens his argument for a shift away from *episteme* to *phronesis*, but also implies that theory (*episteme*), know-how (*techne*) and social practice (*phronesis*) exist independent of each other. Generally, the separation of theory and practice is recognized as being part and parcel of what is known as 'positivism'. Yet, if, as Flyvbjerg does, one considers Foucault's power/knowledge nexus, one recognizes that theory, know-how and practice do not exist independent of each other. That is, theory and practice have a reciprocal relationship and thus, theory (*episteme*) influences the nature of social practice (*phronesis*). While Flyvbjerg undoubtedly recognizes that theory influences practice, the nature of this influence is not clear in his book. Furthermore, his placement of boundaries between theory (*episteme*), know-how (*techne*) and practice (*phronesis*) while at the same time espousing the need for a 'both-and' approach, reveals a paradox that requires further explanation.

In recent times, theorists such as Karl Weick, Stewart Clegg, Cynthia Hardy, Kenneth Gergen and, more generally, some 'ethnographers' and 'action researchers', have called for the gap between theory and practice to be bridged. In particular, if one reflects upon Karl Weick's work on sensemaking, one could argue that sensemaking is a form of practical theorizing. In short, when people attempt to make sense of things they are actually theorizing. This was the central insight that Clegg took from ethnomethodology in his 1975 book *Power, Rule and Domination*, when he referred to 'theorizing power' as something that both professional theorists and lay people do. One may ponder over the difference between Flyvbjerg's conception of phronesis and sensemaking. If so, phronetic social science might also be seen as the study of practical theorizing. One difference between phronetic social science and sensemaking however, appears to be that phronetic social science is based on a premise that reinforces the boundaries between theory and practice, while sensemaking takes steps towards narrowing the gap between them.

It is acknowledged that Flyvbjerg defines theory as being abstract (context independent). Nevertheless, people still reflect upon abstract theory, constituted within their knowledge, when making sense of things. The impact of this reflection on *phronesis* needs further explanation. It is also acknowledged, that Flyvbjerg suggests that phronetic social science will involve bridging the gap between *techne* and *phronesis*, this bridging resulting in "*techne* with a head on it" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 168), meaning technical know-how shaped by value rational deliberation. Maybe Flyvbjerg needs to go further and put a head on *episteme*, which he went a long way towards doing in his previous book *Power and Rationality,* through its power-is-knowledge approach to power. In this approach to power, Flyvbjerg argues that the outcome of the struggle for power shapes the constitution of rationality. In other words, the winner of the power game decides what is 'valid' knowledge, not to mention what is rational, right and just.

With the previous critique on 'legitimacy' in mind, one must question whether Flyvbjerg will win his own power game. For instance, will those readers committed to a more orthodox approach who not only value the pursuit of abstract theory in social research, but also find quantitative research interesting, hear his 'voice'? Or, will Flyvbjerg's 'hook' - *there is no room for abstract theory in the social sciences* - be viewed by these readers as infelicitous. If so, rather than legitimising his approach Flyvbjerg may simply reconstitute another paradigm war?

Alternatively, those readers who are more familiar with interpretative sociology may not find Flybjerg offering anything terribly new. Rather, they may see his arguments as reflecting much of what Weber had to say more than a century ago. Additionally, readers of journals such as the *Harvard Business Review*, who appear already commitedly anti-theoretical, might find Flyvbjerg ignorant of their viewpoint or, if not ignorant, apologetic on their behalf. Either way, one must question whether these readers will also hear his 'voice'.

In Flyvbjerg's defence, his aim is to call attention to what he sees as the central problem in the social sciences, that is, the limited theoretical and methodological success that the social sciences have had in comparison with the natural sciences. He also acknowledges

that his attempt to offer an answer to this problem "should be seen as only a first step that will undoubtedly need further theoretical and methodological refinement" (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 5). It is hoped that the above points of critique provide helpful insights for such refinement; their offering, is not intended to suggest that Flyvbjerg has been unsuccessful with his aim. Indeed, his provocative argument will capture the interest of academics and students alike and, *Phronetic Social Science* is likely to help generate interesting and valuable research in the future. However, the tensions and paradoxes in Flyvbjerg's arguments need to be careful scrutinized before it can be said that phronetic social science actually offers a way out of the science (or any other paradigmatically oriented) wars.

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