

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**BENT FLYVBJERG, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001, 204 p.**

*Making Social Science Matter* is a thoughtful, useful, controversial, and strange little book. Flyvbjerg is an experienced and competent Danish urban planner who writes well about the philosophy of social science, urban politics and the science wars. Glowing recommendations from Robert Bellah, Pierre Bourdieu and Steven Lukes grace its back-cover, suggesting intellectual ambition and scholarly seriousness. Flyvbjerg's first book was *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, a politically influential and well received empirical study on local power in Denmark that positions him well to reflect on the big questions he posits in his subtitle. And he almost succeeds.

There is much to recommend in *Making Social Science Matter*. Offering a way out of stale science wars where social scientists either defensively attack or cravenly emulate the natural sciences, Flyvbjerg outlines a lovely account of how Aristotle's ideas about *phronesis* can provide a philosophical justification for the type of social science he argues for in *Making Social Science Matter*. Rejecting both universal scientific approaches (what Aristotle calls *episteme*) and a view of social science as a craft or art (*techne*, to Aristotle), Flyvbjerg makes the case for a social science that is concerned with ethics, deliberates about values, is context-dependent, oriented towards action and is based on practical value-rationality. Not satisfied with a purely philosophical social science that is not research oriented, methodologically sophisticated, and concerned with power, Flyvbjerg attempts to synthesize Aristotle's insights with what he has learned from Nietzsche, Foucault and the learning theory of Dreyfus and Dreyfus. With this theoretical foundation, Flyvbjerg then reflects on the research he conducted in the 1990s on local power and community planning in Aalborg, a medium-sized Danish city. From the lessons he learned in this case study, Flyvbjerg proposes methodological, ethical, and theoretical guidelines for the conduct of a social science that matters.

The writing is clear, concise and entertaining throughout *Making Social Science Matter*, and Flyvbjerg's suggestions for building livable cities are sensible and thoughtful. It is unusual today, unfortunately, for a scholar to combine sophistication in dealing with the work of Aristotle, Foucault, and hermeneutics with a commitment to empirical research in archives and through the use of ethnographic methods. This reader learned much about

how Aristotle's philosophy can help us envision a socially relevant contemporary social theory and research. The fact that Flyvbjerg is further willing to get his hands dirty in doing a "public intellectual sociology" of sorts that actually makes a difference in how the use of space and cars are thought about in practical urban politics makes for a valuable and useful contribution to contemporary knowledge. For all this, *Making Social Science Matter* is worth reading.

Flyvbjerg, however, is not without his critics. Sociologist of science and culture Stephan Fuchs, in particular, wrote a stinging critique of *Making Social Science Matter* in the American Sociological Association's flagship theory journal *Sociological Theory*, raising questions that Flyvbjerg's text does too little to answer (Fuchs, "To Whom it May Concern," *Sociological Theory*, 20:1, 2002). Fuchs argues that the way Flyvbjerg addresses the big questions regarding the purpose of social science leads to meaningless rhetoric, weak research, and a politically motivated public intellectual social science that is neither methodologically rigorous nor original. More importantly, Fuchs suggests the real question is "not whether social science matters, but to whom it does so, in what ways, and to what effects." These complex questions are not even seriously broached in Flyvbjerg's book, and Fuchs rightly suggests that it is presumptuous and undemocratic to assume, as Flyvbjerg tends to, that other social scientists and even the public will care about the same issues, and see things the same ways he does. For Fuchs, public derision of social science is due to the fact that it is too often too politically motivated and not analytic and serious enough, not that it too scientific, as Flyvbjerg claims. Fuchs is perhaps too shrill in his critique of Flyvbjerg, and ultimately Fuchs' vision of a sociology concerned exclusively with scientific and explanatory goals is unconvincing for practical reasons. A sociology, for example, organized like the natural sciences or economics is an "impossible science" as Turner and Turner once argued. This is true even if a purely scientific sociology were a good thing, which unlike Turner, Turner and Fuchs, I am not sure it is. Yet even for those who find Fuchs' alternative vision of sociology unconvincing, his basic critique of Flyvbjerg is telling. This is especially so in the Canadian context where we see unwilling to deal seriously with what has recently been called sociology's "succession question" (Curtis and Weir, "The Succession Question in English Canadian Sociology," *Society/Société*. Oct. 2002).

*Making Social Science Matter* is thus ultimately a strange and unsatisfying book. I do not really see what Foucault, Aristotle, and hermeneutics add to Flyvbjerg's urban research on efforts to limit the dominance of cars in a European city--excellent scholarly work that sounds to me like a traditional sociological ethnography and power-elite community case study. Despite the claims Flyvbjerg makes for Foucault's methodological and theoretical insights, I fail to see a major difference between the research Flyvbjerg did using Danish city planning records and the careful archival research any competent historian would undertake. It is fine that Flyvbjerg draws inspiration from Nietzsche and Foucault, while others may draw theoretical and methodological insights from more traditional disciplinary traditions.

The proof is in the research results, and Flyvbjerg has done interesting and important work.

The problem is when Flyvbjerg moves from competent and useful scholarship to very large and rather ambitious proposals to reform the social sciences with a missionary zeal for the "interpretive" social science he wants to call *phronesis*. From my perspective, "scientific sociology" is not something we should eliminate from our discipline, as much can be learned from surveys, advanced statistical methods and attempts to build an explanatory and cumulative social science. Surely we have enough room in sociology for sophisticated theory, rigorous social research, insightful ethnography and historical analysis and the valuable "local public intellectual work" that Flyvbjerg does very well. Making sociology matter involves difficult ethical issue raised by our use of public resources for research, competition between disciplines, public credibility, and organizational politics and dynamics within modern universities dominated by corporate priorities and student consumerism. Flyvbjerg ignores these larger issues, concentrating on secondary philosophical and methodological concerns. In my view, we need more public intellectual sociologists, although surely we cannot assume that they will all share the broad left liberal orthodoxy of our discipline. Established and young scholars interested in moving outside their own specialization to intervene in local, national or even global politics may well find inspiration in *Making Social Science Matter*. But he says far too little of use for anyone concerned with thinking seriously about the future of the social sciences in ways that are not idiosyncratic. This sociologist at least, will offer two cheers for interpretive social science. But not at the expense of polarized polemics that ignore both the value of more traditional social scientific methods and the intellectual dangers of overly speculative work inspired by the humanities that naively bypasses decades of excellent empirically oriented social science.

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