



Book review symposium: *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*

Book Review Symposium on Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram (eds) *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*, 2012, CUP, 318 pp. £18.99 (paperback)

Phronesis and the participants' perspective

Brian Caterino

In *Making Social Science Matter* (2001), Bent Flyvbjerg proposed a radical challenge to positivistic versions of social inquiry and rational choice. Social inquiry according to Flyvbjerg is not really a 'science'. The latter, he claimed had roots in the notion of epistémé or what Aristotle viewed as certain and reliable knowledge. Flyvbjerg viewed this type of knowledge as 'theoretical'. As realized in modern nomological views of science, particulars are subsumed and governed by general laws. In contrast to this nomological version of social inquiry, Flyvbjerg claimed that knowledge of the social world was phronetic in Aristotle's sense. It is practical, context bound, and independent of theoretical knowledge. Phronesis required the wisdom, insight and skill of an interested participant in social life.

Flyvbjerg's work found a sympathetic ear in the spreading discontent with the rational choice theories and quantitative approaches dominant in major political science journals. Yet such work seemed increasingly irrelevant to their own concerns. For some of us in the Perestroika group, Flyvbjerg's work provided a way to raise the questions we had about the limits of rational choice theory and exclusively quantitative approaches that emphasized theory building to the neglect of practical life of the participants (Green and Shapiro 1996). Such theories considered the theorist as a neutral or detached observer of social life, and severed the links between social inquiry and the perspectives of the participant in social life.

Flyvbjerg's theory goes considerably beyond Shapiro and Green's proposal for the priority of problem driven over method driven research. Practically

oriented social inquiry links the perspective of inquiry to the participants' perspective. Like ordinary social interaction inquiry is both normative and evaluative. 'We don't just think and interact, but evaluate things including the past and future'. (Sayer 2011: 1) Social inquiry is practical, that is it is engaged in the 'reflexive analysis of goals value and interests' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 53). Social research is never neutral it cannot ignore it's place in the social world.

The principal objective for social science with a phronetic approach is to carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action i.e. praxis. (Flyvbjerg 2001: 60).

The social researcher is more like a skilled diagnostician who recognizes patterns of symptoms rather than a technical or mechanical applications of rules or methods.

Flyvbjerg also wants to incorporate issues of power and domination into phronetic inquiry. This notion of phronesis links with Machiavelli's imperative to reveal the effective truth of matters. It rejects what it sees as ideal explanations (i.e. Habermas) in favour of a realism concerning power relations. A social science that addresses power requires not just virtue in Aristotle's sense but *virtú* in Machiavelli's sense.

Real Social Science (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012) introduces the idea of tension points to emphasize the need to confront power. A tension point is a turning point in a power constellation.

in phronetic research tension points, power relations that are particularly susceptible to problematization and thus to change, because they are fraught with dubious practices contestable knowledge and potential conflicts. Thus even a small challenge – like a problematization from scholars – may tip the scales and trigger change in a tension point. (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 288)

The editors suggest that 'building on this new version of Phronesis – to include issues of power – is the best bet for the rebirth of the social sciences in society. Intelligent social action requires Phronesis' (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012).

This is an innovative collection of essays. It is sure to provoke both critical debate and spur future studies. However, the attempt to combine the neo-Aristotelian version of social inquiry based on notions of mutual understanding and Foucault's analyses emphasizing the constitutive nature of power yields an uneasy mix. As it stands the two elements are contradictory not complimentary (Caterino 2006, also see Lukes 2005).

While articles by Schram, Landman, Frank and Clegg and Pitsis, treat the theoretical foundations of phronetic social science, the majority of the

articles are case studies in phronetic social science. Several articles focus on a collaborative approach in which researchers are co-participants engaged in a dialogical relation between researcher and participants. Phronesis requires mutual understanding. A second set of articles are concerned more explicitly with variations on the 'productive' conception of power of Foucault. Here power impacts phronetic research in a number of ways including the research process, the formation of subjectivity and power in public deliberation.

Research cannot be detached from the researcher's participation in the social world nor is social inquiry an objective value free process. The model of the researcher as co-participant draws on the basic situation of actors in the social life world that both researchers and participants share and in which individuals are mutually responsible and mutually accountable. This is not just a descriptive but a moral condition. If researchers are co-participants, those whom they study have an equal ability and responsibility to evaluate and criticize research. Several of the case studies in *Real Social Science* take up this collaborative conception of the research process. They reject conceptions of the researcher as disengaged or detached observers for one that stresses the involvement of researchers with the public. Both researcher and participant work on the same level. The researcher is not seen as a collector of information who has an exclusive right to interpret data and use it without regard to the concerns of the groups they research and without a chance to critically assess the results. Ultimately researchers and participants are engaged in common practical projects aimed at social transformation (Gomez and Sorde Marti 2012).

Corey Shdaimiah and Roland Stahl (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 122–36) advocate a form of collaborative research which is inherently phronetic. The phronetic model of social research is a form of collaborative research that 'invites engagement with issues that matter to the communities and other stake holders'. Rejecting a one-sided version of expert knowledge they hope to reverse the relation between researchers and participants. It is not the subjects who participate in research but researchers who participate in larger social projects. Leone Sandercock and Giovanni Attili (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 137–66) also stress the importance of mutual knowledge and dialogue between researchers and participants, in their article on the film-making project they carried out to bring attention to Canadian government violation of the human rights of aboriginals. They reject the priority of expert knowledge in favour of the centrality of narrative that links participants to knowledge in phronetic research.

Virginia Eubanks' (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 228–45) study of feminist groups, finds links between feminist theories of Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith and phronesis. Both are concerned with the integration of the perspectives of subjugated knowledge in social research. In so doing they have to start from the everyday knowledge of social action. She extends the model of collaborative research into a model in which critical understanding is

promoted. Using a collaborative model involves going beyond learning how to use technologies but encompassing forms of self-understanding. Individuals began with the understanding that they were the problem – being deficient in learning – but gained the insight that social relations of power were at the source of their subordinate status. William Paul Simmons (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 246–63), suggests the value of participatory research for training students in a programme in social justice. Participants in research are stakeholders who have a say in the formation structure and outcome of research. Simmons stressed giving students exposure to subordinate groups, however he argues that students lack the requisite seasoning to be virtuosos in social justice. Simmons develops a more careful reading of Aristotelian *phronesis* than others; Aristotle's wise man is a superior individual who has a skill only a few really have. Perhaps this trope, which is an element of Flyvbjerg's position, is too narrow. Collaborative research requires the participants' knowledge of the social world but it may not require everyone to be virtuoso in aspects of social research to succeed.

The collaborative version of *Real Social Science* rests on the model of mutual understanding. Indeed the editors note that social orders have a core of shared values and interests. The element of power comes into play however because collaboration encounters opposition.

Stuart Clegg and Tyrone Pitsis (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 66–91) argue that Foucault's theory of power is superior to alternate views like Lukes or Habermas. These views of power rest on a notion of undistorted interests of knowledge that can be seen as free of domination. The classical model of power is inherently individualistic and Foucault assumes that hermeneutic theories of mutual understanding are similarly idealistic and individualistic. 'Power is coextensive with the social body,' Foucault states, 'there are no sources of primal liberty between the meshes of the network' (Foucault 1980: 142). However, interpretive theories including neo-Aristotelians and Habermas do not theorize a primal self, or view society as subject writ large but an intersubjective world made up of a plurality of subjectivities.

Foucault sees the struggle for power as all pervasive, however he sees the terms of struggle as a way power shapes desire and knowledge through the formation of rules and structures *priori* to subjectivity and constituted through power. Foucault's archaeology uncovers the types of discourse which finds the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth and the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 1980: 38). Yet such a notion seems to negate the reflexivity through which we take up these rules and can critically evaluate the norms and values of society. Since they are constituted by these regimes, subjects cannot critically transform them.

In his later genealogical work Foucault focuses on micro processes through which compliance is secured. Here reflexivity is a kind of self-surveillance. Institutions like the family, medicine, practices of confession and systems of punishment shape the individual. As exemplified in confession, the subject's own reflexivity is seen as necessary to find the truth about the self, but as these confessional discourses are basically administered by the new social sciences they are forms of objectifying and normalizing subjectivity. This leads to the same problem on a different level. If subjectivity and self-reflection are just forms of self-surveillance or self-policing and domination then how can subjects get a hold of this domination?

According to Stuart Clegg and Tyrone Pitsis, research is a practice of power (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 67). Thus is it not formed through paradigms or other models (see Schram): 'the mechanisms of its maintenance [i.e. power] are above all, political' shaped by social location and social carriers like sponsors or journal editors, or foundation boards (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 67) Their project, involving research on manager learning over the course of multiple mega projects required public – private partnerships, included the definition and funding of the research project and input by managers. Their work involved coordination between different stakeholders in a more traditional social research project. Part way through the project the researchers found they had lost access to the managers, supposedly for reasons of 'sensitive' dealings, but in fact most of the managers involved left the project and were replaced by a new team. The head of this team was more skeptical about the value of research, posing a threat to the project. The project is redirected. While it is certainly true that power influenced the direction of research it is harder to see how the stronger thesis, that the nature of research is reproduced only through power, is valid. To the contrary they seem to employ standard markers of validity that are not just political.

Bent Flyvbjerg's (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 95–121) article employs a version of Foucault's notion of critique (Foucault 1987) to discuss his own experience with power and media. When Flyvbjerg criticizes the chronic overspending on megaprojects in the media, he encounters attempts to intimidate and deflect him from continuing his criticism. Flyvbjerg contends that tension points can be used to counter this coercion and win the case in the public sphere. Tension points represent areas of problematization that make practices questionable and undermine the secure sense of normality. Phronesis becomes a virtuoso ability to identify these weak spots in ideologies and practices in order to break the aura of authority.

If critique consist solely of suspending the naturalness of norms, it is not clear how we would escape a generalized skepticism over norms. Foucault's critical stance suggests that the critic stands above the moral commitments of participants and views norms as sets of normalizing strategies – that is as

something that produces effects. The interpretive model of social inquiry postulates that the interpreter and participants are on the same level. If phronesis is normative, it can't step outside the world of mutual accountability; in fact it is not possible to understand norms as a set of effects without the element of evaluation. How do we justify our own norms and goals? How do we diagnose and understand the illusion of naturalness?

It is just as plausible to see Flyvbjerg analysis as resting on a very Habermasian belief in the power of the liberal public sphere. In bringing to bear conceptions of free discussion in the public sphere, Flyvbjerg is drawing on the participants' perspective developed in the collaborative model not Foucault's theory of power.

The merger of the contextual approach of Neo-Aristotelian phronesis with Foucault makes understanding between regimes of power/knowledge problematic. If a regime of power is really constitutive of knowledge then it is difficult to see any way to compare different regimes of truth. It is obviously true that interpretive understanding is contextual in a weak sense since we can only understand at all against a background of pre-understandings that structure the world. However, we also possess however general communicative competencies that enable us to understand other cultures and groups that don't share our own assumptions.

Arthur Frank's (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012: 48–65) contribution to this volume attempts an answer to this question in his essay. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (Bourdieu 1977, 1998) notion of fields, Frank argues that we can learn to understand more than one field in a multiple view. It seems however that this understanding of fields is discrete and limited. Frank's solution here is something like J.F. Lyotard's (Lyotard 2009) image of forms of knowledge as an archipelago. Skilled judgment (Phronesis) tacks between fields and is able to move between them. While this might be useful to describe the ability say to translate so to work between expert and lay cultures it really does not account for questions of understanding between cultures or languages. I think the problem is one generated by the limits of the strong versions of contextualism, often employed in phronetic social science. 'Tacking' presumes less a special faculty of judgment than a general interpretive competence of subjects in the social world. Our own interpretive abilities are not constituted by power but by our general ability to make and understand commitments and be accountable to one another.

Real Social Science represents a promising approach to a practically oriented social research, but, to redeem that promise, phronetic inquiry needs to develop a critical approach to power that links understanding power to the reflexive ability of participants.

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What really matters

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We might speak of fundamental principles of human enquiry.
Wittgenstein (1969: §670)

The actual research conducted by the authors and the manner in which they have creatively brought together theory and research and applied that research to practical social and political issues constitutes a landmark achievement in social science. My purpose is not to bury the spirit of this volume but to praise it, but this makes it even more imperative to confront candidly some issues that tend to remain submerged and sometimes elided, and I raise these issues less in criticism than as a way of encouraging clarification.

It is ironic that the essays, which, arguably more than any other recent development in the social sciences, represent the indigenous historical spirit of

these fields, seem somewhat strangely detached from sensitivity to their past and particularly to past struggles with problems relating to their practical relationship to their subject matter. The essays also tend to perpetuate the idea that the basic difference between natural science and social science is methodological and that 'making social science matter' hinges on an epistemological shift. The social sciences have long harbored the belief that the key to transforming their object of inquiry is to first transform themselves, but although, as Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, the first task of philosophers is to cure their own ills before becoming physicians to others, self-help manuals have their limits as a guide to social relationships.

After reading these essays, someone unfamiliar with the history of the social sciences might be left with the impression that creating a 'real' social science and 'making social science matter' implies a radical departure from the past concerns of these disciplines. But in Europe, England, and the USA, the origins of the social sciences were in the therapeutic aspirations of moral philosophy, religion, and social reform movements. In almost every instance, the adoption of a scientific self-image, not unlike the case of Christian Science, was to secure the cognitive authority to address matters of ethics, civic values, and public policy. The great ironies of this strategy were, first, that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, science was no longer an amateur affair and had become institutionalized in the university. This transformed the problem of the relationship between social science and society into a problem of the relationship between the competing demands of, on the one hand, the university for objectivity and impartiality, which often nevertheless clothed a conservative agenda, and, on the other hand, the more radical ideologies that had often attended the genesis of fields such as economics. The second irony was that this strategy attached these fields, not to actual practices of natural science but to philosophical accounts of natural science, from which many subsequently struggled to escape. In the late nineteenth century, many of those who attempted to speak truth to power from the podium were cast off from the university, and those who remained went further underground intellectually by clothing themselves in whatever happened to be the reigning image of science. Both conservatives such as the sociologist William Graham Sumner and left-leaning economists such as Richard Ely believed that it was necessary to pursue what had been religious and ethical goals by scientific means. By the turn of the century, the paradox of social science, to be both scientific and practically efficacious, was evident in Europe as well as, for example, in the documents relating to the founding of the American Political Science Association. In both cases, the argument was that because social science had no intrinsic political authority, only by becoming truly scientific was it possible, especially in an ideologically pluralistic society, to gain the epistemic purchase that would allow social science access to the arena of public decision-making. In the history of American

political science, it was largely the problem of reconciling the demands of science and reform that led to the increased autonomy of the subfield of public administration.

Today, it remains difficult to see exactly how the idea of phronetic inquiry can solve the endemic dilemma of reconciling objectivity and advocacy and pursuing the vision of a democratic social science. This is particularly the case in contemporary society where all kinds of academic criticism is disarmed, and neglected, by an ethic of pure tolerance. Although in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the strategy of seeking the authority of science was still very apparent in the work of individuals such as the political scientist Charles Merriam, the tragic flaw in the scenario was that, as the years passed, the means often morphed into the ends because of the structure of university incentives, external ideological pressures, and the forgetfulness of a new generation regarding their actual disciplinary lineage. However, even during the rise of the behavioural sciences in the 1950s, the growing dispute over the nature of scientific inquiry masked more fundamental underlying normative and ideological divisions. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the emergence of perestroika and debates about such issues as whether social inquiry should be interpretive and qualitative or quantitative and scientific, it was really just *déjà vu* all over again.

The essays tend to perpetuate the assumption that the basic difference between natural and social science is methodological. The authors quite repetitively claim that there is a fundamental choice to be made between a science of society modeled on the generalized law-like abstract predictive claims of the natural sciences and a practical science that is based on methodological pluralism and focused on producing situated local knowledge relevant to specific problems of public policy and particularly to remedying the unequal distribution of power in society. The first thing to be noted about this claim is that the very image of natural science and scientific method that is evoked as a contrast model is not actually a description of the practice of natural science but a reiteration of the same positivist image of science that first informed the practical origins of these fields. The notion of pure science, either social or natural, as a value-free domain is surely a myth, and much of natural science is, for better or worse, engaged in problem-based research and devoted to furthering applied science, and it is certainly methodologically diverse. What is obscured is a quite different account of natural science such as that advanced by Thomas Kuhn and which now probably actually dominates much of the post-positivist literature on the philosophy and history of science. This includes, for example, the recognition that there is no such thing as the scientific method, which was a philosophical myth, and that basic changes in science itself are effected by persuasion rather than through some neutral process of the testing of hypotheses. The so-called covering model of scientific explanation and the correspondence theory of truth are sublimated

philosophical ideals rather than descriptions of how the practices of natural science operate.

It is a mistake to assume that what is involved is a fundamental choice between the method of science and the method of interpretation. The retreat of social science from social involvement is not something that can be explained in terms of a particular methodological allegiance, and rather than accentuating this mythical methodological dichotomy, it would be better to focus on what the difference between natural and social science really involves. All social inquiry is interpretive and representative, because the practices that are the object of investigation are conceptually pre-constituted and autonomous. Various methods, including those putatively associated with natural science, are a means of interpreting and representing, even though one can argue about what method is the best. Max Weber claimed that the ideal-type was best suited for rendering the meaning of social phenomenon, because there are different and changing forms and levels of social phenomena that inhibit the relevance of any one form of typification as a vehicle of generalization. This was his basic criticism of one-dimensional classic economic theory – not that it was other than interpretive in character. Most social scientific frameworks of analysis, such as systems theory and rational choice, really amount to ideal types rather than something akin to laws in natural science. Wittgenstein also advocated a similar approach to interpreting the meaning of discursive phenomena but stressed that the great problem was reification or, in his words, the dogmatism that attends confusing the means of representation with what is represented and reading into the object what is characteristic of the model, as if the model reflected an underlying reality. The actual difference between natural science and social science is the fact that natural science *presents* rather than *represents* its subject matter. Although we might be inclined to say that natural science interprets the world, the world that it interprets is a factual realm constituted by its theoretical constructions, and when those constructions change the facts of science change accordingly. The gap between inquiry and its object is opened up within the practice of natural science rather than in the relationship between science and the world. But the gap between theory and fact in the case of social science is not only conceptual but practical, and there lies the crucial difference and the problem.

Once the history of social science and the real difference between social and natural science is clarified, we are in a position to look more closely and realistically at the claims and issues attending what is advanced as a phronetic social science. Wittgenstein sometimes specifically argued, and often suggested, that it is important to look at meaningful phenomena, that is, social phenomena, from an anthropological point of view. This allowed a certain objective detachment that was not likely to be prevalent among social actors, but he denied, as opposed to much of contemporary critical theory, that this entailed grounding in some transcendental perspective. Consequently, it is

quite reasonable for social science to claim a certain pragmatic authority and to exercise phronesis and persuasion in pursuit of its judgments. Restraining underlying ideological perspectives and substituting the judgments of the investigators for those of the social actors are greater problems but ones for which there is no apodictic solution. The paradox of the conceptual tension between social inquiry and its object must be accepted as given. It seems that the essays in this volume, with their emphasis on the particularities of politics, recognize this difference and the epistemic entailments, but unless social science moves outside the sphere of the university, the demands and interests of the academy will continue to constrain the goals of social science and leave individual scholars as the fulcrum of that delicate balance. It is important to remember what the basic theme of the book indicates, that is, making *social science* matter – not how various *individual social scientists* might take it upon themselves to attempt to make a difference. There is a typical American prejudice that when we confront community problems they can be solved by individual action when what is called for is institutional transformation, which is seldom achieved from the bottom up.

A question that is not really confronted in these essays is that of whose social science we talking about. The phrase ‘making social science matter’ implies a unity among these fields that does not exist, and it would be folly to believe that, by becoming more ‘phronetic’, embracing methodological pluralism, and focusing on more qualitative and engaged research, differences in ideology would be dissolved and that a democratic attitude would be fostered in both society and the study of society. While the authors look to individuals such as Bourdieu and Foucault for guidance, I think that the more instructive illustrations might be the claims of Weber and Karl Mannheim. Weber moved rather easily, although not comfortably, between the spheres of politics and the academy, and his goal was to reconcile social science and public policy. His essay on ‘objectivity’ as well as his essays on the vocations of science and politics reflected his concern about the politicization of the podium by individuals whose ideology he contested, but although he wished to insinuate his own values into politics, his primary concern was to find a way to bring reason and order to the ultimately irrational world of politics in an age in which both the university and public life had become ideologically diverse and in which there was no common authority. His answer was, first of all, to establish the claim of science as both impartially objective and authoritative, and second to deploy a method that allowed generalization but at the same time was sensitive to historical and social particularities of politics. In the world of Weimar, various forms of both critical theory and Weberian images of science failed, and the problem of how to create a politically engaged social science was bequeathed to Karl Mannheim. Mannheim believed that the mediation of science and politics could be generated from the very problems of epistemic relativism and ideological pluralism that had defeated past

strategies. This was not to be accomplished by feigning scientific objectivity and establishing the authority of knowledge but rather through a dynamic and synthetic concept of truth deployed by intellectuals who, while grounded in various elements of partisan politics, were also trained as social scientists in the university and constituted a somewhat homogenous and relatively socially unattached class that was capable of discerning common social interests and goods that would serve to bridge ideological extremes as well as the divide between science and politics. Mannheim's answer to creating what he referred to as a real 'science of politics' seems to echo in the essays of this volume, but in many ways the essays reflect the very utopianism that Mannheim wished to avoid.

One might argue that the visions of both Weber and Mannheim failed because of the collapse of the political order in which they were situated, but those visions have in various ways been perpetuated in more politically stable settings. In the USA, they can be traced from Merriam's Chicago School, to John Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey 1927), to the image of the semi-automatic society that dominated the American image of pluralist politics from the late 1920s to the work of Robert Dahl in the 1950s, to David Easton's Presidential address to the APSA in 1969 and the resurrection of the idea of political science as a policy science, to new versions of critical theory inspired by theorists such as Habermas and Foucault, to the turn of the century manifesto of 'making social science matter', and perestroika.

If, as Sanford Schram puts it, embracing a 'phronetic' approach is 'an idea whose time has come', it would suggest that the conditions that make it possible have finally emerged. Arguably, however, it may be more difficult than ever to achieve this long-standing goal. There were many reasons why perestroika failed to change the discipline of political science in any fundamental manner. These include the fact that it was often more about professional equity and opportunity than about changing the discipline. In the end, it was easily co-opted and absorbed by the political science establishment, in which pluralism as a political, professional, and methodological ethic was already deeply embedded. Perestroika embraced a paradoxical strategy, because if the goal was to make *political science* matter, it was necessary either to establish the authority of the discipline as a whole or find a way to connect the diverse elements of the field to politics on some basis that did not rely on their status as political scientists. What actually characterizes the work of authors such as Flyvbjerg and Schram is that they have in fact operated outside the imprimatur of establishment social science. Again, the problem has never been simply how individual political scientists might find a way to make a difference but one of making political science as a discipline matter, which would entail establishing the authority of the discipline as a whole. And here we can begin to see the core of the problem that comes to the surface in various ways in the essays. The authors themselves claim that phronetic social science has always been around

in the form of particular individual efforts and that the basic problem has been that these efforts have not been sufficiently organized.

The authors make it quite clear that they believe that natural science matters because it leads to the kind of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge that enables the control of nature. They appear to suggest that the criteria for making social science matter would be the presence of similar a capacity, ability, and opportunity to intervene in social practices. One of the principal criticisms of modeling an image of social science on the practice of natural science has, however, typically been that this is an inherently undemocratic if not anti-humanistic idea and that even in the case of natural science there is reason to question the results of such interference. The authors are sensitive to this issue of substituting expert judgment and advocating something like social engineering, and they suggest various ameliorating strategies and methods. They also note that they are not necessarily literally adopting Aristotle's rather sharp distinction between *Phronesis* and *Sophia*, but in the end there is no escaping the fact that it is necessary to assume quite definite answers to a range of questions relating to values such as democracy, the exercise of power, and human rights. What is advanced as a phronetic social science involves what in Aristotle's terms would mean the imposition of philosophy on practical judgment and the entrance of *Theoria* into *Praxis*. To the question of whether phronetic social science entails actually engaging in a practice such as politics, the authors say that 'the unequivocal answer . . . is therefore that the phronetic call to social scientists is exactly to become virtuoso social actors in their chosen field and to *do* politics with their research' (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012). Surely the authors are not advocating something similar to the Technocracy movement in American politics or even allying themselves with the elitist top-down claims of individuals such as Dewey, Merriam, and Harold Lasswell with regard to what constitutes a policy science, but they have not directly confronted the history of the kind of claims that they are advancing. One of the difficulties is that the idea of a phronetic social science is presented in a rather global fashion, and although there is considerable concern with adapting it to particular contexts, there is not much direct attention to how this image might differ with respect to radically different cultural and political settings. Even as the authors tell their story, it becomes clear that it is one thing to become involved in matters of public policy in Alborg, Denmark and quite another thing in Florida, USA.

Those familiar with my work will know that in confronting this problem that my answer is that there is in fact no distinct answer, either methodological or practical, and that it is like the problem that T.S. Eliot exemplified in his account of the multi-faceted dilemma of anthropologists studying cannibals. As Wittgenstein noted, all the philosopher can do with certainty with respect to understanding and interpreting human practices is to seek clarity, which means first and foremost doing justice to the subject matter in the sense of not

imposing, either in conception or practice, the *Weltbild* of the interpreter. Beyond that, it is a matter of serendipity and conscience. If one feels compelled to convert cannibals, simply do it rather than seek to justify it. There may be good reasons for one's beliefs, but there are no extrinsic grounds. The spirit of phronetic social science is noble, as noble as that of the Mormon missionary and the Jehovah's witness. I listen to both when they come to my door, even though I personally would not accept either. I prefer the noble spirit of this volume, but we cannot predict the effects, results, and consequences of the spirit. The theory/practice problem is not really a problem at all. It is an irremediable condition of human inquiry.

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Spatializing phronesis: a critical evaluation of *Real Social Science*.

Edward W. Soja

I am pleased for many different reasons to see the stir caused by Bent Flyvbjerg's ideas about phronesis (2001). Attacking the narrowed channels of epistemic social science, opening up a greater appreciation for ethics, justice, and power relations, pointing out the need for practical wisdom and a theory-practice dialectic leads to a far-reaching and necessary revisioning of the methods, concepts, and goals of not just political studies but all the social sciences. With its collection of rich case studies, *Real Social Science* illustrates the scope and achievements of 'applied phronesis' and will no doubt be a guidepost to the future development of phronetic research.

My objective here is not to critically review *Real Social Science* but to identify and discuss a major weakness in phronetic research that will need to be addressed and dealt with if phronesis is to become a new pillar and paradigm for effective societal analysis and policy formation. I refer specifically to

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the near absence of a critical *spatial* perspective in contemporary phronesis studies and hope to show how the addition of a reinvigorated and assertive spatial perspective can significantly strengthen phronetic social science.

The virtual absence of a critical spatial perspective in *Real Social Science* is not just one of a list of noticeable gaps or lacunae in phronetic research. If this were the case, it would be easy to dismiss with such responses as ‘we can’t do everything in one book’ or ‘this is the purview of other scholars’ or ‘we will get to that later’. It can be argued, however, that phronesis is necessarily, if not ontologically, a geographical or spatial concept, and must incorporate a pertinent spatial perspective right from the start. Space or spatiality is not something that can be added at a later stage or presumed to be implicit (and thus hidden) in such broad terms as context, social location, or situated knowledge.

There are several reasons for making this fundamental argument. One cannot, for example, emphasize context, situated knowledge, and other related aspects of phronetic praxis without recognizing a significant and formative spatial dimension. Spatial understanding and influence may not be the most important factor in particular practices and projects, but should not be entirely ignored. Argued even more forcefully, it can be said that all social relations are concretized and realized by becoming spatial, by being expressed and embedded in what Henri Lefebvre described as the social production of (socialized) space. (Lefebvre 1991) Otherwise, they remain as ungrounded abstractions, disembodied and distanced from social reality, mere words to be manipulated by those who have the power to do so.

Applied phronesis must begin with an awareness that there are no a-spatial human societies, economies, or polities, only scholars who persist in seeing social, economic, and political systems as if they existed on the head of a pin, without a significant and at least partially explanatory spatial dimension. Just think how absurd it would be to try to understand phronesis as if it were asocial or ahistorical. There is good reason to assert that phronesis from the start needs to be seen as simultaneously social, historical, *and spatial*.

It is no coincidence that Flyvbjerg’s ideas are rooted in the intersection between geography and critical planning theory, a dynamic field of interaction that has been buzzing with new ideas in recent years due in part to what some have called the ‘spatial turn’ in the human sciences, the unprecedented transdisciplinary spread of a critical spatial perspective throughout the social sciences and humanities (Warf and Arias 2008). Yet Flyvbjerg’s contributions to *Real Social Science* contain almost no evidence of geographical thinking. Interestingly enough, the field of political science has been one of the least affected by the spatial turn. Is it possible, I ask, that the dominating role of political science in the Flyvbjerg Debates has contributed to the weak spatial perspective that comes through in *Real Social Science*?

Ranu Basu in her chapter on ‘Spatial Phronesis’ (Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram 2012: 264–84) makes a useful first step in adding a spatial dimension to

phronesis, but the ideas presented need to be pushed further and deeper into the Flyvbjerg Debates. And Flyvbjerg himself must be more explicit about the spatiality of phronesis, not just because of his background in geography but even more so given the primary inspiration he – and phronetic social science – draws from the works of Aristotle and Foucault, both of whom have been exceptional pioneers of *spatialized* social analysis and theory.

It still astonishes me that many the most enthusiastic Foucauldians (and many of the chapter writers in *Real Social Science*) fail to recognize and accept the fundamental spatiality of Foucault's understanding of knowledge and power, that his work emphasizes not just the knowledge/power binary but a triad that speaks of space, knowledge, and power. As he forcefully notes, power expresses itself in and through space. It is not enough to speak historically or socially about context, hierarchy, surveillance, reflexive practice, local knowledge, situational ethics. A much more explicit inclusion of spatiality is necessary, not as some isolated physical determinant, but as part of what I once called a socio-spatial dialectic, the mutual formation of social and spatial processes and forms (Soja 1980).

In this dialectic, spatiality is not just shaped by social processes but reflects back to shape these social processes as well, whether we are speaking of class relations, social stratification, economic development, political conflict, or cultural identity. If spatiality is seen purely as physical form, however, analysing the impact of geographies on human behaviour or societal development seems too much like an exercise in environmental or geographical determinism. Human geographies, however, need to be seen as socially constructed or produced, and filled with contingencies and unpredictability, many of the same conditions typically associated with phronesis. Because they are not 'natural' or God-given, these phronetic geographies can be changed by concerted social action, especially when they are oppressive or disciplinary in their impact – the subject of so much of Foucault's writings.

Tracing the debate on phronesis back to Aristotle (and to some extent Foucault as well) opens up another path to spatialization, in this case a new appreciation for an *urbanized* social science, an awareness that human society arises directly from the phronetic spatial organization of the first cities and city-states.¹

Once human beings settled down in permanent urban settlements, new needs arose that were not so pertinent in hunting and gathering bands. It can be argued that managing the city-state and its imperial extensions (the first megaproject?) stimulated the development of phronesis and would make practical wisdom the foundation for (urban) social life in all its forms over at least the past 6–7000 years.

I also see a vital link between phronesis and another Aristotelean concept, *synoikismos*, which I have recast in English as synekism – the stimulating effects of communities uniting to form a common territorial homeland, the

city-state or *polis*.² Being and becoming urban is the source of competitive and cooperative politics, as Engin Isin, another Foucauldian geographer-planner, so convincingly argues in *Being Political* (2002). It is now becoming increasingly clear, especially among those building on the work of Jane Jacobs in *The Economy of Cities* (1969), that settling in dense agglomerations has been the primary force behind nearly all major economic and social developments in human history, starting with the agricultural revolution and leading to the development of the centralized state, social hierarchies of power, religious systems and cultural identities, great artistic achievements, industrial revolution and the rise of urban industrial capitalism.

These arguments about *urban spatial causality* would have been seen as incomprehensible if not entirely unacceptable to social scientists fifteen or so years ago. Many new developments over the past two decades – and I would include the rise of phronetic social science here – have radically revised critical studies of the relations between cities, space, and society. Taking the lead today has been a group of geographical economists, including Paul Krugman, Edward Glaeser, Richard Florida, Allen Scott, and Michael Storper, who have pioneered the notion that cities and urbanization are the primary generative force behind economic development, technological innovation, and cultural creativity, following the innovative example set by Jane Jacobs in *The Economy of Cities* (1969).³

Almost all the work of the geographical economists, however, remains ensconced in the econometric super-modeling mode of epistemic social science. Tractability within econometric models, for Krugman and others, becomes the determinative factor in advancing ideas about urban spatial causality. Here then in my view is one of the most significant unexplored fields for phronetic social science, applying to urban spatial causality and the generative effects of urban agglomeration the greater appreciation for ethics and power relations, prudence and praxis, characteristic of theoretical and applied phronesis. This becomes especially important when it is recognized that this generative power also produces inequality, hierarchy, and injustice. Focusing attention on these topics is a key step in the spatialization of phronetic social science.

Perhaps the most difficult and challenging move towards a spatialized phronesis involves a realization that the debates between epistemic and phronetic social science – the so-called ‘Science Wars’ – are not just a contemporary phenomenon but have evolved over the past hundred or so years from a distorted ontological framework that emerged in the late nineteenth century with the original formation of the liberal social sciences, and I might add also the radical socialist theory associated with Marxism as historical materialism. I speak of the rise of *social historicism*, a deep and almost unquestioned belief in the privileging of time over space and historicity over spatiality in explaining everything about human society. All the human sciences, epistemic and

phronetic, have been rooted and shaped by this privileging of time and history, and an associated marginalization and stultification of critical spatial perspectives, for nearly 150 years.

Perhaps the only scholar to have explicitly recognized this great ontological distortion was Michel Foucault, although Nietzsche spoke of a 'malignant historical fever' in the 1870s. Did it start with Bergson, Foucault asks (Foucault 1980). Why is it that almost all scholars see time and history as dynamic, dialectic, developmental, problematic, infused with social causality and process; while space and geography are seen as fixed, dead, background, environment, a container and stage of social action rather than a vital part of the action itself. There is no fundamental reason for this privileging, Foucault thought, and he expected the present era to be one dominated by space, by ideas about simultaneity, juxtaposition, the near and far, the side-by-side (Foucault 1986). Although the past two decades has seen a marked spatial turn in all the human sciences, the ontological hold of social historicism still prevails and is present in nearly all the chapters of *Real Social Science*.

What in retrospect can be called the historical turn of the late nineteenth century, when every discipline, including the natural sciences, became imbued with an explanatory historicity and historiography, was not an unintentional ontological blunder. Although there is almost no literature on the subject and it cannot be treated in depth here, this 'bias' about time versus space emerged quite consciously from the German philosophical tradition of *historismus* and its search for an alternative to natural science in producing a rigorous social science. A quasi-scientific historiography was the answer, idiographic and empirically detailed in the liberal social sciences, more nomothetic and law-seeking in scientific socialism or Marxism. In many ways, this search for a more 'humanistic' alternative to the natural sciences in the last decades of the nineteenth century was very much like what would happen with the development of phronetic social science a century later.

Historical understanding, the narrative form, and scrupulous historiography became the foundation for all the new social sciences as well as scientific socialism. The core thinkers in German philosophy at the time included J.G. Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt (the geographer Alexander's older brother), Leopold von Ranke, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Also influential were their students, many of whom would become well known thinkers of the twentieth century, including Martin Heidegger (codifier of an historicist ontology in *Zeit und Sein*), Max Weber (brother of the almost forgotten location theorist Alfred), and Georg Simmel (a major influence on the Chicago School of Urban Ecology) (see Iggers 1983). Connected in various ways are Immanuel Kant (many of the historicists considered themselves neo-Kantian), Hegel, Marx and Engels, many in the Frankfurt School and, more recently, Jurgen Habermas.

Meanwhile, the field of geography, mired in large part in a deterministic environmentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, had its own 'scientific' mode in physical geography and, despite its strong Germanic roots, participated little in the early debates on social vs. natural science. Indeed, social historicism was in part a response to geography's environmental determinism, seeking in historical hermeneutics and heuristics a freeing of the human and social will and consciousness as a means of creating a socio-historical rather than (physical) geographical causality.

There is so much more here to explore and explain. The key point I am making, beyond explaining the fundamental spatiality of phronesis, is that resolving the debate between natural and social science can all too easily lead to an occlusion or peripheralization of the geographical or spatial imagination. This is what happened in the late nineteenth century in what I have called the great ontological distortion, and I worry that it may be happening again in the contemporary development of phronetic social science. This makes the relative absence of a critical spatial perspective in *Real Social Science* more than just an incidental weakness but a much more essential and challenging problem.

The spatialization of phronesis needs to be based in a conscious critique of the effects of social historicism and the acceptance of an ontological 'trialectic' that adds spatiality to the longstanding emphasis on the relations between sociality and historicity. In other words, the (phronetic) study of human society must recognize from the start the interdependence of the social, the historical, and the spatial, with no one of the three privileged over the others. This revamped and rebalanced ontology has profound implications for the production of knowledge of all kinds. Perhaps never before has it been so necessary to challenge the occlusive hold of social historicism and engage more directly – especially in applied phronesis – with the spatiality of social life.

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Notes

1. I make the distinction between city and city-state to reflect recent ideas that urban settlement originated more than 12,000 years ago but these first cities were acephalous, without centralized authority. Around 6–7000 years ago, however, the city-state (referred to in ancient Greek as *polis*) began to form in south-west Asia and soon after in many other parts of the world. I refer to these as the first and second urban revolutions in the first two chapters of *Postmetropolis* (Soja 2000).

2. Aristotle, like Thucydides, saw *synoikismos* as defining the formation of the city-state. Most of the very few scholars who have recognized the concept (usually spelling it as synoecism) have tended to see it as a one-shot affair, as a kind of originary moment. I have extended the concept in my use of *synekism* as a continuing stimulus associated with social agglomeration, the most basic definition of urbanization.

3. Jacobs sums up her arguments with the statement 'Without cities, we would all be

poor', that is, we would have remained hunters and gatherers as we were since the origins of homo sapiens. Economics text-

books (e.g., McDonald 1997) now include 'Jane Jacobs externalities' as a major factor in economic development.

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Tension points in real social science: A response

Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram

Social science today often contents itself with trying to explain *particular* events in terms of *general models* without understanding those events as *experienced* by the people being studied and without providing findings that might help people address the problems they are experiencing. It can be argued that the recent development of social science has focused too much on its own 'evidence-inference methodological core' and has lost sight of what is being studied, who is being studied, and how the results of research can challenge popular understanding, misconceptions, and power relations. At the

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most basic level, our edited volume *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram 2012) is designed to provide examples of research that is situated in real communities, grows out of the concerns of people in those communities and is conducted in ways that can help those people address those concerns. These examples demonstrate that what we are calling 'phronetic social science' (as originally coined by Bent Flyvbjerg) offers a meaningful approach for making social science useful and relevant to real people experiencing real problems. Phronetic social science calls for social scientists foregoing the attempt to build generic models of social behaviour and instead situate their work in ongoing political struggles as they occur in specific contexts.

The three short essays in this symposium on issues raised by our collection are most welcomed not just for their generous compliments but also for their thoughtful criticisms that help move the debate about our work further. The key issue is what to make of the idea of phronetic social science now that it is associated with a growing number of research projects across the social sciences. In our volume, we suggest that the case studies provided by our colleagues highlight how phronetic social science is not just context-specific and designed to be relevant to addressing issues people are confronting, but that it is research that is sensitive to power relations and the tension points that those power relations create. Focusing on tension points, we suggest, is key to making phronetic social science useful. These tension points highlight how power relations are standing in the way of addressing the particular problems being studied. The same can be said for this response. We focus on *selected* tension points our commentators have provided in the name of helping to make progress on moving phronetic social science forward. (Our commentators have given us much to consider but space limitations prevent us from considering all.)

Our first tension point comes from Brian Caterino's ideas of 'mutual understanding' and 'collaboration' between researchers and actors (Caterino 2013: 739–45). He appears to be arguing that phronetic social science *must* have these features, but we disagree. Phronetic researchers may decide such mutual understanding will form part of their research, but phronetic research itself can be done (and indeed already exists) that is without such mutual understanding. For us, the notion of mutual understanding in phronesis is the understanding among the reference group to which the researchers consider themselves to belong, i.e., the group that shares the same concerns as the researchers; and this group may or may not include actors. The same argument applies to collaboration. Phronetic social science may engage in collaboration but it does not have to in order for it to be phronetic. Beyond this major tension point with Caterino, we object to the ideas that a phronetic researcher must be a 'superior individual' and 'stand above' the moral commitments of participants. In both cases, we do not see the phronetic researcher as superior or above that

which he or she studies, rather he or she may remain ‘outside’ the moral commitments of participants; a position that is in our view more consistent with Foucault.

The second major tension point comes from John Gunnell’s thoughtful essay questioning our understanding of the relationship of theory to practice (and by extension, research to social action) (Gunnell 2013). Gunnell shares with us a concern about reification, or how much of social science modeling ends up studying reified models of its subject matter without giving due appreciation that these are at best heuristic devices and not the thing in itself. Gunnell’s mention in this regard of Max Weber’s concerns about Economics as a discipline is entirely consistent with our understanding of how social science is best when it puts reified models aside and situates its investigations in specific contexts as experienced by the people being studied. Part of our reasoning is that the subject matter of the social sciences is how people on the ground are experiencing social relations, and this is not reducible to abstract, universal causal models. Gunnell’s complaint with our version of what he calls this ‘interpretive’ approach is that it draws on an outdated and repudiated model that distinguishes the natural sciences from the social sciences. For Gunnell, both the natural sciences and the social sciences are interpretive in that they provide interpretations of the subject matter being studied. The difference for Gunnell is that while the natural sciences ‘present’ an interpretation of their subject matter, the social sciences ‘represent’ interpretations of the interpretations the people being studied. We agree on this distinction between the natural and social sciences and also agree that social science needs to be sensitive to the problems of reification. If we take this tension point seriously, it can move phronetic social science forward by making the clash of interpretations (within a political community or social setting, but also between researchers and the people being studied) a key focus for getting at what impedes action to address a problem.

A third major tension point comes when Gunnell worries aloud that phronetic social science is at risk of repeating the failures of the past in trying to make social science matter. For Gunnell, social science best gives up the hope of being political, taking sides, trying to be relevant, etc. Instead, it is best when it sticks simply to trying to offer a clear understanding of what is being studied. Theory is theory and practice is practice. Here the tension point is inflected. We disagree in that social science as an interpretive enterprise cannot but be involved in the offering of interpretations that people are using to make sense of their experiencing. Social science is in this sense relevant whether it wants to be or not. The question is whether it will perform its relevance effectively. Clarifying what counts as a good interpretation is itself taking sides, engaging in advocacy and proposing solutions. Michel Foucault popularized the term ‘discursive practices’ to highlight how theory was imbricated in practice and vice versa. The theory/practice divide is as Gunnell suggests a

non-issue but not necessarily in the ways that he states. To theorize, to engage in research, to interpret social action is ineliminably a form of that social action and when done in ways that are directly connected to specific social struggles it becomes part of that struggle. Phronetic social science grows out of a specific context of social struggle so as to further attempt to resolve those conflicts, and to do so by focusing on interpretive tension points in particular. Phronetic social science operates as a more systematic, reflexive, even meditative moment within social struggle, not something apart from it. The very idea of a discursive practice suggests that this is how it should be (making phronetic social science not an unnatural violation of the theory/practice divide).

Despite our agreement with much of what Gunnell writes there are remaining areas of difference that we would like to address. First, he argues that the necessary institutional transformation for *making social science matter* is likely to come from the top, but history shows us that there are countless examples of real institutional transformations that have been sustained precisely because they have come from below (e.g. the struggle for citizenship rights, improved labour conditions, women's rights, gay rights among many others). There is a real opportunity for contributing effectively to similar transformations from the kinds of social science we have assembled in this volume. Second, Gunnell argues that we advocate for a social science that has the capacity, ability and opportunity to intervene in social practices akin to the ways in which natural scientists seek to control nature. In fact, our position is exactly the opposite. Third, he makes a rather ethnocentric argument that somehow the phronetic approach would only really work in contexts with which we are intimately familiar (i.e. Aalborg, Denmark), while we have shown throughout the chapters in *Real Social Science* and in particular in our discussion of tension points that the phronetic approach must always be adapted and modified to fit particular contexts, such as the work that Flyvbjerg has done in Africa and Landman in China, mentioned in the book. Finally, we contest the comparison of our enthusiasm for the phronetic approach to Mormon missionaries and Jehovah Witnesses, as both these communities are based on *faith*, and the one obvious demonstration in our volume is the *real empirical difference* the phronetic approach has made to the research process and research results detailed in the case studies.

The final major tension we wish to highlight here comes from Ed Soja whose essay focuses penetratingly on the importance of *spatiality* for phronetic social science (Soja 2013). Soja appropriately notes the Ranu Basu contribution to our volume entitled 'Spatial Phronesis' (Basu 2012). Yet, he is concerned that we did not integrate her focus on spatiality into our overall explanation of phronetic social science, leaving us vulnerable of being accused of re-inscribing the longstanding social science prejudice against space in preference of privileging time. In this regard, we are happy to stand corrected and thus need to highlight more the importance of how space is constructed in social science

research, while at the same time recognizing the variation in how space is used across different country contexts. We can think more about how to theorize context so that specialization can be accounted for. Yet, as with much of the phronetic approach, we resist modeling. We do not want to specify a model of how to do phronetic research for that would undercut the idea that it should be something that varies with the context, otherwise it would not be context sensitive. That said, context specific research needs to be sensitive to the role of how space is being constructed and how the people being studied understand social relations spatially. We thus agree that space deserves its place in phronetic research.

As we write for this symposium, the US Senate has passed an amendment to the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013, which if sustained will limit National Science Funding to political science only to those projects that are focused on national security and the economic interests of the USA. The conscious abolition of funding to such fundamental topics of political research, such as voting, elections and democracy (among many others such as the use of the filibuster) shows that there is now an even greater need to take on board a political science (and a social science more generally) that engages with its subject matter and challenges entrenched interests in the ways that we believe the essays in *Real Social Science* do. The further demonstration of the value of the phronetic approach found in this new volume shows how, why and under what conditions social science research can matter, while our hope is that the bottom-up institutional transformation made possible through phronetic social science continues to be embraced by an increasingly larger number of individual social scientists.

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