Book Review: Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, Sanford Schram (eds.), Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis

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Phronesis and Political Science

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Book reviewed:


Deriding the social sciences is easy enough. From flying to sending text messages, we daily experience the achievements of the hard sciences in all facets of our lives. Self-confident natural scientists can point to a long list of extraordinary accomplishments. By comparison, the record of social scientists looks, at best, unimpressive. The hard sciences can boast reliable and accurate predictions. Meanwhile, the forecasts of social scientists are often no better than a coin-toss. Even growth predictions by economists may, at times, be taken as a statement to the world that practitioners of the ‘dismal science’, too, have a sense of humour. This apparent failure of the social sciences to earn their place as respected scientific disciplines on a par with physics, mathematics, biology and chemistry has resulted in two sharply divergent diagnoses with suggested cures going in equally opposite directions. For some, the failure stems from the social sciences not being scientific enough. The strategy to address it is, therefore, to make the social sciences more like the hard sciences by improving and updating the methodological skills of social science researchers. Other scholars have
drawn the exact opposite conclusion. For them, failure is the inevitable result of a misguided attempt to mimic the natural sciences in a hopeless quest to identify universal, law-like explanations of social phenomena.

Unambiguously siding with the latter camp, Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis presents itself as a cure for social scientists suffering from physics envy. Edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram, the book assembles a rich collection of essays which all purport to articulate a conception of social science as ‘phronesis’. In contrast to the hard sciences with their emphasis on ‘epistémé’ (universal truths) and ‘techné’ (technological know-how), phronetic social science stresses ‘the practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of any particular social practice’ (p. 16).

This understanding of phronesis was first articulated by Bent Flyvbjerg in Making Social Science Matter (2001), in which Flyvbjerg reinterpreted the original Aristotelian concept to include issues of power and then offered it as an alternative to the idea of social science as science modelled on the natural sciences. The present volume is explicitly intended as a sequel to that book. It goes beyond Making Social Science Matter in that it does not only provide a theoretical discussion of the phronetic approach but also shows phronesis in action. The desire to demonstrate that phronesis does not work only in theory, but also in practice, is reflected in the balance of theoretical and applied chapters. The first four chapters comprising the first part of the book grapple with what are essentially methodological and theoretical issues, including what phronesis is, and how it relates to
narrative analysis and concepts of power. The eight chapters forming the remainder of the book are all cases studies applying phronesis to a broad assortment of concrete, situated problematics, ranging from the fight over London’s Heathrow third runway and racism in rural Canada, to power relations between researchers and advocates fighting for an affordable housing fund in Philadelphia.

It is an achievement of the book that, despite the sheer breadth of subjects covered, the reader gets a fairly good sense of how the shared methodological perspective provides the various narratives with a common thread. This is, in many respects, essential to the credibility of the phronetic enterprise in the ongoing Methodenstreit, and it makes Real Social Science a powerful articulation of the phronetic approach, as well as being a well-executed and carefully edited book.

The real litmus test for such a book, however, is whether it can preach to more than the converted, and here a degree of scepticism is not entirely unwarranted. In anticipation that some might dismiss their book as continuing the sterile quants vs. quals dispute, the authors emphasize that both quantitative and qualitative data are pertinent to phronesis. Those with a quantitative bent may also find it reassuring that the name of Todd Landman – a scholar well-known for his quantitative research on human rights – figures among the editors. Still, it is telling that the book does not include any quantitative study and that even the chapter contributed by Landman is devoted to the methods of ‘narrative analysis’. The quants’ suspicion can only be reinforced by an examination of the index with
numerous references to the work of Foucault, Gadamer, Heidegger, Bourdieu and Habermas, but no mention of game theory or Bayesian statistics. More fundamentally, some assertions (particularly in the chapter presenting the phronetic project by Sanford Schram) may strike quants, and even some moderate quals, not just as critical, but as antithetical to quantitative social science research. Phronetic social science, it is argued, entails ‘a repudiation of the main tenets of the positivist social science model’, including the assumption that “the accumulation of a growing body of predictions about social relations comes from the study of variables in samples involving large numbers of cases’ (p. 23). Alas, for those most inclined to disagree with its most radical claims the book provides scant reason to change their mind.
About the author:

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Key quote

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