

# Making Political Science Matter? Phronetic Social Science in Theory and Practice

Edward W. Gimbel

**Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis.** Edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 320p. \$95.00 cloth, \$32.99 paper.

*Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*, edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram, is an interesting read in the context of the current assault on both the scientific status and the practical utility of social science in general and political science specifically. In it, the editors collect examples of social scientific work that embrace what Flyvbjerg and others have described as phronetic social science. This approach makes creative use of the Aristotelian intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which the editors identify with the knowledge of how to address and act on social problems in a particular context. Rather than emphasizing the universal truth (*episteme*) that has traditionally been the summum bonum of social scientific inquiry, or fixating on the know-how (*techne*) that is characteristic of methodologically driven approaches, Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram present examples of social scientific research where contextual knowledge, deep understanding of embedded power dynamics, and immediate relevance to political reality take center stage. In so doing they give the lie to those who would deny the practical relevance of social research. At the same time, however, the editors develop an understanding of *phronesis* that marginalizes valuable elements of Aristotle's understanding of the intellectual virtue, most notably its basis in self-examination, while simultaneously bringing *phronesis* much closer to *techne* by seeking to develop their phronetic social science along methodological lines.

To begin with the essays themselves, the subject matter of the substantive pieces collected in *Real Social Science* is remarkably diverse, engaging with the economic human rights of women in the small cities of upstate New York

(Virginia Eubanks' "Feminist Phronesis and Technologies of Citizenship"), transitional justice in post-Amnesty Law Brazil (Tricia D. Olsen, Leigh A. Payne, and Andrew G. Reiter's "Amnesty in the Age of Accountability: Brazil in Comparative Context"), and how cartographic representations of "at-risk" communities in Toronto have served to deflect critical attention from the broader structural conditions of neoliberal policy (Ranu Basu's "Spatial Phronesis: A Case Study in Geosurveillance"). "Methodologically" we see approaches that emphasize researcher participation in social projects, digital ethnography, post-structuralist discourse theory, Foucauldian genealogy, feminist epistemology and sociology of knowledge, and others.

If we seek a unifying theme across these essays, even the idea of phronetic social science advanced by the editors falls somewhat short as it takes on various aspects throughout the individual essays—as anti-hegemonic phronesis (William Paul Simmons), spatial phronesis (Basu), and feminist phronesis (Eubanks). Whatever phronetic social science means to the editors, it takes on a wide range of meanings in the hands of the authors collected here. In my reading the substantive essays are united less by a common understanding of the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* and more by a commitment to its expression in *praxis*.<sup>1</sup> This is social science that is engaged with the social world and political action in very direct ways. Flyvbjerg's own substantive essay discusses how social research can influence public deliberation, policy, and practice by way of relationships between social scientists and the media. In "Power and Conflict in Collaborative Research" Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl similarly interrogate the relationship between social science and policy making, in this case where researchers actively participate in social projects negotiation. For their part, Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili were invited to undertake the digital ethnography project described in their essay "Unsettling a Settler Society: Film, Phronesis

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and Collaborative Planning in Small-Town Canada” by local anti-racism activists, and their work takes on an explicitly political cast as a result. Simmons is perhaps most explicit about the political nature of social science when he writes in “Making the Teaching of Social Justice Matter” that “a phronetic social science, *to the extent that it is concerned with questions of social justice*, must get involved in doing politics” (p. 247). Whatever *phronesis*—and phronetic social science—may be, it must be expressed in political practice. These pieces offer a firm rebuke to those who would critique social science as disconnected from and irrelevant to the social world.

These essays are, on the whole, enlightening and well worth studying in their own rights, and the editors are to be commended for seeking out and assembling such an engaged and engaging set of authors. I am left, however, with a somewhat uneasy feeling with respect to the broader and elusive idea of “phronetic social science.” Thus, while there is much to be said about and praised in the substantive chapters of the volume, my focus will be on the overarching theme and theoretical structure of the larger project of which this volume is a part. My unease can be summed up quite straightforwardly in the question, “Is this *phronesis*?” It may seem strange to focus so intently on the use of the term *phronesis* in critiquing a volume as generally superb as this one, but there is more at stake here than semantics. The appropriation of *phronesis* evident in this volume and its predecessors serves not only to potentially misidentify the very real contributions made here, but also to foreclose other critical applications of the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* in the analysis of political science as a discipline and the political world more generally. More specifically, if we take seriously Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue that requires self-examination and the interrogation of one’s own values in relation to the world of action, we have reason to believe that phronetic social science as it is presented here loses something of value in its appropriation of *phronesis*. To see how this is the case, it will be necessary to consider the larger project of which *Real Social Science* is a part.

This collection is continuous with a pair of earlier texts authored by Flyvbjerg or prominently featuring his work and approach. The first, *Making Social Science Matter*, was published in 2001 and immediately became something of a bellwether among political scientists inspired by Perestroika—the counter-hegemonic movement in political science that sought to challenge the dominance of quantitative, method-driven work in the discipline. Flyvbjerg’s text resonated with Perestroikans, in part, because it offered something that Perestroika was accused of lacking—a way forward. Even while Perestroika changed the face of political science in important ways, it remained a somewhat ambiguous, discontinuous movement. This is perfectly understandable given the history of the movement.

The Perestroikan challenge to hegemonic visions of political science has roots that go back to the debate within the philosophy of the social sciences between positivist visions of science and more interpretive approaches. These tensions found clear expression in debates within political science surrounding behavioralism. Behavioralism emerged in force in political science in the 1950s as a broader neopositivist current within the social sciences found expression in calls for a more scientific approach to politics. The contributions to the war effort made by the natural sciences (physics most obviously and in particular) ignited within these departments the feeling that the route to political significance lies through the aspiration to science. In his history of the movement, James Farr traces out the affinities that united otherwise diverse scholars under the revolutionary banner of behavioralism, focusing on “(1) a research focus on political behavior, (2) a methodological plea for science, and (3) a political message about liberal pluralism.”<sup>2</sup>

Behavioralism rose to prominence quickly,<sup>3</sup> and just as quickly engendered a backlash, but as Farr notes, “postbehavioralism neither inspired the allegiance nor provoked the challenges that its namesake had.”<sup>4</sup> In the era after behavioralism the discipline settled into a fraught status quo where no single approach could claim the broad support that behavioralism enjoyed in its heyday, and the scholars of a fractured discipline oriented themselves around “separate tables” according to methodological, ideological, and political affinities.<sup>5</sup> Thus behavioralism’s rise to establishment doctrine was followed closely by a period of renewed criticism of this new establishment, and a settling in to a status quo. Over the years, absent a purposive and coherent opposition, adherents of a loose behavioralism characterized by a preference for quantitative methodologies began to calcify into an institutional hegemony over the discipline less by design than by default.

The same tensions that gripped the discipline in the wake of the behavioral revolution re-emerged in the context of the Perestroika movement, albeit with different expressions and consequences. The methodological plea for science characteristic of behavioralism had held strong, and by the turn of the century there was a growing dissatisfaction with the perceived continued hegemony of broadly positivist, quantitative, behavior-oriented research at the highest levels of the discipline. But just as postbehavioralism was characterized by a loose hegemony countered by an even looser insurgency, the institutional dominance of quantitative methodologies was in turn countered by a heterogeneous alliance of area studies specialists, theorists, and adherents to qualitative methodologies. In this context, *Making Social Science Matter* offered both a cogent critique of dominant trends in social science and a way forward. It was, in the words of its subtitle, a powerful statement of both “*Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*.”

In commenting on that book, and the larger trends of which it was a part, Stephen K. White praised a phronetic social science that “can help people in ongoing political struggle question the relationships of knowledge and power and thereby work to change things in ways they might find more agreeable and even satisfying.”<sup>6</sup> This was a way forward: A vision of social inquiry that was not tied to specific methods, or even to overarching methodological debates, but that was avowedly critical and political. *Making Social Science Matter* was inspiring enough to many Perestroikans to warrant further work explicitly tying Flyvbjerg’s project to post-hegemonic political science. Thus in 2006 came the publication of *Making Political Science Matter*, an edited volume that looked to the applicability of Flyvbjerg’s work to political science.

For all its theoretical development over this period, phronetic political science remained, somewhat ironically, difficult to pin down in practice. In the present volume, Schram acknowledges as much, noting that phronetic social science “has so far existed mostly in theory, with only a few examples of application to practical issues in policy, planning and management” (p. 15). At its core, *Real Social Science* is a response to that observation—a wide-ranging collection of work by scholars who identify with a phronetic social science approach and who bring it to bear on diverse topics all while exhibiting the plurality of methods characteristic of post-Perestroikan political science. But *Real Social Science* is more than a collection of essays; it is also the continuation of this larger project of appropriating the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* in the post-Perestroikan context.

There are two tendencies with respect to *phronesis* evident in *Real Social Science*. The first of these, and the one that the editors and many of the collected authors (Shdaimah and Stahl, Sandercock and Attili, and Simmons most notably) emphasize throughout, is the focus on public engagement noted above, and the development of diverse approaches to social science that put this engagement front and center. This is both an admirable emphasis and one that is in my reading perfectly consistent with Aristotelian notions of *phronesis*—the substantive essays in the collection are grounded in deeply contextualized knowledge of complex power dynamics, and tend to interrogate the connections between the social scientist and the social world. Where the authors get into more trouble in my estimation (and this is as much the case in the earlier volumes as in the text under review) is when they present *phronesis* as being itself a kind of proto-methodology for the social sciences. This approach is much more pronounced in the framing essays that open the volume and in the concluding piece by the editors, “Important Next Steps in Phronetic Social Science.” *Phronesis* as method is alien to Aristotelian notions of intellectual virtue and, more importantly for our purposes, threatens to return us to the ground of methodological

debates that have been unproductive at best for political science.<sup>7</sup> Rather than pointing a way forward, we are at risk of backsliding into familiar methodological debates.

It is to the authors’ credit that they are aware of this risk, and seem intent on trying to avoid it. The theoretical essays that open the volume (particularly Schram’s essay) repeatedly emphasize that phronetic social science is not about a particular method, but rather shares with Flyvbjerg’s original project a commitment to methodological pluralism. Indeed in both *Making Social Science Matter* and *Making Political Science Matter* Flyvbjerg made similar statements, remarking that “the most important issue is not the individual methodology involved, even if methodological questions may have some significance.”<sup>8</sup> This caution with respect to treating *phronesis* as a method is well advised. In terms of Aristotle’s *Ethics technē* (the “technical” wisdom of the craftsman who applies known methods to the solving of a problem or the production of a product) is quite distinct from *phronesis*. In short, methodology is a question of *technē*. *Phronesis*, as Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram seem to recognize, refers to something else entirely.

However well this distinction may be understood in the abstract, it becomes clear throughout this project that phronetic social science has methodological aspirations. These aspirations are suggested as early as *Making Social Science Matter* with Flyvbjerg’s “guidelines for a phronetic social science” and continue in the present volume. In discussing prior treatments of *phronesis* in philosophy, the authors note that “no one had developed the theory and philosophy of *phronesis* into a practical methodology that could be applied by researchers interested in actually practicing a phronetic social science” (p. 285). In short, earlier authors had upheld the distinction between *phronesis* and *technē*. The authors go on to argue that such an “applied *phronesis*” was in fact outlined by Flyvbjerg in *Making Social Science Matter*, further developed in *Making Political Science Matter*, and now bears fruit in *Real Social Science*.

Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram are careful to clarify that “application” in this case does not mean quite the same thing as it does in the natural sciences, but the tendency to return to these methodological terms is interesting to me even apart from this specific context. It rehearses the problematics of the backlash against behavioralism in political science with its emphasis on method. Where behavioralism emphasized a plea for science cast in methodological terms, postbehavioralism sought to counter this tendency, and the discipline found itself arranged around the “separate tables” described by Almond.<sup>9</sup> Perestroika has similarly been down this road before, rejecting one method or set of methods in favor of another, ostensibly less methodologically-focused approach. Flyvbjerg’s phronetic social science promises to be such an approach. This makes the incipient rever-

sion to method all the more disappointing, particularly when cast in terms of *phronesis*.

So if the appeal to *phronesis* as a methodological guide is to be rejected, as I argue, we may inquire as to what *phronesis* can offer post-Perestroikan political science beyond the aforementioned emphasis on *praxis*. On this point Hans-Georg Gadamer's reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* provides a guide. Gadamer's reading of *phronesis* explicitly focuses on the distinction between *phronesis* and *techné*, the distinction that I have drawn on in rejecting phronetic social science understood in methodological terms.<sup>10</sup> In the course of that discussion, Gadamer notes that one important point of distinction rests on the kinds of knowledge characteristic of *techné* and *phronesis*. In short, the practitioner of *phronesis* (the *phronimos*) possesses a kind of self-knowledge that is distinct from the technical knowledge demanded by *techné*.

In connecting this idea to his own interest in textual interpretation, Gadamer argues that in order to understand the meaning and significance of a text, the interpreter "must *not* try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand it at all."<sup>11</sup> Interpreting a text, like the ethical action ruled by *phronesis*, requires that the text in the case of the reader and the action in the case of the ethical decision-maker *matter to* and be *related to* the reader/actor's own situation. Understanding is only possible in the context of one's own situation. This is what we mean by saying that *phronesis* requires a kind of self-knowledge: Practical wisdom requires that we interrogate our own situation vis à vis the action we take. Gadamer uses this insight and applies it to the understanding of a text. Understanding a text also requires self-understanding, and the willingness to examine, insofar as it is possible, one's own beliefs and prior knowledge in relation to the subject matter.

Much as Gadamer extends this point about *phronesis* to the understanding of a text, I would suggest that we can similarly extend it to the understanding of society. Where Flyvbjerg and others represented here are conscious of the relationships between the social scientist and society—through connections to mass media for Flyvbjerg, in collaboration with policy-makers for Shdaimah and Stahl, or in exposing value conflict for Steve Griggs and David Howarth—there remains a tendency to exempt the social scientist from the form of self-examination and the standard of self-knowledge that *phronesis* requires. Flyvbjerg likens phronetic social science to throwing a stick of dynamite (p. 96), or hitting a rock with a hammer to discover a fault line (p. 100). Such metaphors are illustrative for the engaged *praxis* that defines the approach of *Real Social Science* insofar as they suggest a real, even radical, effect on the social world, but inspire less confidence if our concern is the self-understanding of the social scientist and the social actor.

In total, *Real Social Science* is an impressive book, and one that political scientists of all descriptions should be able to appreciate. It takes seriously Flyvbjerg's counsel that social science must concern itself with four value-rational questions: Where are we going? Who wins and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? Is this development desirable? What, if anything, should we do about it? Nonetheless, while Flyvbjerg is aware that the "we" in the first and fourth questions is problematic, and that how this "we" is connected to power mechanisms and the desirability of proposed outcomes deserves scrutiny, the texts at hand rarely exhibit evidence of critical self-reflection on these points. In addition to Flyvbjerg's four value-rational questions we might also ask additional questions: What is the self-knowledge of the dynamite-throwing or hammer-wielding social scientist? How does he understand himself in light of his relationship to the social world? How does this understanding reflexively act on the research at hand? Perhaps it is too much to ask of each social scientist that her work engage in this kind of critical self-reflection directed toward self-knowledge, or that this examination be made an explicit part of published social scientific inquiry, much as one might include a literature review or, ironically, a discussion of methods. But this would be an appropriate expectation for a truly *phronetic* social science. And, I would add, such self-knowledge would be a valuable asset to cultivate in an environment where the social value and scientific status of the social sciences are under continual scrutiny from within and without the academy.

## Notes

- 1 Aristotle distinguishes between virtues like *sophia* (philosophic wisdom), *techné* (technical wisdom), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) on the one hand, and the activities that express these virtues—*theoria* (contemplation, the end goal of which is truth), *poiesis* (making, the end goal of which is production), and *praxis* (practice, the end goal of which is action). So, while our authors understand the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* differently, they seem to be united in their commitment to the activity associated with this virtue: action.
- 2 Farr 1995, 202.
- 3 Dahl 1993, 261.
- 4 Farr 1995, 219.
- 5 Almond 1990.
- 6 White 2003, 843.
- 7 It should be noted that the understanding of *phronesis* that I invoke here is draws heavily from Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to the intellectual virtues, particularly as developed in *Truth and Method*, *The Enigma of Health*, and *Reason in the Age of Science*. Flyvbjerg is aware of Gadamer's treatment



of *phronesis*, but finds it inadequate to his purposes on account of its insensitivity to questions of power. See Bent Flyvbjerg, "A Perestroika Straw Man Answers Back: David Laitin and Phronetic Political Science," in Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino, eds. *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 74. For our purposes the interesting question is not whether Flyvbjerg reads Gadamer appropriately or whether Gadamer or Flyvbjerg gets Aristotle "right." The more pressing question for our purposes is whether Gadamer's understanding of *phronesis* may illuminate interesting elements of social scientific practice that Flyvbjerg's appropriation obscures.

8 Flyvbjerg 2001, 129.

9 Almond 1990.

- 10 The first two points of distinction between *phronesis* and *techne* that Gadamer discusses are that a *techne* like any "technique" can be learned and also forgotten, and that in the case of a *techne* means and ends (the tools and techniques we use and the product we produce) are clearly distinct. Neither of these is the case with *phronesis*. See Gadamer 1989, 312–324. These two points relate to the mismatch between *phronesis* and method discussed above. Method, like *techne* and unlike *phronesis*, can be learned and taught, and distinguishes clearly between means and ends. The third distinction, discussed in what follows, points us in a different direction.

- 11 Gadamer 1989, 324, emphasis added.

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