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What is This?
Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino
Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method


Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino bring together a number of leading scholars to discuss the current state of political science research in their edited collection *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*. Central to the collection is the recent debate, sparked by the controversial arguments of Alborg University’s Professor Bent Flyvbjerg in his 2001 book, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, on the use of natural science methodologies in the social sciences.

In the field of political science, Flyvbjerg’s book prompted a group of writers to break away from the mainstream and form what has been termed the Perestroika movement. These writers argue that their work signals a shift towards making the political science discipline more relevant to understanding not just the problems political scientists address in their studies, but also the problems political actors confront in the field of political struggle (Shapiro, 2005).

At first glance, readers unfamiliar with the debates stemming from Flyvbjerg’s work and the Perestroika movement may view Schram and Caterino’s book as yet another in a long string of volumes presenting a fruitless account of opposing paradigmatic viewpoints. Indeed, for more than a century there has been an ongoing dispute between advocates of social science methodology following the natural science model and those who argue for the adoption of a human-science approach that draws on historicism and hermeneutics (Schram and Caterino, 2006). However, such an assessment does not do Schram and Caterino’s book justice. Their edition cleverly, yet subtly, illustrates the essence of Flyvbjerg’s arguments and the Perestroika movement.

In *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, Flyvbjerg argues that social scientists need to rethink the type of research they are capable of producing. Like others before him, he calls for the social sciences to reject the pretense that it can emulate the natural sciences. He suggests that, given the necessary irrationality of the subject matter, the social sciences will inevitably fail when following the natural sciences model of providing causal explanations for human behaviour. Instead, Flyvbjerg traces an intellectual path back to the work of Aristotle and, in doing so, provides an argument suggesting that the social sciences are better equipped to help inform practical, rather than law-like, reason.
In *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*, Schram and Caterino (2006:1) point out that what differentiates Flyvbjerg’s work from his predecessors is the way he bridges the gap between theory and practice. The editors note that Flyvbjerg unites philosophical and empirical subdivisions by providing a strong theoretical grounding which is then illuminated by empirical examples from his own research. He achieves this in a way that demonstrates how researchers can engage in the research of political decision-making that enhances democracy. While Schram and Caterino do not fully agree with Flyvbjerg’s arguments, they acknowledge that he makes a compelling call for a social science that people can use to make a difference in their lives.

Prior to presenting what the contributing scholars have to say about the debates stemming from Flyvbjerg’s work, Schram and Caterino set the scene by reviewing the recent history of political science research. They link the persistence of the naturalistic model to a push, in a Kuhnian sense, for a unitary approach to research based on a positivist paradigm and, more recently, rational-choice theory. They show how, over time, resistance to this push resulted in a shift in the discipline to radical pluralism. However, with reference to contemporary writers in the field, Schram and Caterino point out that this shift is more accurately referred to as a *constrained pluralism*, where the so-called *plurality of methodological approaches* was subject to partial positivist hegemony that actually limited methodological diversity. Indeed, contemporary writers refer to radical pluralist approaches as forms of *post-positivism*.

Schram and Caterino suggest that at the end of the twentieth century the field of political science research remained dominated by constrained pluralism, but a variety of *interpretative approaches*, such as critical theory, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, and feminism, had emerged. These approaches challenge the primacy of positivist models of causality through an emphasis on understanding how people attribute meaning to social action within specific contexts. Researchers utilising these approaches find it difficult to conceive of a pure social fact that is independent of the context of meaning: ‘knowledge of the social world is impossible without understanding the meaningful involvement of the participants in the social world’ (p. 7).

Schram and Caterino then show how Flyvbjerg draws on these interpretative approaches to offer a way of moving beyond the positivist paradigm that emphasises scientific causal modeling. Flyvbjerg uses several strains of social and political inquiry to argue that social science is best suited to promoting the type of practical knowledge that Aristotle called *phronesis*. In contrast to the natural science model, which focuses on the production of abstract universal knowledge, phronesis ‘is akin to practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of various forms of social practice embedded in complex social settings’ (p. 8). In essence, phronesis concerns the study of how people make practical sense of their worlds and thereby places an emphasis on entering the space between theory and practice. It is this part of Flyvbjerg’s work that has given rise to the fledgling Perestroika movement in the field of political sciences. The Perestroikians are interested in promoting a
methodological pluralistic discipline that focuses on problem driven research aimed at generating more relevant civic-minded scholarship. However, just as Flyvbjerg’s compelling and undoubtedly controversial impact on the broader social sciences, the breakaway Perestroikians are being met with much resistance from mainstream political scientists.

The book presents the critiques and commentaries in three sections. The first section begins with a chapter written by Sanford Schram in which he provides a defence of phronetic social science by arguing that it is ‘post-paradigmatic’. He notes that Flyvbjerg prefers to call phronetic social science ‘non-paradigmatic’. Regardless of terminology, both Schram and Flyvbjerg view phronetic social science as adopting a more pragmatic, problem driven approach. Instead of suggesting that research ‘ought’ to be done in a particular way, phronetic social science ‘uses multiple methods to address a problem in ways that can inform and empower the people being studied’ (p. 11).

In the following chapter, David Laitin, while attempting to appear dispassionate by using the occasional phrase of praise, offers a critique of Flyvbjerg’s book that hints of arrogance and, at times, borders on scathing. In a similar argument to many mainstream positivist researchers before him, Laitin asserts that phronesis, more to the point isolated phronesis, cannot make a recognisable contribution to the accumulation of knowledge unless it adopts a scientific approach to the study of politics. He presents an alternative model to Flyvbjerg’s that he refers to as the Tripartite Method in which statistical analysis, formal modeling and narrative based case studies play a crucial role. He reiterates though, 'we all work inside a scientific frame' in which 'we ought to maximize inter alia openness of procedures, internal coherence of argument, good measurement of variables, increasing attempts to unravel contexts, assiduous concern for valid causal inferences, and rewards for replication' (p. 54).

The next chapter sees Bent Flyvbjerg respond to Laitin’s critique with a spirited defense of phronetic social science and his book. Flyvberg systematically illustrates how Laitin misrepresents his arguments and offers a series of possible explanations for these misrepresentations. He then welcomes Laitin’s Tripartite Method as one way to improve validity in a specific type of social research. However, he questions what type of science the method entails, arguing that:

if social science would use mathematical and statistical modeling like natural science, social science, too, would become scientific. But being scientistic does not amount to being scientific. Regardless of how much we let mathematical and statistical modeling dominate social and political science, they are unlikely to become science in the natural-science sense (p. 63).

In doing so, Flyvberg falls back on a well established argument by reminding Laitin of his position as ‘the’ researcher. That is, Laitin’s commitment to a scientific frame is built on his own preconceived theory of context and judgment. The inability of Laitin, or any other researcher for that matter, to escape his own leap of faith indicates that the social sciences are not constituted by the law like cause and effect relationships central to the natural sciences.

In the remaining chapters of the first section, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson employs a witty baseball analogy to further critique the dominance of natural science
methodologies in the field by highlighting the limits to mainstream comparative analysis; while Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl offer a practical demonstration of phronesis via the application of Flyvbjerg’s concept of *value-oriented phronetic social science* to an action research project.

The second section of the book deals with some of the larger theoretical questions posed by Flyvbjerg’s work. First, Theodore Schatzki systematically reviews the theoretical dimensions of *Making Social Science Matter* and argues that perhaps it is necessary to rethink its overly narrow account of Aristotle’s concept of phronesis. In one of the most interesting chapters in the book, Brian Caterino then follows a similar line of argument to challenge Flyvbjerg’s synthesis of Aristotelian, Nietzschean and Foucauldian notions of virtue and phronesis. Caterino provides a comprehensive set of arguments that move beyond Foucault’s dilemma in explaining his own critical stance by illustrating, in a similar vein to Laclau and Mouffe, that ‘a social science that pursues a critical analysis of values and power can best proceed from communication-theoretic rather than power-interpretative analysis’ (Schram and Caterino, 2006:149). Mary Hawesworth then, within a post-positivist frame, rejects the natural/social science division in favour of a focus on the pragmatics of knowledge production. She states:

‘[t]he critical challenge for political science, in my view, is not how to make political science matter– it does, profoundly– but how to assist political scientists to develop sophistication about our knowledge production, heightened awareness of ideological bias, normative presuppositions, and the political consequences of our research’ (p. 168).

With a similar central argument, but from a very different approach, Stewart Clegg produces a chapter that resonates with the arguments Flyvbjerg presented in his 1998 book *Power and Rationality*. Clegg, through the use of the Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus, elaborates on Flyvbjerg’s conception of contextual and bounded rationality to illustrate how power produces rationality. For both Clegg and Flyvbjerg, power blurs the dividing line between rationality and rationalization and, rationalization presented as rationality is the principle strategy in the exercise of power (Flyvbjerg, 1998:2). In short, whether or not something is considered to be rational will depend on how it is rationalized – the process of rationalization is strategic and subject to power. Following on from Clegg’s discussion on bounded rationality, Leslie Paul Thiele, from the entirely different starting point of contemporary neurophysiology, elaborates on Flyvbjerg’s notion of intuitive knowledge. She argues the cognitive conditioning of recent times and the tendency to privileged rational thought over intuition misrepresents rationality. She asserts, ‘if we are to become more proficient moral and political judges, we must acknowledge and cultivate, rather than deny or deprecate, the role of intuitive unconscious’ (p. 189).

The third section of the book addresses the disciplinary implications of Flyvbjerg’s analysis. Peri Schwartz-Shea advocates an agonistic version of political science instead of harmonistic versions of pluralism. She argues that adopting an agonistic frame necessarily requires researchers to critically assess their position as ‘the’ researcher and the political value of their research to its uses. Greg Kasza applies phronetic analysis to the education of graduate
students and provides a framework that students can employ to critically evaluate methodological claims of research models. David Kettler returns to the 1960s caucus for a new political science and to the critical theory of Franz Neumann to explore an alternative version of the relationship between political theory and research (p. 12).

The concluding and, for this reviewer, the most interesting chapter is written by Tim Luke. He suggests that Flyvbjerg’s phronetic social science, while timely, does not go far enough. In a similar vein to Isaiah Berlin’s work on positive and negative freedom, Luke asserts that “we must go beyond it if we are to appreciate sufficiently how freedom and unfreedom are intertwined with a priori assumptions that inform the analysis of political power” (p. 12). Luke adds that political analysis today is operating in the shadow of an emerging biopower regime and, for this reason, political scientists need to free themselves from the subjectification of this power:

‘they must reach down to examine the quasi-, proto-, and even pre-political practices of power that work through processes of subjectification, or what Michel Foucault called ‘governmentality’. Political Science must follow power into the biopolitical realm of subjectification if it is to serve efforts to resist it or even to turn toward fighting for freedom’ (p. 12).

A primary strength of the book is clearly the insight provided by a number of prominent scholars from diverse fields regarding social science research in general, and political science research in particular. The breadth and depth of the contributions is both interesting and informative. By way of weaknesses, some readers may find fault with the structure of the book as it seems to just end without concluding comments or a summary of its central arguments and contributions. Also, while Flyvbjerg’s concept of phronetic social science promotes a non-paradigmatic stance, readers may well be concerned, perplexed and even frustrated at times with the obvious struggle that he and each contributing author has with his or her own bias in regard to how to best undertake political science research.

However, I would assert that neither of these points are weaknesses in a phronetic social science framework. For me, the real strength of the book lies in the way the editors have arranged the critiques and commentaries. If one views them as a whole, a common theme can be traced that reflects the essence of Flyvbjerg’s concept of phronetic social science, which I believe is misinterpreted in Laitin’s critique. Both Flyvbjerg and Laitin acknowledge the difficulty one has in overcoming his or her bias. However as Flyvbjerg points out, phronetic social science is not concerned with privileging any one point of view of how things ‘ought’ to be done, it is concerned with facilitating engagement between points of view and the process of learning that occurs as a result of such engagement. This is exactly what the editors’ arrangement of the chapters facilitates. In the spirit of phronetic social science, the editors have considered the position of the author relative to the reader and while acknowledging their own bias and active role in arranging the text, they allow room for their readers to form their own conclusions about Making Political Science Matter. In this sense, the book itself is a piece of phronetic social science.
Jerald Hage and Marius Meeus (editors)
Innovation, Science and Institutional Change: A Research Handbook

2006, Oxford University Press, 573 pages, GBP £85.00

Why do some organizations develop more innovative products, services and processes than others? Why isn’t there a more direct relationship between expenditures on research and development and innovation performance measures? How can innovation be better understood using various insights from different disciplines and countries? Is there a new approach to researching innovation that is both interdisciplinary and cross-cultural? What new directions could research on innovation take?

These are the central questions Hage and Meeus’ collection addresses, setting out the ambitious aim of writing a book that constitutes a new approach to researching innovation. The reader learns from the acknowledgment section, that the two editors, Jerald Hage and Marius Meeus, were working on an interdisciplinary team researching innovation at The Netherlands Institute for the Advancement of Science when they and some of their colleagues realized that innovation processes were understood differently by scholars representing various disciplines. They decided to build an edited volume through several conferences that would help combine the insights from a number of knowledge communities – industrial innovation, history and sociology of science, evaluation research, management science and economics. They met in 2003 and 2004 with the future contributors to this book to discuss concepts, assess similarities and differences in thinking and integrate ideas. This bonding experience is noticeable throughout in the numerous introductory and concluding chapters as well in the way chapters build on each other, providing progressively deeper analysis of the concept of innovation.

In the first introductory chapter (there are five in this book), Meeus and Hage provide the reader with a guide on how to navigate through the collection. The book is three-dimensional: it has four topics, five parallel themes and three cross-cutting themes. The contributors come from the disciplines of management, economics, political science, science & technology and sociology. They are based mostly in Europe and the United States with two authors being based in Japan. This mixture of backgrounds provides for the diversity of thought represented in the volume. Unfortunately, there is not much a gender balance: only four of the 35 authors are women.