Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino (eds), Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method

Davydd J. Greenwood

Published online: 11 October 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2007

This is a book for political scientists but it should be of considerable interest to action researchers because of the confluence of two streams of thought: the so-called perestroika movement in American political science and its linkage specifically to the book by Bent Flyvbjerg, Making Social Science Matter (Flyvbjerg 2001). The perestroika movement is an internal conflict in American political science between some quantitatively-oriented “modernist” positivists and a diverse group of dissenters who advocate a more ecumenical set of approaches including case studies, constructivist studies, historical political economy, cultural studies, and postmodern research strategies. For a brief and useful overview of this movement, see http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/Perestroika/Miller.htm.

American political science appears to be deeply divided between positivist modernism with its inherent social disengagement and a broad array of qualitative, case, and praxis-oriented approaches. The two sides have recently become engaged in a public ideological struggle over the future of political science as a discipline with all of the exaggerations and parochialisms that intra-disciplinary fire storms create. Such debates are not unique to political science and are certainly a welcome relief from the smug positivism of the recent past. For example, there have also been attempts to engage both anthropology and sociology in “public” anthropology and sociology and the debates about public work have been featured as themes of recent annual meetings, something rare in previous decades outside of political mobilizations about issues like the Vietnam war. However, the public character of this debate about the future of political science is unusual. Indeed, if we look at the history of the social sciences, it is filled with attempts to quell intra-professional debate in order maintain the supposed prestige of the disciplines (Furner 1975).

I sense that a kind of academic plate tectonics is at work here. The space that political economy created in the 19th century between the natural sciences and the cultural sciences is being divided again with a significant group of social scientists and their funders floating

I profited from comments by Sidney Tarrow on this review, including help in learning more about the perestroika movement in political science. He does not agree with all of my formulations and bears no responsibility for them.

D. J. Greenwood
Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA
e-mail: djg6@cornell.edu
back toward natural science and another group of social scientists floating toward the cultural sciences. In other words, the bifurcation of the sciences and the humanities seems to be growing once again and the very legitimacy of a “social science” combining elements of the natural sciences and cultural sciences is in question. I see no inevitability here. This shift is our own fault. I see it as a combined loss of courage in the social sciences to deal, as we always did, with multiple and competing frameworks for understanding society and a desire to stay out of political trouble while remaining on the funding gravy train or to launch critiques from a cultural studies base without worrying that anyone significant is going to pay attention.

This is not a process playing out on an abstract playing field. Many of the funding agencies and the hegemonic powers in the social science disciplines have thrown their weight behind “scientism,” social science that keeps out of the public eye, and that is “objective. The culturally and historically-oriented practitioners are both embattled and deprived of resources. Since the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of social science positivism have been convincingly undermined by a generation of critiques, the perpetuation of this kind of social research in a hegemonic position makes it clear to the opponents that reasoned debate and critique alone will not change much. Direct political action is required to move the disciplines in new directions.

While the perestroika movement itself is interesting and worth knowing about, what fascinates me about the present book is the way the authors of this edited volume have used Bent Flyvbjerg’s interesting and challenging book, Making Social Science Matter, as the point of reference for organizing a broader and more intellectually-nuanced response to this internal political science debate. To see his treatise on action research used as a point of reference for adjudicating a social science disciplinary conflict is both unprecedented and exciting, suggesting that the evident crisis in the conventional social sciences may well be creating opportunities for action researchers to reclaim the social sciences for reform-oriented social purposes.

The book is edited by Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino and is divided into three parts, “The Flyvbjerg Debate”, “Phrónēsis Reconsidered”, and “Making Political Science Matter”. There are a total of 14 chapters and they are written by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds including political science, feminism, philosophy, and planning.1 Flyvbjerg himself is one of the authors and he engages in a spirited exchange with the political scientist, David Laitin, an unreconstructed positivist.

This book rewards a close reading because the issues stretch well beyond political science, affecting the future of all of the social sciences, cultural studies, and action research. The debate in political science foreshadows similar debates that are taking shape in sociology, anthropology, and planning, though they seem, for the moment, to be absent in economics and psychology where the “natural science” framework appears to have driven dissenters out.

One of the most striking features of this debate in political science for an action researcher is the perestroikan’s agreement that political science should seek to improve society and not just study how society works. This commitment reverses a trend evident for nearly a century by which the academic social sciences retreated completely from engagement with social problems as actors to occupy what Donald Schön called the “high, hard ground” where things are clear but trivial rather than occupying the swamp where

---

things are complex, dynamic and confusing but hugely important (Schön 1983). The combination of “disciplining” the social sciences (see Furner 1975; Messer-Davidow 2002) and purges aimed at driving socially critical social scientists either underground or out of academia entirely did its work so effectively that the very idea of engagement strikes most conventional social scientists at elite universities either as odd or dangerous. Whatever else this debate does, it takes for granted that the social sciences have public social obligations to meet and that many of the methods they have cultivated for so long do not help them meet such obligations to anyone’s satisfaction.

That Flyvbjerg’s book could serve a group interested in pursuing this cause so well is a valuable lesson for action research. The basic tenets of action research including the privileging of *phronēsis* over *episteme* and *tekhne* in social research and our unwavering commitment to the democratization of power relationships serve to anchor this political science discussion in a way that existing concepts and theories in political science apparently are not able to do as well. It is as if the *perestroikans* developed their own critique of political “scientism” and then discovered that Flyvbjerg and action research already had a language and conceptual framework developed enough to serve as a better general anchor for their critiques. This is both a tribute to Flyvbjerg’s own persuasive powers and to the *perestroikans*’ sincerity in a quest for a new way to conduct themselves.

All the chapters reward a close reading. In this short review, I will single out only a few for specific comment before making some more general remarks about the overall book.

Brian Caterino and Sanford Schram open by explaining that Flyvbjerg has become central to their efforts in the *perestroika* movement because he not only links theory and practice but he does so by linking the philosophical and empirical subdivisions in a way that speaks to key issues in political science. They give a brief history of what they call the naturalistic model (by which they mean quantitative, theory-driven, objectivifying political science). Intriguingly for me, this history is devoid of political interpretation as if these trends happened in a Platonic disciplinary space outside of the context of the creation of doctoral education in the U.S., the coercion the social sciences faced when they did speak out on public issues, and the competition among the fledgling social sciences for space and resources in the new post-graduate educational arena.

They make what is certainly the core assertion of both *perestroika* and of action research by affirming that practical reason is both the source of ordinary understanding and of social science understanding, not two kinds of knowledge. This demotes social science from a uniquely superior pedestal from which to “observe” the world and places it in the fray where concepts are tested in action. By doing this, they show that they understand Flyvbjerg’s aim is not to assimilate practical reason into the naturalistic positivist framework but rather to put practical reason at the center of social science practice. And they support this position by affirming that their goal is not to settle the methodology wars in political science but to “keep the conversation going” toward a rejuvenated political science.

In his own chapter, Schram argues that the centerpiece of the *perestroika* effort is to situate political science as the field that challenges power. By taking this position, he links political science directly to action research. Schram also provides more of the intellectual infrastructure that links *phronēsis* and AR by arguing that what makes Flyvbjerg particularly effective is his ability to link Marx, Habermas, and Foucault in an overall approach centered on practical reason.

While this is fine, I find it interesting that the challenges to power are articulated here as if they were the unique responsibility of political science in some kind of idealized
academic division of labor. Surely power is relevant to anthropology, economics, sociology, planning, etc. This framing shows a lack of awareness of the way perestroika, more fully developed, could not possibly be a mere political science fief. *Phróneśis* necessarily stands against the disciplinary structures of the social sciences as currently established.

David Laitin is included in this volume to stand as a defender of the “science” of political science against the perestroika challenge. To him, perestroika is a drastic and unnecessary mistake. Like so many positivists, he argues that the problem is not too much “science” but too little (just as positivist economists and managers blame too little “rationality” for their problems rather than entertaining the idea that perhaps we have already had too much of their wrong-headed rationality). He articulates his argument carefully and cogently and attempts to bring the perestroikans back into the fold by arguing that perestroika is really nothing more than case studies and qualitative methods. These, he affirms, can and must be synthesized under the master “scientific” framework of political science that is based on objectivity, quantification, and abstract modeling. His essay demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding of phróneśis, action research, and the depth of the challenge that perestroika represents to his form of positivist business-as-usual.

Bent Flyvbjerg’s chapter responds to Latin in a spirited way that effectively disposes of Laitin’s misrepresentations of his work and of the project of practical reason. The response is a model of an intelligent intellectual argument and it is effective in rebutting Laitin. However, the sparring between Laitin and Flyvbjerg also makes it clear that both of them are reduced to using very limited conceptions of science, narrow concepts of generalizability, and are overly focused on the struggle between “science” and its apparent opposite. I will comment further on these issues at the end of this review.

Theodore Schatzki adds helpful nuance to these arguments. A sympathetic analyst, he questions the image of social sciences that Laitin, Flyvbjerg, and apparently many perestroikans share as activities dominated by the search for general theories. He asserts that, at this point in the history of the discipline, the activities of explanation and prediction are separating, with explanation coming to have a much more significant role for most practitioners.

He also points out that treating this struggle dichotomously as one between two vague and homogenized abstractions, “science” and “social science” misses the fundamentally important contributions the contemporary humanities have to make to these issues. And he reminds the perestroikans that a generalized rejection of theory (episteme) would be a fundamental error. Good theories are useful, even when the goal is social action (a point Kurt Lewin made in the 1940’s quite persuasively).

Leslie Paul Thiele contributes an extended discussion of intuition as a centerpiece of phróneśis. He points out that conventional science already has taught us a great deal about the character of practical judgment and how to improve it and so, logically, the exclusion of conventional science from perestroika would be a mistake. Some of the work of the positivists is of direct relevance and value to phronetic social science.

I have cited these chapters and arguments, not to exhaust the book, but to demonstrate the variety of rich and interesting arguments to be found throughout. There is no simple party line here. There is systematic doubt, self-criticism, and optimistic assertion mixed in a productive way. All the chapters reward a close reading.

In looking over the whole collection, I am struck by the clear links between a phróneśis-based social science and the impossibility of single discipline approaches to important topics of social research. Taking a multi-method approach is not a choice but a necessity as is being resolutely multi-disciplinary in practice.
An important in-house struggle is going on in political science and some of the participants are more cautious than others about stereotyping their opposition. This is not a new problem in action research either. I have been guilty of stereotyping conventional social science in writing in order to use it as a foil for my arguments in favor of action research. If this polemical approach is confused with a research approach, it leads to overlooking the contributions of a broad array of intelligent people and the value of diverse theories and methods that have been tested repeatedly in action.

My own views on the controversy are those of an anthropologist with over 20 years of action research experience in manufacturing companies, service organizations, and communities. I am an advocate for action research and, with my co-author Morten Levin, the author of a book and a growing set of papers that critique the practices of the existing social sciences in quite fundamental and challenging ways. So my sympathies are with the perestroikans. But, I have some major reservations about the way this movement is developing.

I am stunned by the absence of a complex view of the sciences when so much of the polemic revolves around science and scientism. Repeatedly science is treated as a monolithic structure, which is a serious mistake. Even within physics and chemistry, there are a wide variety of practices and problems ranging from the abstractly theoretical to the applied and even pedestrian.

I am even more struck by the failure to distinguish between the physical sciences and the life sciences anywhere in this set of arguments. Generations of debates have surrounded the scientific standing of the life sciences with their reliance on historicity, context, and evolving subjects. By the kinds of standards Laitin lays out, even evolutionary biology would not be a science. Yet, evolutionary biology, with its emphasis on systems, context, dynamics, and historicity is an enormously valuable point of reference for phronetic social science. Indeed, I doubt that action research can develop farther without a proper understanding of the role of practical reason in the sciences.

I was surprised that a discipline putatively focused on politics and power could be silent throughout this whole book on the systematic suppression of the reformist elements in the social sciences from their very founding. Though Dorothy Ross is quoted, her history of academic purges of reformers is left out (Ross 1991), as is the fate of people like Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in sociology (Madoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998), and the combined attacks of the FBI, the CIA, and the House Un-American Activities Committee on anthropology (Price 2004). Reformist political economy did not become the socially disengaged academic fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, and psychology by accident. If we are to analyze power, then let’s be serious about our own history too.
While there are a couple of chapters that do articulate the value of theory and assert the interdependence of *episteme, tekhnē, and phrónēsis*, this deserves more emphasis. In an outstanding presentation of Aristotle’s thought on these matters, the philosopher and action researcher, Olav Eikeland, demonstrates the fundamental interdependence of *episteme, tekhnē, and phrónēsis* (Eikeland 2006). The balance between them and the synergies among them are central to the Aristotelian project and certainly should be central to the rejuvenation of the social sciences.

Finally, though there are gestures in the direction of the sciences and the humanities, this book and the *perestroika* movement is not about reforming the “social sciences” but about trying to reform political science as a discipline. This strategy, to my mind, is a fundamental mistake because it operates within and mainly reproduces the very institutional dynamics that have given rise to overspecialization and social passivity and already made *phrónēsis* impossible. Either we join with the scientists and humanists and with each other and reform what we do together or the ongoing downward slide in our prestige, funding, and social value will continue.

Whether it is possible to reform the social science disciplines one at a time is a strategic question that should concern action researchers much more than it currently does. While it is enormously gratifying to see the power action research thinking and processes can have when brought to bear on a single discipline, the battle for the future of the social sciences has to be fought on a broader terrain.

References