Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram


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The book Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012, is undoubtedly a really attractive reading since it supplies an alternative way of carrying out research in social science. The objective of the book is quite straightforward since its onset: respond to the call for providing specific instances of phronetic research in practice.

Inspired by Aristotelian concept of phronesis, phronesis is intended as “practical wisdom on how to address and act on social problems in a particular context” (p.1). Actually the book is not the first one, but the third in a series that started about fifteen years ago. It has been headed by Bent Flyvbjerg’s Making Social Science Matter in 2001 and, in 2006, by Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino’s (eds.) Making Political Science Matter. The latter also detected the spirited dispute called the “Flyvbjerg debate” between Bent Flyvbjerg and David Laitin over what phronesis is and should be in social and political sciences. In addition, the work of Nonaka and Toyama (2007) and Kase et al. (2014) have explored the power of phronesis for knowledge management and strategic leadership thereby introducing the issue of “phronetic leadership”.

Aims

The book’s key aims are as follows (p.3):

a) to present various examples of applied phronesis at the interface between social science and policy studies;

b) to inspect these examples in the context of evolving theory and methodology of phronetic social science; and eventually
c) to gather the implications in this field for policy-oriented social science research.

Let me say that I certainly like having the opportunity to read this book. Notwithstanding that, what is bewildering in this regard is that, while the book’s promises to illustrate “applied phronesis”, 6 of the 14 chapters are essentially theoretical ones, with only 8 chapters devoted to case studies. Evidently, from the two predecessor books some valuable theoretical work was left to be done.

For the motives reported hitherto, the intended readership is primarily an academic readership. The book would certainly appeal to students and scholars of social science, political science and business, management and accounting. Nonetheless, for its peculiar flavor, awareness and orientation to problem-driven research, it would also be of interest to policy makers and practitioners in these relevant disciplines.

**Key points**

There are a few points that the book pinpoints and possibly requires specific treatment. First, as early as in chapter 2 Sanford Schram clarifies that phronetic social science is not organized around specific methods of data collection. It is actually open to relying on a diversity of data collection methods so as “to best inform attempts to promote change related to the issues being studied” (p.20). In this vein, phronetic social science supplies an opportunity to move beyond the debates between positivists and interpretivists about how to organize social science in terms of method. The question is not “which method”, but “what matters” (p.20).

Second, the authors put forward that natural and social sciences are “entirely different enterprises”, given their respective subject matters (p.15). In this regard, let me say that, while I fundamentally agree on the different contextual conditions in which the two essential branches of sciences operate, I must confess that I am a bit puzzled by the “irreconcilable artificial separation” between the branches of sciences that the authors muscularly advance. In fact, while I certainly agree on the non-necessity for the social sciences to mimicking the natural sciences as well as to engage in problem-solving activities (as reported at p.15), I am much less comfortable with the books alleged impossibility of using in social sciences such methods, theories and approaches already used in the natural sciences and vice versa. Probably for my background, devoid of engaging in a neopositivist revival of the unity of science, I would definitely favour a more open-ended and non-restricted view of the relationships between the two key branches of sciences and of their methods and theories. In my opinion, some trade between natural and social science is always important and would be hugely fruitful to both. This contention is also supported by recent rapid developments of evolutionary and behavioral approaches in economics, sociology, management and accounting as well as by the grand inception of neuroscience and neuroscientific methods in the social sciences.

Third, the call for narrative analysis in phronetical social science in order to enhance its authenticity, veracity and representativeness that Todd Landman has put forth (p.33).

**Contribution**

The authority and appeal of the book definitely lies in the case studies. The collection of cases, in my understanding, fruitfully incorporates thoughtful joint wisdom across the various cases,
corroborating the book’s initial claim that in-depth, case-based investigation leads to profound and actionable practical knowledge. For instance, chapter 4 by Arthur W. Frank’s conveys a phronesis lesson, exemplified by the progressively developing wisdom of the gambler Nikolay in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, as well as the skills of the street-smart tramp Béasse in protecting his freedom, in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. Chapter 5, by Stewart Clegg and Tyrone Pitsis, describes their work on large-scale Australian public construction projects, ruminating on just how deeply disheartening it is for project professionals, who have wrestled to implement professional values of safety or community engagement, to hear their bosses’ cynical interpretation that their project is actually a case of political point-scoring rather than community service.

Flyvbjerg’s chapter 6 converses on how his own research team has engaged with the mass media as a vehicle for making his phronetic research matter to the large public. Flyvbjerg has studied and publicized, cost over-runs and mismanagement of megaprojects (i.e., public construction projects costing billions of dollars, such as metro expansions or under-sea train tunnels). In the process, he has ruffled feathers among the politicians and planners who take pride in these projects, and has garnered strong public and media support for his whistleblowing activity. The chapter presents two tips, both simple (e.g., that journalists are dealing directly with academics rather than with PR people), and profound (e.g., that doing research that matters to our communities and communicating it through the media to inform public deliberation is the strongest safeguard of social science value).

In an angrily divided Canadian community, where “Native” and “non-Native” groups were in a gridlock over land-rights, in chapter 8 Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili show how they managed to earn the trust of both parties, thereby enabling the creation of a fair-minded documentary film, that was used as the groundwork for a series of constructive conversation groups. The description of their research protocol shows them giving uncommonly vast control to the participants over the use of their interview material and the production of the film. While this appears risky in such a politicized and sensitive environment, their judgment is fine-tuned by the trust and commitment with which their candidness was eventually rewarded.

In chapter 9, Steven Griggs and David Howarth show how local problems may have global import when seen through the lenses of phronetic social science. They analyze the fight over London Heathrow airport’s third runway thereby pinpointing a growing global concern over economic growth vs. the environment, namely what is termed as sustainable aviation in the UK.

**Conclusion**

Interestingly, the kind of research that Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram are advocates of in this book resembles quite a bit to two approaches that have now developed somewhat a tradition at the intersection of management and marketing studies and practice; the ones, respectively, of “actionable research” (Lehman, 1977; Denier and Tranfield, 2006) and “evidence-based management” (Briner et al., 2009). This condition rests in that both intend to use existing management research to truly inform practitioners’ decision and actions.

While I acknowledge that this kind research has no such aristocratic and honorable patriarchs as Aristotle, it would be appealing to dig out whether some cross-fertilization might be activated among the three relevant streams (i.e., actionable research, evidence-based management and applied
phronesis). In such a way, it would turn out clearer under what conditions and how “phronetic research is well suited for effectively influencing policy and practice” (p.287). This juxtaposition would in fact come to meet Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram’s chapter 14 calls to clarify the “similarities between phronetic social science and other types of social science research” (p.294).

All in all, my impression is that this rather fascinating anthology of original papers on applied phronetic research displays a good degree of cohesiveness and drive. Therefore, it bears notable potential to have impact on the next developmental steps of social science research orientation in general and management and accounting investigation in particular. It may also have an impact on the next wave of megaprojects policy, especially in the European Union. In the all encompassing Aristotelian tradition, consequently what I would be glad to see in the future is inevitably additional exploration not only of phronetic social science, but on “phronetic natural science”!

**References**


