

S. F. Schram and B. Caterino, eds. *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. 288pp. \$24.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffrey C. Bridger

**M**aking *Political Science Matter* is a play on the title of Bent Flyvbjerg's influential 2001 book, *Making Social Science Matter*. Flyvbjerg's basic argument is that we are making a mistake to think the social sciences can approximate the natural sciences in either their predictive ability or their ability to provide causal explanations for human behavior. Like many before him, Flyvbjerg argues that because humans are self-reflective, and because the social world is contingent and historical, it makes no sense to search for universal, timeless truths. Our understanding must be contextual and aimed at providing the practical wisdom Aristotle called *phronesis*. Instead of prediction or the development of abstract theory, the social sciences should, in Flyvbjerg's (2001, 167) words, "... contribute to society's practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests. The goal of a phronetic social science becomes one of contributing to society's capacity for value-rational deliberation and action." In short, the social sciences should be used to help us lead the good life. If they are not animated by this purpose, they are, in Flyvbjerg's view, sterile academic activities with little value to society.

Not surprisingly, Flyvbjerg's call for an explicitly value-laden approach has provoked controversy in many disciplines, including political science. For the most part, the debate has been predictable, with those on one side dismissing the call for a phronetic social science as little more than an abandonment of the entire scientific project in favor of idiosyncratic and context-dependent case studies that will never produce cumulative knowledge. On the other side are the Perestroikans, who—because of their ideological and/or methodological bent—are sympathetic to Flyvbjerg's rejection of the natural sciences as the path to knowledge in the social sciences.

Unfortunately, this debate has generated more heat than light, with each side talking past the other and both largely preaching to their respective choirs. *Making Political Science Matter* aims to provide a more nuanced and balanced assessment of Flyvbjerg's argument. As the editors Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino put it, the purpose of this volume is not simply to restate the same tired arguments about method that have been going on for over

a century. Instead, they hope the various contributors will help to “. . . move the conversation further down the road in hopes that we might begin to see the emerging possibilities for a rejuvenated political science.”

The first section of the book, which focuses mainly on Flyvbjerg's vision of the social sciences, covers familiar territory and highlights the main points of disagreement between him and his critics. David Laitin, for instance, presents Flyvbjerg's argument in the starkest terms possible and proceeds with a critique that is so heavy-handed that Flyvbjerg felt compelled to respond with a point-by-point rebuttal in a chapter titled “A Perestroikan Straw Man Answers Back.” Unfortunately, the personal tone of this dialogue makes it less productive than it might otherwise have been. Other chapters in this section, however, offer a more nuanced assessment of the potential for a phronetic social science. Patrick Thaddeus Stevenson, in particular, uses a witty baseball analogy to present a compelling argument urging us to move beyond the kind of caricature presented by Laitin in favor of genuine dialogue about the issues raised by the Perestroika movement. And Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl provide an interesting discussion that highlights some of the practical difficulties that arise when researchers and advocates bring their respective agendas to collaborative research. Doing phronetic research, it turns out, is immeasurably more complicated than the detached approach that finds its way into mainstream journals.

The second set of essays examine the broader theoretical issues raised by Flyvbjerg's work. Theodore Schatzki broaches the important topic of the appropriate scope of a phronetic social science. Is Flyvbjerg's phronetic social science too narrow? Should the phronetic approach be extended to other domains and disciplines that are also central to what Schatzki calls the “public democratic process”? Brian Caterino asks whether Aristotelian and Nietzschean conceptions of virtue and phronesis can be productively synthesized. Mary Hawkesworth questions whether we should even be arguing in terms of a distinction between the natural and social sciences, proposing instead that we take a pragmatic approach to the production of knowledge that asks “. . . to whom do we want political science to matter?” Who is the audience for a particular piece of research? Stuart Clegg examines Flyvbjerg's notion of bounded rationality and demonstrates how power, history, and imagination can be used to understand the current “conditions of our social existence” while imagining a different future. In his essay, Leslie Paul Thiele examines Flyvbjerg's concept of intuitive knowl-

edge, arguing that recent developments in neuroscience can help us better understand how to become more “. . . proficient moral and political judges.” The editors suggest that this set of essays allows us to see how Flyvbjerg’s work can be used to enrich research across a number of fields. While this may be true, it is just as important that they point to gaps in his argument that beg for more analysis and reflection—especially when it comes to the role the social sciences and social scientists should play in public debate and decision making.

The book concludes with a set of essays that, collectively, take stock of what Flyvbjerg’s work means for the practice of political science. Should we take a pluralistic approach and acknowledge that there are many legitimate ways of doing political science? Or should we, as Peri Schwartz-Shea argues, admit that this is not likely to happen and strive for an explicitly reflexive and critical political science that examines the role that researchers play in creating and reproducing the social and political structures that govern our everyday lives? Perhaps, as Gregory Kasza suggests, we must begin with graduate school and encourage students to grapple with the complex moral, ethical, and ontological questions that are at the center of the discipline instead of creating methodological technocrats whose work does little to help us fashion a better world. Maybe we need to take David Kettler’s advice and look back to the critical theory of Franz Neumann in an effort to create linkages between theory and research that address the “realities of the day.” Finally, perhaps we should follow Timothy Luke and train our lights on the “dark power”—those subpolitical and technical regimes that control much of our life. In one way or another, all of the essays in this section demonstrate how political science and the other social sciences are implicated in the issues highlighted by Luke, and they underscore his point that we must move beyond the tedious debates that animate most of our disciplines and “. . . begin grappling with the bigger questions of ethics and politics, as well as the regimen of subpolitical governmentality that hides too much of them both” (p. 267).

Despite its obvious emphasis on political science, this volume deserves to be read by those working across the social sciences. The various contributions to *Making Political Science Matter* demonstrate why we need to develop research programs that, to paraphrase Ben Agger (2007), do more than use method to take social facts and freeze them into social fate. This is a daunting challenge. Books like this can help us consider the issues we face and suggest how we might become more relevant. But for political science

or any other social science to truly matter, its practitioners must engage with the publics they serve. Ultimately this requires scholars who think of themselves as active citizens who have an active role to play in creating the good life that Flyvbjerg and most of us want.

## **References**

Agger, Ben. 2007. *Public sociology: From social facts to literary acts*. 2nd ed. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2001. *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## **About the Reviewer**

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