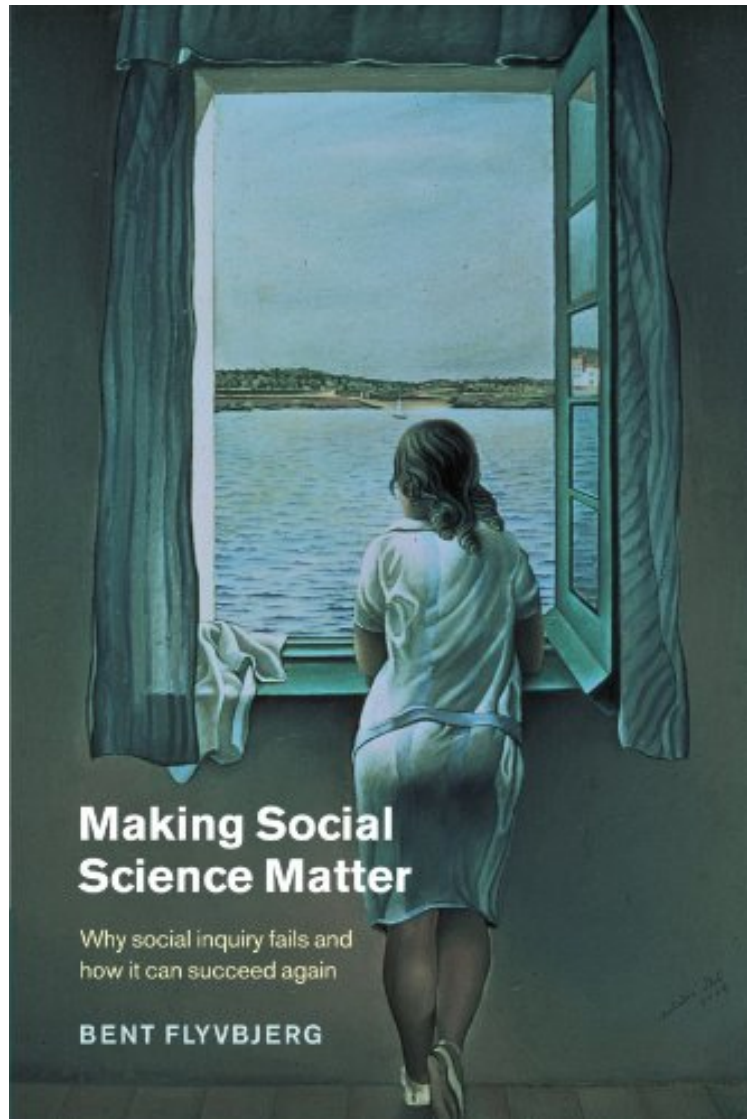


(Free read ebook) Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again

Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again

Bent Flyvbjerg

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Bent Flyvbjerg : Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again

before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Draws Oppositions where Synergies are Available By Herbert Gintis Making Social Science Matter was written in Danish and translated into English, very beautifully, by Steven

Sampson. It is a fine addition to sociological theory, and deserves a careful reading. It is a new addition to the venerable tradition set down by Peter Winch, Hubert Dreyfus, Harold Garfinkel, and many others, who claim that the canons of natural science do not apply to understanding human society. Various reasons are given supporting this view, but they all agree with Richard Lewontin (p. 3), who opines that "social science has set itself an impossible task when it attempts to emulate natural science and produce explanatory and predictive, that is, epistemic, theory." Among the prominent reasons are that social theory is inherently value-laden because we are both the subject and the object of study, society is the product of human consciousness, which is self-incomprehensible, and most simply, human society is far too complex to either explain or predict. Flyvbjerg develops this theme with insight and flair, although he tries to do two other things as well, with less success. The first is to show that the concept of "power" must be central to all social theory. He fails to show this and his treatment of power is quite standard and rather restricted to left-critical and post-modern treatments. The second is to apply his theory of what social science should be to his own life-experience. Here too his treatment is quite mundane and lacking in insight. He would have done better to drop these two themes, and simply refer to the great hermetic social thinkers, such as Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, J. J. Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, Bernard Mandeville, and Comte de Montesquieu, and the other greats whose works exemplify this approach to social understanding. Flyvbjerg's approach is to contrast three forms of knowledge in Aristotle: episteme (theoretical knowledge), techne (technical know-how) and phronesis, which he treats as wisdom gathered through personal life experience and emotive identification with the life-forms studied and their myriad activities. The social-science-as-natural-science folks believe that the height of social knowledge is episteme in the form of Grand Theory, whereas in fact meaningful social knowledge consists of phronesis in the form of case studies by wise and perceptive viewers. "At present," Flyvbjerg claims, "social science is locked in a fight it cannot hope to win, because it has accepted terms that are self-defeating. We will see that in their role as phronesis, the social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest: just as the social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, neither have the natural sciences contributed to the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests, which is the prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society." It should be clear that by "social science" Flyvbjerg means "sociological and anthropological theory," because his remarks simply do not apply to psychology, economics, or biology, and his treatment of power is too weak to consider his analysis as applicable to political science. Obviously areas like paleontology, neuroscience, epidemiology, and many other areas of social science are quite impervious to the Flyvbjerg critique. Flyvbjerg is absolutely correct in his support for thickly descriptive ethnographic and historical research, and in his claim that phronetic approaches are important contributions to social science. His error is thinking that this research conflicts with more traditional approaches to explanation in sociology and anthropology. In fact, the research he supports is synergistic with analytical and empirical studies aimed at understanding human society. Sociology and anthropology are intimately connected to paleontology and evolutionary biology simply because *Homo sapiens* is a species that evolved to its present position by virtue of the same biological laws that apply to all other species. Of course, there are staggeringly important human specificities, but there are many social species, and until some 30,000 years ago we were not alone in exhibiting these specificities. There is much to learn about human society by comparing and contrasting with other social species---see for instance the recent book *Superorganism*, by Bert Hilldobler and E. O. Wilson, or my edited collection *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests*. I appreciate Aristotle and Machiavelli, but I also have learned an enormous amount about society by reading widely and deeply in animal behavior theory. I love Levi-Strauss, but I also appreciate Donald Brown, who has shown how human values are represented in hundreds of societies, and Frasier's *Golden Bough*, which gives insight into human religion by cataloging hundreds of religious forms around the world. Flyvbjerg makes his case by setting up straw men and choosing only examples that support his point of view. One example of a straw man is the notion that the natural sciences can "explain and predict" while the social sciences cannot. Physics can explain phenomena only under highly controlled circumstances, certainly not in general. Physics has changed our lives so much because engineers can reproduce these controlled circumstances in the real world. Except for astronomy and atmospheric (in the age of satellite supercomputers), physics cannot explain or predict much in the way of natural events. Social theory can easily do as well as the natural sciences in situations in which carefully controlled experimentation is infeasible for one reason or another. An example of cherry-picking examples, Flyvbjerg's examples of successes in the natural sciences are all of the thought-experiment type: Galileo on falling objects, Einstein or general relativity, and the like. Most advances even in physics are not of this type, but rather involve careful and repeated measurement linked to deductive and inductive logic. Flyvbjerg will appeal to the armchair philosopher who is too ignorant of real advances in our understanding of society to appreciate the value of sustained empirical and theoretical research. I urge the author to give us a new book that appreciates the synergy among episteme, techne, and phronesis, for synergy there surely is.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.
Provocative, Convincing, and Important
By Camber
This is a provocative and important book, maybe even pivotal. Bent Flyvbjerg says that he's arguing for a new approach to social science, but I think his thesis is considerably more radical than that: he's effectively calling for social "science" to be abandoned and instead replaced with a sort of applied social practice analogous to medicine and civil engineering, endeavors which draw on science but necessarily

go well beyond it. Flyvbjerg begins by arguing that social science never has been, and probably never will be, explanatory and predictive in the way that the natural sciences are, especially the physical sciences. A main reason is that context and judgment are key to any kind of practical social science, yet they can't be reduced to theoretical terms. The arguments here borrow from the critique of AI presented by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus. These limitations are fatal flaws for the project of social science modeled on natural science, so Flyvbjerg instead revisits Aristotle's classification of "intellectual virtues" and argues that, rather than aspiring for the virtues of episteme (associated with science) or techne (associated with technology), social science is better associated with phronesis, which is concerned with practical action in particular human situations, and thus deliberately and reflexively brings in context and judgment, along with considerations of values and interests. And because particularities are so important in making practical judgments and decisions, high-quality case studies are an important tool for phronetic social science. The one element Flyvbjerg finds missing in Aristotle's conception of phronesis is explicit consideration of the issue of power, and he explores the ideas of Habermas, Nietzsche, and Foucault to help redress this. He finds Habermas' aims to be laudable, but his approach to be ultimately idealistic to the point of being infeasible. Nietzsche and Foucault turn out to be of greater value, largely because of their emphasis on contextualizing genealogical analysis. Flyvbjerg next distills a set of methodological guidelines associated with his phronetic social science framework, and finally illustrates the framework with an interesting case study involving city planning (his specialty) in Denmark. I greatly enjoyed this book, surely in large part because I tend to agree with Flyvbjerg's thesis and reasoning, and I guess it's not a coincidence that the philosophers he draws on are among my favorites. I also found the book to be well written and smoothly translated from the original Danish, though the chapters related to power were somewhat tough going at times. Overall, I highly recommend this book to anyone with a serious interest in social science. However, at least a modest background in both social science and philosophy are probably prerequisites, since this is a fairly sophisticated book aimed more at an academic audience rather than the general reader.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. It fulfills my interest. By sociotechnic. As far as I'm reading and taking notes from the text I've found very interesting the ideas that the author is presenting. It's an unusual perspective of taking the social inquiring into account for understanding today's way of living. Social scientists must show up more nowadays and breaking the gaps that separate scientific from social approach is worthwhile and appreciated.

Making Social Science Matter presents an exciting new approach to social science, including theoretical argument, methodological guidelines, and examples of practical application. Why has social science failed in attempts to emulate natural science and produce normal theory? Bent Flyvbjerg argues that the strength of social science is in its rich, reflexive analysis of values and power, essential to the social and economic development of any society. Richly informed, powerfully argued, and clearly written, this book provides essential reading for all those in the social and behavioral sciences.