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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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REAL SOCIAL SCIENCE: APPLIED PHRONESIS

Edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram
Alex Lovit, Reviewer

This edited volume collects responses to and applications of the idea of “phronesis,” as it was introduced by Bent Flyvbjerg in his 2001 book, *Making Social Science Matter*. Flyvbjerg adapted the concept of phronesis from Aristotle, who distinguished phronesis (practical wisdom) from epistemé (universal truth) and techné (technical know-how). In Flyvbjerg’s view, the academic social sciences have erred in attempting to emulate the model of the physical sciences. Where hard science seeks replicable, universal truth (epistemé), social scientists study subjective, conditional, and localized human relationships. Phronesis, or the search for knowledge that is applicable in practice, is therefore the appropriate model for social science research. As Sanford Schram puts it in his contribution to this volume, “Phronetic social science . . . is centrally about producing research that has relevance to decisions about what can and should be done, and also how to do it.” (19) To guide social science research toward this goal, Flyvbjerg provided four central questions that phronetic research projects should address: “(1) Where are we going? (2) Who gains, and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is it desirable? (4) What should be done?” (25) Suggesting a fundamental reorientation of the multiple social scientific academic disciplines, Flyvbjerg’s concept of phronesis is not lacking for ambition. *Real Social Science*, which collects the efforts of various scholars attempting to put these theories into practice, will be of interest to *HEX* readers who wish to know the results of this experiment in applied scholarship.

The book is divided into two sections: the first containing four theoretical essays on the subject, and the second containing nine essays on “applied phronesis.” Although phronesis seeks to make scholarly knowledge useful outside of the academy, the essays in this volume are theoretically dense and are unlikely to appeal to lay readers. Different essays approach the subject of phronesis through varying theoretical literatures. Sociologist Arthur Frank

cites Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*—socialized norms within a field—and *illusio*—investment in the stakes of a field. Frank writes, “Real social science, as I understand Bourdieu, requires the capacity for sustaining the respective *illusio* of both the academic and the everyday fields, while remembering the differences between them.” (56) Frank also endorses Michel Foucault's emphasis on problems rather than solutions, concluding that “[p]hronesis is tolerating the understanding of life and theory as projects-in-process . . .” (63)

Virginia Eubanks, a professor of women's studies, argues that feminist theory can address weaknesses in Flyvbjerg's approach by complicating his understanding of power structures and oppression. Eubanks also argues that phronetic researchers should not abandon objectivity, but rather adopt Sandra Harding's concept of “strong objectivity,” which is “best achieved when a number of different standpoints are put in conversation with each other in the context of social justice oriented research and action.” (241)

Phronetic researchers' desire to avoid privileging “expert” knowledge frequently leads them to embrace democratic practices: “[P]hronetic social scientists rely on public deliberation and the public sphere, not because these set-ups are perfect, but because they are the best we have for collective decision-making.” (286) Many of the researchers included in this volume have worked closely with partners outside the academy in order to create broader social impact. Of course, this work requires a difficult balancing act between the divergent responsibilities of academic scholars and other groups, and between research and action goals. As Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl argue, “Collaborative research requires that conflicts be engaged actively and openly while a research project is carried out. In other words, the conflicts among the scientific, advocacy and public spheres are recognized and negotiated within the collaboration.” (133)

Many of the individual studies of “applied phronesis” presented here are compelling. Flyvbjerg's own contribution to this volume supplements his previously published research on “mega-projects”—large-scale construction projects, often developed through public-private partnerships. Gathering data from across the globe, this research determined that estimates for such

projects habitually underestimate costs and overestimate benefits. These findings were published in Flyvbjerg's 2003 book *Megaprojects and Risk*. But in the essay published here, Flyvbjerg describes his attempts to publicize these findings through the mass media, to reach a wider nonacademic audience. In his view, this is a fundamental phronetic strategy: "phronetic social scientists are explicitly concerned about public exposure, because they see it as one of the main vehicles for the type of social and political action that is at the heart of phronesis." (97) In describing his own experience, Flyvbjerg argues both that the mass media is an essential tool for academic findings to have a real impact on public policy, and that interacting with journalists need not make significant demands on scholars' time.

In discussing his own experiences of attempted intimidation by government bureaucrats, Flyvbjerg also provocatively argues, "If nobody is against a specific piece of phronetic research, most likely the research is unimportant as regards its implications for practice. Phronetic researchers are power researchers, and as such they do not expect consensus for their work, but conflict. . . . [A] *priori* consensus is considered dubious, because too often it is an illusion created by disregarding power." (117) As the editors of this volume point out in their conclusion, Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili's essay presents a contrast to this perspective, as they "seem to trust dialogue and consensus a bit more than some of the other authors in this book." (292) Sandercock and Attili's essay describes the authors' creation of a documentary film about conflict between Native American and white settler populations in Burns Lake, British Columbia, where a tax dispute had recently led the non-native municipality to shut off water and sewer services to the native reserve. Sandercock and Attili write, "The goal is to produce an input into the ongoing social dialogue and praxis of a society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge." (143) With this phronetic goal in mind, they carefully constructed their documentary in partnership with both the native and settler populations of Burns Lake in order to capture multiple narratives and to promote intergroup dialogue.

Flyvbjerg's use of the mass media to expose government misinformation and Sandercock and Attili's attempts to reconcile a divided community are clear examples of applied scholarship.

But not all the essays in this volume describe such nontraditional academic roles. For example, Tricia Olsen, Leigh Payne, and Andrew Reiter describe amnesty laws in Brazil, preventing prosecution of historical human rights abuses by the military. These authors present an international comparison of human rights indices, examining the effects of different strategies for resolving traumas and abuses. They conclude, “Combining and sequencing trials and amnesties, or trials, amnesties and truth commissions, is more likely to improve democracy and human rights than adopting a preferred single mechanism.” (217) This is compelling analysis, and the policy implications are clear, but it is not obvious how this essay—which employs esoteric academic methods and is published in an academic collection—will contribute to changing Brazil’s transitional judicial practices. The global comparative nature of this research also appears to contradict Schram’s statement that “phronetic social science understands that social science is best equipped to offer contextualized knowledge appropriate to particular settings and focused on specific problems.” (24) The editors of this volume argue that “Phronetic social science scales well” (287), and indeed it must if it can embrace both an international comparison and a study of a Canadian community of 3,000 people.

But more than disparities of scale, what is problematic here is a lack of agreement on what constitutes the definitional practicality of phronesis. The question is so unsettled that William Paul Simmons’ essay in this volume states, “What is not clear is the extent to which Flyvbjerg is calling on social scientists to get involved and *do* politics in lieu of merely *studying* politics.” (247) The editors of this volume (including Flyvbjerg) respond to this question with the “unequivocal answer . . . that the phronetic call to social scientists is exactly to become virtuoso social actors in their chosen field of study and to *do* politics with their research . . .” (287) But the essays in this volume take a wide range of approaches to research that “*does*” politics.

This variety is both the strength and the weakness of this book. Its various chapters contain such diversity of discipline, methodology, theory, scale, geography, and practical goals that it can be difficult to see such disparate studies as integral parts of a coherent intellectual tradition. However, this same diversity demonstrates the rich possibilities of approaching academic work through

the concept of phronesis. Whatever the differences between them, the scholars in this book have all been energized by the call to produce research that contributes to society's practical knowledge. And although this book's editors can prescribe no singular method for phronetic research, their concluding comments on the concept of "tension points" might help to guide engaged scholars toward social impact: "In phronetic research, tension points are power relations that . . . are fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge and potential conflict. Thus, even a small challenge—like problematization from scholars—may tip the scales and trigger change in a tension point." (288) *Real Social Science* provides a useful resource by collecting diverse views from academic scholars, attempting various strategies to discover tension points, and seeking to trigger social change.

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