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Truthful social science or: *how* we learned to stop worrying and love the bomb

Dr. Strangelove: The whole point of a
Doomsday Machine is lost, if you keep it
a secret! Why didn't you tell the world,
EH?

Ambassador de Sadesky: It was to be
announced at the Party Congress on
Monday. As you know, the Premier
loves surprises.

(‘Dr. Strangelove’, by S. Kubrick, 1964)

Phronetic social science

Phronesis, for those new to the concept, is one of the three intellectual virtues identified by Aristotle. Opposed to *episteme*, which concerns universal laws and knowledge, and *techné*, which is related to the application of instrumental, technical knowledge, *phronesis* is ‘akin to practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies...of social practice embedded in complex social settings’ (Schram and

Caterino 2006, p. 8). In other words, phronesis is knowledge emerging from contextual praxis, which can inform and guide decision under the particular circumstances where it emerges. It is neither about general truths, nor technical applications; rather, it is about *making* a localized set of practices and knowledge *matter* in terms of practical reason. In *Making social science matter* (MSSM), Flyvbjerg (2001) expands the original Aristotelian concept through insertions from Bourdieu, Dreyfus, Foucault, and Nietzsche. His aim is to show (as he successfully does) that social science should not emulate natural science on the basis of *epistemic* or *techné* as a foundation for its knowledge practices. Rather, social science should be concerned with ‘practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations’ (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 134), critically investigating the norms and structure of power and dominance relations, and thereby contributing to the framing of society’s judgments and choices. Framed in this way, social science is not about explicating the rules that govern society as-a-whole, rather is about actively helping society in reasoning about its diverse, multiple, and context-specific practical rationalities.

The debate that Flyvbjerg’s (2001) contribution sparked (Laitin 2003; Flyvbjerg 2004; Schram 2004), and the further theoretical-methodological points raised in *Making political science matter* (Schram and Caterino 2006), bring us to the book that I’m about to review, *Real social science: applied phronesis*. The aim of the book is captured in its title: to present concrete examples of how phronesis works in social science research. It is worth noting from the outset that the book is extremely engaging, rich and stimulating. It is an illuminating collection of essays that provide a wide spectrum of examples of phronetic social science: from narrative analysis to filming, passing through feminist

studies and collaborative research, to cite just a few. What unifies these case studies is not their explicit reference to phronesis – indeed, as the editors of the volume remind us, ‘phronetic social science existed well before this particular articulation of the concept’ (p. 285) – but the fact that they investigate localized practices and contribute (although with different degrees of engagement) firstly to problematizing and secondly to actively challenging the rationale(s) underpinning them. Moreover, the book provides a solid ground to trace the potentialities of the phronetic approach to social science. The book consists of fourteen chapters distributed among three-hundred pages and is divided into two parts, the first dealing with theory and methods, while the second presents the case-studies. I will first critically review each of the chapters and then, on the basis of insights collected along the way, will turn to a broader reflection on phronesis and social science research.

Theory and method

Following a concise introduction by the editors, including Sanford Schram’s very clear introduction to phronetic social science, in chapter three Todd Landman makes a strong case for ‘the use of systematic methods that address otherwise normatively informed and value-based questions’ (p. 27). For Landman, but also for Flyvbjerg, strong methods are a quintessential characteristic of a phronetic approach to social science. Among them, Landman prefers narrative analysis, which is particularly relevant to phronetic research since it ‘allows the social scientist to uncover perceptions, experiences and feelings about power, power relations and institutionalized constraints as they are confronted (or not) through social and political engagement’ (p. 32). The chapter competently demonstrates

the usefulness of narrative analysis for phronetic research, although it does not fully explain why this particular method should be privileged above others. Although the author never argues that this should be regarded as *the* phronetic method par-excellence, the reader may wonder why narrative analysis is the only methodology fully investigated in the first part of the book (where the most theoretically dense essays are presented). An explicit comparative discussion on other methodologies that could be proficiently used in phronetic research – such as participant observation, given its attention to the *context* of action – could have been better situated in this part of the book. It is worth noting, however, that the chapter concludes with a very clear ‘set of steps’ to conduct ‘real social scientific research’ (p. 43), which is informative also for scholars adopting methodologies other than narrative analysis.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the strongest and most compelling theoretical contributions in the book. The former, written by Arthur W. Frank, is a beautifully written account of ‘everyday phronesis’, which understands phronesis not as something to possess, but as an ethos, i.e. phronesis is ‘what social scientific study *requires* from researchers’ (p. 48, emphasis added). Frank explains and clarifies his point through an example taken from Tolstoy: phronesis is the capacity of Nikolay Rostov (a central character in Tolstoy’s *War and peace*) to learn from the peasants he observes and, in light of these interpersonal experiences, he also learns how to act accordingly. Without entering into too much detail here, phronesis is understood as a resource, a capacity, and a practice. This point is further developed in Frank’s account of Bourdieu and Foucault, to whom he turns to find phronetic research tools. In the first case Frank argues that Bourdieu, in showing the importance of *illusio* in understanding the relationship between the habitus of the self and

the context (field) of action, *phronetically* (hence practically) teaches us that '[r]eal social science...requires the capacity for sustaining the respective *illusio* of both the academic and the everyday fields, while remembering the differences between them' (p. 56). As I will argue later on, I find this point extremely important, especially if taken along with Flyvbjerg's stress on 'the very *raison d'être* of phronetic social science', which is 'to help society see and reflect' (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 158). In the second case, Frank points out that what Foucault teaches us in terms of everyday phronesis is that we are always confronted by *danger*. Frank concludes the chapter by showing how phronesis has a relational nature, and thus cannot be the property of an individual. Our *illusio* is therefore constantly confronted with that of others, in a relational game of power where Foucault's alertness to danger becomes possibly the only real phronetic advice to follow: since there is *always* danger, the only possible thing to do is to learn practically from our encounters with it, as Nikolay Rostov does (more on this point below).

The following chapter has been written by two of the most respected authors in the fields of organization science, Clegg and Pitsis. The chapter reflects Clegg's extensive writing on power, as well as the empirical work that the two authors have collaborated on in researching megaproject alliances. The authors confront the notion of power in phronetic research deepening the account originally given by Flyvbjerg, which was mainly based on Foucault. Re-constructing the debate around the dimensional view of power, from Dahl to Bachrach and Baratz, and from Lukes to Haugaard, the authors argue in favour of a notion of power which moves beyond the idea of social actors being passively (or unconsciously) subjected to power. In other words, the actor is not unknowingly in the hands of power – as Lukes' three-dimensional view seems to

suggest – nor simply unable to express his/her true interests. Rather, as Haugaard puts it (1997), social actors have a practical consciousness (a sort of tacit knowledge that emerges in everyday practices) that they are sometimes unable to translate into discursive consciousness knowledge. However, the lack of translation does not imply that they are unaware of power, since they *practically* experience it. Underlying this point, Clegg and Pitsis render quite vividly the added value of phronesis in the study of power: phronesis is a ‘pragmatic tool’ that forces us – by definition – to look within the contextualized practices of the actors that we take into consideration, therefore taking into account their practical consciousness. From this perspective, phronesis is a relevant political tool too, since it can be used to help those actors in articulating their practical consciousness in the form of discursive consciousness knowledge. Starting from these premises, which strengthen Foucault’s relational take on power, the chapter provides a captivating account of research undertaken by the authors on megaproject alliances. The account is interesting because it shows that ‘doing phronetic research necessarily entails a power relation between researchers and researched’ (p. 83). In other words, the researcher is not exempt from power relations, since (again, like the fictional Nikolay Rostov) he/she inhabits contexts (the context of research, and the academic one) and enacts his/her own practical consciousness through negotiations with that of the researched. The bottom line is that phronetic research should not only study practices, but also translate its practices (even those that fail) into discursive knowledge.

Applied phronesis

The second part of the book, named ‘applied phronesis’, presents a series of case-studies. Before turning to a more general reflection, I will give a brief review of the most compelling of them.

In ‘Why mass media matter and how to work with them’, Flyvbjerg gives, to my knowledge, the most readable and insightful account of why social researchers need to engage with the public sphere and how to do so. Reporting on his own experience with Danish and international media, Flyvbjerg advocates for the public dissemination of social research through an *ad-hoc* engagement with mass media. For him ‘[c]ommunicating research to practice is part and parcel of applied phronesis and not something external to it’ (p. 95). The chapter is in itself a form of phronesis, since it provides the reader with insightful and practical advice on how to ‘make social science matter’ beyond the auto-referential walls of academia. Engaging with mass media is not the most important part of the phronetic game, since the first rule is always to ‘study things that matter in ways that matter’ (p. 116), but *it is* nonetheless part of what social scientist need to do to have a real impact in public deliberation, policy and practice.

In the following chapter, Shdaimah and Stahl confront one of the possible ways of doing phronetic social science, namely collaborative research (CR). The authors claim that CR is ‘the very model of phronetic research’ (p. 122) because it does not only imply that stakeholders simply participate in the research project but that ‘researchers participate in the larger societal projects’ (p. 123). In this way the researcher’s ideas and arguments are unavoidably exposed and contested, so that the question of power (or the relations of power among researchers, stakeholders and the wider community) is once again highlighted. In this sense, the authors unfold some of the points raised by Flyvbjerg

in the preceding chapter. First, that the ‘need for research (and researchers) [is], to large extent, a result of political forces’ (p. 128), which therefore need to be taken into consideration in reflecting upon the research process. Second, that the research process could ‘harm constituents’, and that the constituents themselves are usually very aware of this. Third, that in doing CR, the non-academic research partner may see the research as an ‘organizing tool’ for its own purposes (as shown also by Clegg and Pitsis) and that this triggers a whole set of power-related issues. Shdaimah and Stahl do not, however, limit themselves to the enumeration of these issues. Rather, they clearly state that phronetic researchers should not try to *prevent* conflict but to *actively engage* with it: conflict is part of the research process, and as such needs to be *practiced*, in order to unfold the ‘knowledge-power nexus’ (p. 133) both for the sake of the researches and the stakeholders.

Chapter 8, by Sandercock and Attili, is arguably one of the most brilliant works presented in the book. The chapter illustrates the authors’ research project on conflict, which involved two small First Nations communities in northern British Columbia, where they used filmmaking as their main research method. Filming, for the authors, is a mode of enquiry. It is, moreover and quite obviously, also a means to target the wider public arena in a way tangential – but not necessarily equal – to Flyvbjerg’s use of mass media: it is a way, as they put it, ‘to start public conversation’ (p. 142). However, the chapter is not only stimulating for the kind of research that the authors have carried out. Its strength relies on the fact that it candidly offers an account of what being phronetic implies in terms of the methodological, political and ethical choices adopted in the research. Sandercock and Attili have designed and carried out their work through a coherent set of

objectives which are clearly set out in the chapter. The delineation of objectives and self-imposed guidelines is of course an almost obligatory part of the research design process. However, Sandercock and Attili's objectives are intrinsically of a political nature, since they aim to unfold the conflict that takes place in the two communities without serving to 'exacerbate the existing polarization' (p. 147). The lesson that the two authors offer us is that they speak freely, and frankly, about the political and ethical consequences of their political choice. Half of their chapter is almost solely about this, namely because phronesis is quintessentially about the 'practical knowledge and practical ethics' (Flyvbjerg 2001, 56) that one implies in what one does. Disclosing these choices to the reader, and rendering clearly how one ought to achieve his/her political and research objectives, should be thus seen as a fundamental step in phronetic research.

Chapter 9, by Griggs and Howarth; 10, by Olsen, Payne and Reiter; 12, by Simmons; and 13 by Ranu, are four very good methodological examples of how phronetic social science can be (respectively) a vehicle to problematize technocratic forms of decision-making; to re-work established scholarly knowledge; to find new ways to teach social justice and deconstruct dominant ideologies; and to show how neoliberal, spatial, policy-making is able to divert attention from the causes of localized problems of poverty and marginality. Among these relevant contributions, Simmons' chapter is of particular interest for at least two reasons. First, because it is the only one in the book that addresses the problem of 'teaching' phronesis (aren't we, after all, also teachers?). Second, and most importantly, because it offers an original take on phronesis itself, based on a notion of power derived from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2007 [1968]). From this account we learn that in order to defeat the 'hegemonic power

structures' of our academic knowledge (and, I would add, paraphrasing Flyvbjerg, of our academic contexts) social scientists 'must work with marginalized communities to call into question academic knowledge itself through the co-generation of new knowledge' (p. 247). This is a point, as I will argue in the conclusions, which could really make a positive difference in the future of social science (which was Flyvbjerg's main concern in introducing phronesis in the first instance).

Virginia Eubanks' chapter 11 does the important job of connecting phronesis to feminist epistemology and sociology of knowledge. The contribution this makes to phronetic social science is relevant because it enables it to take into consideration differences of class, race and gender in the production of the contextual practices and knowledge that phronesis aims to investigate. In particular, Eubanks draws attention to the specific role of texts and discourses to 'order and organize practice and understanding across a variety of sites and settings' (p. 235) and to the fact that different 'vectors of oppression work together' rather than in self-contained forms (p. 237). These are elements, in the end, which force phronetic social scientists to trace carefully the complicatedness of oppression and privilege. Moreover, Eubanks concludes her chapter with a call that expands those evoked in chapters 7 and 8, namely that *theory production* should be seen as a mutual process between the researcher and the 'researched', as much as it is for the production of *practical reasoning*.

The book ends with a final chapter by Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram, who summarize how the book contributes to a return of 'social science to society and its politics' (p. 286). Phronesis is, first and foremost, about politics – it is a call for social scientists to 'become virtuoso social actors in their chosen field of study and *do* politics

with their research' (p. 287, emphasis in original). The editors explain that the case studies presented in the book have a common focus, namely the identification of 'tension points' through which contextualized issues of power are recognized and challenged. These points can be discerned when/where power relations are 'particularly susceptible to problematization and thus change' (p. 288). The phronetic researcher is asked to reveal them, unfolding their rationale and developments, and not to refrain from the potential conflicts that naturally arise in dealing with them. A list of 'important next steps' to be carried in order to further strengthen the phronetic approach to social science is also provided, which includes, but is not limited to, some of the things that I am briefly going to touch on now.

Truthful social science?

As a way of concluding this review, I want to compose a few words around the opportunities that phronetic social science offers to date, trying also to challenge some of its tenets.

First, as recognized by the editors in the concluding chapter, there is the necessity to identify 'clarification of similarities and differences between phronetic social science and other types of research' (p. 294). The point is important, but there is the risk that it becomes an indexical exercise that succeeds in procuring a few publications for its authors, but little more (and I am confident that the editors are aware of this). In other words, the risk is to reduce phronesis to a tick-box exercise, a labelling practice: 'This research conforms to phronetic standards'. How to avoid this? My suggestion is to consider phronesis not as a *form* of social science, but as a growing *repository* of

practice-based knowledge that can be used by different social-scientific researchers. The book seems to me perfectly aligned to this understanding of phronetic research. In this sense, the confrontation between, for instance, ‘action research’ and ‘phronetic social science’ would not be a matter of what the two have in common and where they differ, but of what the former could take from the latter and how, in doing so, it could give back more practical knowledge to the ‘phronetic repository’. The book offers some good examples of how such a confrontation might work, as in the case of Eubanks where she provides theoretical and methodological tools taken from feminist studies that both contribute and challenge the phronetic repository. I am probably flying too high here but I see the phronetic approach to social science as a transdisciplinary meta-container, an open-source project, defined by guidelines and values to which its participants adhere, further implementing them, contaminating their own scientific identities with that of others *through* the phronetic encounter. In this sense, ‘phronetic social science’ should not be seen as another kind of social science, but as an overarching platform from which to take and to which one can contribute. A possible parallelism is with *Wikipedia*: an ongoing repository of knowledge where the singular entries have their own peculiar specificity, although they all comply with a precise socio-political project (which no-one could appropriate, privatize, or reduce to a pass-by reference in a paper). This is how I understand the decade of debate and contribution around ‘phronetic social science’, and this is why I think that it can make a huge difference to any and all scholars.

The second point is related to the most problematic of Flyvbjerg’s phronetic questions, which from my perspective is: ‘Is this desirable?’ (Flyvbjerg 2001). The question is central because it poses an ethical dilemma: is (the development of the

situation that we have researched) good or bad? This dilemma, along with the focus on practices and the stress on public engagement, is the most important part of what we are identifying as ‘phronetic approach to social science’. It asks us to take a position, to stand up and make our research alive. *But how do we do so?* Flyvbjerg has always been quite clear on this point. Since phronesis is about contextual praxis and knowledge, our understanding of the good and the bad should be contextually based too. As the editors write in their conclusion: ‘the socially and historically conditioned context, and not fictive universals, constitutes the most effective bulwark against relativism and nihilism and is the best basis for action’ (p. 293). Although I agree with this argument, I do think that its practical consequences are still under-explored by the phronetic debate. Flyvbjerg and his colleagues suggest that the normative basis for applied phronesis ‘is the attitude among those who problematize and act, and this attitude is...based...on context-dependent common world view’ (p. 293), which of course may be (and usually are) different for each group taken into consideration. To me, this means that the answer to the question ‘Is this desirable?’ does not come from us, the researcher, but from the relation between what we produce and the groups’ engagement with it. Sandercock and Attili’s chapter is the perfect example of what I am talking about. They provided the groups that they studied with a map (the movie) to explore and to discuss their issues, and these groups decided, on the basis of their own practical knowledge, if their situation was or was not desirable. It is, however, not always possible to proceed by the route taken by Sandercock and Attili, and that’s why further debate is needed around this central phronetic question. Let me briefly highlight two points in this sense. First, the framing of the research project may be implicitly affected by underlying assumptions that

researchers carry with them. In this case responses to ‘Is this desirable?’ are going to be affected by the way the question has been posed. Second, the complexity of the different ‘worldviews’ at play in a specific field could be so dense as to require research within the research (the first to establish where we, and every one of the parties involved, sit in terms of the research topic, and the second to answer the actual research questions). I experienced the latter case in my own research on homeless people in Turin, Italy, where the desirability of this or that policy on homelessness could not be determined without questioning my own perception of homelessness, the established academic views on it, the social welfare discourses of public policy, and the Catholic take on poverty implied by the faith-based organizations operating in the city (Lancione 2011; forthcoming). Both the first and the second point could be confronted by inserting reflexivity as a basic practice of any phronetic research, as some of the authors of the book have already done. Auto-ethnography, in this sense, could be a valuable methodology in order to consciously acknowledge the *illusio* that Frank writes about (Reed-Danahay 1997).

The third and last point, which is linked to the previous one, is a provocation aimed at further highlighting the intrinsic political value of phronesis. Phronetic research is, perhaps, not *real* social science (a term which I find rather problematic), but a *truthful* approach to social science. If we adopt a Foucauldian take on power, being truthful (or honest, or virtuous) means first and foremost to unfold and vividly render the relations of power in which we are enmeshed. These include our own *illusio*, the circuits of power in which we operate (and that we reproduce), the relations that we have with research partners, and the ones with the broader public sphere. As Flyvbjerg, his colleagues, and all the authors of the book show, a phronetic take on social science is

well equipped for this task. However, in order to be truthful, phronetic social scientists also need to *clearly assess* where they are coming from, where they want to go, and how they aim to get there. In the end, if we do not legitimize our work either in the form of universal laws (*episteme*) or on the basis of technical knowledge (*techné*), then our research practices form the only possible ground from which to forge our practical values *and* scrutinize the value of what we do (as shown, for instance, by Clegg and Pitsis). Thinking of phronesis as a truthful approach to social science requires new phronetic questions to be answered along with the old ones (Table 1).

Table 1 about here

Phronetically-driven social scientists need to openly discuss their methods and (as far as possible) be able to disclose deep-seated assumptions, mindful of the limitations and possible consequences of their knowledge-production (Simmons), clear in their political role (Sandercock and Attili), ready to engage in conflict (Shdaimah and Stahl), and actively involved in society (Flyvbjerg). These are all elements that do not need to be kept secret, as in the case of Dr. Strangelove's 'Doomsday machine' quoted at the start of this essay. Rather, they need to be brought to the forefront of what we produce, because they allow us to be truthful to our phronetic claims, where the 'truth' is seen as 'the generic potency of a transformation of a domain of knowledge' (Badiou 2009, p. 43). In other words, it is through these reflexive elements that we will be able to 'invent a better social science, one that connects research to practical reasoning and social action' (Eubanks, this volume, p. 228). Phronesis is co-constituted by the researchers' efforts to question their own knowledge (and their knowledge production), and by the practice-

based and discursive-based knowledge emerging from the studied context. If carefully prepared, this is the kind of bomb that many of us would rather love to detonate.

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Table 1. Truthful phronetic questions

Flyvbjerg’s original phronetic questions¹	Methodological questions related to tension-points²	Reflexive questions
Where are we going with this specific problematic?	Can we identify dubious practices within policy and social action?	Am I conscious of the <i>illusio</i> of both the academic and the everyday research field?
Who gain and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?	How can these practices be problematized?	What are my underlying pre-assumption on the specific topic of my research?
Is this desirable?	How can we help to develop better practices?	How are my pre-assumptions going to affect the design of my research?

What should be done?	-	What are the consequences of the knowledge that I am going to produce?
-	-	What is the political rationale of my work?

Source: (1) From Flyvbjerg, 2001; (2) Adapted from Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram, 2012.