

Phronetic Planning Research: So What?

Dr Stuart Farthing

University of the West of England
Faculty of the Built Environment
School of Planning and Architecture
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1QY
England
UK

Tel: +44 (0)117 328 3073

Email: Stuart.Farthing@uwe.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Some years ago, in 2001, Bent Flyvbjerg published *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. As the title suggested, this text advocated a new approach to social science, which was based on an analysis of what can reasonably be expected of social and natural science. 'Just as social science has not been able to contribute with Kuhnian normal science and predictive theory to scientific development, so natural science has little to offer to the reflexive analysis of goals, values and interests that is a precondition for an enlightened development in any society. However, where natural science is weak, social science is strong, and vice versa.' (p 53). Quoting Aristotle, he argued that it was an increasingly important task to balance value-rationality with its scientific and technical rationality. Phronetic social science was his answer to this challenge. Surprisingly, because he is a planning academic and his empirical work has been about urban planning issues, there has been very little reaction within the academic community of scholars concerned with cities, urban development and planning to this proposal. By contrast, there has been much more attention to it in the field of political science. A number of possible explanations for this neglect might suggest themselves. It may be that urban scholars are not aware of the book. It may be that they are aware of it, but feel that they are already conducting 'phronetic' social science so no more need be said. Finally, they may feel that it does not offer a convincing alternative to conventional approaches. This paper explores these issues and presents a critical evaluation of the potential contribution of phronetic social science to urban research. In particular it asks 'how far has it revolutionized the debate about values in social and political inquiry'?

Key Words: research, planning, phronesis