

Bent Flyvbjerg: Power and project management – an appreciation

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Abstract

Purpose: To provide a critique of Bent Flyvbjerg's work that has high relevance to the PM literature.

Findings/research limitations/implications: The paper challenges readers, PM academics and practitioners to view PM with a political perspective. This paper was delivered at the ICAN 2007 conference (which is the focus of this issue), which was entitled Mission Control: Power, knowledge and collaboration in project practice.

Original/value: This paper triggers and sustains the debate about the influence of power and its unintended consequences that may affect projects. The review raises PM issues worthy of consideration that are often neglected.

Paper Category: Research Note

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Research Note

Bent Flyvbjerg's books in English are *Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), and *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998). Each of these books are highly significant contributions to knowledge in their respective fields, but *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice* exemplifies in many ways what is distinctive about Flyvbjerg's work, as densely textured, ethnographically detailed, and theoretically

acute. Also, it is very close to my interests as a power theorist (Clegg 1975; 1989; Clegg et al 2006).

Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice is a detailed case study of planning intended to limit the use of cars in the city centre of the city of Aalborg in Denmark. Soon after its initiation, several agencies, trade unions, police, local and national consultants, the business community, private corporations, the media, and interested citizens became involved in order to decide on issues such as redirecting traffic by creating a rational local and national bus traffic system. A task force was established to formulate a three-year plan. The first conflict arose between architects and the bus company over the location and size of a bus terminal. Originally just a minor disagreement, the discussion turned into embittered conflict and division among the main players. There was a public hearing and the production of a counter-plan by the Aalborg Chamber of Industry and Commerce, which produced a revised plan that was approved in 1980.

Small business people with retail outlets in the planning precinct grew increasingly dissatisfied with the original urban renewal plan. Without a constant stream of cars coming in to the city centre they feared they would lose business. They succeeded in halving the original plan to construct the bus terminal. The Environmental Protection Agency then began to question the environmental hazards and impact of the proposed bus terminal, while another source of local conflict concerned a sub-plan designed to try and maintain the authentic charms of the old shopping streets. The Town Council forbade all non-retail businesses (banks, insurance companies, and offices) from occupying ground floor premises, to try and preserve the street's character. However, non-retail business leaders were also present in the local Chamber of Industry and

Commerce, and they agitated against this plan. In its first four years the Aalborg Plan underwent six rounds of reconstruction and modification. Although the overall plan was never actually rejected, specific projects became more and more minute, as well as more problematic in content and scope, generating further subordinate and specific episodes of power between local factions: cyclists and planners; planners and small business people; motorists and public transport, and so on.

Unexpected and unanticipated environmental contingencies had an impact on the project, such as the Mayor and several high-level local officials being jailed on bribery charges, thus challenging the overall legitimacy of the urban renewal plan. By this time the original plan had undergone its eleventh revision. The Chamber of Industry and Commerce reversed its original stand and began arguing that redirecting traffic would hurt businesses by causing falling revenues. However, the city council survey rejected this fear by revealing that retail profits were increasing. Meanwhile, new Social Democratic politicians came on the scene, deciding to bolster the urban renewal project by emphasizing positive aspects of the original plan adopted a decade earlier, which led the Aalborg Project into a total impasse.

The outcomes were not what any factions wanted: instead of reducing car traffic, it increased by 8 percent; instead of creating an integrated system of bicycle paths, unconnected stretches were built; instead of reducing traffic accidents, the number of fatalities and injuries among cyclists increased 40 percent; instead of reducing noise the levels substantially exceeded Danish and international norms, and air pollution increased.

Flyvbjerg's (1998) main theme is that power shapes rationality. At various stages in the project the various political actors sought to steer the project through their preferences – they sought to structure what the circuits of power model terms obligatory passage points. Different claims were made for participation in different committees; differential participation produced different outcomes at different times, favoring different preferences. Small battles were fought over who, and what, could be introduced in which arenas and meetings. In this way the relations of meaning and membership in the various locales were contested, reproduced or transformed. As these changed then the obligatory passage points shifted; as these shifted the relations of power that had prevailed shifted also – most dramatically when the Mayor and officials were indicted and imprisoned. Thus, small wins in specific episodes of power had the capacity to shift the configuration of the overall circuitry through which power relations flowed. The actors engaged in the plans were constantly seeking to fix and re-fix specific schemes, and although the play of power was very fluid, the underlying social integration of the small business people with each other, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and the editorial views of the local newspaper, seemed to mean that the small business people were the prevailing winners in the many struggles. The attempts to re-specify the system integration of the traffic plan in Aalborg consistently foundered on the reef of social integration. How Aalborg was planned, designed and looked, as well as how it was not planned, not designed and did not look, was an effect of power relations.

Flyvbjerg (1998) alerts us to one very important fact of power relations and rationalities: that when power and knowledge are entwined then the greater the power the less the need for rationality, in the sense of rational means-end justifications. The

relation between rationality and power was an uneven relation: power clearly dominated rationality. That is, those who presently configured power sought to continue doing so and were quite ready to define the reality of the project in any way that seemed to them to further their preferences, using whatever strategies and tactics were available to them. In this sense, what was defined as rationality and reality was an effect of power, as it defined and created ‘concrete physical, economic, ecological, and social realities’ (Flyvbjerg 1998: 227). What was advanced and argued as rationality depended wholly on power relations; the more disadvantaged in these the agents were, the more they were liable to have recourse to conceptions of rationality that downplayed power, and sought to position themselves through factual, objective, reasoned knowledge. The most powerful rationalities took the form of rationalizations rather than authoritatively grounded accounts. Often these were public performance of rationality which other agents who were witness to the rationalizations felt compelled not to reveal it because they lacked the powers to do so; they anticipated and feared the reaction that their actions would in all probability produce, should they move, dangers lurked in open conflict and identification of differences.

The greater the facility with which agencies could have recourse to power relations the less concerned they were with reason, and the less they were held accountable to it. Access to more power produced less reason. *As an aside, those who have witnessed recent events in the federal election sphere may detect some similarities¹.* In Aalborg, what was most typical was the constant attention to the small things of power relations that continually reproduced the status quo; rather than attempts at transformation, it was largely reproduction that prevailed – and the most skilled

¹ This refers to the Australian November 2007 Federal election.

strategists of power were those for whom reproduction was their preferred strategy – in the case of Aalborg, the small business community, whose institutionalized voice was much more actively represented to governmental rationality than that of the various citizen groups: the cyclists, greens and so on. In turn, these relations were embedded in deeply held local loyalties and relations. When, in openly antagonistic settings, these relations came up against contra-points of view that were well researched and represented in rational terms, power-to-power relations dominated over those defined in terms of knowledge or rationality against power.

Mostly, power relations were both stable and inequitable. Where power relations could be maintained as stable and characterized by consensus and negotiations, rationality could gain a greater toehold; the more power relations became antagonistic, the easier it was to deploy arguments and strategies that elided it. Thus, rationality must remain within the existing circuits of power if it is to influence them. To challenge them is to play a losing hand.

Reading Flyvbjerg is important because it takes us into the heart of projects as political processes as well as into the contexts in which their design is brought into being through processes of *becoming*: how dreams become designs, designs become concrete, and interests become embedded in the processes that surround these acts of becoming. All project managers and researchers of project management need to read Flyvbjerg if only to have a reality check that immunizes them against the overly linear and rational thinking that they will ordinarily encounter in the project sphere.

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