

RATIONALITY & POWER

Democracy In Practice

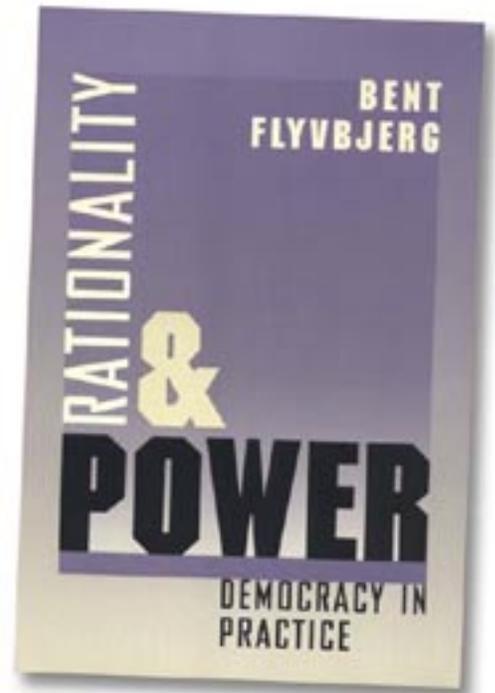
Bent Flyvbjerg (U. Chicago Press, 1998)

BY BOB CHAUNCEY

Bill Wilkinson, our boss here at the National Center for Bicycling and Walking, recently attended a meeting of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) from a progressive western state. One of the speakers was the secretary of the state's department of transportation.

The secretary began his speech with words to the effect that he was on their side — the side of intelligent transportation planning, the side of developing a multimodal transportation system. However, he added that there are some 7,000 employees in his department. Most of them were there before he took office, and most would remain long after he left. Overcoming their inertia was the real opponent of smart transportation policy.

Had Bent Flyvbjerg been in the audience, I believe his response — perhaps only to himself — would have been the Danish equivalent of “hogwash.” Effecting change is not about overcoming the inertia presented by a bureaucracy, he would exclaim. It's about creating and effectively employing political power. It's about creating



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Photos: Dan Burden



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a structure of relationships based on self-interest that can be mobilized to get what you want. Professor Flyvbjerg would undoubtedly agree that bureaucracies are resistant to change. But, he would add that change can occur, even in large bureaucracies, when the structure of power changes.

Flyvbjerg arrives at this and related conclusions through his detailed analysis of the Aalborg Project, an attempt to reshape the downtown area of the Danish city of that name. The project is envisioned to address issues of urban renewal, land use, traffic and environment. The traffic and environment objectives are especially familiar and noteworthy to those of us in the bike-ped business:

- *To accord increased priority to the urban environment, the more vulnerable road users, that is, pedestrians and bicyclists, and public transportation.*
- *To downgrade automobile traffic – especially commuting motorists – where it causes conflict with other types of transport.*

Yet in Flyvbjerg’s hands the Aalborg Project becomes only the backdrop for an exploration of a fundamental problem: How does democracy happen? This question

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leads to a host of others: How are ideas propagated and accepted — or rejected? How do some visions become realized, while others do not? How are projects reshaped in the crucible of political discussion and behind-the-scenes plotting? How is power created, nurtured and employed? Who has power, and why? And what is the relationship between rational argument and power?

In one of my favorite quotations, Flyvbjerg answers this last question: “(P)ower has a rationality that rationality does not know, whereas rationality does not have a power that power does not know.” If you enjoy puzzling and then chuckling over revelations like this, you’ll love this book.

But, beware dear reader: *Rationality and Power* is dense while illuminating; challenging while worth accepting the challenge. Do not think of leaving this book by your nightstand, to read as you grow drowsy. Pick the part of your day when you are at your most alert, and read it then. And be ready to take your time.

Professor Flyvbjerg will lead you on a twenty-year journey, from the origins of the Aalborg Project through its various fits, starts, iterations, and conflagrations to its whimpering conclusion. You will meet self-righteous politicians, self-serving businessmen, and self-important civil servants. In other words, even though the story takes place in Denmark, you’ll feel right at home.

Flyvbjerg goes into what feels sometimes like excruciating detail, explaining the minutiae surrounding seemingly insignificant decisions. But, it is just these details that illuminate the story and provide meaning for Flyvbjerg’s conclusions. He notes that “Nietzsche teaches us not to ‘despise little things;’ because they are ‘the basic concerns of life itself’...” Get ready to learn a lot of little things, then watch them accumulate into big things.

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The biggest thing, of course, is the unfulfilled promise of the project. I found it a bit puzzling that Flyvbjerg's most powerful post-mortem appears hidden in a footnote. Yet it is worth emphasizing. It reads, in part:

"As we have seen, the fate of the Aalborg Project was decided by a tiny elite of top-level politicians, high-ranking civil servants, and business community leaders. The study uncovers an informal, hidden business-government 'council' in which decisions about the Aalborg Project — and about other policies and plans of interest to the business community — were negotiated and enacted in corporative fashion before anyone else had a say over such decisions. Business interests also gained special weight in the Aalborg Project because of strong and coordinated support by the local press and the police. This is not to say that all decisions benefited the business community. Nevertheless, the trend in the overall pattern of decisions that comprise the Aalborg Project — from its genesis, through design and ratification, to implementation and operation — indicates a clear and irrefutable preference for business interests as a result of the initiatives by the business community. Democratically elected bodies of government ... had very little influence. ... Other community groups beside the business community lacked influence on outcomes, as did the general public. In sum, by democratic standards, and understood in terms of conventional power theory, decisions regarding the Aalborg Project were made by too few and the wrong parties."

As much fun as it is to see one's conspiracy theories validated by a noted university professor, it is even more fun to consider the lessons about democracy and power he

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derives from this case study. Without going into any detail, let me offer a few more bons mots from the book:

- *“Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion.” (Nietzsche)*
- *“Power is more concerned with defining a specific reality than with understanding what reality is.” (Flyobjerg)*
- *“The possession of power unavoidably spoils the free use of reason.” (Kant)*
- *“There is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating change.” (Machiavelli)*
- *“Rationality is context-dependent; the context of rationality is power; and power blurs the dividing line between rationality and rationalization.” (Flyobjerg. I think Galileo discussing his sun centered universe with the Catholic Church would get this one.)*

One of my all-time favorite questions is: *So what? What do I do with all of this hard-won enlightenment?* As I write this, I see on my nightstand a publication by the Maryland Department of Transportation, inviting the public to discuss the proposed construction of the “Intercounty Connector” — a new limited access highway. While this highway has been talked about for some 50 years (talked about, not planned — as stated in the brochure), there appears to be a certain inevitability about it now. The new governor has made it his top transportation priority. The department of transportation naturally believes in it, noting:

“This transportation project is intended to increase community mobility and safety; to facilitate the movement of goods and people to and from economic centers; to provide cost-effective transportation infrastructure to serve existing and future development patterns reflecting local land use planning objectives; to help restore the natural, human and cultural environments from past development impacts in the project area; and to advance homeland security.”

Leaving aside for a moment the skepticism that some may have toward the veracity of these claims — imagine building a highway to improve the natural environment, what will we think of next? — Professor Flyobjerg would probably issue a wry smile at the invitation of public comments, for when one looks more closely at the invitation, the public is invited to learn about the project, rather than to discuss the merits of building it. If

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“We must distinguish between ... those who, to achieve their purpose, can force the issue and those who must use persuasion. In the second case, they always come to grief.”

“The possession of power unavoidably spoils the free use of reason.”

—Immanuel Kant



Professor Flyvbjerg would probably issue a wry smile at the invitation of public comments on a highway project in my state...

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you share his interest in peeking under the curtain of how political decisions are really made, you will smile too.

But after smiling, you might get angry. Professor Flyvbjerg offers advice on what to do with your anger. In summarizing the lessons learned from the Aalborg Project, let me cite just a few more key ones to consider.

1. Power defines reality. There are two competing realities in the transportation field today. The first goes something like this: the focus on building more roads as the primary means of reducing traffic congestion has been a disaster. While becoming increasingly dependent on our cars we have grown increasingly obese and increasingly ill as the incidence of various chronic diseases related to overweight and lack of exercise has risen dramatically.

We have passed this on to our children, as they are beginning to suffer from diseases formerly found only in out-of-shape adults. At the same time, vehicle emissions have become the primary threat to our air and water quality and our dependence on foreign oil continues to rise. Oh, and traffic congestion continues to grow. Other ways of moving people must be emphasized. Public transit, bicycling, and walking should play larger roles.

The other reality argues that bicycling, walking, and transit will never replace our love of cars, that part of the American Dream is owning a home surrounded by a spacious lawn, and that building new roads and maintaining existing ones are necessary byproducts of these preferences until technology takes us beyond the internal combustion engine. In the meantime, we can build playgrounds to keep our kids healthy, encourage adults to diet and exercise regularly, persuade fast food restaurants to provide healthier menus, and build more fuel efficient cars.

How do bike-ped advocates increase their power and thereby supplant the reality that currently holds sway?

2. Flyvbjerg cites Machiavelli's advice here: "We must distinguish between ... those who, to achieve their purpose, can force the issue and those who must use persuasion. In the second case, they always come to grief." Succinctly put, power trumps persuasion. This is not to say bike-ped advocates should ignore the economic, environmental, public health and mental health arguments in support of their position. Rather, a dependence on rationality and logic in the absence of other forms of power will not likely lead to success. But what other forms of power are available to bike-ped advocates?

3. Flyvbjerg advises: "Special interest groups have substantially more freedom to use and to benefit from the full gamut of instruments in naked power play than do democratically elected governments." As examples, he cites some of the tactics used by the Aalborg Chamber of Industry and Commerce: "overt politicization, pulling strings, making undocumented assertions, manipulation of facts, outright lying, using the press, personal letters to key persons, drawing on outside parties to use their muscle – these are all part of the arsenal of private interest groups."

Now, I am not suggesting that bike-ped advocates stoop to such tactics. Those on the public's side (some call it "doing God's work") need to find other ways to fight battles like this — ways in which their integrity will not be compromised. There are several such examples of strategies and tactics used by some MPOs cited in our NCBW upcoming publication tentatively titled *Getting Around Town*, if you will allow me to sneak in a plug.

4. The final piece of advice I will cite from Flyvbjerg is this: Looking at democracy from a long term perspective "shows us that forms of participation that are practical, committed, and ready for conflict provide a superior paradigm of democratic virtue than forms of participation that are discursive, detached, and consensus-dependent, that is, rational." In other words, those who are practical, in the sense of understanding the role of power, committed to a long-term struggle, and ready for conflict (realizing that public debate rarely follows Robert's Rules of Order) are the true progeny, advocates, and practitioners of democracy.

In twenty years, will your favorite project, your now heartfelt but somewhat unreal dream, become a reality or another Aalborg Project? Will you be able to hold off the Visigoths who wish to build your community's version of the Intercounty Connector? To increase your chances of success, consult with Professor Flyvbjerg.

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Bob Chauncey, a sociologist by training, former professor, and human resources consultant, was executive director of Maryland's statewide advocacy group and is now Senior Project Manager for the National Center for Bicycling and Walking. For NCBW, he coauthored "Are We there Yet?," a report on state DOTs, and "Getting Around Town," a study of MPOs, and he manages NCBW's Walkable Communities Workshop program.

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