Review of Steve Fuller (2018). *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*

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Abstract

Steve Fuller pleads the case for democratizing knowledge by, among other things, dismantling the expertise “protection racket” run by universities and professional bodies (what he calls academic “rentseeking”). He argues that “facts” have “always existed in the state of scare quotes, not only in politics but also in science,” contending that this insight does not carry with it a lack of respect for knowledge and expertise, but simply the recognition that the plausibility of a claim can only be assessed within the rules of hypothesis-testing set within the context of the scientific institutions in which expertise is formed and exercised. Fuller describes the activities of academic disciplines, professional bodies, and accreditation agencies as different kinds of gatekeeping and boundary work, all of which exists for the purposes of keeping people out rather than letting them in. If universities genuinely want to produce and disseminate knowledge as a public good, then their main task is not to prime a select few to be admitted into their ranks, but to aid in the redistribution of epistemic wealth and social capital. The aim of the perpetual revolution for which the university classroom is a fitting scene, he suggests, would be the achievement of a common sense of humanity. But insurgencies begin with dissatisfaction. If the academy is serious about promoting the public good, then it should be able to make a convincing case about what academic knowledge can do for those who are sceptical. According to Fuller, the answer is “modal power,” enhanced control over what is conceivable as true or false, possible, or impossible. This increased capacity to change rule rules of the game benefits all insofar as it can be further intensified when it is more widely available and distributed. While there are risks involved in the phenomenon of “ProtScience” that he envisions, there are also enormous gains to be made.

Keywords Steve Fuller · Post-truth · Expertise · Knowledge · Populism · Pareto · Elites · Social epistemology

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Fear and Loathing in the Academy

Anyone familiar with the work of Steve Fuller will expect *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* to be original, provocative, and, of course, funny. It is all these things. Even the glossary is entertaining. Peer Review, for instance, is there defined as: “A piece of academic Newspeak to refer to the relatively few academics who pass judgment on other academics’ work...” (189). This use of pithy shockers such as the conceptual tie between the very emblem of scientific and scholarly rigor, on the one hand, and ambiguous euphemistic propaganda, on the other, is classic Fuller, whose style might be called “gonzo scholarship.” On Hunter S. Thompson’s own account, his infamous style of journalism was inspired by William Faulkner’s notion that the best fiction is *truer* than any kind of journalism—and that the best journalists have always known this (Thompson 2011). Just as Thompson’s style blended the techniques of story-telling and investigative reporting, Fuller combines erudition and philosophical analysis with creative counter-narratives and a hearty dose of incredulous *épater les bourgeois* one-liners, the bourgeoisie in this case being complacent elites who accumulate advantage in part by recycling third-hand inherited pieties about “the scientific method,” the unfettered search for Truth (“academic freedom”), and the inevitability of our current ideas about meritocratic assessment and academic norms. Moreover, he implies that his own ideal of imaginative reconceptualization (in Fullerian parlance, “game-changing”) characterizes the greatest, most useful, and thus, in a post-truth sense, most “true” works in philosophy—and that the best philosophers have always known this.

So what is the argument? Fuller begins his story against the backdrop of Brexit, in particular the notion, prevalent among politicians, professionals, and the intelligentsia, that it is an expression of a wider revolt against expertise being waged by anti-intellectuals who privilege ignorance over knowledge and treat all ideas and opinions as equally valid and worthy of consideration. This picture, Fuller says, is a “big canard.” To the contrary, he suggests, it seems more likely that leaving important matters to the “experts” to decide encourages a blind trust in authority that weakens the scaffolding of democratic institutions that depend on the active exercise of judgment to flourish. Our “culture of intellectual deference” as he calls it, is actually anti-Enlightenment (13). Echoing one of his sources of inspiration, Karl Popper, he points out that questions involving knowledge have a necessary ethical component, that being the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own ideas and actions, and to acknowledge “ownership” of their consequences. Rather than see the debate as being between the cognoscenti, on the one hand, and the great unwashed, on the other, Fuller portrays the struggle as one between two forms for political discussion and decision-making: technocracy and rhetoric. In the case of the Brexit vote, the attitude of the rhetorician is more democratic—the idea is to convince someone of something by engaging her interests. This is, of course, how politics worked in the Athenian agora that was the birthplace of democracy.

The technocrat, on the other hand, takes herself to be a neutral purveyor of information and observer of “attitudes” held by the masses whom she instructs and studies. While increased media literacy would certainly benefit the individual and society by enabling a more critical distance to one’s feeds, Fuller notes, we would do well to accept that this heightened discretion requires at least as much everyday trial

and error experience as formal training (17). This idea runs throughout the book, in which Fuller pleads the case for democratizing knowledge by, among other things, dismantling the expertise “protection racket” run by universities and professional bodies (what he calls academic “rent-seeking”). It is in this context that Fuller makes his most incendiary epistemological claim, namely, that “facts” have “*always* existed in the state of scare quotes, not only in politics but also in science,” (17) contending that this insight does not carry with it a lack of respect for the authority of science, but rather the recognition that the plausibility of a claim can only be assessed within the rules of hypothesis-testing set within a given scientific context. These contexts are the spaces in which expertise is formed and exercised; in Fuller’s terms, training and accreditation are the ticket for entry into the “high-rent epistemic district” (21) called expertise. Fuller describes the activities of academic institutions and disciplines, professional bodies, and accreditation agencies as different kinds of gatekeeping and boundary work, all of which exists for the purposes of keeping out the riff-raff. If universities genuinely want to produce and disseminate knowledge as a public good, then they should use the classroom not as a place to prime a select few to be admitted through the portal to the sacred city, but to help all the others to crash the gates, and aid in the redistribution of the epistemic wealth and social capital guarded within. The aim of the perpetual revolution for which the university classroom is a fitting scene, says Fuller, would be, like other liberal and socialist revolutions, the achievement of a common sense of humanity. But insurgencies arise from dissatisfaction; they begin with a willing or wanting. Thus, if the academy is serious about promoting the public good, then we should first and foremost show students that we possess something that they are lacking. On this point, Fuller is at one with both Aristotle and Kant: education is training in what to desire.

Although Fuller’s account is compelling, much of its force owing to his talent for turning the tables on our most basic assumptions, one might have liked to have seen a more direct engagement with the nagging issues that the Brexit chapter raises. He might have referred, for instance, to Peter Mair’s thesis in the second part of his now canonical *Ruling the Void* (Mair 2013), which examines the role of the EU in enfeebling and at times circumventing the decision-making capacity of national governments, an issue of direct relevance for understanding Brexit. Mair argues that politicians have divested themselves of accountability for policy decisions and their consequences, having handed it over to anonymous bureaucrats who cannot be held responsible by discontented voters. The apparent impotence of elected officials leads to contempt for politicians and even for politics as such. Citing Tocqueville, Mair reminds us that the privileges of the pre-revolutionary French aristocracy fell into disrepute when they no longer reflected genuine societal functions. Reading Mair, one has the impression that it is almost a self-contradiction to be both pro-EU and democratically minded, a view shared by many left-leaning Brexiters. This aspect of Mair’s argument seems to resonate with Fuller’s view that the privileges of our bureaucrats and experts are being called into question for similar reasons. Yet Fuller clearly has a different take on the role of global finance, raising the question of how more precisely he understands the seemingly asymmetric relationship between the knowledge interests of major international financial actors, for instance, and the personal interests of citizens, individual voters, students, and consumers.

“I, Plato, *am* the Truth”

The second chapter concerns the philosophical quest for truth. This chapter is central to Fuller’s project, since it is here that he makes the argument that Plato and his epistemological progeny (which include inter alia Thomas Hobbes, John Maynard Keynes, and Walter Lippmann) are and have always been post-truth, the difference between Plato and his heirs being the former’s higher degree of self-awareness. On Fuller’s Nietzschean reading (Nietzsche 2005, 171), the point of philosophy is what he calls “modal power” (28–29 and *passim*), the control over what can be conceived of as true or false, and our intuitions of contingency, necessity, possibility, and impossibility. In this understanding, the political is everywhere and always implicated in the epistemic. Fuller is hardly alone in taking this view; variations of it are found in Marxist analyses, Straussian dramatic readings, and certain strains of post-structuralism. One objection that I wish Fuller had taken seriously is the possibility that the neo-Platonists understood Plato correctly. On such a reading, the Socratic “method” of *diaeresis*, of the division of a genus into its parts, is nothing more than a spiritual exercise, an exercise in the self-discipline required for the attainment of enlightenment. And this dimension is made explicit by the very idea of method, since, in Greek, the term designates the pursuit or following of a path, not the path itself. The lights illuminating the way are not the road, and certainly not the destination. The only direct access to Truth is noetic vision; but learning how to break down received notions and everyday assumptions is a way to become more receptive. But this version of Platonism need be neither fundamentally political nor necessarily mystical. It is a kind of reading favored by those students of Plato who have a feeling for what one might call “the real” in the sense of “real life” (Stanley Rosen, Hannah Arendt, and Iris Murdoch come to mind), without embracing “realism,” “anti-realism,” or any other -ism with regard to truth, which is to say that they refused to play by rules of the game that Fuller sees as the organizing principle of the philosophical endeavor as such. In fact, a strong case has been made for seeing not only Socrates’ character in Plato’s dialogues in this light (i.e., as engaged in “spiritual exercises”, or, as Arendt might say, “thinking”), but even later philosophers such as Descartes and Wittgenstein (Hadot 1995). Another way of putting the point is to note that the *Republic* has been read by some, on good textual evidence in, say, the first two and last three books of the dialogue (Plato 1974), not as a treatise on how to steer one’s polis, but, in the first instance, on how to steer oneself. By contrast, the Sophists were interested in teaching people how to steer and win an argument, making them the forebears of analytic philosophy today, at least as described in Fuller’s account.

In a comparable vein, Fuller’s portrayal of the “two Wittgensteins” glosses over continuities and exaggerates differences. In particular, the claim that Wittgenstein takes our most basic frames of reference to be utterly arbitrary is based on the assumption that the choice stands between necessity and contingency. But it is precisely that sort of assumed dichotomy that the later Wittgenstein vivisects. Rather than claiming that our ways of dealing with the world could change overnight, his point in, for instance, *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969), is that we can hardly make sense of what it would mean for that to happen. Any attempt to describe that situation from our current framework would be, strictly speaking, nonsense. These caveats by no means suffice to disregard Fuller’s very captivating story, nor are they intended to do so. But they can indicate the

way in which Fuller is inclined to “fictionalize” in *Vaihinger’s* sense, that is, provide credible narratives rather than test hypotheses. There’s much to be said in favor of this manner of seeking out aspects of our thinking that remain otherwise hidden. But there are other stories to be told. Fuller is obviously fed up with philosophical (and scientific) Whig historiography, which has a tendency to be more a matter of celebrating a “heritage” than conscientiously interrogating the past for present purposes. On the other hand, it can be argued that instead of collapsing philosophy into a form of rhetoric, one can show the absolute necessity of rhetoric in human life as a means of getting at the human mind without that account itself being rhetorical (for a stellar instance of the latter, see *Descombes 2001*).

The third chapter is devoted to science and technology studies (STS), a field in which Fuller is a preeminent figure, having formulated the program of “social epistemology.” If mainstream philosophy is, as Fuller would have it, the “truther” discipline par excellence, STS has, at least until recently, fallen fairly squarely into the “post-truther” camp. In fact, Fuller maintains that the whole of sociology, which he labels a theory of “anomie-management,” belongs there. Fuller is surely right to emphasize the birth of sociology as an academic discipline in the realization that the rules of the game were rapidly changing at the end of the nineteenth century, and that two of the founding fathers of the subject, *Durkheim* and *Weber*, were concerned to understand what happens when old value systems erode without new one firmly taking root. Similarly, argues Fuller, the norms, values, and goals characteristic of the twentieth-century welfare society are giving way to... we know not what. What is clear, and what Fuller recognizes, is that the current post-truth situation at very least displays signs that national identities with respect to language, borders and resources are giving way to more self-generated and self-organized ones (what we call “identity politics”).

Fuller views the popularity of “trans”-phenomena (transgender, transracial, transhuman discourses) as the logical conclusion of the post-truth sensibility that has always existed, namely, the insight that the rules of the game can be changed even at the level of personal identity. In a particularly clever rhetorical turn, Fuller suggests that trans-arguments can and should be used to nuance arguments made in the name of “epistemic justice” (58). His case is that epistemic justice would seem to entail justice toward knowledge itself, which would mean putting different theories of justice on the table for negotiation (with regard to merit, fairness, cost, benefit, etc.) when producing and disseminating knowledge, rather than fixating on a axiomatic criterion of truth, facticity, or equity. Fuller’s complaint about the fashionable use of the notion of epistemic justice is that it is “truthier,” assuming in advance an unproblematic conception of social justice with the normative agenda of identifying and correcting “violations.” STS, by contrast, should take ownership of its post-truth program, the core of which is that the meaning of a scientific fact can only be known by its effects, how it’s taken up and used “post-publication”; that truth in science is established institutionally, not conceptually; that scientific consensus requires manufacture and maintenance; and that what counts as competence and expertise is determined by specific interests and alignments. In short, Fuller thinks that STS needs to acknowledge that the context of justification, upon inspection, collapses into the context of dissemination. But proponents of STS are loath to do this. In part, this may be due to wanting to see itself as simply a discipline apart from the philosophy of science, not one at loggerheads with it.

The main issue, however, which Fuller addresses head on, is the worry that the post-truthiness of STS feeds climate denial, homeopathic medicine, and intelligent design. On this point, Fuller admonishes STS research to distinguish between the methodological game and the political one. I am not sure that he's entitled to uphold that distinction, given everything else he has to say about the intimate and intricate co-dependency of the two that he foregrounds elsewhere in this book as in others. Be that as it may, Fuller's hope that the post-truth condition is a sign of greater epistemic democracy in which more people than ever have access to the instruments of knowledge which they can make use of as they themselves see fit, constitutes a genuine challenge for academic self-understanding. Of course, if that dream is not to give rise to a nightmare of rule by brutality, tribalism, or chaos, one would need to address the question of what kind of democracy is envisioned here. Liberal? Constitutional? Social? And who is to be included in the demos? Should five-year olds have the same say as forty-year olds on climate change? How far should we take the all-affected principle? The question of what is at stake for whom is addressed here, but perhaps not as fully as some of us may need to be completely convinced of the salubrious effects of seeing science (all of knowledge, really) as a game. Wittgenstein's use of language games, rule-following, etc., by contrast, nowhere insists that science, or language, or society is, or ought to be seen as, a game. The very notion that the intricate dynamic historical and social activity involved in our use of the word "knowledge" is any one thing has a strangely Platonic ring to it.

The argument that ends the chapter, in which Fuller accuses defenders of expertise of epistemic mercantilism, is a master stroke of academic rhetoric. By pointing out how domains of knowledge have functioned as organizing principles for production and profit in the same way as the nation state since the nineteenth century, Fuller demonstrates the cash-value, as it were, of his contention that academic knowledge today lives off "rent-seeking practices." If we follow through with the analogy, then academic liberalism, like political liberalism, should seek to prevent monopolies such as those arising out of licenses granted in perpetuity (presumably university charters would fall under this heading, although Fuller does not explicitly say so). The upshot is then that the cumulative advantage arising from formal arrangements that ensure perpetual dividends to certain groups, institutions, and individuals should be counteracted. Such arrangements include some of the sacred cows of the academic dynasty, including peer review, self-delimiting disciplinary domains, and the reification of scientific or scholarly consensus in the form of citation statistics.

The Democratic Ethic and the Spirit of Science

In the fourth chapter, the aforementioned push for reading the logic of justification as generated by what I have called "the logic of dissemination" is, if not retracted, at least tempered. Fuller discerns the germ of democratized knowledge in the idea of a logic of justification as central to the scientific spirit. By allowing, at least in principle, anyone to examine the argument and weigh the evidence offered for himself, institutionalized methods of scientific inquiry break the ties with the idiosyncratic origins of knowledge claims. In Fuller's terms, the positivist ideal of the unity of science removes trade barriers and reduces epistemic rent-seeking. As a matter of historical fact, things did not

work out this way, as Fuller acknowledges, since entry into the respectable neighborhood of scientific inquiry, due to the prestige of physics, required paying heavy dues in the form of mathematical formalization. But the most striking thesis of this chapter, perhaps of the book as a whole, is that the academy, left to its own devices, will compromise its own liberal universalism unless compelled by external countervailing forces. The exemplary case of the latter is the military-industrial complex. Here, Fuller's reasoning is at once complex and riveting. He assaults the reader with a number of discomfiting characteristics of peer review, academic gatekeeping at journals and funding agencies, and what all of it tells us about the inclination toward continuity at the expense of risk-taking (and therewith the possibility of genuine renewal). The interests of the military and the industrial mindset force the academy to think of truth(s) in terms of real achievement, rather than as a regulative ideal; in the case of the military, the strategy is to approximate a target; in industry, to accumulate. These two goals are for the ultimate aims of victory or monopoly, respectively, which are formulated epistemically in terms of correspondence theories of truth, on the one hand, and coherence theories, on the other.

The point that Fuller wants to drive home here is that the knowledge interests of industry and the State mitigate against academic path dependencies and open up venues where existent knowledge and research results that have not won acclaim, or even received attention, within their “proper spheres” can be useful to both science and society. Fuller's aim is not so much to argue against the splendid isolation of the academic enterprise as to preach the gospel of the human potential to know and to take the best possible advantage of that knowledge. At this juncture, Fuller somewhat unexpectedly reflects on the special literary qualities of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Rousseau 1997):

A key feature of Rousseau's sense of authorship was that he never declared whether he was writing ‘fact’ or ‘fiction’ but rather simply took responsibility for the veracity of the thoughts and feelings being expressed and invited the reader to try the content out for themselves, resting his integrity as an author on the consequence of that encounter. In this rather clever way, he evades those who might otherwise be preoccupied with the source level accuracy of, say, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. (99)

He commends Rousseau for being “one of the first secular authors to invite readers to realize the truths of which he writes by inhabiting the words for themselves, without scrutinizing the empirical basis for what is presented on the page.” (100) Given the tone as well as the content of Fuller's writings, I take these remarks, situated in the middle of the book, in a chapter entitled “The Post-Truth about Academia,” to be a kind of implicit allusion to how we should read Fuller himself.

The fifth chapter makes the case for seeing our post-truth era as comparable with the Protestant Reformation. Instead of being led by authorities, people are now taking responsibility for their own decisions regarding what is worth knowing, and assessing the validity of claims to knowledge independently of established authority. But whereas science was a weapon of secularization during the first Reformation, it is now its quarry. The secular State and the scientific methods that issued from the first revolt are themselves under attack, but, importantly, in the same spirit. Thus “Protscience,” Fuller's term of art for this development, is a natural progression from, rather than a backlash against, the

sensibilities that issued in the Enlightenment. Fuller's argument here regarding the crisis of legitimation in science is one that echoes Mair's regarding the crisis in politics. As validators of policies ranging over health, security, the environment, and the economy, scientific elites are in essence the high priests of the secular state. "Protscience challenges such state-science ties, not least because scientists are unaccountable to those they govern by proxy." (110). In this context, although he refrains from drawing the parallel explicitly, Fuller's argument suggests that public intellectuals and science writers can serve as the equivalent of "free churchmen" (dissenters or nonconformists). Interestingly, Fuller points out that the power wielded by academic journals and science academies in virtue of their authoritative position marginalizes in the first instance dissent *within* the academy, while at the same time expecting, indeed requiring, submission and respect. The upshot is that heresy is punished, regardless of whether the claims are formulated with theoretical sophistication and in terms of established scientific data, or just culled from the Internet: "conformity is the primary marker of competence" (124).

The sixth chapter neatly grafts philosophical debates on realism and anti-realism onto Max Weber's distinction between value-rational and end-rational pursuits, where science belongs to the first and politics to the second. In the first case, we pursue the truth without knowing where it will lead us. We are ready to accept, indeed commit ourselves to the inevitability, that our present truths will be superseded by other ones (otherwise science would not progress, and the whole enterprise would be meaningless). Our methods are akin to moral laws; they cannot guarantee that we'll get it right, but they help keep us on the straight and narrow. By contrast, the point of politics is not to test our ideas against the world, but to make the world conform to our ideas. Thus, on Fuller's reading, science is realist, while politics is anti-realist (constructivist, decisionist). This discussion leads up to Fuller's *coup de grâce* for the idea of the neutrality of the scientific enterprise as the limning of reality as it is in all its truthfulness. He sees in science as in politics rather the ability to decide what is and is not possible, which he terms "modal power." The basic idea is that reality is not given but decided: "When God decides, the result is the best possible principles for ordering the universe; when humans do it, the result is no more than a risky hypothesis that can be falsified by subsequent events" (141).

In the seventh and final chapter, Fuller draws out the implications of this stance. One such consequence is the diminished status of expertise, which, he argues, should be seen in sociological terms rather than epistemological ones. On this view, an expert is someone who other people rely on to decide certain matters based on his presumed mastery of a coherent body of delimited, dependable, and pertinent knowledge. The point of expertise is not the knowledge possessed by the expert, however, but the deliberations and actions ensuing from her expert decision within her sphere of discretion. Sociologically speaking, says Fuller, "expertise is the most potent non-violent form of power available" (161). The cure for what ails us, in his view, is not so much that experts say more than they know, but that we laypeople want to put the burden of responsibility for the consequences of actions taken on the basis of their expertise on their shoulders, which means that they are less inclined to bold conjectures. If we were to embrace the ethic of the Reformation, we would utilize their knowledge without kneeling to their authority, which would both free them to be more enterprising, and make us devise, consider, and attempt more rigorous refutations, thereby honing the expert opinion in question for all. But that means that we are all implicated in the consequences, good or bad, of our trials and errors. The risks involved in not making the best possible use of the human capacity for reason, Fuller argues, are as great as the ones

emanating from overstepping its bounds, since the former entails a state of passivity in the face of the unknown, such as what the future will bring. Getting things wrong is the only way to learn how to set them right. Fallibility is the motor of scientific and social advancement. The world is a precarious place, but we are not made safer by just counting on the edicts of experts to keep us safe. Fuller is well aware that his post-truth utopia will not hold universal appeal. But then, he is just selling us a good story, one which he goes to impressive lengths to get us to buy. I am not sure that I am entirely sold, but it's a brilliant pitch.

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