

***Reinventing Humanity with a New Sociological Imagination***<sup>1</sup>

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*The New Sociological Imagination*

By Steve Fuller

London: Sage Publications, 231 pp., 2006.

Steve Fuller's *The New Sociological Imagination* is a provocative book that touches on many contemporary themes in sociology and related human-social sciences. It is an attempt to update the contribution of an earlier book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) by [C.W. Mills](#), which set the tone for a sociological revival in the United States in the 1960s. Fuller appeals to global humanity as a type of 'endangered species' due to the threat posed by ideologies such as naturalism, biologism and scientism, which Fuller claims result when biology and other natural sciences are elevated above human-social thought, as was demonstrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What Fuller suggests is that the aspiration of sociology to improve society and to assist in governing it can still help to modernize the Enlightenment promise of bettering humanity as a whole. Fuller's goal is 'to reinvent humanity' so as to provide a basis for a new type of social science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A one-phrase summary for the book might be: 'humans of the world unite!' even though ideologically, culturally and religiously this seems next to impossible to achieve.

The force of Fuller's argument can be found in basic statements. For example, he argues that, "Sociologists should stop deferring to the authority of biologists." (pg. 3) This highlights the sovereignty of sociology as a scientific and academic discipline, which gives it undeniable rights of self-expression and self-identity that are not answerable to or reducible to biological science. It is wrong both for biologists (e.g. such as those of the sociobiology school) to abuse their authority with respect to human-social things and it is likewise ill-advised for sociologists to look to biologists for authority on topics that exist outside of the realm proper to biology. Sociologists thus need to develop "a sociological sensibility that breaks decisively with biology." (76) Fuller is calling for a kind of proactive sovereignty in which scholars and scientists are asked to contribute to communal knowledge on topics of their greatest specialization, but also to accept the inevitable limitations of their disciplines. This would mean showing respect for the knowledge that other legitimate academic disciplines possess in promoting more holistic, interdisciplinary collaboration.

Fuller begins Part I – "Desperately Seeking Sociology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" – with an appeal for sociologists to address the legacy and status of socialism, which must be faced up to as an integral component of the social scientific canon. Because the growth of sociology occurred within countries that were mainly capitalistic, "sociology became the science *of* and *for* the welfare state," (17) which mistakes the contribution that socialist

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thought has made to understanding human society and persons. Socialism is even referred to, in one of Fuller's chapter titles, as 'the elusive synthesis at the heart of social science.' He opposes the idea common in western sociologies that without capitalism, sociology would cease to exist. Instead, he places the focus on humanity as a collective project which *Homo sapiens* undertakes to transcend its animal nature. Thus, Fuller highlights the legitimacy of a human-centred (or 'anthropic') socialism, which he sees as consistent with monotheistic belief.

One of the ways sociology can reclaim its rightful territory in the contemporary Academy, according to Fuller, is by pushing back against the ideology of naturalism. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century prospects of socialism for social science have now turned into the challenge of naturalism against which sociologists must defend their legitimate realm of study. Our humanity depends on our biology, as Fuller recognizes and demonstrates with his considerable references to biological literature and its impact on human-social thought. However, Fuller argues that there is a danger of reductionistic thought in trying to explain human beings strictly in naturalistic terms.

The 'gene's eye-view of the world,' presented by British evolutionary biologist and ethologist Richard Dawkins is insufficient for understanding and defining personal human identity. This is why Fuller attacks Australian philosopher Peter Singer, along with Dawkins, for professing such a selfish gene-oriented view of humanity, which is inconsistent with the core teachings of social sciences from the start. Here Fuller is rejecting the possibility that a natural scientist or philosopher could rightfully dictate to human-social thinkers what can or cannot count as acceptable ideas or theories on topics that belong outside of natural sciences and philosophy.

It is here that Fuller explores what is the title of Part II – "The Biological Challenge to the Social Sciences." The challenge is witnessed in the pressure biological science places upon other disciplines, since it has become "the cutting edge scientific discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." (136) Fuller argues that as a result of the importance currently attributed to biology in the Academy and the 'biological turn' in social thought, the political left is becoming 'green,' which signifies the threat posed by neo-Darwinian ideas being sometimes extended into social sciences. Headed by Singer as a crusader for animal rights, Fuller, himself a leftist thinker, is concerned that the political left is trying to disempower humans, while animals are at the same time empowered. "Are humans always the privileged members of society?" he asks.

From a biologically-oriented, neo-Darwinian perspective, which is consistent with what Fuller identifies as a 'karmic worldview' (see below), the answer is no; human beings are just one species among many and deserve no privileged or unique status. This, according to Fuller, is the most fundamental challenge facing contemporary social science, which is why he presents a counter-argument in *The New Sociological Imagination* that aims to solidify the special character of human beings within the social sciences against naturalistic reductionism. The neo-Darwinian paradigm discredits claims to a unique 'human nature' that is promoted by the 'anthropic' orientation (139); to Fuller, neo-Darwinism is thus an unnecessary presupposition to make in sociology.

The history of the natural-physical sciences actually involves erasing the distinction between humans and non-humans, Fuller claims. He says this leads to what he calls a ‘casualization’ of the human condition, which endorses a ‘disenchantment of the world.’ In making it too easy or simple to manipulate or to terminate human persons at the beginning or the end of their life, global society is in danger of a kind of ‘dehumanization.’ Fuller thus cautions social scientists against the desire to reduce humanity to biological aspects or succumb to the pressure of ‘natural selection’ by reference to an alternative type of ‘social selection,’ in which he includes academic, religious, political and other realms which are unique to human culture and thus beyond the conceptual or theoretical reach of biology.

Sociology is “a discipline that aspires to universality,” he says, but we have no choice other than to formulate it in particular places and times. Today, an ‘environmentalist’ movement is gaining ground, and the ‘green shift’ towards improved ecological stewardship is at the forefront of many national and international concerns. By seeking to unite secular humanists with monotheists under the banner of ‘anthropic worldviews,’ Fuller aims to uplift sociology as a field of knowledge that can help to return dignity and special status back to humanity. While critics of Fuller’s work will say that the cost to the environment is too much to risk in maintaining an inherent distinction between humanity and the rest of nature, the supporter will highlight the work that sociologists can do in mobilizing society to create sound environmental policies that increase care and respect for the environment.

Fuller believes that the theological perspective that human beings were created in the image and likeness of their creator, God, is the fundamental and essential feature that makes human beings a species like no other animal. This, combined with the idea that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, is what distinguishes the social sciences from the natural sciences and humanities. It is this fundamental understanding of sociology as both promoting and also investigating the uniqueness of humanity that leads to the book’s Part III – “Humanity as the Endangered Species of Our Time.” It is here that Fuller reveals his most provocative, but also his most speculative contribution to potentially shaping a new sociological imagination.

Fuller begins by outlining what he calls a ‘world-historic struggle in science and religion’ (131) that will soon occur between what he calls ‘anthropic cultures’ and ‘karmic cultures.’ Karmic cultures downplay or even remove the uniqueness of humanity in the universe. In doing so, they often make use of neo-Darwinian evolutionary principles, which equate anthropology with ethology. The karmic worldview and neo-Darwinism dehumanize humanity by insisting that the only difference between people and (other) animals is one of ‘degree’ and not of ‘kind.’ On the other hand, monotheistic religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam uphold the ‘special’ status and thus ‘anthropic’ role of human beings in our cosmic history. Confronting this alternative approach to the status of human beings in the universe is bound to lead, believes Fuller, to a struggle that endangers the sanctity of human life on our planet.

Several questions arise from Fuller’s suggestions. If humanity is really classifiable as “the endangered species of our times,” then why aren’t people doing something more

significant about the perpetrators of this supposed extinction in order to protect us from this potential fate? Perhaps such action towards the ‘dehumanizers’ is what Fuller is proposing, yet he doesn’t explain clearly how to actively achieve a rebalancing of the academic landscape away from natural science and towards social scientific ideas that would satisfy karmic thinkers. Fuller’s prediction of a ‘coming world-historic struggle’ can be seen as under-estimating the geo-political situation, in that there seems little possibility today that Jews, Christians and Muslims will be able to unite under one banner of ‘anthropic’ given the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and great tensions in Israel and Palestine, in North and South Korea, among other significant disagreements.

One of the strongest arguments in Fuller’s text is found in his opposition to reductionistic approaches to altruism. We are not necessarily more naturally ‘selfish’ than we are ‘altruistic,’ he insists, just because an ethologist (e.g. R. Dawkins) tells us that is true. Fuller points out that “the selfishness metaphor is rarely extended sociologically.” (121) Even if human selfishness seems to make sense according to the modern evolutionary accounts of behaviour (124), this doesn’t surpass the contribution about unselfishness and altruism that human-social thinkers can make with respect to human behaviour, ethics and morality. According to sociobiologists and ethologists, altruism “diminishes as social distance from oneself increases.” (125) Yet from a social-humanitarian perspective that embraces all of humanity anthropically, individuals still feel compelled to help others not only by a simplistic rational choice economic formula. Fuller suggests that there is a species-unity allegiance in ‘anthropic’ worldviews that establishes human solidarity between peoples of different ethnicities and nationalities. I support such a view, with the obvious caveat that practical social unity in human living conditions is a notoriously difficult task. The fact remains, however, that some philosophers are actually ‘biased *against* humans’ (127). This should be seen as a troubling surprise among social scientists and one that should be taken seriously, even by natural-physical scientists.

Fuller’s argument in the end hinges on a recognition that the monotheistic religions, given that a vast majority of modern science was invented and promoted by monotheists, share a common vision. This vision or belief is that “the best of all possible worlds’ implied that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God.” (128) Fuller is saying this as a self-proclaimed non-religious humanist, and so one may be less inclined to accept his position as overly-ideological or religiously-motivated, when it plainly is not. Though he is not forthright in moralizing about the occurrence, Fuller speaks of “the displacement of theology by the natural sciences for the intellectual and spiritual leadership of European and American universities.” (131) This transfer of higher status away from theology to natural-physical and applied sciences has contributed to the imbalance that Fuller identifies in the contemporary Academy. As well, it indicates the situation that European and American universities are often no longer world leaders in certain non-naturalistic fields or disciplines.

Fuller writes of human existence as ‘spiritual,’ marking it as unique from the rest of the animal and natural world (132). But he only highlights this descriptively and does not offer any justification for holding this point of view as prescriptive for everyday human living. What difference does being ‘spiritual’ actually make for humanity? Science and religion may not be inevitably in conflict with each other as some naturalistic scholars

have led people to believe, but this would do little to stop theists, atheists and agnostics from disagreeing with each other about the sources of morals, values, ethics and principles upon which to (re-)organize human societies, communities and nations.

The controversy surrounding neo-Darwinism in the contemporary Academy is a flashpoint for social, cultural, ethical and religious (dis)content. But it is nevertheless beyond the reach of natural science to prove or disprove the existence of a human soul or of a divine Creator. This means that human uniqueness will continually be under threat from a theoretical standpoint by those anti-theists who would seek to use natural-physical scientific facts to try to disprove religious meaning.

Fuller instead appeals to science (both natural and social) as a common possession of humanity; science serves as a vehicle to promote the unity of humankind. He contends that ‘progress’ as a doctrine associated with evolutionary thinking, “destroys the sense of a universal human community” (155), through devotion to a comparative rather than a collective approach to human living. He blames the ideology of capitalism for over-emphasizing an ethic of individual responsibility, but also charges scientism with making people species-indifferent with respect to human life. Science, notes Fuller, has institutionally moved away from its links to monotheism, just as has capitalism (161); both are traditions that have lost their ultimate moorings.

One might question Fuller’s ultimate allegiances at this point and wonder if he is trying to play multiple sides in a two sided game. Fuller admits that ideological Darwinism is vulnerable when it comes to assessing the political focus on making ‘species survival’ the ultimate good, even if individual members of a given species must be sacrificed or manipulated in due course. But one wonders where Fuller draws his source of morality from if he does not share in the Abrahamic theological tradition that places faith in the uniqueness of human beings as sacred creatures. How does Fuller accept evolution and reject neo-Darwinism when speaking with naturalists, while he still seems to promote naturalistic ideology? This question is not answered in the text.

Likewise, several other questions are raised to which Fuller gives only indirect answers. Should we accept the way that biologists, zoologists, and ethologists, in the tradition of Darwinian thought, treat human beings as simply another part of the biological continuum? (185) Must we give up the view long cherished in social science that human beings are a unique and special species, somehow separate or at least partially different from the rest of nature, in order to identify ourselves more completely with nature and the environment? (190) Is there a need to maintain a sense of mystery with respect to ‘human nature,’ either using the reductionistic arguments of sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists or through appeals made by theologians and religious leaders to the non-material aspect of human existence (200)? Fuller makes many provocative statements, but it is unclear in the end if he actually values human beings vertically or simply accepts us horizontally bereft of spirituality and higher purpose.

In the end, Fuller’s main focus is on re-invigorating the ‘legal category of *universitas*’ or the corporation formed by human communities. He calls this institutional fact of human self-formation, “the sharpest break with humanity’s biological origins” (205), which

transcends the interests of particular individuals. Focusing on this will serve to reinvent humanity and help to regain for sociology its legitimate and respected place within the contemporary Academy as a sovereign and progressive realm of scientific and academic study.

If Fuller's book can help raise awareness of this possibility and provoke action on the part of sociologists, a new sociological imagination may indeed begin to form in the Academy. If not, then at least Fuller will have succeeded in breaking new ground in his book by placing the uniqueness of humankind in and beyond nature at the core of his text. Thus, Fuller has shown both intellectual integrity and a fresh vision to defend the heart of social scientific values and ethics against natural scientific reductionism.

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