



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Preface to the Chinese Edition of *Social Epistemology*

Steve Fuller, University of Warwick, S.W.Fuller@warwick.ac.uk

Fuller, Steve. 2019. "Preface to the Chinese Edition of *Social Epistemology*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, (6): 38-43. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4dU>.

Context: A series of five books relating to social epistemology are being translated by the [Central Compilation and Translation Bureau](#), the publishing organ of the Chinese Communist Party. Included among these is the second edition of Steve Fuller's first book, *Social Epistemology*. For the Chinese edition, Fuller was asked to write a new preface, detailing his intellectual background and trajectory, especially in relation to issues of interest to Marxist scholars.

It is with great pleasure that I write this introduction to the Chinese edition of *Social Epistemology*, which was originally published more than thirty years ago—and I especially want to thank Yaxin Yao for making the translation possible.¹ In what follows, I will reflect on the significance of 'social epistemology' as the signature theme in my intellectual trajectory. Although I did not coin the phrase 'social epistemology', I founded the journal by that name in 1987 and a year later published this book—the first one with the title 'social epistemology'. All of this was done shortly after I had finished my Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh in History & Philosophy of Science. Even though I was still under thirty years old at the time, I had been considering these matters from my time as a scholarship student in a Jesuit prep school (Regis High School, in New York City) more than ten years earlier. I begin on this note because it helps to explain how I think about 'social epistemology' in a way that remains relevant today.

Jesuit Influence, Marx and Engels, Protestantism

The Jesuits are the order of the Roman Catholic Church that was created in the sixteenth century to keep Christendom united after the Protestant Reformation had threatened to divide the Church. But this history has been controversial. In the 1970s when I was a teenager, the Jesuits were promoting a radical rethinking about humanity's place in society and the cosmos more generally. They were the ones who most explicitly incorporated Marxist teachings in their theology, and here I refer to 'Liberation Theology', which spread across Latin America and Africa during the period. The most popular thinker amongst my teachers was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit palaeontologist whose works were banned by the Church in his lifetime because he read the Bible through the ideas of the Soviet Cosmist chemist, Vladimir Vernadsky, who is now credited with having invented the concept of the 'Anthropocene'. My own more recent work on 'Humanity 2.0' draws on this thinking. But perhaps of greatest relevance to my original work in social epistemology is the demystified view of history that Marx and Engels present in *The German Ideology*, which the Jesuits presented—just as Marx and Engels themselves did—as a critique of Protestant theology. So it's worth recalling the original challenge posed by Protestantism.

Protestantism's distinctiveness in the history of Christianity is also the source of its legacy to modern epistemology, not least social epistemology. The Protestants called on Christian believers to 'justify' their belief. 'Justification' generally means who or what authorizes what

¹ Editor's Note: Subheadings were added that do not appear in the original text.

you believe. Modern epistemologists think about this matter in terms of providing an empirical basis or a rational argument in support of a knowledge claim, in which expert testimony might play an important role. However, the Protestants meant something much more direct and personal, namely, an encounter with the ‘Word of God’. While the Protestants saw themselves as recovering the mentality of the original Christians, their cause was greatly assisted by the promotion of mass literacy and commercial Bible publishing, which gave believers the opportunity to decide for themselves what to make of what they read in the sacred scripture.

Protestantism turned out to be so important in the history of epistemology because Roman Catholic rule over Europe had been maintained by the illiteracy of most believers, who simply trusted the local Catholic officials—the priests—to act benevolently on their behalf. However, this climate of trust bred multiple forms of corruption that the Protestants seized upon as evidence of Rome’s overall spiritual failure. In particular, the Church seemed too preoccupied with cultivating its ties to existing temporal authorities. For the Protestants, either the state itself had to be reinvented on a ‘properly’ Christian basis or state and church simply had to remain separate. While the great Protestant leaders Martin Luther and John Calvin embraced the first option, the latter has become the norm in modern nation-states. In this respect, Protestantism drew attention to the inherently problematic relationship between knowledge and power, which has been always central to social epistemology.

While knowledge can certainly provide a legitimate basis for power, that power can also undermine knowledge in the long term without adequate checks. From a social epistemological standpoint, this point applies equally to religion, politics and science. Moreover, Protestantism laid the foundations for ‘accountability’ in all three domains, which were only gradually disentangled from each other. Thus, Francis Bacon, the personal lawyer of King James I, not only oversaw the production of the first complete English Bible but also developed the experimental method as a systematic check on all knowledge claims, regardless of their source. He specifically had his sights set on academic knowledge claims, which were often based on little more than unproven ancient testimony.

Baconian Method and Its Influences

Although we now regard Bacon as the spiritual godfather of the world’s first modern scientific society, the Royal Society of London, his ‘Solomon’s House’ was designed to be more ambitious in scope: It was empowered not simply to pursue science for its own sake; it was designed to regularly test the conflicting claims advanced by various religious and political authorities, so that policies can emerge that command general assent across all factions in society, which could then be enacted to benefit society as a whole. Bacon’s guiding idea, which we nowadays take for granted, was really quite profound. He believed in a level playing field for deciding the fate of ideas. The fact that a given idea has been believed—or even worked—for a long time should not necessarily favour its extension into the indefinite future. After all, many ideas become dominant simply by a combination of accident, force of habit and/or lack of competitors. Thus, the cornerstone of Bacon’s method was the ‘crucial experiment’, which compelled even the most entrenched ideas to face opponents on the neutral ground of predicting specific outcomes under agreed conditions. The Baconian method anticipated modern concerns that the truth value of knowledge claims may change over time because evidence degrades, our methods become

better—or perhaps even the world changes. In any case, for the first time, the pursuit of knowledge was cast as an inherently critical enterprise that was systematically pitted against established authorities.

It was in that spirit that Kant dedicated the *Critique of Pure Reason* to Bacon, and in the twentieth century Karl Popper mounted an entire philosophy of the ‘open society’ covering both politics and science on the back of the Baconian method. And between Kant and Popper was Marx and Engels’ own engagement with this tradition, on the basis of which such signature Marxist concepts as ‘alienation’, ‘reification’ and ‘false consciousness’ were forged. In particular, Marx and Engels observed that the liberal theologians of their day, most notably Ludwig Feuerbach, did not take their Protestantism far enough. Their religiously demystified readings of the Bible were replaced by a kind of secular ‘re-mystification’ in terms of an uncritically accepted Enlightenment narrative that, simply put, ‘The truth shall set you free’—even without attending to the material conditions under which such ‘truth’ is produced and distributed. However, as Marx and Engels saw clearly, that was just a formula for chaos that would end up favouring only the powerful. Indeed, this analysis became the cornerstone of the Marxist critique of the capitalist ‘free market’, and was vindicated by the failed 1848 ‘liberal revolutions’ across Europe, including Germany. The general lesson for social epistemology in all this was that the critical spirit can be effective only under specific institutional arrangements. *The Communist Manifesto*, which pointed to centrality of the ‘party’, was of course Marx and Engels’ own positive proposal along these lines.

Social Epistemology and the University

My own version of social epistemology has also gone down this path. Perhaps the best example is my understanding of the university as the site for the manufacture of knowledge as a public good, which is based on the complementary, if not countervailing, functions of *research* and *teaching*—the twin cornerstones of the modern university, often dubbed ‘Humboldtian’, after the early nineteenth century Prussian Education Minister, Wilhelm von Humboldt, a linguist and liberal political theorist who accepted Kant’s understanding of the European Enlightenment as marking humanity’s maturation into adulthood—‘emergence from nonage’, in Kant’s terms. Humboldt aimed to remake the medieval institution of university in the image of that understanding. Kant’s metaphor struck home because monarchs and Popes were frequently characterised as exercising ‘paternalistic’ authority over society. Thus, reflecting Kant’s call to adulthood, Humboldt’s ‘enlightened’ university would grant academics the freedom to research in return for teaching in a way that also frees students’ minds, regardless of however they wish to pursue their lives, which may be quite different from that of their teacher. In this way, education becomes a vehicle of empowerment, not indoctrination. It is worth dwelling on the radical nature of this proposal.

Knowledge is *not* by nature a public good: It must be made one. Understood as a product of research, knowledge is born elite. If knowledge is genuinely innovative—that is, a discovery or an invention—then by definition it is at first known by few people, who in turn potentially acquire some sort of advantage vis-à-vis fellow researchers, if not society at large. In this respect, all knowledge begins as what economists call a ‘positional good’, namely, its

value is tied directly to its scarcity. In order for knowledge to become a ‘public good’, its value must not diminish even as more people learn about, use and develop it. It is here that teaching engages what I have called the ‘creative destruction of knowledge as social capital’. My use of ‘creative destruction’ is obviously indebted to the economist Joseph Schumpeter, whose *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* I first read in my Jesuit prep school. Schumpeter famously located the lifeblood of capitalism in the ‘entrepreneur’ who creatively destroys markets through innovation.

However, the contemporary world poses institutional obstacles to turning knowledge into a public good. Together they effectively subordinate teaching to research, instead of treating them as equal university functions. Two such barriers stand out: academic writing conventions and intellectual property legislation. Each in its own way imposes additional restrictions on access to knowledge beyond the bare fact that knowledge is born known only to a few. Indeed, these restrictions enable knowledge to become a form of ‘social capital’ that accrues power to those able to pay the entry costs to gain access. This is close to the sense of ‘knowledge as power’ that the Protestant Reformers found corrupting of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that Plato and even his latter-day followers such as Auguste Comte would have been pleased, since knowledge-based power is arguably the least violent way to impose social order. Of course, I refer here to the technical training required to be deemed an ‘expert’ with ‘credentials, the ultimate expression of research-based knowledge. This in turn breeds a complementary culture of ‘trust’ and ‘deference’ on the part of those who lack the relevant credentials. The result is a very explicit sense of social hierarchy.

The Epistemic Spirit of Teaching

The relevant way to understand university ‘teaching’ as manufacturing knowledge as a public good is *not* as technical training but as *anti-technical* training. In other words, the goal of teaching is the very opposite of the faithful transmission of knowledge to the student as the teacher learned it. To assume otherwise would be to suggest that restricted access is inherent to the nature of knowledge. Knowledge can be manufactured as a public good only if students are enabled to acquire the ‘same’ knowledge by starting from their own premises. This implies a specific approach to teaching. First, teachers need to have a clear sense of what is and is not essential in the knowledge they wish to convey to students. Teachers should assume that much of how they themselves have come to know something is simply an accident of their biography—that is, the fact that they went to certain schools, read certain books, had certain teachers. Those aspects of their background do not require reproduction. But equally important, teachers need to have a reasonable sense of what students already know, as that will be the basis on which they can understand the relevant sense of novelty that is presented in what they are taught. The result is a form of knowledge that is sometimes dismissed—especially in the context of science communication—as ‘popularisation’, but it is the sort of knowledge that can be genuinely counted as a ‘public good’, simply because excessive access costs to the knowledge have been stripped away.

Although I hardly mentioned teaching at all in *Social Epistemology*, the above discussion of teaching—which has increasingly figured in my work in subsequent years—is inspired by my long-standing interest in *translation*, the subject of part two of this book. A key distinction recognized in translation theory, due to the Bible translator Eugene Nida, is between ‘formal

equivalence’ and ‘dynamic equivalence’. In *Social Epistemology*, I observed that it corresponds to the difference between *exegesis* and *hermeneutics* of the Bible: The former tends to construct the Bible’s authority by distancing the work from its readers, while the latter constructs Biblical authority on the basis of its continuing relevance to people’s lives. Roughly speaking, that captures the difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes to the Bible. But the distinction can be equally cast in terms of education.

Teaching in the spirit of a formally equivalent translation aims to get students to see the world as the teacher sees it. This is the essence of technical training, which—as Thomas Kuhn rightly stressed—is the sense in which a scientific paradigm imposes a world-view on practising scientists. Thus, someone who trains to be a physicist implicitly agrees to adopt the cognitive framework of, say, Newton or Einstein. But this arrangement renders knowledge a positional good, not a public good. Notwithstanding the significance increasingly accorded to the Ph.D. in the modern university, if it is to remain faithful to the Humboldtian spirit, it should be the natural enemy of this approach. In *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times*, I made this point in terms of Ernst Mach’s vehement opposition to Max Planck’s proto-Kuhnian approach to the teaching of science in the early twentieth century. Here I follow Mach in relating education to translation as dynamic equivalence. Thus, the teacher aims to get the students to understand the significance of a piece of knowledge on their own terms, which means that the teacher must recast it in a way that directly addresses the students’ world-view, even if it turns out to challenge, test or critique the students’ beliefs. The measure of successful teaching in this context is that students come to see the knowledge that they acquire as relevant to their normal lives, rather than as a self-contained expertise that is relevant only in certain ‘professional’ settings, in which they exert power over others.

Knowledge as a Public Good

In conclusion, let me return to my original point that knowledge needs to be manufactured as a public good, and that this can only happen through the ‘creative destruction of social capital’. I have increasingly characterised university tendencies to privilege research over teaching—and hence reduce teaching to technical training—as intellectual ‘rent-seeking’. One of the few things on which capitalist and socialist economists can agree is that they abhor rent as a source of value, mainly because it relies on what they regard as an artificial restriction of access to capital. ‘Rentiers’, in Marx’s memorable term, literally try to capitalize on sheer ownership, even though the fact that someone owns something valuable now should not by itself be the source of future value; rather, ownership should be treated simply as the basis on which new value is generated through productive labour. To conclude otherwise is to mystify the original acquisition process by which someone comes to own something. Yet, when scientific paradigms are named after, say, Newton, Darwin or Einstein, origins are effectively mystified. Newton did not merely arrive at an impressive number of truths about the physical universe. His methods for arriving at those truths became the template for physical inquiry, arguably to this day.

This last point recalls what economists call ‘path dependency’ in the history of technology, which means the tendency for one innovation to become so entrenched that all competitors

must play by the rules of its game. Thus, when Henry Ford shifted the paradigm of personal transport from the horse to the automobile, future competitors had to build a better car, not a better horse. However, as we have seen, the intellectual trajectory that flows from the Protestant Reformation to the scientific method has been rightly hostile to the narrowing of horizons that this tendency involves. Thus, instead of grounding the legitimacy of the Christian message on the dynastic succession of the Popes from St Peter onward, the Protestants favoured the approach of St Paul, who spread Christianity to many audiences in a more direct and even customized manner. But arguably, path dependency is a bigger problem in science today. To be sure, it captures well the emergence and evolution of a Kuhnian scientific paradigm, as each new generation of scientists is compelled to ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’, to recall Newton’s characterisation of his own achievement. Evidence of this may be found in academic citation practice, whereby it is near impossible to establish one’s own claims to knowledge without referencing specific precursors, on whose work one then claims to build.

But interestingly, science’s instinctive Protestant tendencies have pushed back against path dependency. The clearest expression of this hostility is the insistence on a sharp distinction between the *context of discovery* and the *context of justification*. This distinction, associated in my student years with the logical positivists and the Popperians, has a long prehistory. It is rooted in the intuition that if science aspires to be a ‘universal’ form of knowledge, then its knowledge must be both universally valid and universally available. It follows that the originator of any knowledge claim is no more than a historical accident, from an epistemological standpoint. Popper sometimes even said that the context of discovery was ‘irrational’. What he meant was that we should not fetishize the origins of knowledge claims because anyone else could have come up with them, under the right conditions—assuming that they are indeed valid knowledge claims.

This in turn makes the epistemological task inherently social, in a way that is related to the role of teaching in the Humboldtian university, which is ultimately about demystifying the origins of knowledge to enable everyone to use that knowledge pursue their own future. The question that remains, of course, is whether this ‘empowering’ view of knowledge, which has been central to my version of social epistemology, can be pursued in a way that in the end retains a common understanding of ‘society’. The Jesuit order was created with that question in mind nearly five hundred years ago, and it remains as relevant as ever in our ‘post-truth’ world.