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A Critical Review of *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* by Steve Fuller

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*Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*

Steve Fuller

Anthem Press, 2018

218 pp.

Reviewing Steve Fuller's book, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*, from the Greek island of Zakynthos, in the middle of a global pandemic is a surreal experience. Particularly, because Fuller's book is dedicated to Thucydides who he states was the originator of fake news. In 'A Quiet Life', I referenced Thucydides and indeed, Pericles (the prime minister's hero who died from typhoid in 430 BC) as I wrote about how plague affected ancient Greece, indeed, how it has shaped the world's history through migration. Thus, one of the fundamental themes of Steve's book, the anti-expertise and anti-science of post-truth politics, have been in my own writing recently for SERRC.

I have argued here that the very politicians that Fuller focuses on in his first chapter on Brexit and 'populism', Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, are the people who are now desperate for science and expertise to help us beat COVID-19. I have also argued how irrelevant the Brexit argument now seems, for the existential crisis upon us now wasn't foreseen as the given, so many experts and scientists said in recent years it would soon become. I believe as a sociologist that individual and collective knowledge are crucial in understanding our world and scientists must change their understanding from day to day, but they warned and warned of the apocalypse upon us now and tried to prepare only for the politicians to let us down. Thus my review will agree in part, with Fuller's main arguments about for example, science and the 'dare to know' principle behind his 'proactionary' political stance, but it will argue against the idea that post-truth politics and fake news should be accepted as here to stay.

I also acknowledge that Fuller (whose background in Science and Technology Studies (STS) is key to this work) is correct in citing and describing the founders of our discipline such as the 'foxes' who break with the status quo in times of great upheaval, rather than the 'wolves' who look back to a better past. Fuller takes these concepts from Pareto, a founder of our discipline and according to Fuller, a great influence on Mussolini as well as mid-20<sup>th</sup> century liberal sociologists like Parsons; so let's start the review where Fuller begins: the DWM, dead white men, who I argued in a previous [review](#), Fuller was correct in referring back to; they have much still to teach us. I also argue, with Fuller that Popper was right in ever questioning our knowledge of science (COVID-19 more than anything else demonstrates that) against Kuhn's shifting paradigms knowledge thesis, protected by the rent seeking academic ivory towers, as Fuller describes the research led universities in particular.

### **Brexit, Politics, Fake News and Its Consequences**

However, I also believe that some things in science and politics are in fact, fact; indeed, what we term empiricism; something Fuller seemingly agrees with in chapter five of his book. Had the politicians, the Brexiteers in particular, listened to any warnings about the consequences

of leaving the EU, or not helped the anti-expertise movement gain ground, arguably we would all be in a better place now. Anybody with half an eye on current affairs would have known what was coming vis-a-vis the pandemic. You didn't have to be Cassandra like to foresee this, indeed, rather than reading the clash of civilisations nonsense that the alt-right, Breitbart people spout, simply watching Pandemic on Netflix would now suffice to show what quiet science and tech has been preparing for so long; indeed, it is baffling as to why one of the greatest modern day purveyors of fake news, the UK Prime Minister, a classics scholar, aware of the how plague from Greek antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> century shaped the world did not have the foresight to see it coming.

I can agree with Fuller's assertion that it is not patronising to the general public who did not educate themselves, but I cannot agree with his assertion in his summation where he argues that 'populism' and post truth politics is a form of greater societal democratization and something expertise and science will have to get used to. The idea that the interference by Russia in the US election via Wiki leaks, Facebook, is something we should accept after all this is corruption not just post-truth politics as something acceptable is not an argument I can agree with (I note that Fuller cites his affiliation with the Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy in his acknowledgements); moreover, the lies peddled here during the referendum, particularly on immigration, which arguably resulted in the MP, Jo Cox's murder, and which saw an increased on-line presence by the far-right is surely anathema to most; and nothing to do with democracy as we view the corrupted ancient Greek concept, and which anyway had precious little to do with what the citizens of today think of as fair government. This is not truth; it is a reversion to fascism. However, I do understand the geopolitical power struggle and how different actors, their rhetoric and agency play into the argument Fuller presents on the Platonic dialogues.

### **The Sociology of Lions and Foxes—and Leaving the Cave**

Moreover, as I have previously argued in this journal, many people simply do not care about social distancing or anything else to protect themselves or others from SARS-Cov-2. Perhaps this, like the anti-vax movement (the part cause of the rise in cases of measles), is the very tragic consequence of the post-truth world. The understanding and acceptance of scientific knowledge in this, and COVID-19 would really have equalled power to the political community, and, to the people, and been the truth and, so real democracy. In any case, following Machiavelli's democratization of the Platonic Dialogues, Fuller employs Pareto, who continued this development, to argue that post-truth politics is made up of 'lions' and 'foxes'. Those lions, like Plato who Fuller refers to so often in his book, look to the past to restore some natural order to society. Foxes can be seen as Schumpeter's followers (who Fuller often employs in other works of his), as they see creative destruction of the status quo and elites as the harbinger of a new world [this is usually the fantasy utopia which apparently only they can see, and we need to be made aware of via fake news]. Fuller also employs Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies* (1945).

This is somewhat ironic, as Popper may have wanted to democratise society with regard to science, and might have thought society should become a living laboratory, but in *The Open*

*Society* he is scathing about Plato's responsibility for the historical consequences of promoting his simplistic and obtuse dialect (although like Fuller he acknowledges Plato as the founder of political science): wolves or foxes; those wolves like Plato who looked back to the glory of the then decayed and degenerated Greek city states, or Marx and Hegel, whose use of the dialectic he argued led to fascism and Soviet Communism; the foxes who imagined something new and better for the future but millions died. It is also ironic that in fact, the Brexiteers like Johnson (he decided at the last moment he was one and not a Remainer) were, despite falling within the foxes camp, hankering after a lost glorious imperial past; 'surfing along on the crest of a wave' as the gang show song goes. Fuller wrote his book before the pandemic so perhaps even forgive this EU Remainer for his support of the 'humanists' he describes Johnson and Gove as, in his use of C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' thesis. That is, those humanists have finally won the battle over the irreconcilable scientific world. This argument is betrayed by the absolute fear both men showed the morning after the referendum went their way.

What is more, is the Machiavellian way in which Michael Gove then knifed Johnson in the back after David Cameron resigned and a leadership battle for the Tory party began. Is this post-truth knowledge and power one could legitimately ask, or simply good old politics, and the will to power? And as Fuller says, the anti-expert Brexiteers scored an own goal by winning the referendum, allowing the EU to turn the UK into an experimental market. Rather than employ the Platonic dialogues and Aristotle and their writings on performance as a metaphor for post-truth political acting *a la* Trump, and welcoming the ridiculing of the traditional liberal media (the *Washington Post* etc); it might have been better if Fuller had spoken of the agora (as he does), literally market place, but really the stage of antiquity where politics was performed, with specific regard to Aristotle.

The *vita activa* of the politically engaged citizen—the *zoon politikon*—was best set out in Aristotle's *Politics* and *Ethics* (1985, 2009, 2013), which the historiography of Eudemonia suggests need to be read together if we want to understand how to be the best we can be: to really effect and affect politics as a community based citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Or indeed, if Fuller had employed differently Socrates' allegory of the cave according to Plato, in which the experience of chained prisoners in a cave which is illuminated only by the flickering light of the guards fire which gives the illusion of monsters all around, is a metaphor for how freedom comes when we go out into the world freed from our bonds and learn; that is

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<sup>1</sup> Adkins, A.W.H. 1984. "The Connection Between Aristotle's Ethics and Politics." *Political Theory* 12 (1): 29-49; Ackrill, J. L. 1980. "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*." In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 93-103. Berkeley: University of California Press; Aristotle. 1985. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company; Aristotle. 2009. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by David Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Aristotle. 2013. *Politics*. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Kraut, Richard. 1991. *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Kraut, Richard. 2002. *Aristotle: Political Philosophy: Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Kristjánsson, Kristján. 2007. *Aristotle, Emotions and Education*. Aldershot UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

acquire knowledge for ourselves—this is the philosophical discourse we need to engage with: the media, fake news are the monsters appearing on the walls of the cave if we do not.

As I said above, Fuller published this book in 2018, so we can't be too critical. Trump's appalling handling of the pandemic, and now the anti-China rhetoric perhaps exemplify Thucydides thesis from the Peloponnesian Wars, (although the President's current law enforcement strategy is equally distasteful), likewise, Boris Johnson's (at first oblivious, then unconcerned—it only killed old people, then totally unprepared and panicky lack of control) has exposed these actors as just that; shallow and without a clue, until they have reluctantly taken the expert and scientific advice that is so obviously correct. The Black Lives Matter movement has also exposed the elitist politicians who claimed to be something new as part of the old establishment elites. How could anyone think the Farages of this world were anything else? And as for Steve Bannon and Dominic Cummings: Please save us from any more mountebank 'creative destruction' geniuses.

### **Lies, Lies and Damn Lies**

Of course all talk of democracy, fake news etc., when sourced, as Fuller does back to Greek antiquity is rendered redundant, for very few people, especially under Plato's philosopher king, who Fuller cites were equal, indeed, the might is right thesis by Plato's polemic is also presented. Why not patronise the general public if they do not want education and ridicule it along the broadsheet research media when they speak the truth? As a wise older voter said during the 2015 general in reply to a young first-time voter, unsure of their position and knowledge of the parties, it's your responsibility to go and educate yourself and take part. Surely crediting the post-truth age with any credibility and seeing as complimentary to the truth, is to engage in the sort of perverse relativism that postmodernism indulges itself with: all value claims are of equal worth; for example, Donald Trump's recent refusal to accept mortality and infection rates of COVID-19 in the USA and brand them as fake news while interpreting the science, figures, statistics etc., differently, is exactly that, perverse.

Fuller argues that post-truth politics is all about controlling what is said and who says it. Trump's incompetence in attempting this is obvious, as was the nonsense and downright lies spouted during the UK referendum on leaving the EU. And I refer here not to the now notorious NHS funding pledge, another irony given the centrality of the discourse on the health service during the pandemic, but also the falsehoods pedalled about the number of laws made by the European Union that controlled the UK government as a member. The truth is about 14% of our laws not 70 % or so were/are made by the EU

Again, public education is key in preventing the power imbalance created by fake news. It might be patronising to those members of the general public who voted to leave the EU because their decision was based on this form of post-truth politics, although we know the reasons were more complex than this, but when did newspapers such as the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* ever have a reputation other than that of entertainment. Indeed the modern *Daily Mail*, a Brexit supporting newspaper declared itself so many years ago. So again I refer to the war veterans words I cited above.

Indeed, if there had been a little more historical awareness of the reasons for founding the EU (to end all wars in Europe) rather than Project Fears mistake of exaggeration over the economic consequences of leaving, the Remainers might have won the argument. Chomsky provided an argument over the manipulation of the news media many moons ago, and so in a way Fuller's argument about control of news equalling power seems familiar. An interesting example of this can be viewed through a rather tetchy but telling interview between Andrew Marr and Chomsky.

The elites employed in broadcasting and who are part of the establishment present just enough of the information, and of course what they think we should know. This was taken to extremes by the BBC for example, after the 2010 general election which saw the unlikely alliance of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The notion that the previous Labour administration was responsible for the global credit crunch and subsequent Great Recession, not only went unchallenged by Andrew Marr and Andrew Neil of the BBC but was further propagated by them, thereby justifying the coalition's austerity policies.

Similarly, after the referendum vote they both went to great lengths to present video footage of Remainers like David Cameron arguing that a vote to leave would mean breaking all ties with the EU, including the economic aspects. However, they spent considerably less time, if any presenting the footage showing Nigel Farage prior to the vote saying he'd be happy for a Norway like solution. Thus these examples seem to demonstrate Fuller's argument that in a post-truth world of politics those who control the news and knowledge have the power. It seems from this that the foxes and lions Fuller characterises as the post-truth purveyors as are hand in glove. So how old is fake news and is Thucydides the originator of it and have historians and philosophers been guilty of it themselves?

### **How the Philosophy of History Provides Salvation From Post-Truth Politicians**

In 'A Quiet Life' I argued the daily Coronavirus updates and public information broadcasts were Orwellian in nature. In my most recent article for SERRC I talked about the Mass Observation Organisation and the revelations about the Blitz during the Second World War. A documentary on this showed how the "Orwellian" ministries of propaganda faked photos of milkman continuing to deliver milk to an almost demolished street in London. So indeed, fake news, manipulated news, untruths have been around for sometime; but what of history? How can we make sense of it, believe or not believe the great historians and philosophers? Perhaps a peek into the negative dialectics of Adorno (1966) can help us out here and provide a closing reply to Fuller's arguments.

Heraclitus the originator of the dialectic and from who Plato took and developed the concept argued the world was in a constant state of flux; Plato's interpretation as argued above (Popper 1945), revolved around the decaying and degenerating Greek City States; where Plato looking back through a eugenicist prism, Popper argued Plato presented the dream of return to a golden utopian past which paved the way for the Nazi vision of a return to an Teutonic Arcadia, and Marx the methodology to theorize the mode of production as

the engine and dialectical movement towards a new world free from capitalism and the bourgeoisie.

Negative dialectics turns these ideas on their head, and rather than as Hegel did, seeing the world and history unfolding through thesis, antithesis towards a resolution, Adorno conceptualized history as an unintentional process, perhaps the unconscious unfolding of actors latent desires a la Freud. The desired state of affairs for anybody might not be the one strived for, but in a counterfactual like process we can make sense of the past for the future. Setting negative dialectics against post-truth society and Fuller's argument, we can perhaps see fake news as a movement that might not end where the rhetoric of the main actors intend, if indeed apart from power there is any real direction to the politicking of today.

We might have to accept for now the status quo but we can take pleasure in knowing it will end; just as COVID-19 demonstrates, unseen events make history more like a lantern swinging on the back of an old galleon [in the midst of a storm] at sea, which shines only on the waves behind us (Coleridge<sup>2</sup>). Perhaps philosophy and history along with science and expertise have something valuable to tell us after all: you just never know what might happen. Indeed, perhaps this is what Fuller's argument is: If we engage with a dialectical like post-truth politics juxtaposed with the truth—and the dare to know sensibility of proactionary politics—then the possibilities for change are never ending.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/160861-if-men-could-learn-from-history-what-lessons-it-might>