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A Review of Steve Fuller's *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition*

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A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition: The Name of the Game

Steve Fuller

Anthem Press, 2020

140 pp.

When writing my last [review](#) of the prequel to this latest book by Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (2018), I was on the Greek Island of Zakynthos. I said what a surreal experience that was, as we were in (and on) a break from the global pandemic, currently surging in Latin America and India. That was Fuller's first book in this series—as a series it will inevitably be, given the pandemic and, the way it has changed politics. That is, I interpreted post-truth politics in precisely the way Fuller now says is incorrect or, rather, too narrow a conception. Moreover, Fuller argues the post-truth condition should not be feared; we should stop worrying (not something I agreed with in my [review](#)).

My fears had been based on the populism, the corruption of Facebook and Russian interference in the election, and the anti-expert and science attitude that saw Donald Trump take office in the US, and Cambridge Analytica allegedly manipulate the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016, enabling Vote Leave to triumph. But for Fuller, this is only the contemporary movement of a process that is at least five centuries old. Fuller's first book in the series was written before the pandemic and the ousting of Donald Trump from office. I will argue this has changed the political dynamic and so challenges what Fuller argues now in *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition* (2020). I argue the book was written in hindsight and has altered Fuller's presentation of his concept of post-truth politics and knowledge.

Fuller now says that post-truth is simply the latest paradigm shift in modernity akin to the Reformation and democratization of so much of the world's institutions and societies: it is the rationalization project of modernity which 'frees us from the chains of reason'. This is perhaps the main stumbling point for me, as I see and speak of reason and rationality in the same breath. Fuller's main thrust seems to be that we should embrace post-truth knowledge, regardless of whether it is true or false and accept that facts are those that the victor declares to be true in the post-truth game. This is *not*, however, relativism Fuller argues—the simplistic epistemological position of postmodernism that sees each and every view point as of equal merit.

Points of Contention

This is my second stumbling point—or rather, point of contention—with Fuller's latest book. I believe there are facts ('empiricism' can be an ugly word, however see below for a word on facts from the past),¹ particularly scientific, and which the pandemic—despite Fuller's point about the Popper-like shifting sands of scientific knowledge—show us how science is correct in the end. Indeed it seems to me that this is precisely the conception Fuller argues for. I will expand on this in the following sections of this review, through the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainability/cp-scott-centenary-essay>.

prism of thought that Fuller presents us with in this latest book. Fuller's book seeks to persuade us in his incredibly cerebral and erudite writing, which perhaps transmits to the reader more than I can describe here, what a 'player' is, and indeed, what the game of 'post-truth' knowledge and politics really is.

One could argue Fuller is playing the very game that his guide promotes to us: history, even the present, can be defined and written by anyone if they understand the game. To do this one must get inside the opponents' head and have agility of thought as in a game of chess. If you are not a chess player, lower your game to chequers; which is slightly patronising. The latter, having agility of thought, is an encouragement we should all of course practice at all times; the former could be an unpleasant activity if we think of our possible opponents, political, institutional or otherwise. Here I call on the reader to use their imagination rather than give my own examples, and to play the game of intellectual battle Fuller hands to us in this truly novel guide to a new game; as Fuller says, 'find a game you can win'.

Indeed, I can identify with Fuller's positioning on this having my own struggle with a state institution at the moment: Without being indiscreet, I am being told I am not due for the fourth government handout for those self-employed with depleted funds due to the pandemic, despite having received the first three. I have complained to the Kafkaesque bureaucratic machine, then I brought it to my Member of Parliament; still the machine refuses to concede, so my next move was to point out the contradiction they had so easily passed to me. 'Playing the game', as Fuller presents it, I have, using this very contradiction, escalated the complaint to their own internal ombudsman using their language whilst remaining subordinate. I expect to lose this round or move, as Fuller would call it, but thinking two steps ahead I have planned my next move; and if in the end I am defeated, I will write the history of the event from my perspective. I will construct the reality as they will not be able to do so. This is my metaphor for Fuller's conceptualization of 'the game'. I hope I am doing justice to Fuller's concept.

The Present and the Past

So, even given my misgivings, which I shall return to later, when I contrast and compare Fuller's 'argument in a nutshell' conclusion to the prequel of this book, I recommend an engagement with an author engaged with 'dangerous ideas'. Indeed this book can be said to follow in Fuller's *Humanity 2.0* (2011) project; the 'dare to know' sensibility of the Enlightenment, which Fuller has written on so much in recent years. I do however wonder if Fuller's proactionary political stance, as opposed to the precautionary political position he has cautioned against, is present here.

Although of course one could say this is by definition 'proactionary', some might say that an engagement with one's political enemy is anathema and dangerous, and it is better to act and write in a manner which is explicitly against them rather than playing their game: Fuller himself points out how the pandemic has enlivened the environmental (a precautionary political movement) and the social democratic movements of the left; these were arguably always on the margins of politics, and so as I argued in my last review, [history](#) is like a

lantern swinging on the back of an old clipper ship. It illuminates only the waves behind us. As one UK Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) once said, ‘Events dear boy, events’.

History is arguably littered with examples of dangerous game playing; those German political elites who tried to tame Hitler in the 1930s couldn’t outwit that fox. In his last book, [Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game](#) Fuller argued that post-truth politics is made up of foxes and lions, a concept he reintroduces in this latest book; lions look to the past in their quest, and indeed game, to restore their society to a glorious past, foxes to the an imagined future. Hitler arguably had a foot in both camps. However, let us explore this intellectually fascinating conceptualization of ‘the game’. Indeed, in my review of Fuller’s previous book in this series I demonstrated how Popper in his *Open Society*, which Fuller employed then and now, argued with great force how this dialectic allowed National Socialism and totalitarian ideologies of the left to flourish in the twentieth century.

The Name of the Game

Very interestingly, and in fact, intriguing in its cleverness, Fuller argues that in the post-truth knowledge-politics game even the losers can be the writers of history, and thereby become the actual winners of ‘the game’. Fuller cites Nietzsche in saying that readers of this much maligned twentieth century philosopher will understand what he means. I reviewed Fuller’s [Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era](#) so I am familiar with Fuller’s interest in this much misinterpreted philosopher. However, I think we can all think of instances, indeed great ruptures in history precisely because of the losers assuming the winner’s mantle. Thus I leave it to the reader to engage Fuller to amuse themselves in pursuit of examples in this new and exciting interpretation of truth and non-truths, facts as defined under the status quo of the historical and present day elite of the State and its institutions. Sociologists have been complicit in defining reality for the state and its institutions, as Fuller points out. This is much more than a Foucault-like interpretation of how society, the world view has come to be constructed, so despite ‘the name of the game’ evoking thoughts of [ABBA](#), let us continue.

In a Nutshell: True or False?

In his previous book, *Post-Truth Knowledge as a Power Game*, Fuller (2018, 2), explicitly names Donald Trump and cites the inaugural speech of the then president of the US in which Trump talked about ‘draining the swamp’; that is, and according to Fuller, ending the old bipartisanship of the two party system. Fuller seems to delight in this, heralding this as another paradigm shift of modernity. Indeed he reiterates the age of post-truth knowledge and politics on page 181 of his first book. Here Fuller traces this so-called rationalisation project of modernity to Plato’s dialogues. Seemingly, Fuller sees this movement as reaching far beyond the five centuries this book under review claims: *A Player’s Guide*.

In my first review, I pointed to the hideous untruths of the Trumps and Farages of this world that arguably have led to race-hate inspired murder. In fact Fuller invokes Plato again

along with Peter Berger, Count St Simon, Friedrich Hayek in Chapter 4,² ‘Capitalism, Scientism and the Construction of Value in the Post-Truth Condition’. Ironically [Hayek](#) also, as well as the books Fuller cites, wrote *The Road to Serfdom*, arguing along similar lines to Popper, although from a very different perspective to Popper, that totalitarian, ideologically based societies ultimately lead to a loss of freedom for the individual. Hayek was of course thinking of left-wing, socialist States.

All unhappy bedfellows one might think until Isaiah Berlin comes into the conversation and the now obvious connection with ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ freedom in the post-truth condition becomes clear, which Fuller argues are the two complementary sides of capitalism, and of course through Berger’s ideas about the social construction of value. What interests me here is the notion of negative and positive freedom which suggests Rawls ‘Veil of Ignorance’.³ Being somebody who believes in positive freedom, an interventionist who sees the ideal society as one that I would want for myself and which did the least harm to others. As I suggested above, it might be preferable to argue your case without playing the ‘game’, so-called—that is, to avoid becoming the victim of a fox or lion, especially angry foxes who *a la* Trump and Farage and their like only want what’s best for them and their mates.⁴

The 6 January 2021 storming of the White House, inspired by Trump himself, who played the part of one of history’s worst as Joe Biden legitimately took office. In my first review of this series of books by Fuller (see link in introduction), I argued how Trump had perverted and polluted the scientific evidence and the statistics on deaths and infections from COVID-19 in an interview. I also pointed to the anti-vax movement with regard to the MMR vaccine and the indisputable evidence of the harm this has done. The same conspiracy theories are now at play with regard to the COVID-19 vaccines. We know the damage this could cause to the success of the vaccine program especially with [regard to variants](#). Science does develop its theories, evidence, daily but this dialectical process, which Popper advocated, works as the fight against COVID-19 goes on. Something Trump seemed incapable of managing whilst Biden has seemingly taken firm control of.⁵

The End of Ideology and Facts?

I will briefly summarize the remainder of Fuller’s book and look at the connections to my own observations above. In Chapter 6, *The New York Times* gets the post-truth truth treatment, Fuller cites an article by Bryan Van Norden an American philosopher. The article published in *The New York Times* in 2019 was entitled, [‘The Ignorant Do Not Have a Right to an Audience’](#). The target of the piece is obvious, Donald Trump, his counsellor Kellyanne Conway and their ‘alternative facts’. I added a footnote above from C.P. Snow, one time editor of the *Guardian*, a British newspaper originally created in the aftermath of the 1819

² Hayek, one of the godfathers of neoliberalism, has been a favourite read for recent UK Conservative leaders, notably Margaret Thatcher.

³ Fuller often invokes Rawls and this concept.

⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-let-the-bodies-pile-high-in-their-thousands-scandal/>.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2021/apr/27/joe-biden-covid-coronavirus-us-politics-live-latest>.

[Peterloo Massacre](#), one of the great radical upheavals in British political history. I argued in my first review, and now here, that there are facts—empirical facts about the world from science, medicine and yes, sociology.

Interestingly Fuller moves to 1930s Germany and the doomed Weimar Republic. In doing so he looks at the positivism of Popper and others. Popper moved gradually from a rejection of what could be termed ‘alternative facts’ to his falsification thesis: when a contradiction to a thesis comes along that proves it wrong. This is of course the basis of scientific research now, and the work on COVID-19 and vaccines shows how science must be open to constant, dialectical change in thought. I cannot accept that we should accept Trump like alternative facts as new scientific research. I also have much sympathy for Van Norden as I wrote in my previous review citing Socrates allegory of the cave: we need to free ourselves from our chains and the illusions of monsters in the shadows through finding light in self-education.

The remainder of Fuller’s expansive book covers much more from philosophy, science than I could capture here: Fuller has a foot in sociology, philosophy and science and technology. He was educated by Jesuit priests so his knowledge of religion is second to none; unmatched in fact. His book moves through all these disciplines, a term Fuller would probably disagree with given his stance on knowledge protection in the university, and the privileged knowledge construction of the Ivory Tower, seamlessly.

So, Fuller’s book contains 14 chapters covering the central concept, how to play the game, and premise of the post-truth condition game, to research, ethics and Chapter 11 called ‘Why Ignorance-not- Knowledge is Key to Justice in the Post-Truth Condition’. Given my discussion above I think the central premise here is obvious and one, which I have argued above and in my review of Fuller’s forerunner publication to this, I do not agree with. However, I have urged the reader to engage with this latest work of this accomplished all-rounder in so many fields of study. This is for the very reason I argue above, to educate ourselves, and as Fuller asks us to, to engage with the enemy on its own terms, even if it means losing. I think as an intellectual pursuit or in safe realms this is correct, but not however in the public and political spheres, as this can be dangerous.

As members of the Frankfurt School once argued in the wake of the horrors of National Socialism, it is sometimes moral and just to deny those bent on violence the oxygen of publicity to maintain freedom: the dangers of Trump like alternative facts became obvious earlier this year; ideologically based movements from either end of the political spectrum are, as Popper (1945) argued, responsible for so much of the world’s misery—foxes, lions, it matters not.

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