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Post-Truths and Inconvenient Facts

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If nothing else, Steve Fuller has his ear to the pulse of popular culture and the academics who engage in its twists and turns. Starting with Brexit and continuing into the Trump-era abyss, “post-truth” was dubbed by the OED as its word of the year in 2016. Fuller has mustered his collected publications to recast the debate over post-truth and frame it within STS in general and his own contributions to social epistemology in particular.

This could have been a public *mea culpa* of sorts: we, the community of sociologists (and some straggling philosophers and anthropologists and perhaps some poststructuralists) may seem to someone who isn’t reading our critiques carefully to be partially responsible for legitimating the dismissal of empirical data, evidence-based statements, and the means by which scientific claims can be deemed not only credible but true. Instead, we are dazzled by a range of topics (historically anchored) that explain how we got to Brexit and Trump—yet Fuller’s analyses of them don’t ring alarm bells. There is almost a hidden glee that indeed the privileged scientific establishment, insular scientific discourse, and some of its experts who pontificate authoritative consensus claims are all bound to be undone by the rebellion of mavericks and iconoclasts that include intelligent design promoters and neoliberal freedom fighters.

In what follows, I do not intend to summarize the book, as it is short and entertaining enough for anyone to read on their own. Instead, I wish to outline three interrelated points that one might argue need not be argued but, apparently, do: 1) certain critiques of science have contributed to the Trumpist mindset; 2) the politics of Trumpism is too dangerous to be sanguine about; 3) the post-truth condition is troublesome and insidious. Though Fuller deals with some of these issues, I hope to add some constructive clarification to them.

Part One: Critiques of Science

As Theodor Adorno reminds us, critique is essential not only for philosophy, but also for democracy. He is aware that the “critic becomes a divisive influence, with a totalitarian phrase, a subversive” (1998/1963, 283) insofar as the status quo is being challenged and sacred political institutions might have to change. The price of critique, then, can be high, and therefore critique should be managed carefully and only cautiously deployed. Should we refrain from critique, then? Not at all, continues Adorno.

But if you think that a broad, useful distinction can be offered among different critiques, think again: “[In] the division between responsible critique, namely, that practiced by those who bear public responsibility, and irresponsible critique, namely, that practiced by those who cannot be held accountable for the consequences, critique is already neutralized.” (Ibid. 285) Adorno’s worry is not only that one forgets that “the truth content of critique alone should be that authority [that decides if it’s responsible],” but that when such a criterion is “unilaterally invoked,” critique itself can lose its power and be at the service “of those who oppose the critical spirit of a democratic society.” (Ibid)

In a political setting, the charge of irresponsible critique shuts the conversation down and ensures political hegemony without disruptions. Modifying Adorno's distinction between (politically) responsible and irresponsible critiques, responsible scientific critiques are constructive insofar as they attempt to improve methods of inquiry, data collection and analysis, and contribute to the accumulated knowledge of a community; irresponsible scientific critiques are those whose goal is to undermine the very quest for objective knowledge and the means by which such knowledge can be ascertained. Questions about the legitimacy of scientific authority are related to but not of exclusive importance for these critiques.

Have those of us committed to the critique of science missed the mark of the distinction between responsible and irresponsible critiques? Have we become so subversive and perhaps self-righteous that science itself has been threatened? Though Fuller is primarily concerned with the hegemony of the sociology of science studies and the movement he has championed under the banner of "social epistemology" since the 1980s, he does acknowledge the Popperians and their critique of scientific progress and even admires the Popperian contribution to the scientific enterprise.

But he is reluctant to recognize the contributions of Marxists, poststructuralists, and postmodernists who have been critically engaging the power of science since the 19th century. Among them, we find Jean-François Lyotard who, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984/1979), follows Marxists and neo-Marxists who have regularly lumped science and scientific discourse with capitalism and power. This critical trajectory has been well rehearsed, so suffice it here to say, SSK, SE, and the Edinburgh "Strong Programme" are part of a long and rich critical tradition (whose origins are Marxist). Adorno's Frankfurt School is part of this tradition, and as we think about science, which had come to dominate Western culture by the 20th century (in the place of religion, whose power had by then waned as the arbiter of truth), it was its privileged power and interlocking financial benefits that drew the ire of critics.

Were these critics "responsible" in Adorno's political sense? Can they be held accountable for offering (scientific and not political) critiques that improve the scientific process of adjudication between criteria of empirical validity and logical consistency? Not always. Did they realize that their success could throw the baby out with the bathwater? Not always. While Fuller grants Karl Popper the upper hand (as compared to Thomas Kuhn) when indirectly addressing such questions, we must keep an eye on Fuller's "baby." It's easy to overlook the slippage from the political to the scientific and vice versa: Popper's claim that we never know the Truth doesn't mean that his (and our) quest for discovering the Truth as such is given up, it's only made more difficult as whatever is scientifically apprehended as truth remains putative.

Limits to Skepticism

What is precious about the baby—science in general, and scientific discourse and its community in more particular ways—is that it offered safeguards against frivolous

skepticism. Robert Merton (1973/1942) famously outlined the four features of the scientific ethos, principles that characterized the ideal workings of the scientific community: universalism, communism (communalism, as per the Cold War terror), disinterestedness, and organized skepticism. It is the last principle that is relevant here, since it unequivocally demands an *institutionalized* mindset of putative acceptance of any hypothesis or theory that is articulated by *any community member*.

One detects the slippery slope that would move one from being on guard when engaged with any proposal to being so skeptical as to never accept any proposal no matter how well documented or empirically supported. Al Gore, in his *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), sounded the alarm about climate change. A dozen years later we are still plagued by climate-change deniers who refuse to look at the evidence, suggesting instead that the standards of science themselves—from the collection of data in the North Pole to computer simulations—have not been sufficiently fulfilled (“questions remain”) to accept human responsibility for the increase of the earth’s temperature. Incidentally, here is Fuller’s explanation of his own apparent doubt about climate change:

Consider someone like myself who was born in the midst of the Cold War. In my lifetime, scientific predictions surrounding global climate change has [sic.] veered from a deep frozen to an overheated version of the apocalypse, based on a combination of improved data, models and, not least, a geopolitical paradigm shift that has come to downplay the likelihood of a total nuclear war. Why, then, should I not expect a significant, if not comparable, alteration of collective scientific judgement in the rest of my lifetime? (86)

Expecting changes in the model does not entail a) that no improved model can be offered; b) that methodological changes in themselves are a bad thing (they might be, rather, improvements); or c) that one should not take action at all based on the current model because in the future the model might change.

The Royal Society of London (1660) set the benchmark of scientific credibility low when it accepted as scientific evidence any report by two independent witnesses. As the years went by, testability (“confirmation,” for the Vienna Circle, “falsification,” for Popper) and repeatability were added as requirements for a report to be considered scientific, and by now, various other conditions have been proposed. Skepticism, organized or personal, remains at the very heart of the scientific march towards certainty (or at least high probability), but when used perniciously, it has derailed reasonable attempts to use science as a means by which to protect, for example, public health.

Both Michael Bowker (2003) and Robert Proctor (1995) chronicle cases where asbestos and cigarette lobbyists and lawyers alike were able to sow enough doubt in the name of attenuated scientific data collection to ward off regulators, legislators, and the courts for decades. Instead of finding sufficient empirical evidence to attribute asbestos and nicotine to the failing health condition (and death) of workers and consumers, “organized skepticism”

was weaponized to fight the sick and protect the interests of large corporations and their insurers.

Instead of buttressing scientific claims (that have passed the tests—in refereed professional conferences and publications, for example—of most institutional scientific skeptics), organized skepticism has been manipulated to ensure that no claim is ever scientific enough or has the legitimacy of the scientific community. In other words, what should have remained the reasonable cautionary tale of a disinterested and communal activity (that could then be deemed universally credible) has turned into a circus of fire-blowing clowns ready to burn down the tent. The public remains confused, not realizing that just because the stakes have risen over the decades does not mean there are no standards that ever can be met. Despite lobbyists' and lawyers' best efforts of derailment, courts have eventually found cigarette companies and asbestos manufacturers guilty of exposing workers and consumers to deathly hazards.

Limits to Belief

If we add to this logic of doubt, which has been responsible for discrediting science and the conditions for proposing credible claims, a bit of U.S. cultural history, we may enjoy a more comprehensive picture of the unintended consequences of certain critiques of science. Citing Kurt Andersen (2017), Robert Darnton suggests that the Enlightenment's "rational individualism interacted with the older Puritan faith in the individual's inner knowledge of the ways of Providence, and the result was a peculiarly American conviction about everyone's unmediated access to reality, whether in the natural world or the spiritual world. If we believe it, it must be true." (2018, 68)

This way of thinking—unmediated experiences and beliefs, unconfirmed observations, and disregard of others' experiences and beliefs—continues what Richard Hofstadter (1962) dubbed "anti-intellectualism." For Americans, this predates the republic and is characterized by a hostility towards the life of the mind (admittedly, at the time, religious texts), critical thinking (self-reflection and the rules of logic), and even literacy. The heart (our emotions) can more honestly lead us to the Promised Land, whether it is heaven on earth in the Americas or the Christian afterlife; any textual interference or reflective pondering is necessarily an impediment, one to be suspicious of and avoided.

This lethal combination of the life of the heart and righteous individualism brings about general ignorance and what psychologists call "confirmation bias" (the view that we endorse what we already believe to be true regardless of countervailing evidence). The critique of science, along this trajectory, can be but one of many so-called critiques of anything said or proven by anyone whose ideology we do not endorse. But is this even critique?

Adorno would find this a charade, a pretense that poses as a critique but in reality is a simple dismissal without intellectual engagement, a dogmatic refusal to listen and observe. He definitely would be horrified by Stephen Colbert's oft-quoted quip on "truthiness" as "the conviction that what you feel to be true must be true." Even those who resurrect Daniel

Patrick Moynihan's phrase, "You are entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own facts," quietly admit that his admonishment is ignored by media more popular than informed.

On Responsible Critique

But surely there is merit to responsible critiques of science. Weren't many of these critiques meant to dethrone the unparalleled authority claimed in the name of science, as Fuller admits all along? Wasn't Lyotard (and Marx before him), for example, correct in pointing out the conflation of power and money in the scientific vortex that could legitimate whatever profit-maximizers desire? In other words, should scientific discourse be put on par with other discourses? Whose credibility ought to be challenged, and whose truth claims deserve scrutiny? Can we privilege or distinguish science if it is true, as Monya Baker has reported, that "[m]ore than 70% of researchers have tried and failed to reproduce another scientist's experiments, and more than half have failed to reproduce their own experiments" (2016, 1)?

Fuller remains silent about these important and responsible questions about the problematics (methodologically and financially) of reproducing scientific experiments. Baker's report cites *Nature's* survey of 1,576 researchers and reveals "sometimes-contradictory attitudes towards reproducibility. Although 52% of those surveyed agree that there is a significant 'crisis' of reproducibility, less than 31% think that failure to reproduce published results means that the result is probably wrong, and most say that they still trust the published literature." (Ibid.) So, if science relies on reproducibility as a cornerstone of its legitimacy (and superiority over other discourses), and if the results are so dismal, should it not be discredited?

One answer, given by Hans E. Plesser, suggests that there is a confusion between the notions of repeatability ("same team, same experimental setup"), replicability ("different team, same experimental setup"), and reproducibility ("different team, different experimental setup"). If understood in these terms, it stands to reason that one may not get the same results all the time and that this fact alone does not discredit the scientific enterprise as a whole. Nuanced distinctions take us down a scientific rabbit-hole most post-truth advocates refuse to follow. These nuances are lost on a public that demands to know the "bottom line" in brief sound bites: Is science scientific enough, or is it bunk? When can we trust it?

Trump excels at this kind of rhetorical device: repeat a falsehood often enough and people will believe it; and because individual critical faculties are not a prerequisite for citizenship, post-truth means no truth, or whatever the president says is true. Adorno's distinction of the responsible from the irresponsible political critics comes into play here; but he innocently failed to anticipate the Trumpian move to conflate the political and scientific and pretend as if there is no distinction—methodologically and institutionally—between political and scientific discourses.

With this cultural backdrop, many critiques of science have undermined its authority and thereby lent credence to any dismissal of science (legitimately by insiders and perhaps

illegitimately at times by outsiders). Sociologists and postmodernists alike forgot to put warning signs on their academic and intellectual texts: Beware of hasty generalizations! Watch out for wolves in sheep clothes! Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

One would think such advisories unnecessary. Yet without such safeguards, internal disputes and critical investigations appear to have unintentionally discredited the entire scientific enterprise in the eyes of post-truth promoters, the Trumpists whose neoliberal spectacles filter in dollar signs and filter out pollution on the horizon. The discrediting of science has become a welcome distraction that opens the way to radical free-market mentality, spanning from the exploitation of free speech to resource extraction to the debasement of political institutions, from courts of law to unfettered globalization. In this sense, internal (responsible) critiques of the scientific community and its internal politics, for example, unfortunately license external (irresponsible) critiques of science, the kind that obscure the original intent of responsible critiques. Post-truth claims at the behest of corporate interests sanction a free for all where the concentrated power of the few silences the concerns of the many.

Part Two: The Politics of Post-Truth

Fuller begins his book about the post-truth condition that permeates the British and American landscapes with a look at our ancient Greek predecessors. According to him, "Philosophers claim to be seekers of the truth but the matter is not quite so straightforward. Another way to see philosophers is as the ultimate experts in a post-truth world" (19). This means that those historically entrusted to be the guardians of truth in fact "see 'truth' for what it is: the name of a brand ever in need of a product which everyone is compelled to buy. This helps to explain why philosophers are most confident appealing to 'The Truth' when they are trying to persuade non-philosophers, be they in courtrooms or classrooms." (Ibid.)

Instead of being the seekers of the truth, thinkers who care not about *what* but *how* we think, philosophers are ridiculed by Fuller (himself a philosopher turned sociologist turned popularizer and public relations expert) as marketing hacks in a public relations company that promotes brands. Their serious dedication to finding the criteria by which truth is ascertained is used against them: "[I]t is not simply that philosophers disagree on which propositions are 'true' or 'false' but more importantly they disagree on what it means to say that something is 'true' or 'false'." (Ibid.)

Some would argue that the criteria by which propositions are judged to be true or false are worthy of debate, rather than the cavalier dismissal of Trumpists. With criteria in place (even if only by convention), at least we know what we are arguing about, as these criteria (even if contested) offer a starting point for critical scrutiny. And this, I maintain, is a task worth performing, especially in the age of pluralism when multiple perspectives constitute our public stage.

In addition to debasing philosophers, it seems that Fuller reserves a special place in purgatory for Socrates (and Plato) for labeling the rhetorical expertise of the sophists—“the local post-truth merchants in fourth century BC Athens”—negatively. (21) It becomes obvious that Fuller is “on their side” and that the presumed debate over truth and its practices is in fact nothing but “whether its access should be free or restricted.” (Ibid.) In this neoliberal reading, it is all about money: are sophists evil because they charge for their expertise? Is Socrates a martyr and saint because he refused payment for his teaching?

Fuller admits, “Indeed, I would have us see both Plato and the Sophists as post-truth merchants, concerned more with the mix of chance and skill in the construction of truth than with the truth as such.” (Ibid.) One wonders not only if Plato receives fair treatment (reminiscent of Popper’s denigration of Plato as supporting totalitarian regimes, while sparing Socrates as a promoter of democracy), but whether calling all parties to a dispute “post-truth merchants” obliterates relevant differences. In other words, have we indeed lost the desire to find the truth, even if it can never be the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Political Indifference to Truth

One wonders how far this goes: political discourse without any claim to truth conditions would become nothing but a marketing campaign where money and power dictate the acceptance of the message. Perhaps the intended message here is that contemporary cynicism towards political discourse has its roots in ancient Greece. Regardless, one should worry that such cynicism indirectly sanctions fascism.

Can the poor and marginalized in our society afford this kind of cynicism? For them, unlike their privileged counterparts in the political arena, claims about discrimination and exploitation, about unfair treatment and barriers to voting are true and evidence based; they are not rhetorical flourishes by clever interlocutors.

Yet Fuller would have none of this. For him, political disputes are games:

[B]oth the Sophists and Plato saw politics as a game, which is to say, a field of play involving some measure of both chance and skill. However, the Sophists saw politics primarily as a game of chance whereas Plato saw it as a game of skill. Thus, the sophistically trained client deploys skill in [the] aid of maximizing chance occurrences, which may then be converted into opportunities, while the philosopher-king uses much the same skills to minimize or counteract the workings of chance. (23)

Fuller could be channeling here twentieth-century game theory and its application in the political arena, or the notion offered by Lyotard when describing the minimal contribution we can make to scientific knowledge (where we cannot change the rules of the game but perhaps find a novel “move” to make). Indeed, if politics is deemed a game of chance, then anything goes, and it really should not matter if an incompetent candidate like Trump ends up winning the American presidency.

But is it really a question of skill and chance? Or, as some political philosophers would argue, is it not a question of the best means by which to bring to fruition the best results for the general wellbeing of a community? The point of suggesting the figure of a philosopher-king, to be sure, was not his rhetorical skills in this conjunction, but instead the deep commitment to rule justly, to think critically about policies, and to treat constituents with respect and fairness. Plato's *Republic*, however criticized, was supposed to be about justice, not about expediency; it is an exploration of the rule of law and wisdom, not a manual about manipulation. If the recent presidential election in the US taught us anything, it's that we should be wary of political gamesmanship and focus on experience and knowledge, vision and wisdom.

Out-Gaming Expertise Itself

Fuller would have none of this, either. It seems that there is virtue in being a "post-truther," someone who can easily switch between knowledge games, unlike the "truther" whose aim is to "strengthen the distinction by making it harder to switch between knowledge games." (34) In the post-truth realm, then, knowledge claims are lumped into games that can be played at will, that can be substituted when convenient, without a hint of the danger such capricious game-switching might engender.

It's one thing to challenge a scientific hypothesis about astronomy because the evidence is still unclear (as Stephen Hawkins has done in regard to Black Holes) and quite another to compare it to astrology (and give equal hearings to horoscope and Tarot card readers as to physicists). Though we are far from the Demarcation Problem (between science and pseudo-science) of the last century, this does not mean that there is no difference at all between different discourses and their empirical bases (or that the problem itself isn't worthy of reconsideration in the age of Fuller and Trump).

On the contrary, it's because we assume difference between discourses (gray as they may be) that we can move on to figure out on what basis our claims can and should rest. The danger, as we see in the political logic of the Trump administration, is that friends become foes (European Union) and foes are admired (North Korea and Russia). Game-switching in this context can lead to a nuclear war.

In Fuller's hands, though, something else is at work. Speaking of contemporary political circumstances in the UK and the US, he says: "After all, the people who tend to be demonized as 'post-truth' – from Brexiteers to Trumpists – have largely managed to outflank the experts at their own game, even if they have yet to succeed in dominating the entire field of play." (39) Fuller's celebratory tone here may either bring a slight warning in the use of "yet" before the success "in dominating the entire field of play" or a prediction that indeed this is what is about to happen soon enough.

The neoliberal bottom-line surfaces in this assessment: he who wins must be right, the rich must be smart, and more perniciously, the appeal to truth is beside the point. More specifically, Fuller continues:

My own way of dividing the ‘truthers’ and the ‘post-truthers’ is in terms of whether one plays by the rules of the current knowledge game or one tries to change the rules of the game to one’s advantage. Unlike the truthers, who play by the current rules, the post-truthers want to change the rules. They believe that what passes for truth is relative to the knowledge game one is playing, which means that depending on the game being played, certain parties are advantaged over others. Post-truth in this sense is a recognisably social constructivist position, and many of the arguments deployed to advance ‘alternative facts’ and ‘alternative science’ nowadays betray those origins. They are talking about worlds that could have been and still could be—the stuff of modal power. (Ibid.)

By now one should be terrified. This is a strong endorsement of lying as a matter of course, as a way to distract from the details (and empirical bases) of one “knowledge game”—because it may not be to one’s ideological liking—in favor of another that might be deemed more suitable (for financial or other purposes).

The political stakes here are too high to ignore, especially because there are good reasons why “certain parties are advantaged over others” (say, climate scientists “relative to” climate deniers who have no scientific background or expertise). One wonders what it means to talk about “alternative facts” and “alternative science” in this context: is it a means of obfuscation? Is it yet another license granted by the “social constructivist position” not to acknowledge the legal liability of cigarette companies for the addictive power of nicotine? Or the pollution of water sources in Flint, Michigan?

What Is the Mark of an Open Society?

If we corral the broader political logic at hand to the governance of the scientific community, as Fuller wishes us to do, then we hear the following:

In the past, under the inspiration of Karl Popper, I have argued that fundamental to the governance of science as an ‘open society’ is the right to be wrong (Fuller 2000a: chap. 1). This is an extension of the classical republican ideal that one is truly free to speak their mind only if they can speak with impunity. In the Athenian and the Roman republics, this was made possible by the speakers—that is, the citizens—possessing independent means which allowed them to continue with their private lives even if they are voted down in a public meeting. The underlying intuition of this social arrangement, which is the epistemological basis of Mill’s *On Liberty*, is that people who are free to speak their minds as individuals are most likely to reach the truth collectively. The entangled histories of politics, economics and knowledge reveal the difficulties in trying to implement this ideal. Nevertheless, in a post-truth world, this general line of thought is not merely endorsed but intensified. (109)

To be clear, Fuller not only asks for the “right to be wrong,” but also for the legitimacy of the claim that “people who are free to speak their minds as individuals are most likely to reach the truth collectively.” The first plea is reasonable enough, as humans are fallible (yes,

Popper here), and the history of ideas has proven that killing heretics is counterproductive (and immoral). If the Brexit/Trump post-truth age would only usher a greater encouragement for speculation or conjectures (Popper again), then Fuller's book would be well-placed in the pantheon of intellectual pluralism; but if this endorsement obliterates the silly from the informed conjecture, then we are in trouble and the ensuing cacophony will turn us all deaf.

The second claim is at best supported by the likes of James Surowiecki (2004) who has argued that no matter how uninformed a crowd of people is, collectively it can guess the correct weight of a cow on stage (his TED talk). As folk wisdom, this is charming; as public policy, this is dangerous. Would you like a random group of people deciding how to store nuclear waste, and where? Would you subject yourself to the judgment of just any collection of people to decide on taking out your appendix or performing triple-bypass surgery?

When we turn to Trump, his supporters certainly like that he speaks his mind, just as Fuller says individuals should be granted the right to speak their minds (even if in error). But speaking one's mind can also be a proxy for saying whatever, without filters, without critical thinking, or without thinking at all (let alone consulting experts whose very existence seems to upset Fuller). Since when did "speaking your mind" turn into scientific discourse? It's one thing to encourage dissent and offer reasoned doubt and explore second opinions (as health care professionals and insurers expect), but it's quite another to share your feelings and demand that they count as scientific authority.

Finally, even if we endorse the view that we "collectively" reach the truth, should we not ask: by what criteria? according to what procedure? under what guidelines? Herd mentality, as Nietzsche already warned us, is problematic at best and immoral at worst. Trump rallies harken back to the fascist ones we recall from Europe prior to and during WWII. Few today would entrust the collective judgment of those enthusiasts of the Thirties to carry the day.

Unlike Fuller's sanguine posture, I shudder at the possibility that "in a post-truth world, this general line of thought is not merely endorsed but intensified." This is neither because I worship experts and scorn folk knowledge nor because I have low regard for individuals and their (potentially informative) opinions. Just as we warn our students that simply having an opinion is not enough, that they need to substantiate it, offer data or logical evidence for it, and even know its origins and who promoted it before they made it their own, so I worry about uninformed (even if well-meaning) individuals (and presidents) whose gut will dictate public policy.

This way of unreasonably empowering individuals is dangerous for their own well-being (no paternalism here, just common sense) as well as for the community at large (too many untrained cooks will definitely spoil the broth). For those who doubt my concern, Trump offers ample evidence: trade wars with allies and foes that cost domestic jobs (when promising to bring jobs home), nuclear-war threats that resemble a game of chicken (as if no president before him ever faced such an option), and completely putting into disarray public

policy procedures from immigration regulations to the relaxation of emission controls (that ignores the history of these policies and their failures).

Part Three: Post-Truth Revisited

There is something appealing, even seductive, in the provocation to doubt the truth as rendered by the (scientific) establishment, even as we worry about sowing the seeds of falsehood in the political domain. The history of science is the story of authoritative theories debunked, cherished ideas proven wrong, and claims of certainty falsified. Why not, then, jump on the “post-truth” wagon? Would we not unleash the collective imagination to improve our knowledge and the future of humanity?

One of the lessons of postmodernism (at least as told by Lyotard) is that “post-“ does not mean “after,” but rather, “concurrently,” as another way of thinking all along: just because something is labeled “post-“, as in the case of postsecularism, it doesn’t mean that one way of thinking or practicing has replaced another; it has only displaced it, and both alternatives are still there in broad daylight. Under the rubric of postsecularism, for example, we find religious practices thriving (80% of Americans believe in God, according to a 2018 Pew Research survey), while the number of unaffiliated, atheists, and agnostics is on the rise. Religionists and secularists live side by side, as they always have, more or less agonistically.

In the case of “post-truth,” it seems that one must choose between one orientation or another, or at least for Fuller, who claims to prefer the “post-truth world” to the allegedly hierarchical and submissive world of “truth,” where the dominant establishment shoves its truths down the throats of ignorant and repressed individuals. If post-truth meant, like postsecularism, the realization that truth and provisional or putative truth coexist and are continuously being re-examined, then no conflict would be at play. If Trump’s claims were juxtaposed to those of experts in their respective domains, we would have a lively, and hopefully intelligent, debate. False claims would be debunked, reasonable doubts could be raised, and legitimate concerns might be addressed. But Trump doesn’t consult anyone except his (post-truth) gut, and that is troublesome.

A Problematic Science and Technology Studies

Fuller admits that “STS can be fairly credited with having both routinized in its own research practice and set loose on the general public—if not outright invented—at least four common post-truth tropes”:

1. Science is what results once a scientific paper is published, not what made it possible for the paper to be published, since the actual conduct of research is always open to multiple countervailing interpretations.
2. What passes for the ‘truth’ in science is an institutionalised contingency, which if scientists are doing their job will be eventually overturned and replaced, not least because that may be the only way they can get ahead in their fields.

3. Consensus is not a natural state in science but one that requires manufacture and maintenance, the work of which is easily underestimated because most of it occurs offstage in the peer review process.
4. Key normative categories of science such as ‘competence’ and ‘expertise’ are moveable feasts, the terms of which are determined by the power dynamics that obtain between specific alignments of interested parties. (43)

In that sense, then, Fuller agrees that the positive lessons STS wished for the practice of the scientific community may have inadvertently found their way into a post-truth world that may abuse or exploit them in unintended ways. That is, something like “consensus” is challenged by STS because of how the scientific community pretends to get there knowing as it does that no such thing can ever be reached and when reached it may have been reached for the wrong reasons (leadership pressure, pharmaceutical funding of conferences and journals). But this can also go too far.

Just because consensus is difficult to reach (it doesn’t mean unanimity) and is susceptible to corruption or bias doesn’t mean that anything goes. Some experimental results are more acceptable than others and some data are more informative than others, and the struggle for agreement may take its political toll on the scientific community, but this need not result in silly ideas about cigarettes being good for our health or that obesity should be encouraged from early childhood.

It seems important to focus on Fuller’s conclusion because it encapsulates my concern with his version of post-truth, a condition he endorses not only in the epistemological plight of humanity but as an elixir with which to cure humanity’s ills:

While some have decried recent post-truth campaigns that resulted in victory for Brexit and Trump as ‘anti-intellectual’ populism, they are better seen as the growth pains of a maturing democratic intelligence, to which the experts will need to adjust over time. Emphasis in this book has been given to the prospect that the lines of intellectual descent that have characterised disciplinary knowledge formation in the academy might come to be seen as the last stand of a political economy based on rent-seeking. (130)

Here, we are not only afforded a moralizing sermon about (and it must be said, from) the academic privileged position, from whose heights all other positions are dismissed as anti-intellectual populism, but we are also entreated to consider the rantings of the know-nothings of the post-truth world as the “growing pains of a maturing democratic intelligence.” Only an apologist would characterize the Trump administration as mature, democratic, or intelligent. Where’s the evidence? What would possibly warrant such generosity?

It’s one thing to challenge “disciplinary knowledge formation” within the academy, and there are no doubt cases deserving reconsideration as to the conditions under which experts should be paid and by whom (“rent-seeking”); but how can these questions about higher

education and the troubled relations between the university system and the state (and with the military-industrial complex) give cover to the Trump administration? Here is Fuller's justification:

One need not pronounce on the specific fates of, say, Brexit or Trump to see that the post-truth condition is here to stay. The post-truth disrespect for established authority is ultimately offset by its conceptual openness to previously ignored people and their ideas. They are encouraged to come to the fore and prove themselves on this expanded field of play. (Ibid)

This, too, is a logical stretch: is disrespect for the authority of the establishment the same as, or does it logically lead to, the "conceptual" openness to previously "ignored people and their ideas"? This is not a claim on behalf of the disenfranchised. Perhaps their ideas were simply bad or outright racist or misogynist (as we see with Trump). Perhaps they were ignored because there was hope that they would change for the better, become more enlightened, not act on their white supremacist prejudices. Should we have "encouraged" explicit anti-Semitism while we were at it?

Limits to Tolerance

We tolerate ignorance because we believe in education and hope to overcome some of it; we tolerate falsehood in the name of eventual correction. But we should never tolerate offensive ideas and beliefs that are harmful to others. Once again, it is one thing to argue about black holes, and quite another to argue about whether black lives matter. It seems reasonable, as Fuller concludes, to say that "In a post-truth utopia, both truth and error are democratised." It is also reasonable to say that "You will neither be allowed to rest on your laurels nor rest in peace. You will always be forced to have another chance."

But the conclusion that "Perhaps this is why some people still prefer to play the game of truth, no matter who sets the rules" (130) does not follow. Those who "play the game of truth" are always vigilant about falsehoods and post-truth claims, and to say that they are simply dupes of those in power is both incorrect and dismissive. On the contrary: Socrates was searching for the truth and fought with the sophists, as Popper fought with the logical positivists and the Kuhnians, and as scientists today are searching for the truth and continue to fight superstitions and debunked pseudoscience about vaccination causing autism in young kids.

If post-truth is like postsecularism, scientific and political discourses can inform each other. When power-plays by ignoramus leaders like Trump are obvious, they could shed light on less obvious cases of big pharma leaders or those in charge of the EPA today. In these contexts, inconvenient facts and truths should prevail and the gamesmanship of post-truthers should be exposed for what motivates it.

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