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Social epistemology or cognitive sociology? On Steve Fuller's interpretation of Thomas Kuhn

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An unavoidably brief treatment of a book that impresses with its bold theoretical and political positioning, excites with its crystal clear conceptual elaborations and fascinates with its meticulous historical details leaves one with an invidious task. It is possible to do justice neither to the book itself nor to the perspective from which it was read.

Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times is, at least for the time being, the culmination point of Steve Fuller's work in the field of the philosophy, history and sociology of science. Considered against the background of an engagement dating from the late nineteen-seventies, his work and career show a remarkable continuity and cumulative tendency – indeed, to an enviable degree from the point of view of an émigré whose education and career had been overshadowed and even disrupted by the political problems of a troubled country. The book brings together an intricate range of instruments drawn from a rehabilitated sociology of knowledge, what Fuller calls a 'normative sociology of knowledge' or 'social epistemology', such as for instance disillusionment, mind-set, generational cohort, aristocratic and capitalistic field of play, the social conditions of the production and distribution of knowledge, the politics of knowledge production, publicly accessible framework, ideology and cultural responsibility. This toolbox is employed to show that Kuhn, as a disillusioned physicist, joined the ranks of a Cold War generation whose conservative endeavours succeeded not only in giving currency to the ideological notion of the scientific community, which helped to cover up the undesirable features and negative consequences of the new phenomenon of Big Science, but also in corrupting philosophy and the social sciences by snuffing out their normative import, critical potential and public significance, and thus subverting both education and the public sphere. Mannheim obviously hovers in the background, but Fuller is particularly inspired by the Popper school, Feyerabend above all, as seen through the critical sociological eyes of Alvin Gouldner, whose viewpoint he had appropriated only as late as approximately a decade after his undergraduate studies or, alternatively, a little more than a decade before the publication of the book.

At this juncture, one could certainly ask a number of questions. From the perspective of the post-positivist situation, did Kuhn not make a positive contribution? Does Fuller not heap too much blame on Kuhn? Is it tenable to attribute so much efficacy to a text? Is Fuller's attention too exclusively focused on Kuhn? Does he disregard his own advice to learn from the dialectical model of Ernst Mach and the historians and philosophers of art and, consequently, remain under the spell of the one-dimensional model of the historians and philosophers of science? Why does he not take his own self-description as a 'devout social constructivist' (xvi) more seriously by treating Kuhn's as but one of several dialectically counterpoised and interrelated positions? Is Fuller fair to social scientists when he portrays them all as having been duped by 'Kuhnification'? But there is still more. Is Fuller's social epistemology actually a

variety of sociology, or does it remain exclusively within the ambit of philosophy? Does Fuller's fleshing out of the larger socio-historical context, which reminds one of Habermas's (1989) early reconstruction of the tendential closure of the public sphere, open sufficient room for the material conditions of the time? For instance, why is there no acknowledgement of the role and impact of neo-conservatism or neo-liberalism, both politically and economically, since the nineteen-seventies? Does he actually admit this much when he suggests that the 'post-Strong Programme sociologists of science' (411), among whom he must certainly be counted himself, are still awaiting their Karl Marx to disabuse them, like the nineteenth-century Young Hegelians Strauss and Feuerbach, of their naivety?

Methodologically, some of the implications of these questions can be made more precise. Considering the historical debate between the sociology of knowledge and critical theory at the time of the former's original formulation (Meja and Stehr 1982; Jay 1976), is it plausible to attribute a critical sociological point of view to Mannheim? Is it tenable at all to derive Mills and Gouldner's critical perspective from Mannheim? Besides their pragmatist roots, would it not be necessary to take into account Mills and Gouldner's respective relations to the critical theorists in exile in the United States and their followers? Considering the different types of critique advanced in critical social science by, say, Horkheimer (1970, 1974), Adorno (1981), Marcuse (1972), Benjamin (1961), Habermas (1972, 1987), Apel (1980), Bürger (1979), Bourdieu (1986, 2001) and Eder (1993), of what type is Fuller's 'embushelment' critique? Are its limits determined by his dual interpretation of Platonism rather than the available fourfold version (e.g. Markis 1980)? What does this concept of critique reveal about the nature and character of social epistemology? Considering the currently refracted relation between theory and practice, does social epistemology as a normative sociology of knowledge not proceed too intentio recta, too directly? While critical social science certainly cannot afford to discard the normative moment, are we not in a better position when we appreciate that today we have to follow a longer and more arduous path, i.e., that it can be dealt with only in a constructivistically broken (e.g. Strydom 1999) manner?

If one keeps to the spirit of the approach adopted in the book, the very analytical instruments that Fuller employs could be used also to analyse his own contribution. Here, however, I am compelled to take a different, much shorter route. First, I content myself with confirming the sense that his peers undoubtedly have of a brilliant advance, and with indicating that nothing could be closer to my heart than his desire to salvage a sensitivity to our own historicity, to highlight the relevance that learning from history has for the present, to recover the public sphere and the public display of critical reason, to renew the university as a site of social change, and to give back to the social sciences their rightful normative impulse. What I wish to focus on instead, secondly, is Fuller's proposal to replace the paradigm as model of the unit of analysis of Kuhn's history and sociology of science with the social movement model. I must confess that this was for me the most interesting, indeed surprising and exciting, aspect of the book. It confirmed my suspicion that there is a deep-seated ambiguity at the very core of Fuller's book: his being torn between 'social epistemology' and what I would call 'cognitive sociology' (Strydom 2000, 2002). In my opinion, the most problematic pages of the book are those covering section 3 in the Conclusion dealing with 'The Secularization of Paradigms as Movements'. By the same token, they are, at least potentially, also the most fruitful for a critical interchange with Fuller.

I agree fully with the strategic sense of Fuller's move from paradigm to movement: the 'transvaluation' (37), as he calls it, of Kuhn in the sense of reversing the value orientation that the latter's work with ill consequences promoted in the organisation and understanding of knowledge production. The incorporation of social movements as central agent not only in the constitution of society but at the same time also in the production of knowledge, however, is not without consequences. It introduces an element into Fuller's social epistemology that, despite its brilliant philosophical copnceptualisation as 'contingent universalist' and hence 'nonrelativist constructivist' (341), is neither easily assimilable nor smoothly accommodated. What precisely this element amounts to is immediately apparent from the principal theoretical sources on which Fuller – over and above Wuthnow (1989) – draws, namely Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) as well as Melucci's (1996) contributions to the sociology of social movements. The subtitle of the former two authors' book explicitly asserts a 'cognitive approach', while the latter's title *Challenging Codes* also hints at his treatment of this same dimension. That it is not easily assimilable to social epistemology is underscored by the fact that historically the cognitive dimension has remained largely outside the tradition of the sociology of knowledge (Wolff 1993: 19). And that it is not smoothly accommodated by social epistemology is demonstrated by the fact that Fuller (14-5, 17, 70) quite emphatically distances himself from the cognitive approach, which he regards as exhibiting an objectionable anormative predilection. This evaluation, as is confirmed by Eyerman and Jamison (not to mention authors closer to critical theory), is a one-sided and inadequate one that reveals once again Fuller's debilitating neglect of the relation between the sociology of knowledge – as model of social epistemology – and critical theory.

A further problem arises from the fact that Fuller takes over not only the central cognitive sociological insight from the sociology of social movements but at the same time also the limitations of the latter. These limitations mirror and reinforce his above-mentioned tendency to deal with Kuhn in terms of the one-dimensional model of the historians and philosophers of science rather than taking the co-existence of several counterpoised positions within a structured setting into account. He indeed speaks of a 'collective dialectical process' (401) and a 'swirl of opposing discourses' (407) in the context of an 'open discourse' (401), yet he conceives these strictly from the vantage point of a social movement being the central agent. A significant recent advance in sociology, by contrast, is represented by the insight that social movement research has for far too long remained confined to the level of collective action and collective identity formation to the detriment of appreciating the public construction that takes place in the structured setting provided by a historically specific discourse in which not only the movement but at the same time also its supporters, its adversaries and those observing and commenting on the various participants, such as social scientists, the media and in particular the public, are involved (e.g. Eder 1993; Strydom 1999, 2000). Fuller's option in favour of rhetoric rather than a broader communication theoretical position bears out the fact that he does not dispose over the necessary means to get an adequate grip on the discursive dynamics and relational context that are thus generated. The fact that he neglects the transposition of constructivism from the micro- and meso- to the macro-level implied by public construction also contains the suggestion that Fuller overestimates the contemporary relevance of science and technology studies and its ability to revitalise liberal arts education.

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