

A Prefatory Word: "Rhetoric"

to Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (2018)

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Steve Fuller is merely asking us to grow up. Many of the rules of Method we are asked to honor have the rigidity of boys' games of marbles, "That's not fair!" In my field of economics, a notably boyish subject, they abound. The economists intone, "Economic propositions should be tested like physics by their predictions," despite the deep homology between economic and biological evolution, both of which tell histories elegantly but cannot ever predict. Or, "Use null-hypothesis tests of statistical significance $p < 5\%$, without a substantive loss function to learn whether a coefficient is important," despite a century of criticism at the highest levels of statistical sophistication showing that such a Method is idiotic, yielding findings with the scientific standing of a Ouija board. Or, "Macroeconomics must *always* have micro foundations of maximizing utility by individuals," even though no reason is supplied why theorizing should *always* go on at the micro level." (One is reminded of the claim of Method in modern biology that it should *always* be cellular.) Or, "Ethics is to be banished from economic argument," even though it is impossible, pointless, and . . . unethical.

As Fuller notes, “modal power” is the crux, what we “ought” or “should” or “must” do. The Dutchman declares *je moet*, and the issue is closed, closed by power, not by democratic debate. You *moet* shut up. Fuller draws our attention most penetratingly to the rules, as a philosopher should, and adds that in a fully democratic polity the rules of debate should be [there it is: “should be”] under contestation. He is a proud Popperian so far as the centrality of debate is concerned. But he echoes the more radical tradition of, say, Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (1975) in noting that the second-order rules about what counts as a good first-order move is, and should be, under debate, too. And third-order. And fourth.

A long time ago my spouse and I played a game of Monopoly with dear Israeli friends visiting our home in Iowa City. The McCloskeys prided themselves on being pretty canny Monopoly players – exercising, for example, the one-order-up meta-rule of *always* building houses immediately, and especially on the orange New York Avenue triplet. But the Israelis outplayed us with ease, because they were willing to play at the *second* order up, proposing new deals – within the loose framework of the official rules – such as for conditional exemptions from rent. “You sell me your New York Avenue card if I undertake not to charge you rent if you land on it. But only two times.”

As Fuller implies in his easy command of European thought since the beginning, the point is not entirely new. Yet it always worth making, against the rigid-rule and undemocratic modernisms that have kept popping up since Plato, in for example

Descartes' "rules for the direction of the mind," or Wittgenstein Mark I. The rebellion after the 1960s against such Method might be called "postmodern," if the word had not been corrupted by clumsy politics, for and against – for example "routinely demonized," Fuller notes, by Wikipedia and other conservative voices.

Yet Fuller's point is that there is *always* politics. Calling a move "clumsy" or "demonizing" is a rhetorical turn in a human conversation, not a fact written in the stars. Indeed, the word "rhetoric" is the one to use in a democracy of science or politics. Post-truth, in Fuller's vocabulary, is actually pre-Truth (note the capital T), the rhetorical practice of the early 5th-century sophists of Sicily, who, when the fall of tyrants required debate, invented rhetoric as a self-conscious craft (it has been called "the first humanism," looking back on language). The obstacle has always been Truth, capital T, the Truth designed to pull the invisible strings, the anti-rhetorical and Methodological premise beloved of authoritarians everywhere. "That's not fair," says the scientific or political tyrant, hoping to settle the argument without argument. The most the scientific tyrant is willing to concede by way of debate is the phony procedure of "peer review," which Fuller skewers as "a desultorily organized protection racket."

The eminent philosopher of economics Uskali Mäki, for example, recently heard out a devastating criticism of his alleged "realism" by a young Polish scholar. Then he smiled, and remarked loftily, "We are all very glad to hear Mr. X-skis's amusing provocation." End of debate. The move was an instance, as Fuller puts it, of "cognitive authoritarianism." It led, in another of Fuller's phrases, away from "maturing

democratic consensus." We need, Fuller says, a reinvention of rhetoric in science, and in politics.

In the early 1980s Thomas Kuhn, with other luminaries such as Clifford Geertz, attended a conference that the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry (Poroi: Greek "river fords, ways and means") organized at the University of Iowa (the conference resulted in a charming volume: Megill, McCloskey, Nelson, eds. *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, 1987). We budding rhetoricians (which by 1989 included Fuller himself, as a year-long visitor to Iowa) tried to persuade Kuhn to adopt the word "rhetoric" to describe what he was recording, doing, and advocating, in the history of physics. It was indeed rhetoric. Kuhn demurred.

Fuller doesn't. He says: grow up.