

Review Forum The Intellectual

Review Forum is an occasional feature in which an author responds to issues raised by the reviewer. Its key purpose is to help thinkers clarify, augment and amend their ideas or dispel misapprehensions about them. In this our third feature, Steve Fuller replies to Douglas Kellner's review of his book *The Intellectual*.

Steve Fuller *The Intellectual*

Icons Books, 2005, 173 pp.

\$20.00 hardcover (1-84046-653-7)

Steve Fuller's interrogation of *The Intellectual* defines its contemporary forms and practices by distinguishing between it and figures like the Philosopher, the Scientist, the Judge, the Journalist, the Politician, and other social types. With a broad background in philosophy, science and technology studies, history, education, and other disciplines, Fuller provides both historical depth and original insight into the history and current forms of intellectuals. Employing short essays with "Four Theses on Intellectuals," a dialogue between an Intellectual and Philosopher, "Frequently Asked Questions about Intellectuals," and a concluding section on what happens to intellectuals after they die, Fuller engages the history and contemporary standing of intellectuals, albeit in a fragmentary form.

Fuller is an idiosyncratic and original thinker whose thought and writing does not easily fall into conventional categories and he provides provocative thoughts about intellectuals, rather than a history or theory of intellectuals. Opening with historical sketches of the culture clash between Socrates and the Sophists in a thesis noting that "the intellectual is a philosopher without the benefit of Plato's spin," Fuller notes how Sophists eschewed the philosophers' concern for eternal and true Ideas, and instead taught skills of argumentation, debate, and what Plato defamed as "rhetoric." Sophists figure as anticipation of modern intellectuals due to their skepticism about absolute knowledge claims, their insistence on practical knowledge and skills, their imbrication in a market in which they sold their skills, and their distance from both society and higher culture.

Fuller's second thesis asserts "Intellectuals are Touched by Paranoia." While he doesn't put it in these terms, intellectuals are shaped by what Paul Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion," as when Marx suspected economic interests were behind dominant ideas, while Nietzsche saw a will to power behind all behavior and institutions, and Freud suspected a primacy of sexuality in human life. For Fuller, intellectuals are especially suspicious of the power structure and conspiracies, even questioning science and knowledge, which may be, as Descartes posited, illusion or fantasy. Skepticism and vigilance are thus defining traits of intellectuals, although the breed is skeptical and suspicious about very different things.

A problem, however, with Fuller's generalizations about intellectuals is that he is not always able to articulate differences between different types of intellectuals who pursue often opposing agendas, sometimes allying themselves with factions of the powers that be, while sometimes taking the form of perpetual opposition. His third thesis, "Intellectuals Need a Business Plan" emphasizes the

economic basis of the intellectual's social role, but also suggests that different intellectuals seek or need very different sorts of economic support, which skews their activity accordingly. Fuller's comments here are especially relevant to the contemporary era where intellectuals try to brand ideas, sniff out "The Next Big Thing," find a favorable market environment for their ideas, and then promote themselves and their product.

Thesis Four, "Intellectuals Want the Whole Truth" takes on the thorny issue of truth and distinguishes between those who want "the truth" about particular facts or matters, and those who want "the whole truth," as in courtroom trials, government panels looking into political problems or scandals, historians like Howard Zinn who want to expand the field of American history to include voices and movements usually excluded, or theorists who try for big explanatory apparatuses. Intellectuals typically deploy writing as their mode of getting at and articulating the truth and use imagination to make connections or provide explanations. But their writing takes quite different forms and Fuller downplays the different modes, styles, and media of writing that intellectuals engage in.

Fuller's opening theses in the form of short essays are very dense, rich, and suggestive and I have barely touched on the ideas proliferating in his idiosyncratic mode of writing that throws off idea after idea in condensed and often unsystematic form. Such complexity sometimes, though, makes Fuller hard to pin down, although this is arguably compensated by the suggestiveness of his ideas.

In a section on "The Intellectual and the Philosopher: A Dialogue" Fuller focuses more narrowly on the difference between the intellectual and philosopher, although here too he covers a lot of ground and makes many interesting asides. In particular, he zeros in on the differences between continental and analytic philosophers. The former offer "one stop shopping," with theories or discourses that explain a vast number of phenomena and attract schools and followers who parrot the master thinkers. The analytic philosophers, by contrast, are more skeptical and modest, although Fuller's hypothetical intellectual accuses them of simplification and hypocrisy, as they create straw-person opponents to champion their own positions and attack intellectuals as not precise enough if they fail to make sharp distinctions, and as superficial and stereotypical if they are too clear and direct. Fuller's intellectual also accuses analytic philosophy of being too close to and uncritical of science, as well as often failing to criticize big institutions at the same time they criticize the "monumental" ideas of continental philosophers.

One might, however, object, to Fuller's too sharp delineation between the Academic, the Philosopher, and the Intellectual. Some, like Fuller and myself, try to be academics, philosophers and intellectuals at the same time and not conform to specific categorical delineations. While one might find, and in some of his examples Fuller names, quite specific cases of individuals who exemplify the specific types articulated in Fuller's categories, many of us elude such characterization and combine traits of many of the related species of mind, intellect, and practice that Fuller distinguishes. In particular, in many countries marked by hypereconomic and media development, the lines are blurred between these categories as academics and philosophers sell their wares, or insert their opinions into the media and markets, and are forced to publish or perish to keep their jobs, and in some cases to get big research grants to legitimate their standing.

Attempting in Part 3 to answer "Frequently asked Questions About Intellectuals," Fuller makes some distinctions and clarifications to his sometimes starkly posited positions in the opening chapters. He

defines intellectuals' role as deploying abstractions in thinking and fighting, as they define themselves against dominant positions, an activity the Greeks characterized as "dialectics" (p. 111). Intellectuals define ideas, defend and deploy them, and criticize other intellectuals. They follow an ideal of autonomy, choose causes to champion, and rally round ideas like freedom and fraternity. Fuller claims that the latter binds intellectuals with ancestors and social groups, reaching out to large communities such as humanity, or to one's nation or religious affiliation. Seeking universality and pursuing teaching, intellectuals founded the *Universitas*, organizations which later became universities.

A detailed discussion defines different types of intellectuals and the conflicting careers, causes, appeals, judgments on current events, attitudes toward history and sources of intellectuals' ideas. Concluding queries define intellectuals' relations with politicians, academics, philosophers, and scientists, and why intellectuals seem to seek out and find themselves in conflicts. Since intellectuals are often defined by critique, they will necessarily alienate certain groups and face as well cross-generational challenges in keeping their ideas relevant.

While hype on the book cover claims that: "Modeled on Machiavelli's notorious tract on statecraft, *The Prince*, Steve Fuller's book dissects what it means to be an intellectual." In fact, Fuller offers few instrumental suggestions that would be of use to a potential Prince, but provides engaging insights into intellectuals. He fails to discuss, however, earlier theorists of the intellectual such as Mannheim, Sartre, or Gouldner, whose excellent work on the intellectuals seems to exemplify Fuller's Postscript on "What Happens to Intellectuals When They Die" — they become ignored or forgotten. This is unfortunate, for Gouldner's last works described the relationship between Marxism and intellectuals, connections between intellectuals and technologies, and the multiple roles of intellectuals in modern politics (1976, 1979, 1980).

Without a solid grounding in previous discussions, Fuller's comments sometimes appear a bit *ex cathedra*, although they are often illuminating and useful. While Fuller makes some asides concerning relations between intellectuals and technology, he does not carry out full-bodied descriptions of how media and new technologies like the Internet, for example, transform the social roles, functions, and perhaps nature of intellectuals (compare Kellner 1997). He also does not develop any strong theses concerning intellectuals that he systematically develops through the short essays and dialogue in his book, but rather offers more fragmentary observations. Perhaps this more "postmodern" method helps capture the contradictory, complex, and changing role of intellectuals in the contemporary era, but as it stands Fuller's study of *The Intellectual* offers at best a prolegomena to a treatise on the mutating roles of the intellectual in the present era.

References

- Gouldner, Alvin W. 1976. *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology: The Origins, Grammar, and Future of Ideology*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Gouldner, Alvin W. 1979. *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class: A Frame of Reference, Theses, Conjectures, Arguments, and an Historical Perspective on the Role of Intellectuals and Intelligentsia in the International Class Contest of the Modern Era*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Gouldner, Alvin W. 1980. *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Kellner, Douglas. 1997. "Intellectuals, the Public Sphere, and New Technologies." *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, Vol. 16: 15-32.

Douglas Kellner
UCLA
kellner@ucla.edu

Douglas Kellner is George Kneller Chair in the Philosophy of Education at UCLA and is author of many books on social theory, politics, history, and culture, including *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*; *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*; a trilogy of books on postmodern theory with Steve Best; a trilogy of books on the Bush administration, including *Grand Theft 2000* (2001) and his recently published *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (2005). His home page is at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellnerhtml.html>.

CJS Online

Pro Machiavelli: Response to Kellner

Douglas Kellner raises many issues in his sympathetic yet critical review of *The Intellectual*, which befits a book that, as he rightly says, “throws off idea after idea in condensed and often unsystematic form.” I shall try to address some of them through my explicit appeal to Machiavelli, which has puzzled several commentators, not least Kellner. First, let me say that my adaptation of the genre of the princely primer may be “postmodern,” but only as a concession to my intended readers, not to the content I wish to convey. In fact, I wish to defend a rather classical view of the “universal intellectual” that postmodernists presume to be simply not possible anymore — if it ever was. Moreover, just as Machiavelli composed a scholarly *Discourses on Livy* alongside the pithy *Prince*, I too intend to write a general social epistemology of intellectual life. Nevertheless, it is worth saying that in six months of publication, *The Intellectual* has attracted the attention of journalists, students, and bloggers worldwide – and was even a featured book in the US *Chronicle of Higher Education* (24 June 2005), even though no US edition has yet appeared. As of this writing translations are being prepared in Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Hungarian. So, the book seems to have been a reasonable rhetorical success.

But let me be clear: *The Intellectual* is meant to be an analogue – not an updated version – of *The Prince*. I grant Kellner that I don’t say much that would be of use to an aspiring ruler, but it doesn’t follow that there isn’t much of use to people interested in becoming intellectuals. While many share Kellner’s concerns about the unsystematic nature of the work, they are attracted by the premise that the intellectual has a somewhat different, perhaps even antagonistic, self-understanding from that of the academic. Some have even read the book as decidedly anti-academic. While this was not my intent, I appreciate this interpretation and, in the current cultural climate, it may serve as a wake-up call to academics that the status of intellectual is not a natural entitlement of university employment. Even academics need to work to become intellectuals.

Here I begin to draw inspiration from Machiavelli, whose premier intellectual virtue was an ability to keep his eye on the ball — “the ball” in his case being statecraft. A prince may genuflect to all the relevant pieties, but if he cannot manage his own court or preempt the causes of civil unrest, then he doesn’t deserve to rule: End of story. “The ball” in my case might be called *idea-craft*. Intellectuals are mainly in the business of promoting ideas. This means, among other things, that they must assume the existence of ideas. This is already a tall order in postmodern academia, which tends to

regard ideas as annoying remnants of the dreaded “metaphysics of presence” (Fuller 2004). Of course, I do not deny the central role that academics continue to play in the certification, elaboration, and reproduction of the disciplinary discourses and techniques that carry the authority of “knowledge” in the wider society. However, a “knowledge worker,” to recall management guru Peter Drucker’s brutal but accurate expression, is not necessarily an intellectual, notwithstanding the wishful thinking that attended the “culture of critical discourse” promoted by Alvin Gouldner — whom, by the way, I would certainly class among the leading US intellectuals of the last half-century (Fuller 2002).

I insist on a sharp distinction between academics and intellectuals for much the same reason that Machiavelli wanted to make the grounds of political legitimacy forward- rather than backward-looking. In Machiavelli’s terms, the prince is never justified by the power on which he draws — be it noble ancestors or papal blessing — but only by the power he makes available to his constituency, which may be as basic as living in peace and prosperity with one’s fellows. To put the point in a somewhat scary form that recalls the trajectory from Machiavelli to Mussolini, the ruler must enable the ruled to see their own intentions realized in his actions. Whatever else one wishes to say about this vision of politics, it assumes that the exercise of power is a creative process that compels the ruler to continually translate the hopes and fears of his people into a whole greater than the sum of the parts. To be sure, this conceptualization of politics can easily generate contempt for the rule of law — as in the case of Carl Schmitt, the Weimar jurist who did the most to legitimate the Nazi regime. However, even if Machiavelli cannot be said to offer an adequate normative theory of politics, he may nevertheless provide *malgré lui* the elements for a normative theory of intellectual life.

In that case, academics who trade on their discipline-based authority are like the backward-looking rulers derided by Machiavelli. They try to compel obedience by reminding the audience of the distance they stand above them by virtue of their distinctive lineage, which for academics pertains to their degrees rather than, say, their heredity. Public choice economists bring together the two sides of this analogy in the concept of “rent-seeking behavior,” whereby exclusive possession of a factor of production, such as land, is a source of value regardless of its actual productivity. Without wishing to contribute to the cynicism that often accompanies such appeals to economics, there is no denying that often there is not much more to the “ideas” of academics and other knowledge workers than the restricted access their discourses provide to spheres of action that, assuming their larger relevance, could be accessed by other means — if not in simpler words, then in some form of non-verbal imagery. In this respect, a testimony to the intellectualist aspirations of the logical positivists is that, in their incarnation as the “Red” Vienna Circle of the 1920s and ‘30s, they tried to design a universally applicable iconic language of thought -- what Otto Neurath dubbed “ISOTYPE” — for representing complex socio-economic data on public newsboards to inform political debate.

Of course, academics themselves should be capable of performing the requisite translations to extend access to their linguistic and technical cartels. This is what pedagogy and curriculum design are supposed to accomplish. However, we inhabit an academic culture that disproportionately values what is uncritically called “research” over teaching, so that the latter needs to be informed by the former but not vice versa. This is bound to discourage any general “intellectualization” of society that does not at the same time stratify people into the “knows” and the “know nots.” I place

“research” in scare quotes to recall that the tendency to subject the production of novel findings and counter-intuitive insights to the discipline of “peer review” invariably contains their subversive potential. I don’t mean to condemn this tendency out of hand. But what is gained in the insurance policy effectively underwritten by a peer-reviewed journal must be weighed against the exaggerated authority that publication under such a regime tends to command both inside and outside the peer community.

Interestingly, the most accomplished intellectuals in academia may be natural scientists. In a 2004 poll conducted by *Prospect* magazine of the UK’s 100 leading intellectuals, Richard “Selfish Gene” Dawkins topped the list. While this generated consternation in that bastion of US conservative high culture, *The New Criterion*, it did not surprise me in the least (Johnson 2005, Fuller 2005). Only science popularizations like *A Brief History of Time*, *The Selfish Gene*, *The Mismeasure of Man*, and *The Blank Slate* — four transatlantic best sellers that epitomize the genre’s heterogeneity — can compete in sales with pop psychology, New Age mysticism, and the latest wheeze from the management gurus. Among the branches of higher learning, the natural sciences are the least wedded to a specific expressive medium. Journal articles and popular books are typically afterthoughts to knowledge initially embodied in field observations, laboratory experiments and, increasingly, computer simulations. Not surprisingly, then, natural scientists are comfortable delivering papers without reading them, chunking their theses into media soundbites, and otherwise adapting to the Powerpoint generation. Of course, I generalize and what I generalize about has not come without some tears. Nevertheless, natural scientists do not display the “principled hesitation” about multimedia translation one so often finds among humanists and social scientists. We academics outside the natural sciences need to ask a hard question at this point: *Do we hesitate because we truly fear that our knowledge claims might be distorted or merely that their implications might be made sufficiently clear to render us accountable to more people than we would like?*

Some general conditions are necessary for a world fit for the existence of ideas and intellectuals:

- (1) Ideas must be capable of multiple forms of realization, i.e. they are eligible for multimedia transmission. Anything worth saying can always be said in other words and maybe even by other media.
- (2) Ideas must open up a sphere of potential action that would be otherwise absent, i.e. they must expand the collective imagination in certain directions (even if that means contracting it in others).
- (3) The material conditions must exist for realizing a “collective mind,” nowadays deontologized and democratized as the “public sphere,” into which one can reasonably speak of ideas as being introduced, contested, and variably influential.
- (4) Ideas are *shared* in the strict sense, i.e., an idea does not spring full-blown from an original genius who then imprints it on the masses; rather an idea comes to be realized gradually as more people participate in its production.

Historically speaking, the realization of these conditions has required two transitions. On the one hand, the origin of ideas had to be pulled out of the Platonic heaven and relocated in human psychology. On the other, human psychology had to be seen, not as irreducibly private, but as beholden to common intellectual property. France became the spiritual home of intellectuals with the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870 because both conditions were very self-consciously put

in place. The educational system was explicitly secularized, and prior affective attachments to the Church were transferred to the “Republic” as the common heritage (i.e. *res publica*) of French citizens, in which they were invited, if not obliged, to participate through a free press. This heritage is symbolized in the Panthéon, a cruciform neo-classical structure resembling the US Capitol located near the Sorbonne. It contains the remains of the great French citizens, many of whom are reasonably classed as intellectuals. Although these figures typically operated with a universalist normative orientation, it was always articulated in relation to the nation’s pressing concerns. Consequently, a genealogy of French intellectuals — and the same could be said of intellectuals from other nations — would not form a neat self-contained network of teachers and students (as, say, Collins 1998 does for the history of philosophy), but a more centrifugal system of dissenters vis-à-vis core political tendencies in the nation’s history. This alone continues to undermine any attempt to write a coherent narrative about the place of the intellectual in modern society.

References

- Collins, Randall. 1998. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fuller, Steve. 2002. *Knowledge Management Foundations*. Woburn MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Fuller, Steve. 2004. “Intellectuals: an endangered species in the 21st century?” *Economy and Society* 33: 463-83.
- Fuller, Steve. 2005. “You call yourself an intellectual?” *Times Higher Education Supplement*. London. 18 February.
- Johnson, Daniel. 2005. “British Intellectual Life Today.” *The New Criterion*. Vol. 24. September.

Steve Fuller

Sociology

University of Warwick

s.w.fuller@warwick.ac.uk

Steve Fuller is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick, UK. Originally trained in history and philosophy of science, he is most closely associated with the research programme of “social epistemology,” which is the name of the quarterly journal he founded in 1987 and the first of his eleven books. In 2006, two new books will appear: *The Philosophy of Science & Technology Studies* (New York: Routledge) and *The New Sociological Imagination* (London: Sage).

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/intellectual.html>

October 2005

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online