

## A Different Perspective on Post-Truth: Lions, Foxes, Academia, and Brexit

Lucia Toman

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Lucia.Toman@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

### Abstract:

*Post-truth* has recently garnered a lot of attention, yet its definition escapes us. Steve Fuller challenges the a priori contempt for post-truth most scholarship seems to have. Instead, he sees post-truth as a stage in the progressive democratization of knowledge. He questions the anti-intellectual label it often bears and claims that its negative consequences are but “growth pains of a maturing democratic intelligence” (181). The book provides compelling analyses of the post-truth condition across a breadth of disciplines and fills in countless lacunae in the study of post-truth.

### Eine andere Perspektive auf die Post-Wahrheit: Löwen, Füchse, Universität und Brexit

#### German Abstract:

Obwohl *post-truth* in letzter Zeit viel Aufmerksamkeit erregt hat, ist ihre genaue Definition noch unbekannt. Steve Fuller stellt nun die Verachtung infrage mit der die Wissenschaft der *post-truth* a priori zu begegnen scheint. Stattdessen betrachtet er sie als eine Etappe in der fortschreitenden Demokratisierung des Wissens. Ebenfalls hinterfragt er das anti-intellektuelle Etikett, das *post-truth* oft trägt und behauptet, dass ihre negativen Folgen stattdessen lediglich „growth pains of a maturing democratic intelligence“ (181) seien. Das Buch liefert überzeugende Analysen des Zustandes von *post-truth* über die Grenzen einer Vielzahl von Disziplinen hinweg und füllt so zahllose Lücken in dessen Erforschung.

### How to cite:

Toman, Lucia: “A Different Perspective on Post-Truth: Lions, Foxes, Academia and Brexit [Review of: Fuller, Steve: Post-Truth. Knowledge as a Power Game. New York: Anthem Press, 2018].“ In: KULT\_online 62 (2020).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2020.1060>



## A Different Perspective on Post-Truth: Lions, Foxes, Academia, and Brexit

Lucia Toman

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Fuller, Steve. Post-Truth. Knowledge as a Power Game. New York: Anthem Press, 2018. 218 pages, 24.95 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-78308-694-8.

As Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year 2016, post-truth has become the subject of much scorn, yet its very definition remains elusive. Colloquially, post-truth refers to situations in which public opinion is easily swayed by emotion and irrational beliefs. Steve Fuller rejects the pejorative and obscure definition and sets out to find a more fitting one whilst analyzing the phenomenon with minimum bias. Characteristic of Fuller's writing, the book is provocative in its audacity, addressing even politically inconvenient issues with a mixture of rigor and subtle comedy. His critique is unprejudiced and constructive – unsparing even to academia, where Fuller himself draws his paycheck.

To elucidate the mechanism of post-truth, Fuller uses Vilfredo Pareto's concept of circulating elites: *lions* and *foxes*. While lions treat the status quo as a reliable point of departure for the future, foxes suspect the status quo inhibits a better future and seek to undermine it – not to gain dominance in given conditions, but to change the conditions to their advantage. Thus, the lion-fox struggle (to change or to preserve the status quo?) is one for *modal power* – control over what is possible (p. 2-6).

Linking modal power to post-truth allows Fuller to plumb post-truth's philosophical origin. Plato's conflict with the sophists is analyzed as one over modal power. An advocate of restricting modal power for the governing elite, Plato denounced the sophists' epistemologically democratic attitude towards selling their dialectical skills for potentially destabilizing the authoritarian social order of the day and age. Similarly, he deemed performative arts a threat for their public display of *poiesis* – the creative activity of verbally conjuring up alternative worlds, which imitates the way lawmakers create established social orders. Its transparent

advertising could impeach the legitimacy of lawmaking and subvert the existing order by inspiring *second-order awareness*.

Crucial to post-truth sensibility, second-order awareness implies that this knowledge game is the pursuit of the determination of rules (p. 36). Following the philosophy of fictionalism (based on the Kantian *als ob*), the real world is ascribed no determinate epistemic standing and the 'truth' is anything that is ruled true by a judge endowed with the relevant modal power. Relatedly, Wittgenstein's *Investigations* holds that the interpretation of data depends on the frame of reference employed. Fuller's philosophical insight into the post-truth condition invites us to see the phenomenon in a different light than the usual disdain by revealing its deeply democratic nature.

Despite his vocal disapproval of Brexit, Fuller, who resides in the UK, examines its politics impartially in the light of the anti-expert turn. The decision to call a referendum on what seems like a statutory issue was, he argues, itself a step down from cognitive authoritarianism. Fuller argues that blind trust in experts in modern democracies has led to a "moral dumbing down of the population" and a "culture of intellectual deference" (p. 11-13). However, absent in the case of Brexit is what Fuller calls the *ethic of intelligent risk-taking*. This supports his main argument: post-truth is not a negative phenomenon; the problem is our unpreparedness to handle it. Fuller concludes that although "the anti-expert revolution has not quite gone to plan, it remains the direction of travel in democracy's fitful progress" (p. 22). Albeit convincing and successful at showing the bright side of Brexit, the analysis does not offer much of a blueprint for action. If greater epistemic democracy is the destination, when shall we arrive and how much salt is yet to be rubbed in the wounds before we do? If Fuller asks these questions, he does so rhetorically and implicitly.

Arguably the most intriguing chapter critiques academia as a rigid system in which knowledge flows along established lines of enquiry without much opportunity for innovation and change (p. 73-77). Illustrated by Pareto's 80/20 principle, a disproportionately large amount of attention goes to a small portion of literature. Thus, scholars fail to connect literatures to effectively exploit the already available knowledge (p. 70). The result is extensive *undiscovered public knowledge*. In post-truth terms, academia suffers from underutilized modal power and fails to see alternative ways of how knowledge can be used and propagated. As an antidote, Fuller

suggests reinforcing *interdisciplinarity* to prevent academic disciplines from claiming intellectual ownership of knowledge and from inhibiting the knowledge flow (p. 76-80).

Fuller argues that, left to its own devices, academia will compromise its intellectual liberalism – unless incentivized by the *military-industrial will to knowledge*: a use-oriented research responding to urgent societal pressures to improve the human condition (p. 69-70). Yet, not every academic discipline's social usefulness can be expressed monetarily, and not all improvements of the human condition result in increased economic demand. While the argument is convincing, one cannot but wonder where such an incentive would lead – or which disciplines might be the first to perish.

The book offers further analyses of how the post-truth condition manifests itself in a breadth of situations and settings. Overall, it presents a compelling argument that the world immersed in the post-truth condition is *not* on the brink of apocalypse. The problem with post-truth is the fact that we need time to adjust to it. Fuller's open-minded inquiry casts a glance beyond the point where most publications on post-truth halt. Where most resort to categorical disdain, he takes a step back to consider the big picture. In this way, his book presents a unique endeavor and a valuable contribution to post-truth scholarship.