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The fabrication of man

PETER BAEHR

Steve Fuller, *The New Sociological Imagination*. London: Sage Publications, 2006.

Intellectually astute and morally serious, *The New Sociological Imagination* is a work that deserves the widest audience. I will begin by summarizing its argument; proceed to build on its insights; and then offer some critical remarks.

FULLER'S ARGUMENT

Arising early in the 19th century, sociology secularized two key features of religious monotheism. The first was the belief that human beings, created in the likeness of God, occupy a special place in the order of things. The second was the notion that God's dispensation touches all human beings equally, irrespective of social rank or physical status. To these core beliefs, Fuller continues, the early sociologists affirmed that humanity is more than a mere datum, a creature of fate or physical necessity. It is an active project committed to increasing the sum of human welfare and to asserting greater control over the arbitrary use of power. Sociology's role was to record that human project and guide it. A similar ambition characterized socialism with which sociology 'was born joined at the hip'. Common to both normative science and political movement was the belief that humans distinguish themselves from other animals by their ability to create public institutions (guilds, sects,

corporations), by their willingness to extend recognition to others, and by their capacity to act in concert. Sociology, its founders believed, is an empowering discipline for human beings because it helps them recognize facts and potentials of which they may have not been aware. Equally, sociological propositions are tested against the knowledge and inclinations of those to whom they are addressed.

Today, Fuller laments, the human project sociology sought to advance is in bad shape. It is corroded by postmodern cynicism, and, even more, by the growth and dispersion of what he calls a 'karmic sensibility' in which human beings are absorbed into a continuum of life-forms. Deprived of its privileged status, humanity is increasingly viewed as an idiosyncratic species with no greater claim to the earth than any other. The quest to maximize human welfare is usurped by the imperative to reduce risk and minimize suffering. Greater public control is eviscerated by the primacy of individual choice and multiple lifestyles. The engines powering this tendency are neo-Darwinism, exemplified in the work of Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer, and bio-liberalism, an orientation that favors a minimalist state favorable to eugenic choice. Both have contributed to the view that altruism is a cloak for selfish dispositions, that human life has no inherent value, and that animals aside from humans are worthy of equal considerations of interests. Neo-Darwinism, while extending sympathetic concern to the whole of creation, depresses esteem for human life because of its highly calibrated view of which life is worthy of respect. A terminally ill human being, a human embryo, or a badly disabled person is, on this account, less valuable than a non-human animal with greater sentience and potential. Choosing the former over the latter is speciesism. The commercial corollary of neo-Darwinism is 'bio-prospecting', an intervention that enables its clients to choose which human attributes are to be retained and which sloughed off. Even where such prospecting is justified to prevent, by genetic manipulation, the occurrence of harmful abnormalities, Fuller sees a dark side. It is wrong to pick who is, and who is not, to inhabit humanity; wrong to assume that less than normal people, whatever that ephemerally means, are less worthy of life than the temporarily fit; wrong to try and shape the species as if one knew in advance what the ideal shape was.

The culmination of karmic, neo-Darwinist and bio-liberal ideas is 'the casualization of the human condition'. It is an ugly phrase. But so, Fuller maintains, is its referent: the treatment of human life as plastic, dispensable and morally indistinguishable from the lives of non-human animals. Such casualization supposes 'a flat ontology of indefinitely extendable networks whose members need not even be human' (13), a 'tendency to make it easier for humans to come in and out of existence, especially in terms that do not presume the human condition to be an unmitigated good' (12). Does your pregnancy interfere with your career plans? Abort. Does your terminally ill

mother drive you to distraction? Tell the doctors you have no objection to an induced death; she's a goner anyway. Does that infant to whom you have given birth appear less than fully human? Let it die. In a bracing passage, Fuller remarks that the 'suffering we freely attribute to the disabled and the downtrodden without their consent masks that it is *we* who find their existence insufferable' (120). It transpires that once one drops the notion of humanity as an intrinsically worthy species, in all its manifestations, one is in danger of becoming less humane. The reason the green movement today trumps socialism, Fuller argues, is that it is simply easier to have benign thoughts, and perform commendable actions, designed to improve the earth than it is to help the downtrodden or work to lessen poverty.

IMPLICATIONS

Among the most original implications of *The New Sociological Imagination* is its retrieval, against the Nietzschean tide, of the significance of human dependency. Humans are dependent on others when they are in the womb, when they are born, when they are small children, when they are ill, when they require counsel and friendship, and when they prepare for death. Dependency is no accidental moment of life; it is an essential part of it. We learn something from being dependent on others – that no human being is sovereign, that all rely on the kindness of others. We learn from the spectrum of human life that humans were meant to be plural not perfect. Fuller is also trenchant in his defense of altruism. He is unhappy with the view that altruistic actions are essentially motivated by the attempt to display 'superiority ('magnanimity') to those who benefit from [such] actions' (124). He is more attached to the idea that altruism grows out of a sense of responsibility to others. How might one build on that intuition? Albert Camus, discussing decency, offered one way to do so in his allegorical novel centered on the plague-infested Algerian coastal town of Oran. 'I have to tell you this,' says the narrator and protagonist Dr Bernard Rieux, 'this whole thing is not about heroism. It's about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency' (Camus, 2001[1947]: 125).¹ And what is decency? It is the workaday, unpretentious, practical quality of helpfulness that expects little of people and assumes only that misanthropy is absurd: 'that there is more in men to admire than to despise' (ibid.: 237). While heroism is aristocratic – reserved for the best, the excellent – decency is available to Everyman, based on the expectation that all are capable of contributing in small ways to the fight against wretchedness and depravity. Its sensibility is typified by Rieux's remark that the health teams acted as they did, not out of a wish to become saints, but simply because *failure* to act – 'not doing' anything – 'would have been incredible at the time'. Decency is

active but undemonstrative, a 'quiet virtue' (ibid.: 102); as such, it defies being mythologized and celebrated. Decent acts – notably, protecting others from harm – are done not out of grandiose motives such as the quest for glory, but rather to avoid the small shames of inactivity. Such a perspective is fully compatible with the moral outlook of *The New Sociological Imagination*.

Another intriguing aspect of *The New Sociological Imagination* is Steve Fuller's framing of Islam. Fuller argues that the key civilizational fault-line of modern times lies not in the conflict between Islam and the rest but between a karmic orientation and one which is committed to the uniqueness and equality of human beings. This counter-karmic view he dubs 'anthropic'; Islam, together with Judaism and Christianity, are its wellsprings.² Fuller's emphasis on what Islam shares with other anthropic traditions is a welcome corrective to its construction as a demonic world presence.³ But the sociological imagination must be aware of the peculiarities of the phenomena it describes. Fuller is able to see Islam as a 'so-called threat' (154) rather than a real one only because he focuses exclusively on Muslim ideas congenial to (some) anthropic principles, and because his analysis is concerned with meta-physical world-views to the exclusion of political movements.

Let us grant the heterogeneity of Islam which, in Europe, encompasses fully or quasi-integrated elites, second-generation extremists, and those among the first generation who, in Asef Bayat's (2007: 508) felicitous expression, are 'on the margin of the mainstream'. Let us acknowledge, too, that Islam is profoundly affected by the societies that individual Muslims inhabit. Muslim essentialism is a fiction. Finally, let us recognize that even the jihadi movement itself is quarrelsome and fissiparous, split between globalists intent on defeating the 'far enemy' and local movements concerned above all to overthrow their own impious governments (Gerges, 2005). At the same time it is important to recall that those Muslims who are today most intransigent towards karmic sensibility, and the social permissiveness it promotes, are simultaneously at war with western political pluralism. The anthropic world-view, in short, allows plenty of scope for combat within it. Its universalism is also questionable. Often it is the creed of the religious monopolist determined to impose the true faith on all and to decide who deserves equal respect and who does not – infidels, apostates, and members of *jahili* society (Qutb, n.d.: 19–22). Bolshevism, too, claimed to represent humanity – first purged of classes, enemies of the people, and wreckers. Fuller is averse to the karmic 'strengthening of the distinction between the normal and the deviant or pathological' (143). But what are we then to make of Jew hatred, rampant in the Middle East, and in exterminatory projects – for instance, those of Hamas, of Hezbollah and of the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – designed to erase Israel from the face of the earth?⁴ Presumably, a universalism that excludes Jews is not truly anthropic. In that case, however, (political) Islam is a real threat rather than an apparent one.

SOCIALISM, NEO-DARWINISM AND THE
LANGUAGE OF FABRICATION

Steve Fuller is nostalgic for the days when western states were more powerful domestic players than they are now. He reasons that only a strong polity will be able to regulate bio-liberalism and the anarchy of bio-prospecting.⁵ More socialism of a humanistic variety is apparently what we need.⁶ Here, however, we arrive at a revealing anomaly.

Who said the following?

The real antagonism typical of today's world is not that between diverse religious cultures; rather, it is the antagonism between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life on the one hand, and the great religious cultures, on the other. . . . The coming clash will be between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures.

No, that is not Steve Fuller; it is the current pontiff, Benedict XVI (Ratzinger, 2006[2005]: 44). And who said this?

I must confess I am wrestling with a difficult decision. . . . On the one hand, [stem-cell research] offers so much hope; on the other, so much despair. I worry about a culture that devalues life. I believe technologies and science will help solve many medical problems, and I have great hope for cures. . . . Even the most noble ends do not justify any means.

The man buffeted by this dilemma was President George W. Bush.⁷ He came up with a principled compromise. Federal funding would continue for research on previously harvested embryonic stem cells. (Executive writ does not extend to privately funded research.) Public money would not be allocated, however, to research that extracted stem cells from frozen (and potentially viable) human embryos.⁸ In drawing this red line, Bush anticipated Steve Fuller's own objections to bio-harvesting.

Fuller knows that early 20th-century socialists were among the most enthusiastic supporters of eugenics. But why is it that the people who most publicly condemn the human condition's casualization in the modern world are conservatives? It is probably because they refuse to identify human beings *and human societies* as justifiable objects of fabrication. Conversely, from its 19th-century infancy, socialism has been deeply wedded to the idea of shaping, molding, engineering and making humanity through the medium of the state. Fuller admits as much; more than that, he embraces such a view (25, 53, 58, 83, 118–19, 136, 146). He looks forward to 'an integrated welfare policy that encompasses the pre-natal situation, the condition of birth and infancy, child-rearing and formal education, as well as preventive diagnostic, and curative health care' (56). But to speak of humanity as a 'project', and to

endorse the idea that ‘human nature’ is what ‘allows us to remake nature to human benefit’ (83), is chilling. This designer language is socialism’s most dangerous conceptual legacy. At the root of it is the image of the craftsman who must destroy one kind of material to make another (Arendt, 1958). No one can sensibly claim that Marx and Engels were responsible for the cruelty of Bolshevism and Maoism. But their work did lend credence to the notion that history could be ‘made’ albeit at the expense of many of the living, those dying classes to which revolutionary violence would deliver the final *coup de grâce*. Later, Lenin, Stalin and Mao looked longingly towards the New Man that socialism would forge. The basic socialist template of crafting, shaping, manipulating and controlling is broadly consistent with the neo-Darwinist dehumanization that Fuller deplores.

The New Sociological Imagination is a vital book. Lend your copy to a bright undergraduate student. You may fail to save him or her from the clutches of neo-Darwinism. But a writer of Fuller’s power and passion should convince any reasonable person that there is life in sociology yet.

NOTES

- 1 Earlier (100), Rieux says that ‘by giving too much importance to fine actions one may end by paying an indirect but powerful tribute to evil, because in so doing one implies that such fine actions are only valuable because they are rare, and that malice or indifference are far more common motives in the action of men. The narrator does not share this view.’
- 2 Compare with Shariati’s (2003[1970]) distinction between monotheistic and multitheistic religions.
- 3 See the apposite remarks in Roy (2007: 83).
- 4 The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is treated, throughout the Islamic world, as if it were an authentic historical document. I bought my own copy of it in a bookstore in Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The fraud is also a staple of Middle Eastern websites and television: it was aired in a 41-part series in Egypt (2002) and, in a truncated version of 29 parts, in Syria (2003). See Küntzel, 2007: 151ff. Anti-Semitism is increasingly de rigueur among non-Muslim publics. Its expansion among the British left, for instance, is well explored by Hirsh (2007).
- 5 The decline of the centralized distributivist polity and its replacement by the ‘market state’ is a salient theme of Bobbitt’s recent work: ‘The market state is, above all, a mechanism for enhancing opportunity for creating something – possibilities – commensurate with our imagination’ (2003: 232). A social ethos emphasizing choice, merit, and liberation from constraints is unlikely ever to give the state the power of moral regulation that Fuller desires.
- 6 Because Fuller believes socialism is only authentic when it is humanistic, he portrays Peter Singer as a socialist *manqué*.
- 7 I have compressed quotes from Lefkowitz (2008: 23).
- 8 New research appears to have vindicated Bush. It now transpires that stem cells can be created that do not require the destruction of embryos while having their versatile characteristics.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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