

Kuhn's conservatism

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Fuller's project

Steve Fuller in his book *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History of Our Times*¹ attempts to place in historical context Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*² and provide through and around it what he calls a 'philosophical history of our times'. By this term Fuller understands a Hegelian kind of endeavour, which lays more emphasis on philosophy rather than history. History, in this context, is used to assist in the promotion of a philosophical agenda, which, in the case that interests Fuller, is that of bringing 'the politics of knowledge production to the center of public arena' (p. 11). Kuhn is seen as 'decisively contribut[ing] to reversing' such a project, which, according to Fuller, has a history of 150 years and has been carried out by figures like Hegel, Comte, Weber, Peirce, Duhem, Russell, Popper and Feyerabend, among others (*ibid.*). These figures managed to '[weave] their abstract arguments around a historical narrative punctuated by recognisable landmark episodes in "Western civilization," (. . .) enabl[ing] a relatively large intellectual (. . .) public to find points of contact and contestation with what they had to say' (p. 12).

Kuhn and Conant

Kuhn, it is maintained, not only shut the public out of the assessment of science by insulating in his work the production of scientific knowledge from external determinations, but also played, inadvertently, in the hands of James Bryant Conant. Conant, according to Fuller, had assumed the responsibility of carrying out a politically realist Cold War mission, namely, to defend American democracy against the New Dealers and the Communists by establishing and protecting the autonomy of science from the rest of society (pp. 33–34, 180). Conant saw the destabilising effect of making exaggerated demands on science—which, in the course of the twentieth century, had developed into an industrial behemoth—and, in Fuller's view, came to promote a 'matter of fact image' of scientific practice (p. 214). He expected to bring the public closer to science, but also curb the public's high expectations for fear that science might be perverted, as it had happened in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia (pp. 182–183). The public was supposed to get accustomed to science (p. 182), but not from too near. Future managers of science policy, the students of Conant's General Education course, were kept at a respectful distance.³ They were not supposed to meddle into scientific affairs and second-guess

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the scientists (pp. 214–215). Criticism was discouraged.⁴ The public was required to *understand* and not judge. The result was that the public accountability of science diminished just at the time when it was most needed, i.e. after the destructive effects of the use of science in the Second World War.

Kuhn, according to Fuller, added ‘an air of facticity’ (p. 152) to Conant’s account, and became, therefore, an accomplice to these developments. Both as an instructor in the General Education course in Harvard and, subsequently, as a historian and philosopher of science, Kuhn offered the academic analogue of Conant’s political vision (p. 169).⁵ He insulated scientific practice from external determinations⁶ concentrating on the internal conditions that make science possible.⁷ He laid emphasis on the function of dogma in scientific research enhancing authority and restricting critical debate. He even restricted the historical basis of his model to examples drawn from the period between 1620 and 1920, so that the cases he examined would conform to the normative ideal that he had in mind⁸ (p. 73). This normative ideal, backed up by an eclectic wandering into the history of science (what Fuller called ‘hopscoching across the centuries’), served to give the impression that it is possible ‘to understand the scientific turn of mind, regardless of the time and place in which science is practiced’ (p. 215). Consequently, the recent developments that relate to the industrial organisation of scientific research were brushed aside as not contributing to, or substantially affecting, Kuhn’s model. Kuhn explicitly denied the need to change his account of science, in view of the contemporary scene, because, he said, his studying the nature of science ‘is in the first instance a way of looking at the picture of knowledge’.⁹ Fuller finds what he calls ‘retreat to the nature of knowledge’, symptomatic of Kuhn’s *culturopathology*, a state of uninvolvedness and diminished cultural responsibility (pp. 397–398). Kuhn, Fuller maintains, could afford to ‘disengage aristocratically’ from his responsibilities to society because of his privileged position in the academia and the success of his book (p. 399). He retreated into philosophy, ‘leaving the world alone’, and turning philosophy into an underlabourer and a simple accountant of science, an accountant that remains, nevertheless, completely unaccountable (p. 300).

So Fuller paints the following picture: Conant had a clear Cold War mission that required the insulation of science from the rest of society. He hired for this mission Thomas Kuhn who just happened to be there and gave him the opportunity to provide the academic analogue to Conant’s political project. Kuhn was inadvertently recruited and, given his culturopathology and privileged position, developed an account of science that managed to fit the demands of the times. The villain of the story is clearly James Bryant Conant; Kuhn was simply the aristocratic fool who turned out, however, to be highly successful in promoting the conservative cause of maintaining science’s status quo for reasons that should not be attributed to him but rather to others who happened to think and do the relevant significant things at the time (pp. 397–399). Talk of coincidence or the cunning, not of reason, but of the conservative cause.

Questioning Fuller’s methodology

The evidence provided by Fuller for his allegations and explanatory hypotheses is very thin, but he may not have had the need for any thicker. Fuller’s professed aim is to write philosophical history of the Hegelian kind, which, apart from its reflexive dimension noted and admired by Fuller, is also marked by the little interest it shows

in the mere facts. Speculative or metaphysical philosophies of history of the Hegelian type look behind the appearance of haphazard facts to discover the underlying plot in the unfolding of history. If this is Fuller's undertaking, he needs to address the standard criticism leveled against it: teleology, a priorism, mystical guesswork.¹⁰ At least in Hegel's case, or in the case of theology, it was the role of Reason or God in history that needed vindication; in the case of Fuller it is only Conant's malevolent plotting.

To cater for this project Fuller indulges in making overhasty and precarious connections. For instance, in the chapter aptly entitled 'The Pilgrimage from Plato to NATO' and in just one paragraph, Fuller connects what he describes as the Athenians' taste for risky arguments to the development of a volatile foreign policy, which led to the downfall of Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars. He then offers an account of what he takes to be Plato's solution:

Plato concluded that the main culprits were the Sophists (. . .). [His] solution, as detailed in the *Republic*, was to sequester students of the dialectic in the tranquil setting of the Academy (. . .). The main way of instilling the requisite patience was to have students write down their thoughts before opening their mouths. (. . .) Plato held that in a world where fondness for free speech can have such disastrous consequences, it might not be such a bad idea to create a little distance between one's thoughts and one's words. (. . .) [W]riting manufactured a sphere of delayed responses and deferred gratifications that has since become 'the life of the mind,' a place where the conscious and the intentional are allowed free reign. (pp. 47–48)

From the Sophists to writing and the life of the conscious mind, across centuries, disciplines and levels of thought, Fuller is putting forward an overwhelming ocean of ideas from sociology, philosophy, history, art history, economics, linguistics, psychology, psychoanalysis, politics, science and science studies, in order to build a case for Kuhn's conservatism. Often, the only qualification of these ideas is that they 'might not be so bad' in rendering plausible Fuller's initial assumption or prejudice. Even inconsistencies that should have given Fuller a pause are either disregarded or treated ingeniously. A case in point is Kuhn's so-called marginalisation of prescriptivism (p. 292). Being included in the Platonist cult, Kuhn is supposed to be a prescriptivist. Yet, being assigned to Conant's mission, he has to respect science's status quo and leave his prescriptions aside. Fuller, instead of reconsidering his overall thesis in view of these conflicting statements, credits Kuhn with a 'Faustian bargain'.

[A] Faustian bargain *may have been struck* in Kuhn's mind: What science lost in its normative desirability, it replaced by providing a stable military–industrial infrastructure and virtually the only source of legitimate authority for an increasingly fragmented and volatile populace. In light of these stakes, a policy of strategic vagueness on Kuhn's part would allow for a tame misreading of the book that would help ward off the drastic calls for the disestablishment of science (. . .) (p. 74) (emphasis added).

Was Kuhn a conservative?

Kuhn is proclaimed a conservative for refraining from being a political activist at a time that required, according to Fuller, not understanding but criticising science.¹¹ Kuhn sided with the positivists, Fuller says, giving prominence to an internalist account that deterred the requisite external evaluation of science. He was their 'Trojan horse' (p. 288), smuggling in the radical times of the 1960s their 'reactionary' agenda that had previously fallen into disrepute.

I am not going to discuss the ‘progressiveness’ of logical positivism or whether Kuhn had in any way contributed to challenging its hegemony in philosophy of science.¹² Nor will I discuss whether Kuhn *had to be* a political activist of a certain kind¹³ to be worthy of admiration. Strangely for Fuller—given his explicit anti-Platonism—he seems to still hanker, as Rorty says, for a state of affairs that connects intimately virtue and knowledge.¹⁴ I will discuss what I consider Fuller’s main argument in favour of the claim that Kuhn was a conservative, namely the emphasis on tradition in Kuhn’s account of science.¹⁵ I do not so much object to classifying Kuhn as a conservative (as long as this characterisation is not understood politically¹⁶). Yet, I do object in taking this characterisation to be a reproach. Actually, I take it that being conservative, in the sense I intend here, breaks the spell of the ‘rationalist illusion’.

Standard classifications place tradition on the antipodes of reason. Tradition is associated with commitment, trust, authority, habit, prejudice, and dogma. Reason is associated with critical deliberation, openness, independent and impartial judgment. Tradition is supposed to be observed not challenged. It is handed down with respect through propaganda and indoctrination or just mere inertia. Reason lives in argument; it thrives in disagreement. Its exercise, governed by rational principles, shapes rational conduct, offers intelligence and builds free minds. Tradition is passive and cumbersome; reason is active, intrepid and sharp.

Fuller repeats this classification in Table 6 of his book, which illustrates scientific rationality ‘before the Great Kuhnian Scrumble’ (p. 293). In the Enlightenment conception of rationality that Fuller presents, he assigns *tradition* to the image of the irrational and contrasts it with *critique*, which he assigns to the image of the rational. Kuhn is seen as breaching these standard distinctions. Kuhn wants tradition during normal science and critique in the revolutionary phase. But this critique, according to Fuller, is hardly rational. ‘Kuhn [takes] responsibility for the choice between scientific languages out of the hands of self-conscious deliberators and placing it in the “invisible hand” of the Planck effect’ (p. 301).

So, according to Fuller, Kuhn’s preference for tradition makes him a conservative and an opponent of the Enlightenment. As for Kuhn’s focus on scientific revolutions, which would normally place him on the Enlightenment side that bred the great political revolutions of the eighteenth century, Fuller has a different view. Relying on John Pocock, the historian of political ideas, he credits Kuhn with a ‘romantic’ view of history (p. 308) that requires ‘heroic revolutionary agents [to disrupt] the otherwise inexorable reproduction of the past’ (*ibid.*). I really doubt that Kuhn had indeed such a view of history, given that there are no heroic figures in his model and nothing inexorable in it. But I will not pursue this question further. I will turn to the rationalist illusion of the ‘self-conscious deliberators’.

Michael Oakshott, the conservative political philosopher, gives this description of the view that I believe Fuller endorses:

In order that a man’s conduct should be wholly ‘rational’, he must be supposed to have the power of first imagining and choosing a purpose to pursue, of defining that purpose clearly and selecting fit means to achieve it; and this power must be wholly independent, not only of tradition and the uncontrolled relics of his fortuitous experience of the world, but also of the activity itself to which it is a preliminary.¹⁷

But Oakshott continues: ‘My view is that this is not a satisfactory notion of *rational* conduct because it is not a satisfactory account of *any* sort of conduct’¹⁸ (first

emphasis in the original, second one added). Oakeshott, but also Wittgenstein and Kuhn, have stressed in their work the importance of training, of precedent use and paradigm in following a rule and setting up any kind of practice. One cannot learn a language or how to do scientific research in the abstract, by theoretically understanding principles and rules. One needs to be taught by being exposed to exemplary and particular applications of rules against the background of tradition. This is how practices are shaped and new traditions emerge.

[A] person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.¹⁹

To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions). To understand a language means to be a master of a technique.²⁰

But if tradition in this sense, far from being an impediment, becomes a condition of any human activity, is this activity rational? Kuhn's radical innovation was to bring these considerations to bear on the paradigm of rational activity, scientific practice. He was not always consistent, especially after the vehement criticism that he received from those who blamed him for irrationality, but he tried to show that the rationality of scientific practice is not to be judged by atemporal, abstract criteria applied in a Procrustean fashion. In that respect, we may need to adjust our notion of rationality,²¹ in the direction of avoiding an idealised conception.²² The rationality of a certain conduct is not to be assessed by an imposed contrived blueprint, but it emerges from the activity itself.

So, Kuhn may have been a Burkean conservative in the company of Oakeshott and Wittgenstein,²³ but he was truly a radical for bringing into relief the embeddedness and indebtedness of science in and to tradition.

Notes

1. Fuller, S., 2000, *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History of Our Time* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press). All subsequent references to this book will be made in the text by the page number in parentheses.
2. Kuhn, T.S., 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press).
3. That was facilitated by a hands-on approach, which was simultaneously hands-off. 'Opening the laboratories to the public certainly gives the impression that the scientists have nothing to hide. As a result, that gesture of openness may be just enough to discourage the public from further probing behind the scenes' (p. 223).
4. Criticism was seen as 'verging on treason' (pp. 172, 177).
5. Fuller says that Kuhn became the normal scientist in the political paradigm constructed by Conant (p. 5).
6. These external determinations from which science was cut off included, according to Fuller, not only society but also nature. Science was supposed to float unchecked from any kind of restraint relying solely on the authority of its internal tradition (p. 395). Yet, despite Kuhn's professed commitment to an internalist account of science, one should find relevant Kuhn's strong reservations regarding Ben-David's internalist account: 'Apparently [Ben-David] fears that the slightest concession [to the intervention of external social forces] would open doors to the sort of analyses—science as an epiphenomenon of social and economic development—once associated with Marxist historiography.' In Kuhn, T.S., 1972, Scientific growth: reflections on Ben-David's 'Scientific Role'. *Minerva* 10, 166–178, p. 168.
7. Fuller claims that whereas Conant drew a distinction between his own activities and the practising scientist, a distinction reminiscent of the Platonic one between the guardian and the philosophical castes, 'Kuhn did to Conant what Freud did to Plato', namely, 'internalise the protector in the manner of a superego' (p. 182).
8. Elsewhere, instead of a normative ideal Fuller speaks of a mythical image that Kuhn constructs in order to appropriate history in his model. A more charitably disposed reader, Fuller allows, would

- speak of a Weberian ideal type that is invoked by Kuhn to sensitise us to salient features of the object of inquiry (p. 195). For instance, Fuller believes that Kuhn developed the concept of normal science by superimposing different perspectives of normal science from different moments in history to construct a mythical image. Be it mythical image or ideal type, Kuhn is criticised not only as a covert Platonist but as a counterfeiter of history and an inventor of mythical constructs.
9. Sigurdsson, S., 1990. The nature of scientific knowledge: an interview with Thomas Kuhn. *Harvard Review of Books*, winter 18–25, p. 24, cited in Fuller 2000, p. 388.
 10. See, for instance, Walsh, W.H., 1967, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks).
 11. This is a strange contrast to draw. How can one criticise science without understanding it first? The only understanding that Fuller finds legitimate is understanding the role of science in the wide context of social life. Concentrating on an ‘internalist’ understanding of science of the kind that Kuhn offered, is not seen as an innocent, superfluous addition but rather as a move that diverts attention from what is important and serious resulting thereof in strengthening the conservative side.
 12. Fuller would acknowledge that Kuhn’s *Structure* was used to discredit positivism but he wouldn’t credit the author. Apart from Kuhn’s political and academic affiliations, Fuller sees him as ‘largely innocent of the details of logical positivism’ (note 51, p. 286).
 13. I am saying ‘of a certain kind’ because, according to Fuller, Kuhn, by being enlisted in Conant’s mission, got involved in the political developments of the period, he took sides, if only passively and by inertia. I suppose Fuller would consider him an ‘activist’ of the passive kind. Hence the characterisation of ‘conservative’.
 14. Rorty, R., 1999, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books), p. 19. ‘The idea that you can evaluate a writer’s philosophical views by reference to their political utility seems to me a version of the bad Platonic–Straussian idea that we cannot have justice until philosophers become kings or kings philosophers’ (*ibid.*, p. 18).
 15. I will set aside the puzzling suggestion that Fuller seems to be making in note 52 (p. 287). He seems to be implying that engagement in philosophical debate, in contrast with interest in the sociology of science, stamps one with conservative inclinations. I suppose philosophy is seen as inextricably linked to Platonism, whereas sociology to social criticism and responsibility.
 16. I am not going to discuss Kuhn’s alleged political conservatism for reasons of economy. My impression, however, for all it is worth, given mainly my personal contact with Kuhn and the long autobiographical interview that he gave in Athens where he talks about his family, education, and political orientation, is that Kuhn was what Rorty calls ‘the typical left-wing Democrat professor’ (Rorty 1999, p. 19). Rorty sees this group of ‘progressivists’ in a war (‘tiny, unmarket, cultural war’) with the postmodernists who ‘share Noam Chomsky’s view of the United States as run by a corrupt elite (. . .) and think that nothing will change unless we get rid of “humanism”, “liberal individualism”, and “technologism”’ (*ibid.*). Despite his Popperianism, Fuller can be counted among the ranks of this postmodernist camp. Moreover, if Kuhn’s personal convictions and Kuhn’s own assessment of his involvement in politics are completely disregarded, one would be reminded of the standard accusation of ‘objectively helping the class enemy’ that the Communist parties in Europe used to make against their dissident members.
 17. Oakshott, M., 1991, Rational conduct. in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press), p. 105.
 18. *ibid.* p. 109.
 19. Wittgenstein, L., 1958, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell), § 198.
 20. *ibid.*, § 199. For a recent discussion of the rule-following issue in relation to Wittgenstein see the collection of articles *Rule-Following and Meaning*, edited by Alexander Miller and Crispin Wright, 2002 (Chesham: Acumen).
 21. See Kuhn, T.S., 1971, Notes on Lakatos. In R.C. Buck and R.S. Cohen (eds), *PSA 1970: In Memory of Rudolf Carnap, Proceedings of the 1970 Biennial Meeting Philosophy of Science Association*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume 8 (Boston: D. Reidel), pp. 137–146, p. 144.
 22. Toulmin calls it ‘mathematical rationality’. Toulmin, S., 2001, *Return to Reason* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 205.
 23. Wittgenstein was also labelled a conservative. See Nyiri, J.C., 1982, Wittgenstein’s later work in relation to conservatism. In B. McGuinness (ed.), *Wittgenstein and his Times* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press).