

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Steve Fuller**, *The Knowledge Book: Key Concepts in Philosophy, Science, and Culture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 240 pp., \$27.95 (978-0-77353-347-9), \$80.00 hardcover (978-0-77353-346-2).

**T**he *Knowledge Book*, introduced by its author as “an interdisciplinary reference work for students and researchers concerned with the nature of knowledge,” consists of 42 self-contained essays arranged alphabetically on topics in philosophy/sociology of science and technology studies. The 42 topics include Rationality, Progress, Social Science, Expertise, Epistemic Justice, Knowledge Society, Sociology of Knowledge, etc. The general orientation of the book, unfortunately not apparent in its title, but spelt out in the introduction, is that “whatever else knowledge might be, it is intrinsically social” (p. vii). Thus, even the entries that seem to pertain very closely to philosophy are given a sociological, or social scientific, treatment. Each entry includes references to other entries, and readers are thus free to start anywhere in the book and “move as their interests take them.”

*The Knowledge Book* is Steve Fuller's most recent synthesis of his “social epistemology,” a field he contributed to founding twenty years ago when he created the journal *Social Epistemology*, and released the homonymous book soon after (*Social Epistemology*, 1988). For readers not entirely familiar with Fuller's prolific work or with the field of philosophy of science, it might be worth going back to the definition of *social epistemology*, as found in *The Norton Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1999):

an intellectual movement of broad cross-disciplinary provenance that attempts to reconstruct the problems of epistemology once knowledge is regarded as intrinsically social. It is often seen as philosophical science policy or the normative wing of science studies.... Despite their many internal differences, social epistemologists agree on two points: (1) classical epistemology, philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge have presupposed an idealized conception of scientific inquiry that is unsupported by the social history of scientific practices; (2) nevertheless, one still needs to articulate normatively appropriate ends and means for science, given science's status as the exemplar of rationality for society at large.

For readers already familiar with Fuller's version of social epistemology, *The Knowledge Book* does a very good job of presenting the terms of the debates that have been at the core of his work, in his usual informative and often provocative way. His positions about the democratization of knowledge, overcoming the postmodern condition, science wars, the shortcomings of science and technology studies, and his explicitly political and normative agenda are exposed with great clarity and concision. His grudges against Kuhn, knowledge management, or the very idea of knowledge society are expressed in his unrivalled and fun-to-read style. For example, about knowledge society: "The knowledge society is what advanced capitalism looks like to intellectuals, once they have been assimilated into its mode of production" (p. 82), or "The story of the knowledge society is one of large-scale historical deception, mostly self-imposed by those who are paid to be in a position to know better" (p. 83).

As for readers new to the intellectual debates covered in the book, or not familiar with Fuller's previous writings, my bet is that they will find reading the book difficult and frustrating. In his brief introduction, Fuller recommends that these lay readers start by reading certain entries (first and foremost the one on "Social Epistemology") and then "be free to navigate through the book." Lay readers will miss a map for that navigation, which a more substantial introduction could have provided, in which Fuller would make his intellectual biases explicit and summarize his version of social epistemology regarding the major issues covered in the book. Instead, the burden is on the reader to try to grasp the essence of Fuller's position by putting together the numerous sentences peppered throughout the 42 essays that start by "Fuller's social epistemology..." Without an introduction to Fuller's previous work, the reader is also left to wonder about the choice of certain entries (Evolution, Science Wars, Historiography) or about the one-sided or, at least, partial, treatment of contributions in the fields of sociology of knowledge or science and technology studies (for example, dismissing Latour's work for his acritical and apolitical position!). In brief, the reader who opens *The Knowledge Book* in order to find an overview of the *Key Concepts in Philosophy, Science, and Culture* that the book's subtitle promises will be either disappointed or puzzled. For those already acquainted with Fuller's controversial position, *The Knowledge Book* deserves praise for the breadth of the topics covered and their analytical, interdisciplinary, and cross-referenced treatment.

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