Sociology as the Science of Human Uplift: A Once and Future Aspiration

Although Auguste Comte's 'religion of humanity' is often derided as an eccentric outlier to sociology's disciplinary history, in fact perspectives broadly sympathetic to Comte's aim of steering the future of our species travelled under the banner of 'sociology' throughout the 19th century and were prominent when the first British chair in the field was established at the LSE in 1907, even though in the end only a very modest version of this aspiration prevailed. A consequence of this history – which had parallels in France and Germany – is that sociology developed in studied detachment from biology and technology, the two fields that have arguably transformed the human condition at both the micro- and the macro-levels most decisively over the past 250 years. Seen in world-historic perspective, academic sociology's horizons seem remarkably cramped in comparison to what was on offer when 'sociology' was a term that was contested by the spawn of Comte. An especially vivid glimpse of this broader vision for the field may be found in H.G. Wells' presentation to the early Sociological Society, with its invocation of the great 19th century political utopians as well as its adumbration of eugenics and other themes that found a natural home in 20th century 'science fiction'. A hundred years later, largely thanks to science and technology studies (STS), sociologists are now empirically attuned to the role that biology and technology play in defining the human condition – but is there a disciplinary vision to match these developments? It is striking that much of STS is explicitly anti-sociological and especially scathing of the field's 'anthropocentrism'. However, 'humanity' has more often been the name of a yet-to-be-realized normative ideal than an already existing privileged species. That ideal – one that joins Christian eschatology, Enlightenment theories of progress and transhumanist dreams of 'enhancement' in common cause – is increasingly called 'uplift', a concept with roots in both science fiction and bioethics. I shall argue that sociology needs to engage seriously with this concept not only to reconnect with its original spirit but also, and more importantly, to remain relevant as a discipline in the coming century.

Fuller has spoken in more than 30 countries, often keynoting professional academic conferences, and has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts since 1995. He was awarded a D.Litt. by Warwick in 2007 for significant career-long contributions to scholarship. He was appointed to the Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology in 2011, and is a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences, as well as a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (Division I: Humanities).

His writings have been translated into twenty languages. His book *Kuhn vs Popper* was named book of the month (Feb 2005) by the US magazine, *Popular Science*. *The Intellectual* was named a book of the year by the UK magazine *New Statesman* for 2005, and *Dissent over Descent* was named book of the week by *Times Higher Education* in July 2008. He contributed an answer to the 2014 Edge annual question, ‘What scientific idea is due for retirement?’ (His answer was ‘Human being = Homo sapiens’.) One site where his work is regularly featured and pursued by others is the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, maintained by Jim Collier at Virginia Tech.

Since coming to Warwick in 1999 (from Durham, where he had held the chair in sociology and social policy), Fuller has supervised several Ph.D. students, taught on the Doctoral Training Programme and the MA in Social Research. He teaches on the Social and Political Thought MA and convenes the MSc in Science, Media and Public Policy. At the undergraduate level, he has taught the social theory of law, sociology of knowledge, media sociology and social theory more generally. He welcomes students working in the sociology of knowledge, history, philosophy and sociology of science, the nature the university and intellectual life, and normative issues relating to recent developments on the impact of science and technology on the political order, especially concerning our changing conceptions of the biological and what it means to be human.

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