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Review of Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska

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The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism, by Steve Fuller and Victoria Lipińska

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Fuller and Lipinska claim human potential is shackled by precautionary concerns to avoid harm, placing protection against negative potentials above benefits that might arise from admittedly risky experimentation. ‘The proactionary imperative’ rebalances opportunity over protection.

With technological and scientific advancement presented as core to human evolution, citizens are said to have a ‘right’ to liberate science. The manacles of risk adverse policy making supposedly detriment a population denied the fruits of unknown opportunities. Proponents of the EU funding agenda assert the current emphasis on removing barriers to innovation though challenge-led, interdisciplinary approaches undermines assertions that public research is hampering its own ambition. For Fuller and Lipinska however, the research agenda should be open for everyone to steer though investment of economic and biological capital; regardless of the disparity in the information that the population have at their disposal to enable informed decisions about science. Public policy makers assert the importance of strategic approaches to publicly funded research and innovation that balance current and future interests. At the European level, research funders seek to balance conflicting strategic priorities, national programmes and increasingly private sources with leverage potential. For the proactionary, big governmental claim to ‘know best’ when ‘protecting’ citizens from themselves jars with their faith in knowing, risk taking entrepreneurs. However, such lack of faith does not disprove the value of non-market driven expertise.

Allegedly, left/right is being replaced by up/down. Scientific ‘transfiguration’ (genetic or digital) enthuses technocrats and free-marketeers whilst horrifying communitarians and traditionalists, teasing apart technocratic left elites from communitarian ‘masses’, and right libertarians from conservatives. Augmented ‘Humanity 2.0’ ‘playing god’ sets black sky thinkers (leave nature for the stars) against green earth thinkers (don’t mess with Mother Nature). Science/technology affords new possibilities, challenging existing accommodations. Whether this pressure is new or imperative is unclear. Tension between ‘young’ (‘romantic’) Marx and older ‘scientific’ Marx (2.0), between romantic socialists (Goodwin/Morris) and technocratic Fabians, as between syndicalists and ‘Leninist’ statist, shows the left was always divided. 19th century Whigs and Tories highlight similar ‘right’ differences. From Saint Simon, Owen and Comte through to Wilson’s ‘white heat of technology’, the class struggle was routinely offset by growth; promises of more weakening calls for redistribution. Marriage/breeding arrangements between blue blooded aristocrats and red blooded new money show how elites synthesised political, economic and genetic variation long before Mendel. The new affordances Fuller and Lipinska highlight are significant as continuities, not just as novelties. Does genetic enhancement, digitalised minds and space colonisation impel political re-orientation? Mass production tempered left demands, even as vaccines and improved agriculture rebuffed right Malthusians. Technocratic ‘up’ thinking isn’t new. If Fuller and Lipinska are correct
technocratic ‘more’ really must dispense with scarcity. The internet does make some things less scarce (i.e. music). As Maxwell’s demon (an agent overcoming entropy and suspending the second law of thermodynamics), 3D printers downloading medicine, food and houses to all, would abolish left-right divisions. Politics would become a debate over human transfiguration. This possible future has yet to arise. Most ‘transhumanists’ believe free markets already create a world where political distribution is redundant. Fuller and Lipinska disagree. They reject Marx’s ‘utopian’ ‘slur’ against Saint Simon (for believed class struggle was passé after science and industry). Today’s ‘transhumanists’ imply corporations/markets are sufficient to recreate earth in heaven. The authors rightly temper techno-libertarian ‘up-wing’ scenarios with equity and justice mechanisms for a ‘proactionary left’. As such they reposition left politics from welfarist ‘protectionism’ to an equal ‘right to enhance’.

Today’s science and technology are both ‘game changer’ and yet continuation of Western scientific and Christian traditions. Today we ‘play god’ metaphorically and literally. As Unitarian Christians the authors reject the science/religion divide. Atheism just avoids cosmic disappointment. Humans should embrace cosmic uniqueness, comprehending nature and remaking it (becoming god). ‘Don’t play god’ as heuristic for ‘nature knows best’ is rejected. If some knowledge is good and practical (planned parenting), why not embrace ‘good’ eugenics? Yet ‘playing god’ takes many forms. Jesus’ ‘world historical significance’ is said to be his ‘transfiguration’ from man into the divine, an invitation for all humans to become god, not just pupils or robots. ‘Transhumanists’ seek ‘the mind of god’ (via science) and remake earth in heaven (via technology) as ‘the new protestants’. Catholicism, like today’s scientific ‘orthodoxy’ (including ‘Darwinism’) hold back individual transfiguration (the supposed precautionary protectionism of EU science discussed above being the paradigmatic fusion of Catholicism and Darwinian Orthodoxy - allegedly).

Yet, within Western Christianity there are many ways of being god. Deism – God sets the clockwork waiting for Newton to reveal it. Clientalism – God regulates the market, contracting Moses, Jesus, JS Mill etc. to run franchises delivering outcomes. Ecologism – God lives in nature and humans steward Gaia or get punished – Vis Eden. Expressionism – Born a cosmic/evolutionary accident humans can (must), after the ‘miracle’ of self-consciousness, master existence and become god. Given options, none is ‘imperative’. The idea that all humans can become god-like in the sense of bodily transcendence within ‘this’ life is rather heretical. The authors’ ‘Expressionism’ is secular Christian teleology for a scientific age (zeitgeist after geist). If other gods reflect mercantilism, tribal and feudal society, Fuller and Lipinska don’t explain their religion sociologically. They suggest, rightly enough, a particular (secularised) religious outlook drives today’s proactionaries. Whether this secular protestant (largely US led) drive to escape the flesh and realise heaven by hard/solitary (scientific and technical) work is itself right/desirable, is another matter. They insert equity into a ‘transhumanist’ heaven otherwise mirroring a Californian dot.com, a continued but revised left politics (2.0) combining ‘black sky thinking’ with elements of Christian and Social Democratic values.

Our biological evolution enabled ‘miraculous’ consciousness, rational agency, and a special moral status: giving humans the right and obligation to enhance and promote themselves. Rejecting oppressive and murderous forms of eugenics may allow for liberating eugenic promotion of positive characteristics but the distinction remains contested. The authors reject market versions of ‘transhumanism’s’ ‘proactionary’ ethos, seeking new forms of positive and collective action/regulation putting power to improve into the hands of groups with particular genes. Their
concept of ‘hedgenomics’ – the pooling of resources by groups with shared genetic conditions—drawing a parallel with the very market vulture funds they seek to inhibit – may or may not work. Similarly extending intellectual property over the human genome as a defence against private ownership creates paradoxes. Abolishing the invention/discovery distinction is consistent with ‘transhumanist’ logic. However, if such ‘inventions’ are ‘held’ collectively (passing directly into the public domain) to avoid corporate enclosure, why should they be deemed intellectual property in the first place? Nonetheless, as markets and laboratories are not enough to ensure fair access to future opportunities, the attempt to reimagine justice and equity in a future where diversity proliferates is a valuable undertaking.