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Brexit as the unlikely leading edge of the anti-expert revolution

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ABSTRACT

In this invited piece, I deal with Brexit as the leading edge of an ongoing anti-expert revolution. I begin by considering Brexit in relation to my own long-standing anti-expertist approach to social epistemology, which in many ways makes me a kindred spirit to the Brexiteers. Next, I turn to the struggle of parliamentary elites that eventuated in the win for Brexit, focussing on the Brexiteers' distinctive epistemic and ethical strategy with regard to public opinion. Finally, I consider the unforeseen emergence of a Rousseau-style 'general will' with regard to Brexit, which is where British democracy stands for the foreseeable future, ending on the role of academia – and specifically business schools – in the anti-expert revolution.

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1. Introduction

I was and am still strongly opposed to Brexit – and would be willing to see virtually anything happen to reverse the course on which the UK has been heading since that fateful 52/48 decision to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016. Any path that would lead the UK back to the EU is fine with me: a parliamentary vote, another general election, a second referendum – you name it. But I suppose Brexit is inevitable. My view then is that we should examine more closely – and even more charitably – what some of the more 'visionary' Brexiteers have been projecting. However, this is not as easy as it first sounds because their vision is a strange amalgam of populism and elitism, which when taken together threatens not only the sovereignty of Parliament, which has been much discussed in the media, but also the authority of expertise more generally.

Lest we forget just how much Brexit constituted a rebuff to expertise, virtually all of UK academia, business leaders – including the Bank of England – and world politicians who expressed an opinion wanted the UK to remain in the EU. (Russia was a notable exception.) However, as we shall see, Brexit has turned out to be a poisoned chalice for the Brexiteers, who had not anticipated that the public would treat its newfound voice as though it were a sort

of collectively manifested expertise of its own. I shall present the argument that follows in three parts. First, I consider Brexit in relation to my own long-standing anti-expertist approach to social epistemology, which in many ways makes me a kindred spirit to the Brexiteers. Next, I turn to the struggle of parliamentary elites which eventuated in the win for Brexit, focussing on the Brexiteers' distinctive epistemic and ethical strategy with regard to public opinion. Finally, I consider the unforeseen emergence of a Rousseau-style 'general will' with regard to Brexit, which is where British democracy stands for the foreseeable future, ending on the role of academia – and specifically business schools – in the anti-expert revolution.

2. The anti-expert turn in politics and science

The topic of expertise is close to my heart because the version of 'social epistemology' that I have been developing over the past 30 years has stood out for its 'deconstructive' and 'demystifying' attitude towards expertise, which I originally dubbed 'cognitive authoritarianism' (Fuller, 1988: chap. 12). As a philosopher of science who became a 'social constructivist' in the formative years of the field now known as 'science and technology studies', I differed from my philosophical colleagues in seeing the disciplinary boundaries by which expertise is institutionalised as mere necessary evils vis-à-vis free inquiry: the more necessary, the more evil (Fuller & Collier, 2004: chap. 2). In this context, I stood with Karl Popper as against Thomas Kuhn: The former saying that no scientific knowledge claim is irreversible, the latter that science depends

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on its knowledge claims being rarely reversed (Fuller, 2003a).

When I turned to 'knowledge management' about 20 years ago, I was struck by the Janus-faced way in which economics portrayed knowledge in wealth creation. On the one hand, it appeared as a magic 'X factor' in the production function, usually called 'innovation', which is irreducible to the available epistemic and material resources. On the other hand, there is knowledge as 'expertise', a form of rent-seeking that is structured around having to acquire credentials before accessing what is already known. It was Popper and Kuhn all over again. From the standpoint of a dynamic capitalist economy, innovation is clearly positive, not least because it 'creatively destroyed' markets, the functional equivalent of a paradigm shift in science. In contrast, expertise is seen negatively as a major source of information bottlenecks. At the time, I believed that the emergence of 'expert systems', whereby computers are programmed to reproduce the reasoning of experts under normal conditions, might ultimately remove such bottlenecks by rendering human experts redundant, not least in relatively high-paying but routinised fields of law and medicine. That future is still very much on the agenda (Fuller, 2002: chap. 3).

Still more recently, I have become concerned about the future of the increasingly 'research-led' university, which is arguably a euphemism for the institution's role in the manufacture and certification of expertise. In this spirit, I have called for a shift in the university's mission from research back to teaching, which has historically done the most to break down the hierarchies, or 'bottlenecks', that expertise breeds (Fuller, 2016). In this context, teaching should be seen as the regular delivery of knowledge to those who would otherwise remain ignorant by virtue of being removed from the channels in which such knowledge normally travels. To be sure, this levelling of epistemic authority enables more people to 'own' formerly expert knowledge, in the resonant sense that 'own' enjoys today. But at the same time, it removes the stabilising effect that expert knowledge has had on the social order in the past, given that a wider range of people can take the same knowledge in a wider range of directions.

Arguably, this collective epistemic volatility has been intensified in our own day with the rise of the Internet as society's principal means of knowledge acquisition. And just as the Protestant Reformers 500 years ago capitalised on the advent of the printing press to de-legitimise the authority of the Roman Catholic Church by urging the faithful to read the Bible for themselves, various anti-establishment campaigners in both politics and science have urged their followers to override the experts and judge the evidence for themselves.

I have never seen much of a difference between the epistemologies of politics and science. Here I stand closer to Karl Popper than to Max Weber, two thinkers who otherwise share many of the same sensibilities. As someone who has been intimately involved with one of the major anti-expert science movements in our time, intelligent design theory, I see some striking similarities with Brexit.

The first and perhaps most important similarity is that an institutional opening already existed for the experts to be challenged. In the case of intelligent design, it was built into the US Constitution, namely the devolution of education policy to the local tax base, which funds the school system. The original idea was to prevent education from being dominated by the secular equivalent of an established church, or a 'national religion'. In that context, academic authorities function no more than as consultants and lobbyists in terms of curriculum construction and textbook purchases, which are ultimately in the hands of local school districts. In the case of Brexit, the opening was provided by Parliament's right to call a referendum, thereby throwing open to a direct public vote

what would otherwise be a statutory issue. This right has been rarely exercised in Parliament's long history. Moreover, unlike the US, where the referendum is commonly used by several states to determine matters such as setting tax rates, on which voters might be expected to have relatively well-formed views, the UK has called a referendum only on relatively esoteric high-level matters of governance, such as proportional representation and, of course, membership in the European Union.

To be sure, intelligent design theory has been hoist by its own petard in US courtrooms as it is regularly ruled to be a crypto-Creationist plot to overturn secular democracy. Yet, there is little evidence that the well-publicised legal defeats suffered by the theory have diminished public support for it. Perhaps more to the point, there is equally little evidence that these defeats have served to increase the public's belief in evolution, let alone public trust in the scientific establishment that backs evolution. Instead, there is a climate of suspicion and even paranoia that agencies of the state are on a mission to subvert dissenting voices that uphold Christian values. Indeed, if evolution were subject to a national referendum in the US, it might well lose by something like a Brexit-style 52/48 margin. Donald Trump, playing somewhat against type, managed to capitalise on that sentiment in his path to the White House. Similarly, even after the triumph of Brexit at the ballot box, there is widespread scepticism that it will be implemented in the spirit of the referendum campaign, given that the House of Commons was 4 to 1 – and the Lords 6 to 1 – in favour of remaining in the European Union. And while the numbers in the Commons have shifted towards Brexit as a result of the 2017 general election, Parliamentarians generally want to remain as close as possible to the current UK-EU arrangement rather than what the public seemed to have wanted, namely to re-boot Britain's place in the world. A reasonable inference is that, for better or worse, the public is much less risk averse than its elected representatives.

The other important factor in the anti-expert revolt common to intelligent design and Brexit is the establishment's own admission that there are problems, but these can be solved by staying within status quo. Where intelligent design theory goes beyond earlier forms of Creationism is that it argues not only for an alternative basis for explaining the nature of life (i.e. an 'intelligent designer', aka the Abrahamic deity) but also addresses issues that evolutionists have already identified as problematic for their own account. Similarly, and perhaps fatally, Prime Minister David Cameron started the campaign to remain in the European Union by conceding the EU's shortcomings, a panto version of which had been enacted in an ineffectual February 2016 Brussels summit; yet, he also argued that these will not be remedied unless the UK stays to reform the EU from within. Over time, this message morphed into what Brexit campaigners dubbed 'Project Fear', namely a generalised foreboding about the calamities that would follow from UK leaving an 'always already' flawed EU. Likewise, as support for intelligent design theory increased, the scientific establishment amplified the theory's threat to encompass all of science, if not civilisation as such, were it to be taught in schools. Once again, on both matters, the public appears to be much less risk averse than the experts, but equally, by conceding fallibility at the outset the experts unwittingly opened the door to the public taking matters into its own hands.

At this point, we confront one of the big canards perpetrated by defenders of expertise, namely that anti-experts are anti-intellectuals who privilege ignorance over knowledge and would treat all opinions as equally valid. All that this exercise in misdirection does is to cover up the reverse tendency, namely that our trust in experts in modern democracies has led to a moral dumbing down of the population, as people are encouraged to let authorised

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