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Science Fiction Postmodernism Exposed by Peter Berkowitz

Physicist Alan Sokal's article in the journal *Social Text*, submitted as a hoax and unwittingly published, has left its editors huffing with indignation. But beyond the bruised academic egos the episode raises an extraordinary question: What does it say about the state of academic life that leading scholars were unable to distinguish serious argument from utter nonsense?

It was in the pages of the May/June issue of *Lingua Franca* that Professor Sokal explained that his essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was exactly as it appeared: a random assortment of arcane, jargon-infested abstractions. Filled with trendy pronouncements about the need to establish an "emancipatory mathematics," and a "liberatory science," it was, by its author's own account, devoid of both evidence and reasoned argument. In the scandal's wake, *Social Text*'s editors have solemnly reproached Professor Sokal for violating the norms of the academic community, and it is certainly ironic that *Social Text*'s self-styled academic rebels, who pride themselves on putting playful mockery to good scholarly use, have suddenly become earnest defenders of gravity. But the serious questions, as Professor Sokal himself has pointed out, concern the habits of mind that permitted *Social Text* to publish a bold reinterpretation of an abstruse dimension of theoretical physics without soliciting the evaluation of anyone trained in the field. From whence did this arrogance derive?

No doubt many sources, but chief among them is the presumption inscribed in the very tenets of postmodern thought. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined the spirit of postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives." Postmodern incredulity should not be confused with the healthy skepticism that proclaims that human beings lack certain knowledge about what is good and just and true. Nor should it be mistaken for the intellectual virtue Mill called "many-sidedness" --- the ability to discern the partial truth in rival perspectives --- and which Mill saw as essential to the liberal spirit. Nor again should postmodern incredulity be taken for the quality that Keats called "negative capability," a quality "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."

For what the skeptical, liberal and romantic spirits share is philosophical modesty. Postmodern incredulity, by contrast, is boastful, haughty and dismissive. It combines a certainty that older views --- views about nature, social and political organization, the moral life and religious faith --- are wrong, with a disdain for the ignorant multitudes who have in the past or continue in the present to embrace them. Unlike the skeptic who insists,

especially in connection to first things and ultimate questions, on the limits of our knowledge, the incredulous postmodernist knows that what was once believed to be true is absurd. In contrast to Millian many-sidedness, which takes pains to preserve what is true and worthy of admiration in traditional beliefs and institutions, postmodern incredulity focuses narrowly on what is supposedly false and pernicious. And, in contrast to the light touch and discriminating sensibility John Keats sought to capture in the notion of negative capability, postmodern incredulity heavy-handedly seeks to put uncertainties, mysteries and doubts to rest.

This conceit is beautifully captured in Sokal's opening summary of the perspective from which he proposes to develop a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity (whatever that means). Postmodernism knows the ultimate building blocks of reality: "It has become increasingly apparent," Sokal writes in *Social Text*, "that physical reality," no less than social reality, "is at bottom a social and linguistic construct." And postmodernism knows that scientific knowledge is not really knowledge at all but culturally relative and an expression of class interest: "scientific knowledge,' far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it." As these assertions --- in support of which Sokal adduces little more than the authority of the writings of *Social Text* editors and contributors --- indicate, the postmodern study of science is grounded in, and derives much of its critical power from, metaphysical first principles. But the issue is less the validity of postmodernism's metaphysical first principles than the unquestioning credulity with which they are embraced by the faithful.

To hear, in the wake of the Sokal affair, such distinguished voices in the field of cultural studies as professors Andrew Ross, *Social Text*'s co-editor, and Stanley Fish, executive director of Duke University Press (which publishes the journal), one would think that postmodernism, or the social construction of knowledge school, argues simply that human beings bring meanings into the world and that these meanings, which grow out of and reflect human passions and prejudices, sometimes obscure reality and often serve the interests of the powerful. But this is disingenuous. What distinguishes postmodernism is the extreme and dogmatic belief that the principles of morality as well as reason itself are socially constructed --- that is, created by human beings for pleasure and profit --- and nothing more. Time and again postmodern critics have used this eminently debatable opinion to dispose of, with a single blow, the literary, scientific and philosophical achievements of the West. Moreover, they have drawn comforting democratic and egalitarian inferences from the principle that morality and reason are human constructs or creations, a principle that actually fits far more comfortably with the anti-democratic and inegalitarian conclusions that nothing is true, everything is permitted and justice is the advantage of the stronger.

Writing in his Introduction to the "Science Wars" issue of *Social Text*, Ross declares that the critique of the "cultural" or "critical" study of science has been led by "fresh conservative recruits" who have been "bankrolled and coordinated by the same right-wing groups" that have been fighting the Culture Wars. In the same issue his fellow editor, Professor Stanley

Aronowitz, speaks ominously of "scientific conservatives and their publicists" who wish to silence "critical investigations of science and technology." This effort by Ross and Aronowitz to reduce the criticism of their ideas to cranky political motivations is a smokescreen. Indeed, the insight they claim is so daring of them to publicly defend --- that technology threatens the environment and can be placed in the service of evil --- is actually a staple of nineteenth-century Romanticism as well as twentieth-century conservative thought.

What is truly troubling about the "cultural" or "critical" study of science as it tends to be carried out in universities today is what is troubling about postmodernism in general. By teaching that the distinction between true and false is one more repressive human fiction, postmodernism promotes contempt for the truth and undermines the virtue of intellectual integrity. Those who have never performed an experiment or mastered an equation can, therefore, enjoy a sneering superiority based on the alleged insight that science is a form of literary invention distinguished primarily by its outsized social cachet.

It is postmodernism's ethics of intellectual inquiry that allowed Ross and his colleagues to believe they could adequately judge Sokal's paper despite their evident ignorance of its subject matter: physics. If only their blunder were an isolated example in the academy.

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