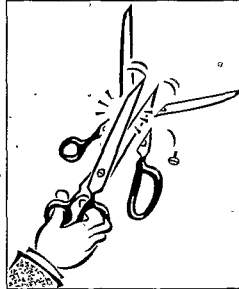


SUBJECT TO DEBATE

Pomolotov Cocktail

You've got to hand it to Alan Sokal, the New York University physicist who tricked *Social Text*, the cultural studies journal, into publishing in its special "Science Wars" issue—as a straight academic article—his over-the-top parody of postmodern science critique. "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" is a hilarious compilation of pomo gibberish, studded with worshipful quotations from all the trendy thinkers—Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Irigaray, *Social Text* board member Stanley Aronowitz (cited thirteen times) and issue editor Andrew Ross (four times). Its thesis, barely discernible through the smoke and fog of jargon, is that the theory of quantum gravity has important affinities with assorted New Age and postmodern ideas; it concludes with a call for "emancipatory mathematics." The whole production was rigged so that anyone who knew physics would realize how preposterous it was. I tried it out on the Last Marxist and had to leave the room, he was laughing so hard. To judge by the gleeful e-mail that's been zipping around academia since Sokal revealed his prank in the current issue of *Lingua Franca*, the L.M. is far from alone.



LISA BLACKSHEAR

When one has been duped so incontrovertibly and so publicly there's only one thing to say: Is my face red! Instead, Ross has circulated an editorial response that stakes out some very dubious turf, much of it seeded with land mines. "A breach of professional ethics"? Talk about the transgressor transgressed! A "hokey" article, "not really our cup of tea"? And yet they published it. *Social Text* not a peer-reviewed journal? Maybe it should be.

Certainly Ross's claim (see "Science Backlash on Technoskeptics," *The Nation*, October 2, 1995) that people need no expertise in science to direct its social uses has been done no favors by this rather spectacular display of credulity. And surely it does not help matters to impugn Sokal's motives, as Ross did when I spoke with him—to insist that this self-described leftist and feminist who taught math in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas (more than I ever did) is not on the level. Equally foolish is his attempt to play the gender card—calling the parody a "boy stunt" and urging responses from "women's voices, since this affair, at least as it has been presented in the press so far, has been a boy debate." It's chicks up front all over again.

It's hard not to enjoy the way this incident has made certain humanities profs look self-infatuated and silly—most recently, Stanley Fish, who defended *Social Text* on the *Times* Op-Ed page by comparing scientific laws to the rules of baseball. Sokal's demonstration of the high hot-air quotient in cultural studies—how it combines covert slavishness to authority with the most outlandish radical posturing—is, if anything, long overdue. Unfortunately, another effect of his prank will be to feed the anti-intellectualism of the media and the public. Now people who have been doing brilliant, useful work for years in the social construction of science—some of whom (Dorothy Nelkin, Hilary Rose, Ruth Hubbard)

are represented in that same issue of *Social Text*—will have to suffer, for a while, the slings and arrows of journalists like the *Times*'s Janny Scott, who thinks "epistemological" is a funny word, and who portrays the debate over science studies as being between "conservatives" who "have argued that there is truth, or at least an approach to truth, and that scholars have a responsibility to pursue it" and academic leftists who, since they believe nothing is real, can just make up any old damn thing. No light can come from a discussion whose premises are so fundamentally misconstrued (including by Sokal, who in his *Lingua Franca* piece cites as ridiculous postmodern "dogma" the argument that the world is real but unknowable, a position put forward by Kant in 1781, and that I have to say exactly accords with my everyday experience).

And the biggest misconception, of course, is that "the academic left," *a k a* postmodernists and deconstructionists, is the left, even on campus. When I think of scholars who are doing important and valuable intellectual work on the left I think of Noam Chomsky and Adolph Reed, of historians like Linda Gordon and Eric Foner and Rickie Solinger and Natalie Zemon Davis; I think of scientists like Richard C. Lewontin, Stephen Jay Gould; feminists like Ann Snitow and Susan Bordo. None of these people—and the many others like them—dismiss reason, logic, evidence and other Enlightenment watchwords. All write clearly, some extremely well. All build carefully on previous scholarly work—the sociology and history of science, for example, goes back to the 1930s—to approach that "truth" that has somehow become the right's possession. As if Charles Murray is a disinterested scholar!

How "the left" came to be identified as the pomo left would make an interesting Ph.D. thesis. I suspect it has something to do with the decline of actual left-wing movements outside academia, with the development in the 1980s of an academic celebrity system that meshes in funny, glitzy ways with the worlds of art and entertainment, with careerism—the need for graduate students, in today's miserable job market, to defer to their advisers' penchant for bad puns and multiple parentheses, as well as their stranger and less investigated notions. What results is a pseudo-politics, in which everything is claimed in the name of revolution and democracy and equality and anti-authoritarianism, and nothing is risked, nothing, except maybe a bit of harmless cross-dressing, is even expected to happen outside the classroom.

How else explain how pomo leftists can talk constantly about the need to democratize knowledge and write in a way that excludes all but the initiated few? Indeed, the comedy of the Sokal incident is that it suggests that even the postmodernists don't really understand one another's writing and make their way through the text by moving from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads. Lacan...performativity...Judith Butler...scandal... (en)gendering (w)holeness...Lunch!

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