

## Reconstructing the Academy

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The article "Strong words, weak thoughts" by Neil Cameron (The Gazette, 11 February 2000) opens a small public window onto what must be one of the best-kept secrets of recent times: for about the last twenty years, the academic world has been a battleground between increasingly powerful and well-organized purveyors of various "postmodern" ideologies and a smaller band of intellectuals who have attempted as best they can to maintain some semblance of standards of rationality in the face of the ideological onslaught.

Probably the most signal event in this saga was the 1996 article by Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the boundaries: Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity," published in the highly respected journal *Social Text*. The article, like its title, is utter nonsense from beginning to end (except for a few meaningfully false statements, such as the assertion that postmodern science has now established that physical reality has no objective existence and is only a "social construct" of the human mind). However, the literally hundreds of citations from and references to postmodernist literature contained in the article are authentic.

Sokal publicly declared the hoax immediately after the article's publication, and just as immediately became a focal point of controversy. A hero to some but a treacherous villain totally lacking in academic integrity to others, Sokal subsequently detailed every one of the twists, turns and absurdities of his original article. The obvious question to be answered is how such an article could be accepted by a reputable peer-reviewed scientific journal purportedly applying rigorous scientific criteria in the selection of its material.

Sokal's simple answer is that his piece flattered the prejudices of newly established academic ideologues. Among other things, Sokal's article purported to give new insights into quantum mechanics and general relativity derived from so-called leftist, feminist, gay, and postmodern perspectives. Significantly, Sokal is himself a committed leftist who openly supported the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. He despairs, he says, that many intellectuals who share his moral and political convictions have abandoned even the semblance of rationality and have sought to counter perceived right-wing ideologies with flimsy ideologies of their own — rather than accepting the challenge of responding by cogent, critical, and rational analysis of whatever weaknesses they claim to find in their

opponents' views. This abandonment of standards of intellectual integrity is the true betrayal, affirms Sokal, not his exposure of that fact.

With Sokal's article, the battle was openly joined, and a number of books and articles have since been published on both sides of the issue. More recently Sokal has collaborated with Jean Bricmont in authoring *Impostures intellectuelles* (2nd edition, Odile Jacob, 1999) in which the writings of a number of French intellectuals are subjected to long overdue rational and critical analysis. One important subtheme Sokal and Bricmont extract from this ideological symphony is an abusive use of the language of abstract mathematics in contexts where it is clearly inapplicable and where the author is transparently aware of his attempted subterfuge.

The problem with the ideological approach to important questions lies not in the specific content of one ideology or another. It lies rather in the very act of giving greater value to the triumph of certain ideals than to the triumph of and search for truth itself. The primal logic of ideology is that ideological ends justify antirational (and politically oppressive) means.

Curiously, while the theoreticians of this ideologization of academe have been mainly certain French intellectuals, the footsoldiers and propagandists have been mainly North American (and Anglophone). It appears that the extreme individualism and fragmentation of North American society have created a social atmosphere in which ideology becomes particularly attractive as a source of entitlement through victimization. We tend to see all of life's problems as the work of an ambiguous and evil "other" rather than as the inevitable and rational outcome of certain social/individual dynamic processes for which we ourselves have a degree of responsibility.

Of course no one doubts that serious injustice and victimization do indeed occur in our society. But postmodern ideologies take such victimization as the norm and tend to view all human interactions as oppressor-victim relationships. Thus, all children are victims of all adults, all women of all men, all homosexuals of all heterosexuals, etc.

We are accustomed to a certain amount of this kind of thinking in the realm of politics, but its entrenchment in the academy has undermined the very institution that has previously stood, to a significant extent, as a bulwark against such ideologization. For example, when anti-semitism infected Germanophone science and scholarship in the 1930's, it was denounced by the rest of the academic world, identified and excluded whenever it attempted to

insinuate itself into scientific or scholarly literature. Now, even university presses may publish ideological diatribes whose tone and intellectual vacuity are uncomfortably close to propaganda.

The perniciousness of postmodernist deconstructionism is that it constitutes an ideological attack on rationality itself. Reason is presented as just a particular means of seeking power, absolutely coeval with mythmaking and propaganda of the rankest sort. Attempts at a rational critique of postmodernism are dismissed as power politics. For convinced postmodernists, there is no objective reality in the light of which our ideas may be judged true or false, only different, equally subjective, opinions.

When postmodernists began their deconstruction of the academy, many of us looked on with fascinated amusement. Surely this was nothing more than a momentary and marginal *divertissement* that would soon implode into its own hollowness. However, with the appearance of such things as Ebonics (the teaching of black inner city ghetto slang as a legitimate language on a par with, say, Shakespearean English) and socially sensitive mathematics (there are no wrong answers only culturally relative answers), some have become genuinely alarmed, anticipating the advent of a new academic "dark age" in which productive and time-tested scientific methods will have become totally submerged in a great wave of ideology.

I do not myself anticipate such a dramatic *dénouement*, and the signs of resistance to postrational nonsense have multiplied in recent months (the book reviewed by Cameron being one example). But students now preparing to enter institutions of higher learning, especially (but not exclusively) in the humanities and social sciences, had better keep their wits about them and be prepared to call nonsense by its true name, more particularly when it is served up to them as wisdom for which they must pay a not inconsiderable price to learn.