Professor Sokal’s Transgression

On Alan Sokal’s hoax in Social Text & the responses to it by Andrew Ross & Stanley Fish

Some things are definitely worth waiting for. In our May issue, we devoted prominent attention to the latest issue of *Social Text*, a trendy, left-wing quarterly put out by the trendy, left-wing academic publisher, Duke University Press (see “‘Diversity,’ ‘cultural studies’ & other mistakes” by Roger Kimball). Edited by Andrew Ross, a postmodern parlor Marxist who occupies an expensive professorship at New York University, this special issue of *Social Text* was devoted to the so-called “Science Wars”—that is, to the attack on science and rationality that has lately become such an embarrassing growth industry among chic academic “humanists,” social scientists, and other partisans of “cultural studies.”

Given the topic, it is likely that we would sooner or later have caught sight of this episode of academic irresponsibility. What brought it to our attention right off the mark, however, was the news, leaked to us by a friend, that one of the contributions to this issue was a hoax. The author of the piece, a professor of physics at New York University named Alan Sokal, got wind that we knew about the hoax and prevailed upon us to keep his secret until he published his own account of the matter, which appeared a few weeks ago in the May/June issue of *Lingua Franca*, a bimonthly review of academia.

It is a delicious, if ultimately a disturbing, story. First, the delicious part. Professor Sokal’s piece is an unsurpassable work of mimicry, hilariously portentous. Its title—“Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”—captures in ten words the whole atmosphere of obscurantism and pretentiousness that characterizes this branch of academic mystification. Its theme—that there exists (somewhere, somehow) a deep connection between quantum theory and radical politics—is just the kind of preposterous ideological gambit that appeals to those who hanker after a “liberatory postmodern science.” And its manner is a letter-perfect parody of the genre, from Professor Sokal’s invocation of “the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook” in his first paragraph to the thirteen pages of hermetic footnotes with which he decorates the fifteen-page essay. Even his use of scare
quotes is masterly: “it has become increasingly apparent,” we read near the beginning of his piece, “that physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct” and that “scientific ‘knowledge,’ so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it.” Nor should we neglect to mention, finally, the many fawning references to the editors and hangers-on of Social Text with which he bedizens his essay.

As we noted in our May issue, there is a great deal that might be said about Professor Sokal’s piece and its appearance in Social Text. To begin with, it shows vividly that Andrew Ross and the other members of the “Editorial Collective” who oversaw this issue of the journal cannot distinguish between sense and nonsense. Or, to put it more precisely, they cannot distinguish between deliberate nonsense and the unconscious variety that they themselves produce and pawn off on their students and the public as “scholarship” and “critical theory.” As Professor Sokal observed in his revelation of the hoax in Lingua Franca, nowhere in his piece was there “anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions.” Andrew Ross and his colleagues failed to notice this for two reasons. First, because their own work—perfectly epitomized by their contributions to this issue of Social Text—relies entirely on the same devices. And, second, because they applauded the implication of Professor Sokal’s essay that “the search for truth in science must be subordinated to a political agenda.”

In our view, this episode not only exhibits the culpable intellectual frivolity of Andrew Ross and his colleagues at Social Text. It also goes a long way toward exploding the claims of “cultural studies” and its many offshoots to be taken at all seriously as a legitimate scholarly enterprise. And this brings us to the disturbing part of the story. At the center of cultural studies is the contention that all truth is a social construction: a form of rhetoric whose ultimate determinants are a matter of politics and power relations. It follows from this view that the ideal of objectivity is little more than a species of fiction, and evidence is merely a fancy kind of propaganda. The ultimate effect of this view is to render the search for truth, in science as much as in the humanities, completely bootless. Which indeed is one reason that essays such as “Transgressing the Boundaries” can be published in a supposedly reputable journal devoted to cultural studies.

We wonder what the deans overseeing professors such as Andrew Ross will make of this episode. Will they regard it as one more welcome piece of publicity—a kind, perhaps, to Professor Ross’s declaration in New York magazine a couple of years ago that he had given up on books for television and pop culture? And what about his students—how will they now regard his supervision of their work? And what about his students’ parents? After all, they are paying some $30,000 per year for the privilege of having their children educated: how many professors, they might well wonder, share Andrew Ross’s views? Alumni, college presidents and trustees: we think that they, too, might do well to ponder the implications of this remarkable episode. What does it tell them...
about the intellectual health and pedagogical competence of the institutions under their care?

Readers of *The New Criterion* know that we have often had occasion to criticize cultural studies and to pose such questions. With this in mind, we think it worth noting that Alan Sokal’s hoax was not a politically partisan gesture. When we have criticized the academic establishment, our comments have routinely been dismissed as “conservative,” “right-wing,” “reactionary,” etc. It will be difficult for Andrew Ross & Co. to respond to Professor Sokal with such epithets. In his piece for *Lingua Franca*, Professor Sokal describes himself as a “leftist” and a “feminist,” and he proudly reveals that he taught mathematics in Nicaragua under the Sandinista regime. Doubtless we would have many disagreements with Professor Sokal. But we agree with him wholeheartedly that the ambition—nearly ubiquitous among the academic Left—to emasculate truth and objectivity, rendering them coefficients of one or another political scenario, is an intellectual and moral disaster. To be sure, the doctrine of social constructivism employs emancipatory language with incontinent abandon; but its effect is to imprison its partisans in a conceptual hall of mirrors in which, as Professor Sokal puts it, “incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors, and puns substitute for evidence and logic.”

Finally, we should say a few words about the response to Professor Sokal’s performance. Reading his piece in *Lingua Franca*, we got the sense that Professor Sokal harbored the hope that his prank would be welcomed by many in the academic establishment as a bracing dash of cold water: an intellectual wake-up call, as it were. If so, we fear that he was being a little naïve. Professor Sokal’s real-life leftist credentials may be in better order than those of many self-professed left-wing academics. But—to judge by the early response, anyway—his hoax will be regarded not as a salutary admonition but as an act of apostasy.

Of course, it is hardly surprising that Andrew Ross should take strong objection to Professor Sokal’s experiment in satire: he more than anyone emerges looking a complete fool. Still, one might have expected him to exercise more circumspection than he did in his draft reply to *Lingua Franca*, a copy of which is floating around the Internet. Instead, he produced a rambling, pathetic document, full of flaccid exculpatory gestures and random *ad hominem* accusations. From the first, Professor Ross assures his readers, he and his fellow editors “considered Sokal’s unsolicited article to be a little hokey.” Had it come from a humanist or social scientist, it would have been “regarded as sophomoric and/or outdated (and therefore unacceptable to the editors).” But since it came from a scientist, they decided to include it as “a curio, or symptomatic document,” even though its main points were “rather well known.” (Is it strange that deliberate nonsense should be blithely described as “rather well known”? Well, never mind.) Revelation of the hoax apparently did not alter this patronizing interest in the essay, but it did make the editors of *Social Text* reconsider their “perception of [Sokal’s] own good faith as a self-proclaimed leftist”: after all, how could any good leftist dare to ridicule them? Professor Ross winds up insinuating that not only are Professor Sokal’s ideological bona fides questionable but also that he is a bit of a male chauvinist: “his actions,” we read, “smacked
of a temper often attributed to ‘unreconstructed male leftists.’” So there.

Even more atavistic but mercifully much briefer were the comments of Stanley Aronowitz, a Marxist sociologist and co-founder of Social Text who teaches at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In a somewhat obtuse but nevertheless extremely damaging front-page report on the hoax in The New York Times, Professor Aronowitz sputters that Alan Sokal “got it wrong. One of the reasons he got it wrong is he’s ill-read and half-educated.” Very nice, that, especially from someone who in his own contribution to the “Science Wars” issue of Social Text cannot even spell Niels Bohr’s name correctly.

Professors Ross and Aronowitz’s responses are not edifying. Nevertheless, since they were themselves among the direct targets of Professor Sokal’s satire, their floundering rage is perhaps understandable. Far more troubling was the long Op-Ed piece by the notorious Stanley Fish—self-proclaimed sophist and cultural studies enthusiast—that appeared in The New York Times on May 21. In his capacity as executive director of the Duke University Press, Professor Fish may have felt called upon to defend the integrity of his press. But in “Professor Sokal’s Bad Joke” he writes not as an administrator but as a commissar of cultural studies.

Anyone familiar with Professor Fish’s rhetorical bag of tricks will instantly recognize his handiwork, which proceeds from simple misrepresentation through sophistical legerdemain to a complete reversal of the truth. The chief purpose of Alan Sokal’s satire was to expose the extreme subjectivism that characterizes so much that goes under the name of cultural studies and literary theory today. Professor Ross and his colleagues were happy to publish an essay that declared physical reality a “social and linguistic construct” because they, too, believe—or at least profess in their writings—the doctrine of social constructivism. It is hardly surprising that every other page of this issue of Social Text contains some such statement: extreme subjectivism is a staple of the cultural studies industry. Stanley Fish himself has been pleased to declare (along with many other absurdities) that “there is no such thing as literal meaning.” Nevertheless, he begins his attack on Professor Sokal by assuring the readers of The New York Times that “none of [Sokal’s] targets would ever make such statements.” He claims that partisans of cultural studies “neither dispute the accomplishments of science nor deny the existence or power of scientific procedure.” No matter that practically every book he oversees at the Duke University Press contradicts this: if “there is no such thing as literal meaning” then why should one feel constrained to tell the truth?

Professor Fish has generally displayed a nice sense of just how outrageous he can be without alienating the public; it is part of what has made him such a successful controversialist. But this time we fear that he may have misjudged his audience. As usual, he proclaims a radical subjectivist position, and then endeavors to disarm criticism beforehand by insisting that what he is proposing is really just what common sense has told us all along. In the present case, after denying that any serious professor of cultural studies would actually argue that the truths of science were
social constructions, he proceeds to insist that at bottom science, like everything else, is ... a social construction. No doubt intending to introduce a homey touch, he compares the procedures of science with those of baseball: “the distinction between baseball and science,” he writes, “is not finally so firm.” We wonder whether even the most avid fan of the game will find this reassuring. Professor Fish concludes with one of his breathtaking, Orwellian reversals, claiming that “it is Alan Sokal, not his targets, who threatens to undermine the intellectual standards he vows to protect.” He also comes within a hair’s breadth of accusing Professor Sokal of fraud. Thus does the defendant transform himself into the prosecutor, declaring that black is white and night is day. It is a shabby, disreputable performance, an insult to Professor Sokal and a calumny on truth.

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