SOCIAL TEXT

The following is an editorial response to Alan Sokal's claim, in Lingua Franca, that his article, published in the **current issue** of **Social Text**, is a parody, and that he intended this hoax as a critique of science studies.

Sokal's articles and further commentary can be found at The Sokal Affair.

Science Wars can be **ordered** through Duke University Press.

What were some of the initial responses of the journal's editors when we first learned about Alan Sokal's prank upon Social Text? One suspected that Sokal's parody was nothing of the sort, and that his admission represented a change of heart, or a folding of his intellectual resolve. Another was less convinced that Sokal knew very much about what he was attempting to expose. A third was pleasantly astonished to learn that the journal is taken seriously enough to be considered a target of a hoax, especially a hoax by a physicist. Others were concerned that his hoax might spark off a new round of caricature and thereby perpetuate the climate in which science studies and cultural studies have been subject recently to so much derision from conservatives in science. All of us were distressed at the deceptive means by which Sokal chose to make his point. This breach of ethics is a serious matter in any scholarly community, and has damaging consequences when it occurs in science publishing. What is the likely result of Sokal's behavior for non- scientific journals? Less well-known authors who submit unsolicited articles to journals like ours may now come under needless suspicion, and the openness of intellectual inquiry that Social Text has played its role in fostering will be curtailed. However varied our responses, we all believe that Sokal took too much for granted in his account of his prank. Indeed, his claim--that our publication of his article proves that something is rotten in the state of cultural studies--is as wobbly as the article itself.

Obviously, we now regret having published Sokal's article, and apologize to our readers, and to those in the science studies or cultural studies communities who might feel their work has been disparaged as a result of this affair. To give readers a clear sense of the circumstances underlying the publication of the article, we have taken the time to recount the relevant history of the editorial process. We regret that Lingua Franca did not provide us with such an opportunity when they decided to publish his statement.

>From the first, we considered Sokal's unsolicited article to be a little hokey. It is not every day we receive a dense philosophical tract from a professional physicist. Not knowing the author or his work, we engaged in some speculation about his intentions, and concluded that this article was the earnest attempt of a professional scientist to seek some kind of affirmation from postmodern philosophy for developments in his field. His adventures in PostmodernLand were not really our cup of tea. Like other journals of our vintage that try to keep abreast of cultural studies, it has been many years since Social Text published direct contributions to the debate about postmodern theory, and Sokal's article would have been regarded as somewhat outdated if it had come from a humanist or social scientist. As the work of a natural scientist it was unusual, and, we thought, plausibly symptomatic of how someone like

Sokal might approach the field of postmodern epistemology i.e. awkwardly but assertively trying to capture the "feel" of the professional language of this field, while relying upon an armada of footnotes to ease his sense of vulnerability. In other words, we read it more as an act of good faith of the sort that might be worth encouraging than as a set of arguments with which we agreed. On those grounds, the editors considered it of interest to readers as a "document" of that time-honored tradition in which modern physicists have discovered harmonic resonances with their own reasoning in the field of philosophy and metaphysics. Consequently, the article met one of the several criteria for publication which Social Text recognizes. As a non-refereed journal of political opinion and cultural analysis produced by an editorial collective (and entirely self- published until its adoption four years ago by Duke University Press), Social Text has always seen its lineage in the "little magazine" tradition of the independent left as much as in the academic domain, and so we often balance diverse editorial criteria when discussing the worth of submissions, whether they be works of fiction, interviews with sex workers, or essays about anti- colonialism. In other words, this is an editorial milieu with criteria and aims quite remote from that of a professional scientific journal. Whether Sokal's article would have been declared substandard by a physicist peer reviewer is debatable (it is not, after all, a scholarly contribution to the discipline of physics) but not finally relevant to us, at least not according to the criteria we employed.

Having established an interest in Sokal's article, we did ask him informally to revise the piece. We requested him a) to excise a good deal of the philosophical speculation and b) to excise most of his footnotes. Sokal seemed resistant to any revisions, and indeed insisted on retaining almost all of his footnotes and bibliographic apparatus on the grounds that his peers, in science, expected extensive documentation of this sort. Judging from his response, it was clear that his article would appear as is, or not at all. At this point, Sokal was designated as a "difficult, uncooperative author," a category well known to journal editors. We judged his article too much trouble to publish, not yet on the reject pile, perhaps of sufficient interest to readers if published in the company of related articles.

Some time after this impasse was reached, the editors did indeed decide to assemble a special issue on the topic of science studies. We wanted to gauge how science critics were responding to the attacks of Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, and other conservatives in science. Contributions were solicited from across the field of knowledge; from humanists, social scientists and natural scientists (the final lineup included many of the more significant names in the field--Sandra Harding, Steve Fuller, Emily Martin, Hilary Rose, Langdon Winner, Dorothy Nelkin, Richard Levins, George Levine, Sharon Traweek, Sarah Franklin, Ruth Hubbard, Joel Kovel, Stanley Aronowitz, and Les Levidow). Most responded directly to the evolving controversy that some were calling the "Science Wars," while others wrote their own accounts of work in their respective fields. Here, we thought, was an appropriate and heterogenous context in which Sokal's article might appear, providing a feasible solution to the editorial problem posed by his piece. He expressed some concern when asked if we could publish his work in this special issue (we assumed he wished to distance himself from the polemical company assembled for the issue), but he reiterated his eagerness to see it in print. Our final decision to include him presumed that readers would see his article in the particular context of the Science Wars issue, as a contribution from someone unknown to the field whose views, however offbeat, might still be thought relevant to the debate. Since his article was not written for that special issue, and bears little resemblance, in tone or substance, to the other commissioned articles, it was not slated to be included in the expanded book version of the issue (with additional articles by Katherine Hayles, Michael Lynch, Roger Hart, and Richard Lewontin) which will be published by Duke University Press in September.

In sum, Sokal's assumption that his parody caught the woozy editors of Social Text sleeping on the job is ill-conceived. Its status as parody does not alter substantially our interest in the piece itself as a symptomatic document. Indeed, Sokal's conduct has quickly become an object of study, for those who analyse the behavior of scientists. Our own role has also come under scrutiny, since, at the very least, the affair says something about our conception of how physicists read philosophy. As for the decision to publish his article, readers can judge for themselves whether we were right or wrong. But to construe this decision as proof of the bankruptcy of cultural studies is absurd.

What Sokal's confession most altered was our perception of his own good faith as a self-declared leftist. However we feel about his deception, we do hope that the ensuing discussion has been, and will continue to be, productive, and that interlocutors will resist the opportunity to exploit existing divisions and splits among committed people and seek instead to bridge and heal those differences. There is nothing we regret more than watching the left eat the left, surely one of the sorriest spectacles of the twentieth century.

Having talked to the (real) Sokal subsequently, we believe that most of the issues he intended to air are, at this point, rather well-known to readers of Social Text and Lingua Franca. Indeed, they have been going the rounds in the academy since the first postmodern, social constructionist, or anti- foundational critiques of positivism appeared over thirty-five years ago. That many natural scientists have only recently felt the need to respond to these critiques says something about the restricted trade routes through which knowledge is still circulated in the academy, policed, as it is, at every departmental checkpoint by disciplinary passport controls. Nor are these critiques unfamiliar to folks who have long been involved in debates about the direction of the left, where positivism has had a long and healthy life. At this point in time, we have a vestigial stake in these critiques and debates, but much less of an interest than Sokal supposes. Like Gross and Levitt, he appears to have absorbed these critiques only at the level of caricatures, and has been re-issuing these caricatures in the form of otherworldly fanatics who deny the existence of facts, objective realities, and gravitational forces. We are sure Sokal knows that no such person exists, and have wondered why on earth he would promote this fiction. He must be aware that early proponents of quantum reality encountered similar parodies of themselves in the opposition to their ideas. Physics is not the only field where this occurred. Comparable caricatures have figured in many different scholarly controversies, from early twentieth century debates about legal realism to more recent ones about genetic reductionism. It is time to put them to rest.

On the other hand, we recognize that professional scientists like Sokal do feel that their beliefs and their intellectual integrity are threatened by the diverse work done in the field of science studies. Doubtless, there have been distorted and reductive descriptions of scientists in many aspects of that work. Over the years, many scholars in the field have responded sympathetically to this grievance, and a good deal of common ground has been established. We share Sokal's own concerns about obscurantism, for example. It is highly ironic that Social Text should now be associated with a kind of sectarian postmodernism that we have been at pains to discourage for many years. We would be all too happy if this episode cleared the air. Sokal has said that he agrees with many of the arguments put forth by other authors in the "Science Wars" issue of Social Text. Unfortunately, he declined to enter into a publishable dialogue with us for this issue of Lingua Franca. We are heartened, however, by the prospect of any levelheaded discussion about the politics of science that does not rest exclusively on claims of expertise, and is shaped by the public interest.

Our main concern is that readers new to the debates engendered by science studies are not persuaded by the Sokal stunt that this is simply an academic turf war between scientists and humanists/social scientists, with each side trying to outsmart the other. Sadly, this outcome would simply reinforce the premise that only professional scientists have the credentialled right to speak their minds on scientific matters that affect all of us. What's important to us is not so much the gulf of comprehension between "the two cultures," but rather the gulf of power between experts and lay voices, and the currently shifting relationship between science and the corporate-military state. Nor are these concerns extrinsic to the practice of science itself. Prior to deciding whether science intrinsically tells the truth, we must ask, again and again, whether it is possible, or prudent, to isolate facts from values. This is a crucial question to ask, because it bears upon the kind of progressive society we want to promote.

Why does science matter so much to us? Because its power, as a civil religion, as a social and political authority, affects our daily lives and the parlous condition of the natural world more than does any other domain of knowledge. Does it follow that non-scientists should have some say in the decision-making processes that define and shape the work of the professional scientific community? Some scientists (including Sokal presumably) would say yes, and in some countries, non-expert citizens do indeed participate in these processes. All hell breaks loose, however, when the following question is asked. Should non-experts have anything to say about scientific methodology and epistemology? After centuries of scientific racism, scientific sexism, and scientific domination of nature one might have thought this was a pertinent question to ask.

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