Sokal's Reply to Fish

This article is taken from the deleuze-guattari list:
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mdu6f@faraday.clas.virginia.edu on Sunday May 26 1996.

Here's the latest news from the NY Times: After giving Stanley Fish 38 column inches (not including graphics) to misrepresent my views, and giving Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross an additional 4 column inches to restate their own views and mildly misrepresent mine, the NYT letters editor (Kris Wells, 212-556-1873) has refused to print my 12-column-inch reply. She said I could have only 7.3 column inches. Since such drastic compression would make a travesty of my letter, I refused.

Here, for your interest, is the letter the NYT refused to print. Feel free to distribute it.

Best, Alan Sokal

To the editor:

It's not every day that a mere theoretical physicist such as myself has the honor of being subjected to a half-page personal attack by the august Stanley Fish ("Professor Sokal's Bad Joke", May 21). Fortunately, his allegations can be refuted in far fewer words.

Fish implies that I am opposed to all sociology of science, and that I fail to understand the elementary distinction between sociology of science and science. Give me a break! I have no objection whatsoever to sociology of science, which at its best can clarify the important political and economic issues surrounding science and technology. My only objection is to _bad_ sociology of science --- numerous examples of which are praised (!) in my parody article in the spring/summer 1996 issue of _Social Text_.

Fish's discourse on the "social construction" of science and baseball is amusing, but the situation can be stated much more simply. The laws of nature are not social constructions; the universe existed long before we did. Our theories about the laws of nature are social constructions. The goal of science is for the latter to approximate as closely as possible the former. Fish seems to agree.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the trendy field of "cultural studies of science" agrees. In a lecture at the New York Academy of Sciences (February 7, 1996), _Social Text_ co-editor Andrew Ross said: "I won't deny that there is a law of gravity. I would nevertheless argue that there are no laws in nature, there are only laws in society. Laws are things that men and women make, and that they can change." [verbatim quote in my notes]

What could Ross possibly mean? That the law of gravity is a social law that men and women can change? Anyone who believes _that_ is invited to try changing the laws of gravity from the windows of my apartment:

I live on the twenty-first floor.

Now, perhaps all Ross means is that our _understanding_ of the laws of physics changes over time; but if that's what he meant, why didn't he say so, and what's the big deal?

Granted, not even the _Social Text_ editors would deny the existence of an external world, or claim that "physical 'reality' dots is at bottom a social and linguistic construct."

The fact remains that they published an article saying exactly this in its first two paragraphs. And despite my repeated requests during the editorial process for substantive comments, suggestions and criticisms, none were ever received, just an acceptance letter.

Concerning my ethics, this issue is treated in detail in my article in the May/June issue of _Lingua Franca_, so I won't repeat it here. Suffice it to say that there is a long and honorable tradition, going back at least to Jonathan Swift, of truth-telling through satire.

Doesn't Fish have a sense of humor?

My goals, however, are utterly serious. I'm a leftist and a feminist and proud of it; I'm angered by a shoddy "scholarship" that claims to be left-wing but in fact, through its sophistry and obscurantism, undermines the prospects for progressive social critique. Like innumerable others from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, I call for the left to reclaim its Enlightenment roots.

But let me now shut up: far better to give voice to the humanists and social scientists who have been flooding my e-mail for the past two weeks, expressing relief that the nakedness of their local emperors has finally been exposed. Let's hear their stories about the debate that is now opening up.

Sincerely,

Alan Sokal

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