Sokal's Reply to *Social Text* Editorial

I confess to amusement that one *Social Text* editor still doesn't believe my piece was a parody. Oh, well.

As for *Social Text's* editorial process, readers can judge for themselves the plausibility of the editors' *post facto* explanations, which if true may be more damning than the incident itself. Some of their chronology is at variance with the documentary record (e-mail and regular mail between Ross and myself, which I've saved), but let me not beat a dead horse.

More interesting than the scandal provoked by the article's *acceptance* is, I think, the scandal that ought to be provoked by its *content*. My essay, aside from being (if I may quote Katha Pollitt's flattery) "a hilarious compilation of pomo gibberish," is also an annotated bibliography of charlatanism and nonsense by dozens of prominent French and American intellectuals. This goes well beyond the narrow category of "postmodernism," and includes some of the most fashionable thinkers in "science studies," literary criticism, and cultural studies.

In short, there is a lot of sloppy thinking going around about "social construction," often abetted by a vocabulary that intentionally elides the distinction between facts and our knowledge of them. I'm no expert in epistemology, but some of this work is so illogical that it doesn't take an expert to deconstruct it. I've analyzed one representative example in an Afterword submitted for publication in *Social Text*; I hope the editors will print it, perhaps along with replies. I'd suggest they also invite contributions from philosophers far sharper than myself, such as Susan Haack and Janet Radcliffe Richards.

Robbins and Ross say that I "declined to enter into a publishable dialogue" with them. Quite the contrary: we're having that dialogue right now. What I declined was an *oral* dialogue, which in my opinion usually yields a low ratio of content to words.

Robbins and Ross guess wrong when they say I feel "threatened" by science-studies scholars. My goal isn't to defend science from the barbarian hordes of lit crit (we'll survive just fine, thank you), but to defend the Left from a trendy segment of itself. Like innumerable others from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, I call for the Left to reclaim its Enlightenment roots. We're worried above all for the social sciences and the humanities, not the natural sciences.

In their last two paragraphs, Robbins and Ross bring up a plethora of real issues, but it would take quite a bit of space to disentangle the substance from the rhetoric. They conflate science as an intellectual system with the social and economic role of science and technology. They conflate epistemic and ethical issues.

These confusions lead Robbins and Ross into a serious error: setting up an opposition between science and progressive politics. They describe science as a "civil religion" that supports existing social and political structures. It is of course true that scientific reasearch is skewed by the influence of those with power and money. But a scientific worldview, based on a commitment to logic and standards of evidence and to the incessant confrontation of theories with reality, is an essential component of any progressive politics.

Despite these differences, there is a potentially vast common ground between Robbins--Ross and myself. When scientific research is increasingly funded by private corporations that have a financial interest in particular *outcomes* of that research -- is the drug effective or not? -- scientific objectivity is undermined. (But to make this argument, one must first have a conception of objectivity: not as a state that human beings can ever attain, but as an ideal standard of comparison.) When universities are more interested in patent royalties than in the open sharing of scientific information, the public suffers. There are hundreds of important political and economic issues surrounding science and technology. Sociology of science, at its best, has done much to clarify these issues. But sloppy sociology, like sloppy science, is useless or even counterproductive.