

Book Review

Title: *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*

Authors: Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont

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In 1996 the journal *Social Text* published an essay by physicist Alan Sokal. Sokal later revealed that the essay was a hoax. He had intentionally written a piece that underneath all of its obscure, sophisticated, and ambiguous language was essentially meaningless. His purpose was to parody the current practices of several postmodern intellectuals (primarily French) who attempt to import mathematical and scientific concepts into other disciplines (such as psychoanalysis and cultural studies) without the requisite skills to do it in any meaningful way. Naturally the essay gained international attention.

Now Sokal, in collaboration with Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont, has produced a book that explores this subject head-on. After a brief introduction that provides an historical background for the book, the authors examine the works of Jacques Lacan (psychoanalyst), Julia Kristeva (linguist/philosopher), Luce Irigaray (linguist/psychoanalyst/philosopher), Bruno Latour (sociologist), Jean Baudrillard (sociologist/philosopher), Gilles Deleuze (philosopher), Félix Guattari (psychoanalyst), and Paul Virilio (architect/urban planner).

Some examples of the claims made by these individuals are:

“Here...we learn from Lacan that the structure of the neurotic subject is exactly the torus (it is no less than reality itself...), from Kristeva that poetic language can be theorized in terms of the cardinality of the continuum..., and from Baudrillard that modern war takes place in a non-Euclidean space...—all without explanation.” (p. 5)

The authors also include several ‘Intermezzos’ in which they focus on specific forms of abuse or areas of mathematics and science that are most easily targeted, such as Chaos Theory and Gödel’s Theorem(s). One form of abuse that they identify centers around the tendency of postmodernists to engage in epistemic relativism. This is characterized most blatantly by the identification of epistemology and ontology, i.e., that only what we know really exists. Sokal and Bricmont illustrate this with the following anecdote:

“An even more extreme example of this confusion appears in a recent article by Latour in *La Recherche*, a French monthly magazine devoted to the popularization of science (Latour 1998). Here Latour discusses what he interprets as the discovery in 1976, by French scientists working on the mummy of the pharaoh Ramses II, that his death (circa 1213 B.C.) was due to tuberculosis. Latour asks: ‘How could he pass away due to a bacillus discovered by Robert Koch in 1882?’ Latour notes, correctly, that it would be an anachronism to assert that Ramses II was killed by machine-gun fire or died from the stress provoked by a stock-market crash. But then Latour wonders, why isn’t death from tuberculosis likewise an anachronism? He goes so far as to assert that ‘Before Koch, the bacillus has no real existence.’ He dismisses the common-sense notion that Koch *discovered* a pre-existing bacillus as ‘having only the appearance of common sense’. Of course, in the rest of the article, Latour gives no argument to justify these radical claims and provides no genuine alternative to the common-sense answer.” (p. 97)

After an epilogue in which Sokal and Bricmont speculate on how the academy could have gotten to the point where these sort of practices are accepted by editors, and what we might learn from all of this, Sokal includes a copy of the *Social Text* essay/hoax, along with his commentary on it.

I would say that this is a very important book for anyone who is trying to come to terms with the role of postmodernism in mathematics and science.