

[*Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture*, Alan Sokal, Oxford University Press, 465 pages]

Transgressing Against the Postmodernists

By Damian Thompson

ONE OF THE PARADOXES of postmodernism is its lack of a sense of humor. Scholars who conceive of intellectual activity as a game, and who delight in exposing its rhetorical and procedural tricks, react like outraged dowagers when someone plays a trick on them. That is one reason Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University and professor of mathematics at University College London, is so despised by the deconstructionist Left.

In 1996, he published an article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," in the peer-reviewed cultural-studies journal *Social Text*. Its declared aim was to use the emerging theory of quantum gravity to show that science itself contradicted the "dogma" that the operation of eternal physical laws can be measured by "objective" procedures and "the (so-called) scientific method." There followed a paper written in fluent Lacanian jargon studied with references to nonlinearity, morphogenetic fields, and differential topology. That, in itself, was not new: the philosophical deconstruction of science was the great postmodern project of the late 1980s and early 1990s. What thrilled readers of *Social Text* was the fact that a leading professional physicist, as opposed to a philosopher, sociologist, or literary theorist, was attempting this exercise from inside the scientific establishment.

Another of the paradoxes of postmodernism is that although many of its practitioners make their careers exposing the

meaninglessness of intellectual hierarchies, they roll over in delight the moment someone high up the hierarchy wants to tickle their stomachs. In this respect they resemble other apostles of what I call counterknowledge—the fast-morphing, overlapping, ever-growing corpus of "alternative" knowledge that abandons traditional methodology in response to the demands of intellectual fashion and the marketplace. Homeopaths, 9/11 conspiracy theorists, and cult archaeologists sneer at academia until a maverick professor endorses their theories, after which they never stop boasting about his or her credentials. So Sokal was—briefly—a hero in cultural studies circles, for transgressing the boundary from his side of the border.

A few weeks later, he had become a bogeyman in those same circles—and he remains one now, more than a decade later. Soon after *Social Text* appeared, Sokal published an article in the now defunct magazine *Lingua Franca* revealing that the whole thing had been a hoax. "Transgressing the Boundaries" was a parody that had been accepted by a leading academic journal whose editors—to Sokal's delight—had not spotted even one of its carefully planted scientific howlers. In his own words, the essay was "a mélange of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, falsehoods, non-sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever" containing speculative theories passed off as science, absurd analogies, and confusion between the technical and everyday senses of English words.

Why did Sokal go to such trouble? Not to defend scientists: as he put it,

"we'll survive just fine, thanks," despite the withering discourse of feminist scholars. Students, on the other hand, do need to be defended, and to defend themselves, against lit-crit verbiage masquerading as physics; the hoax was partly intended to help them develop an informed skepticism with which to deconstruct their professors' deconstructionism. But—and this is what really stung—at the heart of Sokal's exercise lay his own political agenda. And it was a leftist one. If "Transgressing the Boundaries" had been a parody, however exquisitely crafted, by a conservative professor, it would have been easier to dismiss. The author, however, describes himself "an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class."

In his view, epistemological agnosticism of the *Social Text* variety is the enemy of progress because it destroys our ability to make moral and political judgments as well as scientific and commonsense observations. "Deny that context-dependent assertions can be true," he writes, "and you don't just throw out quantum mechanics and molecular biology: you also throw out the Nazi gas chambers, the American enslavement of Africans, and the fact that today in New York it's raining."

This, more or less, is happening. Consumers of counterknowledge tend to be gullible across the board. Some—not many, but enough—postmodernists have flirted with Holocaust denial; and Holocaust deniers, like their Nazi precursors, are often avid consumers of alternative medicine, many of whose claims are these days based on bizarre misrepresentations of quantum theory.

Daniel Larison

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EUNOMIA
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Sokal recognizes that the challenge to the methodology of the Enlightenment has gathered pace since 1996. His new book, *Beyond The Hoax*, consists mostly of previously published material, but is nonetheless valuable since the general reader is likely to be encountering it for the first time. One chapter that is new, however, is the author's very detailed annotation of the original parody, in which he explains exactly how he twisted theory, data, and language in order to smuggle a farrago of nonsense into a hitherto distinguished journal. He begins with the title. "Current practice in the academic humanities dictates that titles must begin with a gerund, consist of two phrases separated by a colon, and contain at least one play on words," he writes. Hence "Transgressing the Boundaries," which in addition to a gerund offers the double meaning of crossing disciplinary borders—"cultural-studies folks love transgression and interdisciplinarity," explains Sokal—and alludes to the technical issue of boundary conditions in quantum gravity. And all before the colon.

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The new annotations do not just reveal a dazzling repertoire of teases, they also expose the extent of the scientific ignorance displayed by Lyotard, Lacan, *et al.* in the course of their showing off. In the parody, Sokal pretended to endorse modish assertions that the limitations of linear mathematics confirmed the redundancy of the linear thought patterns of the Enlightenment. In his new annotations, he points out that the word "linear" has two unrelated meanings in mathematics; postmodern theorists often confused them, with the result that their quasi-scientific justifications for their own "nonlinear thought" were nothing more than pretentious word-spinning.

But the famous parody was written in 1996, and linear time has since carried off several of the postmodern pioneers. Having explained what he did and why he did it, Sokal needs to move the story on to take account of the follies of the 21st century. This he does in a chapter entitled "Pseudoscience and Postmodernism: Antagonists or Fellow Travellers?" which first appeared in a book of essays about pseudoarchaeology published in 2006. He makes two crucial observations: that the more sophisticated pseudoscientists have taken to falling back on postmodern arguments when the credibility of their evidence is challenged and that some postmodernists display a strong interest in—and influence on—pseudoscience. Sokal discusses, for example, postmodern nursing theory. (Yes, there is such a thing.) He quotes Janice L. Thompson, a postmodern medical writer, on the desirability of "developing truth claims outside the discourses of science. ... As a non-discursive practice, therapeutic touch, like shamanic healing, may elude our current epistemic 'paradigms.' Precisely

for this reason, we should be careful about how and why we judge it." Thompson, incidentally, is a highly trained nurse who seeks to influence medical practice; at least no one allowed French literary theorists to carry out "transgressive" experiments in a physics laboratory.

In his last chapter, Sokal moves from pseudoscience to religion, and this is where the problems begin. He is an uncompromising atheist who rejects the notion that the claims of faith are confined to the realm of an untestable transcendent: all religions make purportedly factual assertions, though some make fewer dubious assumptions than others. This is true enough; but, like Sam Harris

in *The End of Faith* (which he discusses at length), Sokal also makes polemical and unsatisfactory generalizations about religion. "The bottom line is that *all* religions, not just Islam, are potentially dangerous—and they are dangerous precisely to the extent that their adherents take their sacred scriptures seriously, for the simple reason that reliance on revelation rather than evidence undermines the possibility of rational discussion," he writes. Really? But how can you establish a precise correlation when you have not begun to define religion, or scripture, or taking scripture seriously, or revelation, or rational discussion? Any argument against "religion," however boisterously delivered, is fatally weakened if the author does not explain what he means by the word: Christopher Hitchens does not even attempt to do so in *God Is Not Great*, which is why it is such a disappointing polemic.

Later in the chapter, however, Sokal does concede that "moral values" might be written into our DNA in some mysterious way and then goes on to imply that immorality in the modern age finds its clearest expression in the operation of free-market capitalism and the policies of the Bush administration. These points are not developed and—together with a strong whiff of Old Left self-righteousness—create a sense of messy improvisation that makes one wish that Sokal had stuck to his original target. When he writes about the misappropriation of scientific language by literary intellectuals he does so with a clarity and wit that have earned him his own place in the intellectual pantheon. "Transgressing the Boundaries" is a minor comic masterpiece. But, like so many boundary-transgressing scientists, when he ventures into the areas of religion and politics he displays a naïvete that positively invites parody. ■

Damian Thompson is editor-in-chief of London's Catholic Herald and author of Counterknowledge: How We Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science and Fake History.

[*Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, Ernest Freeberg, Harvard University Press, 380 pages]

The Conscience of a Socialist

By Clark Stooksbury

EUGENE VICTOR DEBS was a socialist icon, a pioneer of 20th-century labor unionism, a five-time presidential candidate, and a firebrand who went to prison for publicly denouncing America's intervention in the First World War. In 1920, he won almost a million votes running his White House campaign from behind bars. His story is a timely reminder of the limits of a democratic society and should interest today's antiwar Americans, both on the Left and Right.

Author Ernest Freeberg describes Debs as a radical "in an American grain." His "fight against capitalism was inspired as much by Tom Paine, Walt Whitman, and Wendell Phillips as it was by Karl Marx." He was also a man of contrasts: an all-American Marxist and a self-described "citizen of the world" who was devoted to his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana. His socialism coexisted with the unfettered capitalism of early 20th-century America.

Debs and other socialists considered World War I to be a fight among capitalists. In 1915, in the radical publication *Appeal to Reason*, he wrote that to be a soldier was to be a "hired assassin of his capitalist master." The U.S. was then officially at peace. By 1917, when the country went to war, Woodrow Wilson was determined to build support through propaganda and even censorship. That year, his administration introduced the Espionage Act. Congress removed a provision in the original bill that would have given an executive-branch committee the power to censor newspapers, but left in clauses allowing the postmaster general to refuse mailing

privileges to publications he considered "treasonous" or guilty of "insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny or refusal of duty in the military ... or willfully obstruct[ing] the recruitment or enlistment services of the United States." In the spring of 1918, Congress added the Sedition Act, which punished "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" that might encourage "contempt scorn, contumely or disrepute" toward the Constitution, government, or military.

This broad language gave the government great power to gag its opponents. Freeberg documents some of the numerous assaults on civil liberties: "An Iowa man received twenty years for predicting that American boys would leave for Europe as heroes but return to fill the insane asylums. Others went to jail for distributing a pamphlet that a federal prosecutor thought 'overstated the horrors of war.' ... A Montana man was prosecuted when he called the president 'a Wall Street tool' during a 'hot and furious saloon argument.'"

In this atmosphere, Debs's loud dissent was an invitation to arrest, but he declined to be quiet. In a fateful speech in Canton, Ohio, he declaimed, "they have always taught you that it is your patriotic duty to go to war and have yourselves slaughtered at command. But in all of that history of the world, you the people, never had a voice in declaring war ... the working class who fights the battles, the working class who make the sacrifices, the working class who shed the blood, the working class who furnish the corpses, the working class have never yet had a voice in declaring war."

Clyde Miller, a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reporter, was so outraged by these words that he campaigned, both through his publication and by directly lobbying a federal prosecutor, to have Debs punished. Amid public acrimony, Debs was tried in Cleveland and given a ten-year sentence, which was later upheld in the Supreme Court. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who would later reverse his stance on free speech with his famous "clear and present danger" test, wrote the majority opinion.

Democracy's Prisoner covers the trial in detail, but the second, and perhaps more important, part of the book is about Debs's time in prison and the campaign to release him and other political prisoners of the Wilson years. It was a struggle that continued into the 1920s, through three presidencies and amid an evolving public mood.

Freeberg's depiction of Wilson is unflattering. He writes, "for a man determined to impose his ideals on a wartorn world, Wilson showed remarkable deference to his postmaster." After the war, Wilson refused to grant pardons to political prisoners in spite of lobbying from the likes of Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair. He also repeatedly deferred to his infamous attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer. When Wilson cabled from France that he was considering pardons for free-speech prisoners, Palmer convinced him to wait until they could discuss the matter in person. The attorney general persuaded Wilson that amnesty was a bad idea and that it was the wrong time to release Debs.

"For Palmer," writes Freeberg, "the Debs case posed a unique challenge. He had no doubt that Debs deserved to be in prison ... Palmer conceded that his ten-year sentence was excessive and should be commuted at the appropriate time. But in the summer of 1919 he believed that freeing Debs would be a terrible political mistake, one that would only give comfort to Wilson's enemies..." As Wilson's term ended, however, even Palmer publicly supported clemency for Debs, but the

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