

Scientific Expertise and Scholarly Language

To the Editor:

Your article on "The Science Wars" missed a key point of Alan Sokal's parody: Sokal never objected to critiques of science *per se*, he simply objected to *uninformed* critiques of science. I tread lightly here, since I have absolutely no background in science, and I would have been unable to detect that his *Social Text* article was actually a parody (it sounded like the standard "postmodernese" to me). Accordingly, I sympathize with Andrew Ross and the other *Social Text* editors for having failed to detect the joke.

But there is a catch: I would not pretend to be an expert on critiques of science, nor would I edit a special issue of a journal dedicated to this topic. It seems to me that if you wish to make a far-reaching critique of science (as the *Social Text* editors pretended to do), then you really ought to have some knowledge of the object of your critique. You need not be a professional scientist to do so, but you ought to know *something* about the field. Sokal demonstrated -- in the most dramatic possible way -- that the *Social Text* editors lacked any real knowledge of their subject matter.

And Sokal addresses a more important issue, which was omitted from your article: the postmodern penchant for using impenetrable jargon that obscures meaning. Now, it is true that many fields, including physics, have their own jargon, but there is a fundamental difference: If a person like myself, who knows no physics, were to engage in an extended use of technical vocabulary, a trained physicist would spot it immediately. This says something important: The language of physics, though impenetrable to the lay person, does mean something.

A good deal of postmodernist language, in contrast, has very imprecise meaning or, in many cases, no meaning at all. How else can one explain that Sokal could have

written a whole article in the postmodern dialect, which he admits he does not understand, and have it published?

One of the reasons that Sokal's admittedly cruel joke was needed is because postmodernism has virtually immunized itself from serious critique from "outside." If Sokal had written a point-by-point critique, the cultural-studies community would have simply "deconstructed" the critique and then hurled the usual epithets ("logocentric," "phallogocentric," "male linear logic," etc.); they would have done everything but address his arguments. Satire really was the only possible way to make the point.

The Chronicle's account of the Sokal affair seems to fall into the usual clichés of portraying the debate in ideological terms, with the postmodernists occupying the "left" end of the spectrum. However, I fully agree with Sokal that postmodernism has been very damaging for the left. For it is not the "power structure" or "technoscience" that has been harmed in any significant way by all of this critique. And, despite the noise about "tenured radicals," "P.C.," etc., real power centers are not harmed in the slightest. ... The only real victim of this is the political left, which is reduced to sterility and irrelevance.

In a way, postmodernism is the perfect "radical" ideology for this very conservative era, in that it is entirely unthreatening to real power -- and elitist as well.

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