Friendly fire

The hoaxing of Social Text

W hen the editorial committee of the US journal *Social Text* chose ‘Science Wars’ as the title for last year’s special double issue (nos 46–47, Spring/Summer 1996), they could hardly have guessed how apt it would prove to be – not as a description of its contents, but of the furore it would provoke. For with this issue of *Social Text*, a new front was opened up in the ‘culture wars’ which rage in the USA over the disputed terrain where academic discourse meets mainstream politics in the distorting mirror of the media: a complex and treacherous battleground of ‘science’, where political allies can be swiftly transformed into ideological foes in a hail of friendly fire.

The spark was the revelation that *Social Text* had been subjected to a carefully managed hoax. Several months previously, Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, had submitted an article, ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’, claiming to offer support from recent physics for various ‘postmodern’ epistemological positions. After some hesitation, *Social Text* decided to carry it in their special issue on science. However, the day after it appeared, another article by Sokal was published in the bimonthly *Lingua Franca*, in which he exposed his own *Social Text* piece as a ‘parody’ of cultural studies of science, intended to unmask its ‘shoddy scholarship’.

His method, Sokal revealed, was to structure the article around ‘the silliest quotes about mathematics and physics’ from ‘the most prominent academics’, ‘inventing an argument praising them and linking them together.’ All of which, he claimed, was ‘very easy’, since he ‘wasn’t obliged to respect any standards of evidence and logic’ – although it will have taken considerable industry, since the text is liberally referenced, being accompanied by over twenty-one pages of notes and bibliography. Furthermore, Sokal argued, he had perpetrated his hoax on behalf of the Left: specifically, that section of the Left increasingly fed up with the ‘trendy’ obscurantism and wrong-headedness of a postmodern cultural studies which, it believes, is undermining the prospect for ‘progressive social critique’ by insisting upon the ‘social construction’ of reality. Nowhere are its idiocies more apparent, so the argument runs, than in the ‘cultural’ treatment of physical theory.

We were thus presented with a set-piece confrontation between a new, culturally-based academic Left and its scientifically-oriented predecessor, in which the latter, apparently, worsts the former by publicly revealing the illusory character of its clothing (intellectual standards), and gains a rare opportunity to show off its own sense of humour into the bargain.

The media had a field-day. The story made the cover of *The New York Times* (18/5/96); it was picked up in Britain by *The Observer* (19/5/96); it became a subject of debate on National Public Radio; and follow-up articles and exchanges appeared in everything from *Newsweek* (3/6/96), the *THES* (7 & 21/6/96) and *The Village Voice* (21/6/96) to a host of smaller US Left periodicals such as *Tikkun* and *In These Times*. Letters columns were clogged with competing voices, with Sokal comically complaining about the number of Stanley Fish’s column-inches in the *NYT* (38) and refusing to continue playing there when his own 12-incher was cut down to ‘7.3’ by the letters’ editor (7.3!). Sokal chose instead to post his reply on the Internet (with commentary on his threatened inches), although how many inches it can be said to have occupied there is anyone’s guess. Sokal was not alone in making use of the Internet, though, and its communities of interest have played a
significant role in framing and sustaining the affair. But what, exactly, is the affair about? And what does it actually show?

**Misplaced solidarity**

For Sokal and his supporters, there is little doubt (they have few doubts): it demonstrates the bogus intellectual credentials of ‘postmodern’ cultural studies and reaffirms the need for the Left to turn away from ‘wishful thinking, superstition and demagoguery’, to reclaim its Enlightenment roots in the ‘scientific worldview’ (Sokal, talk at the NYU Forum, 30/10/96). For the editors of *Social Text*, matters are predictably more complex. Clearly, they regret the publication of Sokal’s essay and acknowledge it to have been an error of editorial judgement. But, they argue, it was a mistake generated by a misplaced sense of cultural-political solidarity, rather than any particular intellectual affinity with the offending piece — as its comparison with any of the sixteen other articles in the ‘Science Wars’ issue (by the likes of Steve Fuller, Sandra Harding, Ruth Hubbard, Joel Kovel, Emily Martin, Les Levidow and Hilary Rose) shows.

Both stylistically and in tone, Sokal’s essay stands out as an anomaly, but in Andrew Ross’s words: ‘the editors considered that it might be of interest to readers as a “document” of that time-honoured tradition in which modern physicists have discovered harmonic resonances with their own reasoning in the field of philosophy and metaphysics.’ And in its own perverse way, it undoubtedly is. According to Robbins (the other main editor of the journal, besides Ross): ‘*Social Text* was hoaxed not because it liked Sokal’s jargon-filled references to postmodern authorities — in fact we asked him to cut them out — but because we thought he was a progressive scientist, a physicist who was willing to be publicly critical of scientific orthodoxies.’

The mistake was thus to allow the lure of an ally within the scientific establishment to dictate judgment about the piece; to allow political convenience to suspend intellectual judgment. In this respect, for some, it was a representative error, whatever one’s conception of physics, and however much one may disagree with Sokal’s views about science: representative of an overly strategic approach to intellectual matters, characteristic of that section of the cultural Left to which *Social Text*, broadly speaking, belongs. (Although it should be noted that it also represents a certain cultural Marxism, which is one reason it fell for the hoax in the first place. It takes science seriously; seriously enough to be sceptical of its conventional self-understanding.)

But what of the politics of the hoax itself?

**Media Wars**

One of the most salient aspects of the affair has been Sokal’s recourse to the mainstream media to conduct an ideological campaign against another section of the Left. Sokal has used the media skilfully, both to register his hoax and to generalise its point into a full-scale attack on ‘cultural studies of science’ and ‘postmodern cultural studies’ (which he tends to treat as equivalents). And for many on the Left, his hoax was a welcome public counter to the attention-grabbing ‘relativism’ of much recent cultural theory. Yet Sokal has also provided the press with an ideal occasion to prosecute two of its favourite pastimes — disparaging intellectualism, of any kind, and travestyng the Left — while bolstering the sagging image of the ‘scientist’ as a figure of authority and a man of reason and good sense. (Relishing the ‘impenetrable hodge-podge of jargon [and] buzzwords’ in Sokal’s hoax essay, the *New York Times* (18/5/96) selected ‘hegemony’ and ‘epistemological’ for especial derision … postmodern nonsense indeed!)

This was Sokal’s major media card: his status as an ‘expert’ in modern physics legitimated his views about the philosophy of science, and thereby about the cultural study of science,
from whence it was but one small step to cultural studies as a whole. That these views
are simplistic, at best, and never short of commensurational was an added bonus. Stanley
Fish (Professor of English and Law at Duke University and executive editor of its Press,
which publishes Social Text) was wheeled in by the NYT to provide an alternative account
of ‘social construction’, but nobody in the press thought to ask the likes of Hilary Putnam
what he thought about Sokal’s bracingly down-to-earth conception of ‘reality’, his
confidence with which he distinguishes ‘truth’ from ‘claims of truth’, and ‘knowledge’ from
‘pretension to knowledge’. Nor was anybody interested in the decidedly non-commonsensi-
cal character of Sokal’s own scientific work, as spelled out in such papers as ‘New Lower
Bounds on the Self-Avoiding-Walk Connective Constant’.

Philosophy has been notable by its absence, which is just as well for Sokal, since as
Linda Martín Alcoff has pointed out, his robust views would be rejected by nearly all con-
temporary philosophers of science - irrespective of their politics. Yet, strangely, philosophy
is precisely what Sokal now claims his hoax was all about. ‘Social Text is not my enemy,
nor is it my main intellectual target’, he insisted at the recent Forum at NYU. In fact, ‘this
affair is in my view not primarily about science ... What I believe this debate is principally
about ... is the nature of truth, reason and objectivity’. But this is not what it has been
about for the media. Nor is it what it was originally about for Sokal, when he started it all
off by feeding the press yet another version of one of its most relentlessly promulgated nar-
ratives: the story of a decline in a ‘standards’. It was about knocking the cultural Left, and
if that meant reinforcing conservative dogmas about ‘declining standards’, the ‘emptiness’
of fashion and the ‘obscurantism’ of cultural minorities, so be it.

There has always been a section of the radical Left which is more comfortable in the
company of Burkeans than sexual libertarians. And it is here, perhaps, rather than in the
philosophical disputes about science (which have been going on since the 1960s), that the
heart of the matter lies: in a heightening of intellectual antagonisms between generations of
the Left. It is an aspect of the affair that has been most prominent in the parade of opin-
ions on the Internet.

Fantasies of ‘pomos’
One of the functions of the Internet has been to expose to immediate public scrutiny
exchanges that would previously have taken place in private, over a longer period of time.
One of the dangers of this exposure is that intemperate and hastily conceived thoughts
can readily take on the character of ‘positions’ in highly charged debates. One of the
advantages, however, is that the motivations underlying different views are more legible
than usual. So it is that the ad hominem attacks on Stanley Aronowitz and Andrew Ross
– against which Sokal himself has recently protested – have much to tell us about the
anxieties, fantasies and displacements sustaining what is an increasingly harmful divide
between an older ‘scientifically’-oriented and a younger ‘culturally’-oriented Left.

It is tempting (and no doubt, to some, reassuring) to conceive of the divide as structured
by differing attitudes to Marxism. But this is too simple. Not just because the intellectual
culture of Marxism is pervasive, if uneven, on both sides, but because antipathy to the cul-
tural Left tends to be focused on a particular composite image: ‘pomos’ (postmodernists),
who have allegedly taken over the academy, dismissing material interests and laying waste
to intellectual standards in their dogged pursuit of identity politics, fashionable clothing
and academic careers. In the exchanges provoked by Sokal’s hoax, ‘pomos’ are the ideal
imaginary others of the ‘true Marxists’ (and vice versa), and they are modelled on the
media’s fantasy projection of Andrew Ross. (Clothing places a key metaphorical role in
these invectives.)

I might, I think, be forgiven for finding this spectacle both intellectually irritat-
ing and politically depressing: irritating, because of the lowering of the level of debate that
it involves; depressing, because it is so clearly the product of a political defeat, from which
it draws its attention. At a time when the Left needs all the solidarity it can muster just to
survive, there has to be a better way for it to conduct its debates than this.

Peter Osborne