

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments June 2017

Meanwhile, in the academy

On the shambolic standards of academic publishing.

Long-time readers may recall the attention we devoted back in June 1996 to the delicious hoax perpetrated by the physicist Alan Sokal in the pages of the bogus (but highly touted) lit-crit journal *Social Text*. Entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” Sokal’s essay was a piece of deliberate nonsense. Its argument was, among other things, “that physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct,” and that “scientific ‘knowledge,’ so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it.” My, how the scientific illiterates who edited *Social Text* salivated to those ideas! They had always believed, or said they believed, that “physical reality” was only a “social construct” — wasn’t everything? — and here was an honest-to-God professor of physics telling them they were right all along! Hurrah!

Welcome to the contemporary university and its bankrupt culture of malevolent nonsense.

Revelation of the hoax was the cause of some consternation, and a good deal of rationalization, but apparently no remorse or reformation. In 1996 it was *Social Text*. Today it’s *Cogent Social Sciences*, a “multidisciplinary open-access journal offering high-quality peer review across the social sciences.” “High-quality,” eh? “Peer

review,” forsooth! Allow us to introduce you to a recent offering in this august, er, organ, “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct.” Written by Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay (who employed the pseudonyms “Peter Boyle” and “Jamie Lindsay”) this piece of deliberate nonsense applies the wheeze about “social construction” to the realm of biology, or anatomy. Among other things, the 3,000-word essay “argues” that “The penis vis-à-vis maleness is an incoherent construct. . . . The conceptual penis is better understood not as an anatomical organ but as a gender-performative, highly fluid social construct.” As the authors note, the piece is “utter nonsense posing as academic scholarship.” Nevertheless, it was eagerly accepted by a “high-quality,” “peer-reviewed” journal. Why? Because it caters vigorously to a radical feminist, anti-male ideology. It is funny, yes, embarrassing, no doubt, but welcome to the contemporary university and its bankrupt culture of malevolent nonsense.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 35 Number 10 , on page 2

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2017/6/meanwhile-in-the-academy>