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Opportunity knocks

On recent hoaxes exposing academic puffery.

As we recall, it was Benjamin Disraeli who observed that, “next to knowing when to seize an opportunity, the most important thing in life is to know when to forgo an advantage.”

We suppose that a teaching position in academia is a sort of advantage. Less and less, at most institutions, is it an opportunity. This melancholy truth is something that Peter Boghossian will doubtless appreciate. Boghossian is—or perhaps by the time you read this, *was*—an assistant professor at Portland State University. Yes, *that* Portland, the one whose name you cannot hear without sniggering as visions of sugarplums and social justice snowflakes (not to mention masked Antifa thugs) dance in your head. Portland State University is the perfect academic institution for that *echt* politically correct city. It is aggressively undistinguished academically but firing on twelve cylinders in the social justice–identity politics sweepstakes.

In this, it may almost go without saying, psu is par for the course in the fetid swamps of Academia, Inc. So much of what passes for “research” in universities these days is indistinguishable from tendentious, politically inspired nonsense. Longtime readers of *The New Criterion* know well whereof we speak. We have regularly offered specimens of the genre for the delectation and disapprobation of our readers. We will forbear to offer more on this occasion. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping an axiom enunciated by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in mind as one ponders such repellent phenomena. We mean a specific application of the Leibnizian principle of “the identity of indiscernibles.” If something is indistinguishable from nonsense, it *is* nonsense. As Leibniz’s near-contemporary Baruch Spinoza was fond of concluding: *QED*.

We say “*QED*.” But although the thing that was to have been demonstrated has in fact been demonstrated—indeed with “damnable iteration,” as Falstaff put it in another context—the academic establishment, bent on pursuing the advantages of reputation, promotion, and tenure, refuses to acknowledge the proof staring it in the face.

This is something that Professor Boghossian, together with two friends not employed by psu, sought to address. In brief, they composed twenty intentionally nonsensical essays that

pulsated with fashionable jargon and politically correct sentiments and submitted them, under various pseudonyms, to a variety of social science journals. Some were rejected. But four were accepted and published; three were accepted but have not yet been published; others are (or were) under review.

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The title of one of the winners, published in an organ called *Gender, Place and Culture*, was "Human reactions to rape culture and queer performativity at urban dog parks in Portland, Oregon." The very title sums up the fatuousness that Professor Boghossian and his friends sought to expose. The icing on the cake is the authors' summary of the paper's thesis:

That dog parks are rape-condoning spaces and a place of rampant canine rape culture and systemic oppression against "the oppressed dog" through which human attitudes to both problems can be measured. This provides insight into training men out of the sexual violence and bigotry to which they are prone.

We'll wager that you tittered at "the oppressed dog." But the peer reviewers were deeply impressed. One began her encomium with the observation that "this is a wonderful paper—incredibly innovative, rich in analysis, and extremely well-written and organized given the incredibly diverse literature sets and theoretical questions brought into conversation." The editor of the journal wrote to the pseudonymous author to praise the essay and offer to publish it as a featured article in a future issue because "it draws attention to so many themes from the past scholarship informing feminist geographies." No doubt. Readers interested in delving further into this midden of insanity can find all of the essays, along with comments from editors of the journals they were intended for, online at *Areo* magazine under the title "Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship."

This delicious enterprise will remind readers of the Sokal Hoax of 1996, named for the physicist Alan Sokal, who startled the sancta sanctorum of trendy academic self-satisfaction when he composed an essay called "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity"—a crackling pile of gibberish—and sent it to the once-trendy journal *Social Text*, which promptly published it.

Why did *Social Text* publish it? Because here they had a bona fide scientist arguing in owlsh terms, with all the impenetrable jargon that they so loved, for two of their favorite theses. One, "that physical 'reality,' no less than social 'reality,' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct"; and, two, that "scientific 'knowledge,' so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it." Hot dog!

Professor Boghossian and his friends adopted essentially the same strategy, updated the aroma of the nonsense they confected with little squirts of *à la mode* sexual perversity, and Presto! lots of egg

on the countenance of the wrinkled, virtue-signaling academic establishment.

Alan Sokal endured the obloquy of that establishment but, protected by tenure and an admirable carapace of common sense, not only survived the onslaught of the embarrassed natives but emerged as a sort of hero for the partisans of sanity. It is unclear whether Professor Boghossian will enjoy a similar fate. Naturally, he has been subjected to an unofficial smear campaign on campus. Nasty messages have been pasted to his office door, he has been threatened, screamed at, and spat upon by angry opponents, and his likeness has been defaced with swastikas and other emblems of dubious endearment. He now requires bodyguards when attending public events.

Even more worrisome is the interest the panjandrums of the administration at psu have taken in his case. Within days of his hoax being revealed last fall, he received an official notice that he was suspected of “fabricating data.”

As one of his collaborators noted, Professor Boghossian was later found guilty of failing to obtain institutional approval for “conducting research on human subjects.” “But,” you object, “there were no real human subjects. No data was ‘fabricated’ because no real ‘data’ was offered. It was a send-up, a satire.”

You may say so. But social justice warriors are not distinguished for their sense of humor or their appreciation of satire, especially when it is directed at members of their tribe. Indeed, one of the most pernicious effects of the whole totalitarian project of political correctness is to have made satire almost impossible. Satire depends upon a generally accepted horizon of normality to succeed. But it is not at all clear that, in the exotic purlieus of the academy today, we can count on such a shared horizon of values. Is there any absurdity that one can confidently put forward as satire without worrying that one will have already been outstripped by the frantic disciples of “intersectionality” and other allotropes of politically correct animus? We’ve made the experiment and have failed dismally. No matter what gibberish we imagine, a real-life social justice warrior has always beaten us to the punch and has offered in earnest something similar but even more egregious.

As we write, it is unclear what the inquisitors at psu will do to their errant charge. Professor Boghossian may face various official sanctions, but as yet there is no final word about his future at psu. He and his collaborators are surely correct that, as they write in their introduction to the online archive at *Areo*,

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something has gone wrong in the university—especially in certain fields within the humanities. Scholarship based less upon finding truth and more upon attending to social grievances has become firmly established, if not fully dominant, within these fields, and their scholars increasingly bully students, administrators, and other departments into adhering to their worldview.

In our view, Professor Boghossian and his friends performed a public service by engaging in these acts of intellectual fumigation. It will be instructive to see whether they have seized an opportunity or wagered on a deceptive advantage. We hope that the great Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has been a stalwart ally for those besieged by illiberal liberals on campus, has this case on their radar.

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