

The post-modernist wonderland: Intellectual Impostures by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont

Stefan Steinberg
1 July 2000

Intellectual Impostures, Profile Books ISBN 1 86197 1249

Intellectual Impostures has now been published in number of languages including English, French and German, and is also available in an affordable English paperback version. It should be read by all those who have an interest in modern ideological trends, in particular, the various somewhat nebulous schools of thought included under the hybrid term “postmodernism”.

Authors Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont take up their lance and shield and go into battle against the many absurdities that are to be found among the works of a number of the most prominent of the French post-modernists. While this writer does not agree with a number of comments or conclusions drawn by Sokal and Bricmont, both are to be congratulated for their efforts to deflate postmodernism's monstrous balloon of misconceptions, or, as they themselves put it, “to stimulate a critical attitude, not merely towards certain individuals, but towards a part of the intelligentsia (both in the United States and Europe) that has tolerated and even encouraged this type of discourse” (p. 6).

It is worth briefly recalling the prehistory of the book *Intellectual Impostures*. In 1996 Sokal, who is a physicist at New York University, submitted an article for publication in a magazine called *Social Text* which is regarded as an influential left-leaning periodical devoted to sociology and the relatively newly developed field of “cultural studies”. Sokal named his article *Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*.

In the course of few pages he included as much gobbledegook and pseudo-science as imagination and space allowed. With the indulgence of the reader, a small example: “the pi of Euclid and the G of Newton, formerly thought to be constant and universal, are now perceived in their ineluctable historicity; and the putative observer becomes fatally de-centred, disconnected from any epistemic link to a space-time point.” The editors of the magazine, including prominent left-wing radical Stanley Aaronowitz, cofounder of the journal and professor at City University of New York, welcomed the piece as a serious contribution and published it.

Only after its appearance and the admission by Sokal that the article was a hoax did the backsliding on the part of the magazine's editors begin. Sokal had put his finger on a sore spot, and in *Intellectual Impostures* he attempts to probe and deepen the wound.

The book deals with some of the most well-known figures of French postmodernism—Jacques Lacan, Jean-Pierre Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudillard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, amongst others. A series of examples are introduced from their work to demonstrate the cavalier way in which they develop and demonstrate their arguments.

Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva

Luce Irigaray is a prominent French feminist with philosophical and scientific post-modernist pretensions. Her work is well regarded amongst layers of the academia in Europe and America. In one of her essays, “*Le sujet de la science est-il sexue?*” (1987), she turns her attention to an issue that has been virtually ignored in treatments of Einstein's famous relativity

theory. She poses the question: “Is $e=mc^2$ a sexed equation?” She continues: “Perhaps it is. Let us make the hypothesis that it is insofar as it privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us. What seems to me to indicate the possible sexed nature of the equation is not directly its uses by nuclear weapons, rather it is having privileged what goes the fastest...” (p. 100).

In another text on related issues Irigaray gives vent to her spleen: “But what does the mighty theory of relativity do for us except establish nuclear power plants and question our bodily inertia, that necessary condition of life?” (p. 98).

In fact, the argument here is not so tortuous as many to be found amongst the post-modernists. Einstein (a man—q.e.d!) developed his relativity equation, which has become a cornerstone of modern science. A corollary of Einstein's equation is the impossibility of physical objects travelling faster than the speed of light, i.e., that the speed of light is the fastest comprehensible speed. Speed, according to a supposition of Irigaray, is a predominantly male characteristic. Einstein's “fixation” with speed in his equation is sexually motivated. Thus his whole equation is dubious (and a threat to our bodily inertia—long live inertia!).

The fact that male bodies are confronted with exactly the same physical problems as female bodies in attempting to attain the speed of light is swept aside in favour of Irigaray's argument, which has more in common with Alice in Wonderland than serious reasoning. The conclusion reached by Sokal and Bricmont on Irigaray's piece is eminently sober: “Unfortunately, Irigaray's claims show a superficial understanding of the subjects she addresses, and consequently bring nothing to the discussion.”

Irigaray has evidently strayed into a field about which she knows very little and come unstuck. We will take a deep breath and move on.

Julia Kristeva is another leading light in the post-modernist school, who has attempted to establish a connection between literary activity and mathematics. In particular, she has attempted to reconcile poetry with set theory, a special branch of algebra. One paragraph from her work “*Semeiotike: Recherches for a Semioanalysis*” (1969) is typical:

“Poetic language (which we shall henceforth denote by the initials pl) contains the code of linear logic. Moreover, we can find in it all the combinatoric figures that algebra has formalized in a system of artificial signs and that are not externalised at the level of the manifestation of the usual language” (p. 41).

Sokal and Bricmont draw out the many contortions and falsifications of mathematical concepts made by Kristeva in the course of her article. At the same time they point out that she never once in her text puts forward a serious argument to justify her main thesis of a relation between poetry and a branch of mathematics.

Once again one could draw breath and conclude that this is another overrated theorist who has mistakenly been elevated to prominence. However, the list of travesties continues.

Sokal and Bricmont devote chapter after chapter to the most respected figures of French contemporary thought, many of whom would describe

themselves as left-oriented in terms of their politics. The assembled intellectuals utilise proven and valued concepts from natural science in a spurious way in order to prop up controversial theories in the fields of sociology, literary criticism, linguistics, cultural studies and a number of other disciplines.

What is postmodernism?

Sokal and Bricmont have assembled sufficient material to support the case that postmodernism has brought forward at least as much nonsense as the clerical debate over how many angels can dance on the point of a needle. But is that all there is to it? Is postmodernism just nonsense? What is postmodernism? What are the roots of this movement?

Sokal and Bricmont make a number of interesting observations in this respect. First, they correctly identify the general tendency of postmodernism as a school of thought to be the rejection of a comprehensible objective reality and the introduction of relativism into every field of thought and science.

In addition, the authors acknowledge the particular affinity of broad layers of the “academic left” for post-modernist theories. In response to a number of “left” criticisms of an earlier edition of *Intellectual Impostures*, Sokal himself explains why he wrote his book: “Why did I do it? I must confess that I’m an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class. And I’m a stodgy old scientist who believes, naively, that there exists an external world, that there exist objective truths about that world, and that my job is to discover some of them” (p. 249).

Sokal and Bricmont identify French intellectuals as the driving force behind postmodernism, but point out that the movement has been broadly taken up by layers of the intelligentsia in Britain and America: “The lackadaisical attitude toward scientific rigour that one finds in Lacan, Kristeva, Baudrillard and Deleuze had an undeniable success in France during the 1970s and is still remarkably influential there. This way of thinking spread outside France, notably in the English-speaking world during the 1980s and 1990s” (p. 194).

In one passage Sokal and Bricmont concede there is a “sociological link, often exaggerated” with respect to postmodernism, but then go on to say: “In particular, the ideas analysed here have little, if any, conceptual or logical connection with politics.” As a consequence of their own hypothesis, the authors have little more of interest to say about the sources of postmodernism.

In contrast, the leading figures of the post-modernist movement are not so reticent at delineating the social, historical and political roots of their own thinking. Jean-Francois Lyotard is regarded by many as a grandfather or “Pope” of the post-modernist movement. In his book *The Post-modern Condition* he makes a distinction between the modern and the post-modern:

“I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.

“Simplifying to the extreme I define post-modern as incredulity toward the metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds most notably the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university function which in part relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great voyages, its great goal” (Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Post-modern Condition*, 1977).

Lyotard regards as metanarrative all philosophical and social conceptions that proceed from the possibility of arriving at a general understanding of the world and society—a scientific understanding which could then provide the basis for consciously changing the world. Lyotard

firmly rejects any such conception.

He is not alone amongst the post-modernists in regarding the German philosopher Hegel (“the dialectics of the Spirit”) as the greatest offender in this respect. The post-modernist antipathy towards Hegel (more on this question later) is, in particular, directed at the German philosopher’s all-embracing world outlook, based on a dialectical method. Equally suspect in the eyes of the post-modernists is the materialist reworking of Hegel’s dialectic by Marx and Engels, which became a social force in the form of the socialist workers movement.

Postmodernism and Stalinism

Equating Stalinism and its crimes with genuine socialism, Lyotard and the other post-modernists hold that the twentieth century marks the final failure of the Marxist “metanarrative” (“the emancipation of the rational or working subject”). In addition, they declare their dissatisfaction with any overall theory upholding the possibility of developing capitalism on a rational basis (“the creation of wealth”).

Although Sokal and Bricmont belittle the role of politics in the development of postmodernism, a glimpse at Lyotard’s biography reveals that the evolution of his theories is intimately bound up with his own experiences of left-wing post-war politics in France.

Born in Versailles in 1924, Lyotard studied philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne in Paris. As a young man he was active in trade union politics and was radicalised, in particular, by his first-hand view of French colonialism in Algeria, where he worked as a teacher. Rejecting the Stalinised French Communist Party, which collaborated in the suppression of the Algerian national movement, Lyotard joined a group called *Socialism and Barbarism* lead by Cornelius Castoriadis. While referring to themselves as Trotskyists, the group rejected Trotsky’s analysis of the Soviet Union, which they maintained was a type of state capitalist economy.

Following Castoriadis’s own rapid evolution to the right in the fifties, Lyotard split with the Socialism and Barbarism group to form his own organisation in 1964 around a magazine called *Workers Power*. Two years later, in 1966, he broke completely with revolutionary politics. He described this process retrospectively and with disarming honesty in an interview in 1988: “A stage of my life was ending, I was leaving the service of the revolution, I would do something else, I had saved my skin.”

Many of the post-modernist theorists share a similar political evolution. Julia Kristeva published her first essays in *Les Temps Modernes*, the newspaper founded by French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, who himself sympathised with French Stalinism and at the end of his career showed a certain inclination toward Maoism. A number of other post-modernists were either influenced by Sartre or by his most prominent successor at the *Ecole Normale Superior*, Louis Althusser (for many years Central Committee member of the French Communist Party responsible for ideological issues).

A cursory investigation of the roots of many leading figures in the post-modernist movement reveals at some point either membership in, or, at very least, close contact with Stalinist or left-wing radical organisations. Within the framework of a book review it is not possible to deal at length with the sociological development of broad layers of intellectuals in post-war France, but even the most superficial examination points to the enormous role played by the French Communist Party as the leading left-wing organisation in post-war France.

Stalinist dogma formed an important part of French intellectual life. The further degeneration and move to the right on the part of Stalinism in the post-war period, the party’s crimes in relation to Algeria and Vietnam, the betrayal of the radicalised student and workers’ movement in 1968, and finally the collapse of the Soviet block were crucial in spreading disillusionment and disorientation and catapulting a part of the intelligentsia to the right.

In his book *The New Constellation*, American writer Richard Bernstein undertakes to combat some of the excesses of the post-modernists and, in particular, to defend Hegel and the dialectic, but in so doing Bernstein himself graphically sums up the general pressure confronting layers of the intelligentsia (not just in France) in the twentieth century following the experiences of fascism and Stalinism:

“Anyone experiencing the twentieth century where there has been so much violence, barbarism, genocide can scarcely avoid being incredulous about a narrative of history as the progressive realisation of freedom. After Auschwitz and the *Gulag*, one cannot avoid being suspicious and sceptical of achieving reconciliation with reality through speculative comprehension. The entire metaphysics of being ‘at home’ in the world now seems hollow” (*The New Constellation*, p. 306).

Czech President Vaclav Havel also, in his own way, reflects the connection between the crisis of modern ideology and the collapse of Stalinism, when he says: “The fall of Communism can be regarded as a sign that modern thought—based on the premise that the world is objectively knowable, and that the knowledge so obtained can be absolutely generalised—has come to a final crisis” (quoted in *Intellectual Impostures*, p. 181).

The political agenda of the post-modernists

It is true that a section of the post-modernists have been plunged into nihilism and pessimism, singing the praises of “inertia”. Today French intellectuals have to apologise for their non-adherence to reactionary nineteenth century German philosophy. Two intellectuals, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, went so far as to write a book entitled *Why We're Not Nietzscheans*. But it would be wrong to ignore the fact that, although sceptical of being able to implement fundamental social change, the post-modernists do have their own political agenda.

According to the post modernists all “metanarratives”, i.e., comprehensive attempts to change the world in a progressive fashion, have failed utterly. The working class has discredited itself as an instrument for social change and the collapse of Stalinism demonstrates the impossibility of fundamentally changing society for the better.

The alternative which remains has, perhaps, been best articulated by another doyen of the post-modernist movement, Michel Foucault, who wrote: “There is no locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case.”

Together with Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard, Foucault emphasised the necessity of developing micro-politics and micro-struggles. Such a strategy has an obvious appeal to advocates of single-issue type politics: separatists and nationalists of every shade, environmentalists, feminists, and so on.

The weaknesses of the approach of Sokal and Bricmont

Despite the sharpness of their critique of the post-modernists, Sokal and Bricmont share a fundamental common point with their opponents—antipathy towards the dialectic. The most prominent of the post-modernist thinkers make no secret of their hatred of the dialectic: “What I detested more than anything was Hegelianism and the Dialectic (“I Have Nothing More to Admit”, *Semiotext*, Giles Deleuze, 1977).

Abhorrence for the dialectic (and life!) is also expressed in the following cryptic, but not untypical, quote by Felix Guattari: “Existence, as a process of deterritorialisation, is a specific inter-machinic operation which superimposes itself on the promotion of singularised existential intensities. And, I repeat, there is no generalised syntax for these deterritorialisations. Existence is not dialectical, not representable. It is hardly livable! (*Intellectual Impostures*, p. 158).

Sokal and Bricmont also oppose dialectics. As a consequence, their own description of scientific method is weak, to say the least. Seeking to emphasise the continuity between everyday conceptions and those of scientific theory, they argue that scientific methods are “not radically

different from the rational attitude used in everyday life” (p. 54), although they then qualify this remark and state that “it would be naïve to push this connection too far” (p. 55).

In fact, the history of scientific development is testimony to the fact that scientific method and discovery are not just the logical extension of common sense. The first decade of this century witnessed a raging ideological controversy sparked by advances in the scientific understanding of the atom. The “disappearance” of the solid, traditional basic particle in favour of an atom composed of a field of electrical forces led some scientists and philosophers (Mach, Bogdanov) to put a question mark before the existence of matter as well as man's capacity for objective knowledge of the world.

Lenin entered the debate in 1908 with his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, in which he combated philosophical relativism and defended both the objective nature of the material world and the ability of humans to correctly cognise the world as the basis for science. At the same time he made clear that the conflict between common sense notions of the atom and the revelations arising from new scientific research could only be resolved on the basis of a dialectical understanding of matter and human thought.

The issue of philosophical relativism was also the subject of controversy amongst ideological and cultural tendencies in the new Soviet state. In response to philosophical writings by a number of representatives of the Futurist movement, the editor of the influential literary magazine *Red Virgin Soil*, Aleksander Voronsky, commented on the writings of Chuzhak and others:

“All this has nothing in common with the dialectic of Marx, Plekhanov and Lenin. Over these and similar writings blows the wind of absolute relativism, denying all sense of stability. We communists are also relativists, but our relativism is not absolute, but relative.... Comrade Chuzhak argues not according to Heraclitus, who asserted that everything flows, everything changes, but according to Zeno, who proposed that it is impossible to step into the same stream twice, for ‘everything flows, everything changes.’ Heraclitus was a dialectician, while Zeno was a metaphysical relativist. In the camp of bourgeois scholars there are now very many such relativists” (Aleksander Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, p. 107).

On the eve of the Second World War, in the struggle against a petty-bourgeois opposition tendency within the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky made his own powerful contribution to the elaboration of materialist dialectics. The leading theoretician of the opposition at that time, James Burnham, shared a number of the conceptions of the young Lyotard, arguing that a form of capitalism had been restored in the Soviet Union.

Drawing out the philosophical method of the opposition, Trotsky concludes his concise elaboration of dialectics with the following warning: “Dialectic logic expresses the laws of motion in contemporary scientific thought. The struggle against materialist dialectics on the contrary expresses a distant past, conservatism of the petit bourgeoisie, the self-conceit of university routinists and ... a spark of hope for an after-life.” (Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*).

The crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy—its physical destruction in the thirties of the socialist political and intellectual opposition in Russia, together with its embrace of nationalism and complete perversion of the Marxist dialectic—were central in sabotaging the socialist workers movement and fostering new schools of irrationalism and relativism.

The army of relativists has swelled mightily in line with the spread of the contemporary school of thought of postmodernism. But at the same time there is something rather putrid and hypocritical in the claim by members of the movement that they represent the very latest in thought.

Their ideological heroes are, in the main, nineteenth century opponents of the Enlightenment—Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard. Rather than

indicating anything new in terms of ideas and conceptions, the diverse theses and texts of the post-modernists, exuding a contempt for genuine scientific method, cultural pessimism, individualism, obscurantism and a rejection of historical truth, point to an ideological dead end, the distorted reflection of a social order which itself has long run out of steam.

Despite the weaknesses of their approach, Sokal and Bricmont have broken academic ranks to demonstrate the absurdity of much of post-modernist thinking. Their book deserves a wide public.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact