

Portland State University threatens to fire Peter Boghossian for authoring “Grievance Studies” hoax

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Portland State University (PSU) professor Peter Boghossian, co-author of the “Grievance Studies” hoax, is under imminent threat of losing his job in an act of apparent retaliation by the university administration.

On October 2, 2018, Boghossian, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay published an article titled, “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship,” exposing the anti-scientific and right-wing character of identity politics and postmodernist philosophy. The article reviewed how the hoax’s authors succeeded in publishing intentionally absurd articles in a number of postmodernist academic journals, with editors and peer reviewers heaping praise on the faux-studies.

Shortly after publication, PSU initiated an Institutional Review Board (IRB) investigation that ultimately found Boghossian guilty of “ethics violations” for his work on the hoax. His career is now in limbo as he awaits punishment.

“It’s been stressful, I’m not going to sugar coat it,” Boghossian told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They will go to great lengths to get rid of me. I have to walk on eggshells. I’ve faced numerous threats. Someone spat at me in public a few weeks ago.”

The university has barred Boghossian from participating in school-sponsored research projects. On December 17, Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies Mark R. McLellan wrote to Boghossian, “I further direct that no sponsored research proposal or program will be approved by Portland State University where you are a principal investigator, collaborator or contributor in any substantial manner...”

In one of the hoax articles, the authors claimed to have observed 1,000 hours of “dog humping patterns” at dog parks and said the data proved that men needed to be “trained” like dogs to prevent rape culture. This article

was selected by *Gender, Place and Culture* as one of the most important contributions in the journal’s history.

Amusingly, PSU’s McLellan notified Boghossian in a separate letter that the university was investigating whether Boghossian harmed any dogs in the course of his made-up dog park study:

“Because one of your articles...speaks of research into animal behavior, whether factual or not, I find that I must ask the faculty Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) to ensure appropriate actions were taken as necessary to remain in compliance.”

But the reactionary implications of academia’s obsession with identity politics are no laughing matter. Boghossian, Pluckrose and Lindsay also secured publication of a feminist re-write of a chapter of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and won peer review praise of a proposal to force white elementary school students to sit in chains to be shamed for “white privilege.”

Boghossian has been ostracized by his fellow professors and lecturers at PSU, none of whom have come to his defense on the public record to date.

On November 9, twelve PSU faculty published a letter in the school paper, the *Vanguard*, accusing him of “fraud,” “self-aggrandizement” and “academic dishonesty.”

The authors—all of whom remained anonymous—employed the tone of inner-departmental gossip and resorted to personal attacks: “Desperate reasoning, basic spite and a perverse interest in public humiliation seem to have overridden any actual scholarly goals.”

They conclude, “These types of fraudulent, time-wasting, anti-intellectual activities are something we are becoming nationally known for under the guise of free speech or academic freedom.”

Under these conditions, Boghossian has come under threat of physical attack. “One guy followed me into the bathroom recently and asked me what kind of car I drove and told me that he would find me,” Boghossian said. “He called me a fascist—the irony, right? When I offered to talk, he said, ‘I don’t want to talk to you, I want to hurt you.’”

Citing confidentiality concerns for Boghossian, PSU’s public relations director told the WSWS the university would not comment on potential free speech implications of the decision to bar Boghossian from further research. PSU issued a statement saying its findings against Boghossian adhere to federal and state law.

The university says Boghossian violated two ethical obligations by (1) falsifying data, and (2) failing to obtain IRB approval for a test of “human subjects.”

The first charge stems from the fact that Boghossian, Pluckrose and Lindsay did not actually view 1,000 hours of “rape culture and queer performativity at urban dog parks in Portland, Oregon” as the title of their paper states. The latter charge asserts that the Grievance Studies authors were conducting tests on editors and peer reviewers, though these “tests” only consisted of sending them articles to read.

Notably, PSU is not charging Boghossian with plagiarism, although Boghossian, Pluckrose and Lindsay *by their own admission* plagiarized part of *Mein Kampf*. But making this charge would be an admission that a peer-reviewed academic journal published the writings of Hitler, the archetypal identity politician—of the “Aryan race.”

In a letter supporting Boghossian, Alan Sokal, whose 1996 “Sokal Hoax” paper consisting of intentionally meaningless postmodernist jargon was published in the journal *Social Text*, said “it would be a grave injustice to punish Professor Boghossian.”

Denouncing the claim that Boghossian violated academic ethics, Sokal explained:

“Professor Boghossian and his collaborators have a strong affirmative defense on the grounds that their actions were undertaken in the public interest. At no time did they seek to benefit personally—whether financially or professionally—from the hoax. (Quite the contrary, it appears that the fallout from the hoax has had a profound negative effect on their careers and their personal lives.) Their sole aim was to test the intellectual standards in certain sectors of contemporary academia and to draw public attention to shortcomings they might find.”

None of the Grievance Studies hoax authors challenge

the right of the IRB panel to investigate ethical violations against Boghossian, but they are each concerned that the PSU investigation was not conducted properly.

“As the anonymous letter against Peter published by the faculty in the PSU *Vanguard* in early November indicates, the board may be under political or ideological pressure,” James Lindsay told the WSWS.

Boghossian’s co-authors are calling for his colleagues to come to his defense.

Lindsay said, “I think we’re seeing the academic climate changing, as many of the letters of support indicate, and it remains to be seen where Portland State will fall in this. Certainly, I would expect more outspoken support from his own colleagues, and that’s disappointing, but perhaps they’re nervous to speak up, given the circumstances. They are, after all, subject to the same boards, committees, and administrators.”

Helen Pluckrose added, “Twelve of Peter’s colleagues have already demonstrated a very uncollegial attitude with their hit piece in the *Vanguard*, but there are some who support him and I’d urge them to say so. Not secretly, by email. Openly.”

Boghossian denounced those who have labeled him as right-wing for opposing identity politics and postmodernism. “We’ve been labeled ‘alt-right,’ which is ludicrous. I have never voted for a Republican in my life. I’m a staunch liberal. Socially, I am pro-gay marriage, pro-choice, pro-immigration, anti-death penalty. I’m a militant atheist.”

He concluded: “All these people who masquerade as left are not left-wing. They don’t believe in grand narratives. There is only subjectivity and individual experience.”



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