

***Can We Redeem Academia's Worst Contempt?*¹**
Adam Riggio, Independent Scholar and Writer

Present Conflict, Future Sorrows

The mid-2010s will be remembered as the years when the last sanities of the West finally fell apart. The phrase is a poetry of hyperbole, but as a sweeping generalization sadly accurate. Criticism in wider culture had lost its purpose of progressive, reformist improvement. Everything short of perfection became grounds for denunciation. And with so many different visions of perfection, no one could survive without terrible wounds.

But I don't blame the internet. It still holds so much promise. As does humanity, as we shall see.

If the reactionary political movements of the mid-2010s had any substance, it was impotent rage. Rage at the perceived hopelessness of what seemed a permanently stagnant economy. Impotence because the reactionaries chose scapegoating over reform of stagnation's root causes.

The sudden revival in this period of Alan Sokal's techniques of academic denunciation and fraud took the form of this impotent rage. Although Sokal, when discussing his original hoax in 1996, described himself as a left-wing progressive, he was truly a reactionary. His technique was scorched earth: the total denunciation of an entire academic discipline as charlatanry and fakery. He used a theatrical deception—writing, submitting, and publishing a paper in a nonsensical parody of post-structuralist philosophy of science—to denounce as the same nonsense everything the entire postmodern (followers of Derrida) and process (followers of Deleuze and Guattari) theory communities had to say about science.

Were there postmodern and processual theorists who had little authentic knowledge of the scientific principles at the heart of their riffs? Certainly. Did the entire community of those theorists deserve to be tarnished with the same smears? Certainly not. Nonetheless, many theorists' reputations were ruined.

And the shadow persists.

Twenty years after Sokal's nuclear attack on the very legitimacy of critical theory, new spectres arose. Like most spectres, they had no real affect, but their clear outlines revealed the true motives behind using hoax as a method of criticism.

The outline of a shadow is always more clear than the shape of a physical body. It is a stark separation of light and dark. Shadows illuminate.

¹ Thanks to Fred D'Agostino, Stephen Norrie, and Steve Fuller for important contributions in the research and planning of this essay.

The Nuclear Option of Critique

The Sokal Hoax was just that—an act of deception. The submission of a paper in good faith that was designed to deceive, and discredit the deceived for being duped. Peter Dreier, with an article published in *American Prospect* in early 2016, admitted to a similar deception, with the caveat that he never actually followed through. Instead of submitting an article to an editor-reviewed academic journal written entirely in nonsense words, Dreier submitted such an abstract to a panel at 2010’s Society for Social Studies of Science conference, held in Tokyo that year.

Annoyed at the density of what he would—six years later—call “academic drivel” in the other abstracts on the conference program, Dreier submitted an abstract that he assembled from scattered references and garbled phrases that sounded enough like technical critical theory to pass muster. The organizers of the “On the Absence of Absences” panel accepted it.

His poor imitation of Sokal truly was a farce, in every aspect. Sokal, for all the bile of his attitude toward postmodernism, still had a lofty, ambitious goal. He was sure that the influence of philosophies and interpretive models better suited to cultural and literary studies on analyses of scientific ideas undercut the real power of science to make social progress. With this certainty in his grasp, Sokal’s fraud cut his enemies’ jugular. Whatever the real quality of the ideas of any postmodern theorist of science in North America, they were thoroughly discredited.

Fourteen years after Sokal, Dreier did not even have the fortitude to follow his own hoax to its conclusion. He could have written a nonsensical presentation, flown to Tokyo, delivered it completely seriously, maintained his false air of congeniality and friendliness throughout the conference, and flown home to reveal his fraud.

He would have denounced the panel organizers—and by implication 4S as a whole—as unprofessional and incompetent at best. Frauds of equal or greater measure at worst. The credibility of the entire discipline of social epistemology and any other knowledge discipline that has ever participated in 4S would have been terribly wounded.

Perhaps even the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* itself would not exist. The Collective was organized and its website launched in 2011. If the field of so many founding SERRC members were attacked with a regeneration of the Sokal hoax, they all may have been too busy trying to save their own professional reputations to found an organization whose mere existence breaks so many norms of academic research publishing.

Carrying out a Sokal-like hoax is not a method of subtle criticism—it is an accusation that you so fundamentally misunderstand your own field that you cannot even tell the true from the false from the nonsensical. Worse, it is an accusation that appears to demonstrate its targets’ incompetence simply through being made. Once a successful

hoax is revealed, the targets already have to cover a terrible mistake that they themselves have made.

Tenured professors may not lose their university posts after being victims of such a prank, but it would be very difficult for contingently employed faculty to establish a career in the academic sector after the reputational damage of being caught up in it. Since the contingently employed and underemployed had come to constitute a growing majority of working faculty by the 2010s, it is reasonable to think that a Sokal Hoax exploding a discipline in the current era would actually ruin the academic careers of many of its victims.

A Simple Matter of Ethics

Dreier would have destroyed whole fields of knowledge, people's reputations, perhaps even their entire careers. He could have made an indelible mark on the global community of theorists and philosophers. Like a city reduced to ash. His legacy would have been assured.

Instead, he kept silent for six years. He wrote in 2016 that he felt asking his university to cover his flight to Tokyo to deliver a fraudulent presentation would be a waste of money. But surely Sokal's example would have demonstrated that his university would have backed such act of intellectual destruction. His department's research impact index would have skyrocketed!

I do not know what made Dreier confess now. I do not know what is peculiarly special or important in his life or his field's development today that would provoke his confession. Especially since his *American Prospect* article reads with a tone not of shame, but smugness.

He shares that smugness with the more courageous James Vander Putten. The University of Arkansas professor not only planned to carry out many such hoaxes, but made a vast research program from what would have been a plethora of frauds. Vander Putten's research question was to test the intellectual defences of researchers across the humanities and social sciences.

He sent abstracts and proposals to conference reviewers for inclusion. All these submissions contained obvious methodological errors. Vander Putten specifically targeted the conferences he did because he suspected them of lax standards, and that they existed for no other purpose than padding the participants' resumés. His goal was to trap these conferences and expose them.

Vander Putten eventually carried out his research with the approval of a commercial review board, Solutions IRB. But his own ethics review board at University of Arkansas rejected his plan wholeheartedly. As you might expect an ethics board to conclude, they found Vander Putten's plan horrifyingly unethical. For one, his plan made consent to be experimented upon impossible for any of the people whose gatekeeping he was testing.

As well, Vander Putten's experiment could have the real-world effect of severely damaging the reputation of fellow research professionals. Those who he succeeded in duping would have their credibility destroyed, a punishment too harsh to deliver without anything like a fair investigation.

I do not believe I need to state the irony that a research proposal whose purpose was to test the standards of institutional academic gatekeepers was rejected by the researcher's own institutional academic gatekeeper.

Nonetheless, I have.

When Sokal wrote his nonsense paper to *Social Text*, his actual stated purpose was to destroy the reputation and credibility of every postmodern theorist of science. As for Dreier, he merely seemed annoyed at the pretentious verbiage of a sub-discipline with which he had never really engaged. For such a relatively minor grievance, this potential nuclear option of public humiliation—whether at the time or six years after the fact—seems much too powerful a weapon for critique. Dreier could not have been ignorant of the devastating effect Sokal's hoax had on the field of Science and Technology Studies. It seems reasonable to think that he would have been mindful of the similar effect he could have had on the Social Studies of Science.

La Viva Póstuma: A Sort of Regeneration

Perhaps the saddest part of Dreier's miscarried deception and destruction is that a provocative work of philosophy and theory was never written when it could have been. You would, deservedly, be skeptical of this, since Dreier's abstract was nonsense from the start. It was not even informed nonsense. In the most egregious and illustrative example of this, Dreier included a random quote from David Bloor in his word salad of an abstract, after seeing other participants referring faithfully to his work. Dreier, however, had never read Bloor's work before, a sign that he did not even know the intellectual heritage of the field he dismissively called nothing but drivel.

Annoyance at his would-be fellow panelists' verbosity seems to have been his only motivator. Even after all these years, I still wonder what could finally have irritated him so much that he would open up about his fit of intellectual pique from six years before.

Yet there is so much to be made even from his nonsensical abstract.

From the scribes and rabbis who wrote the original Torah, to the troubadour-activists who sang "Which Side Are You On?" and "Waste Deep in the Big Muddy," to the gangbangers and hip-hoppers who create contemporary street rap, the relationship between culture, politics, religion and everyday life has been poorly understood. As Bloor observes: "In fact sociologists have been only too eager to limit their concern with science to its institutional framework and external factors relating to its rate of growth or direction this leaves untouched the nature of the knowledge thus

created.” There is an obvious tension between romanticism and reality, between humanity and barbarism, between self-reflection and communal expression, which pervades both the written word and the oral tradition.

Can a society promote utopianism and dystopianism simultaneously, while allowing its governing officials, whether military conquerors or democratically elected, to perform the necessary day-to-day functions of street-cleaning, sanitation, animal rescue, industrial production, hunting-and-gathering, maintaining law and order, and (what Heidegger called the “organicity of intellectual work”) educating children and reproducing the next generation.

We might call this a kind of scientism of contradiction, or the contradictions of scientific production, or the contradictory intellectual discipline of everyday life. In other words, can the rigors of so called “pure” intellectual work (including those of the priestly class and its modern counterparts), the artistry of craftwork (or the craft of artistry), and the degradations of subsistence agriculture, mining, factory work, and retail sales co-inhabit the same society without igniting the ticking time bomb of social implosion, as we’ve recently seen in riots in the French suburbs and in the ghettos and barrios of Los Angeles? How, in other words, does the globalization of both production and knowledge work (the so-called “Walmartization” of societies) challenge our ability to think clearly about what is true in contrast to what is delusion?

Self-delusion and self-discipline inhibits the reflective self, the postmodern membrane, the ecclesiastical impulse forbidden by truth-seeking and sun worship, problematizing the inchoate structures of both reason and darkness, allowing knowledge, half-knowledge, and knowledgelessness to undermine and yet simultaneously overcome the self-loathing that overwhelms the Gnostic challenge facing Biblical scribes, folksingers, and hip-hop rappers alike. Sociologists ignore these topics at their peril.

Verbose, most definitely. But when I examine these words in themselves, I can easily imagine a Dreier who was not writing fraudulently, but with the pen of a prophet. Far from nonsense, his abstract describes fundamental truths about human society that are the closest I believe we have yet come to the universally true for our time.

Anyone who understands what culture, politics, and religion are—the ideas and philosophies that are their frameworks and the power they have over people—knows that they are deeply and complexly intertwined with the daily drudgery of life. Scientific knowledge, like all truly profound or useful knowledge, has real, physical power beyond the walls of its institutions. Outside the research labs, universities, funding agencies, and schools, scientific knowledge transforms all of human existence.

Science has brought humanity utopian aspirations like universal education, global real-time communication, and medical technology and knowledge that lets us live as gods compared to people thousands of years ago. But science also brings us to the brink of destruction, and perhaps past it. Military technology kills millions. Government and corporate surveillance and espionage would wrap us in invisible chains. The unequal spread of our utopian technology damns hundreds of millions to poverty. Ecological destruction on a global scale threatens our very existence.

And there is a contradiction in the logic of the profound and the quotidian. We are not accustomed to the world and works of gods being part and parcel of the lives of mortals. Yet the profound transformations of scientific knowledge and technology are achieved through the daily actions of ordinary individuals all down the line. Individuals whose faces and names are invisible to the works of historians. Ordinary people produce globe-spanning utopias and catastrophes, even as they are swept up in it to their doom.

Producing the assemblage of globalized scientific humanity does not mean you control its actions. Even the elite classes who have typically led humanity—or at least believed so of themselves—are overpowered in the waves of a truly global economic and technological assemblage. Yet this is not the greatest problem of the contemporary world.

No, the greatest problem we face is that the leading edges of new knowledge have become so inaccessible to the masses of humanity that many no longer trust the institutions of knowledge production. Even professional knowledge producers can no longer understand each other's fields, so highly specialized they have become. Of what hope do ordinary working people have?

So we face the quandary of skepticism on a new, material scale. The masses of people who should be mobilizing knowledge for their own freedom so misunderstand and distrust the institutions that produce new knowledge, that they have turned against science itself. This is climate skepticism, the return to religious fundamentalisms, and the other anti-intellectual messages which gain increasing prominence and power in politics around the world. Alienated from knowledge, we will naturally return to prejudice. This is true of the most humble and the most elite.

On the Causes of Failure

When Alan Sokal completed his hoax on the journal *Social Text*—this includes not only his submission of a nonsensical article and its publication, but also his public humiliation of the journal's editors—he radically transformed the field. But that change was not for the better.

There followed a genuine disciplinary culling of Science and Technology Studies. Having been so brutally attacked for their mistakes in how they brought political content to the meaning of scientific concepts, the field shied permanently away from any political controversy whatsoever. Feminism, cultural studies, and race studies were forbidden in

STS, despite the contemporary power of feminist and racial justice movements which challenge unjust institutional structures so powerfully today.

Any intellectual discipline whose practitioners lack the will to challenge institutional structures for the harms and injustices they perpetuate lacks the social power required for its fullest maturity. Human knowledge at its fullest power must contain this political mission that unites truth and freedom. Total acquiescence will always be a form of ignorance.

One set of institutions that no longer deserve the total acquiescence of its members is the university system itself. I am not, nor have I ever been, anti-university in any simple sense, even though critics of the institution are often labelled as such.

Thankfully, the critiques that the SERRC began in the mid-2010s have continued in the years since, and have only gathered momentum. The 2019 publication of Stephen Norrie's book *Scriptonomicon: The Curse of Disciplines*, caused a minor sensation at the time. After the explosive reception of his panel about the book's themes at the following year's 4S conference, the SERRC has been at the leading edge of calls for institutional reform throughout the academic sector.

Scriptonomicon was as complete an analysis as was possible by one person of how the structure and institutional power dynamics of the 21st century university system not only erected unassailable walls between intellectual disciplines. It also describes how contemporary university institutions inevitably sabotaged the mechanisms of rigour and critique that professional intellectuals require as a minimum standard in their communities.

This short excerpt from Norrie's introduction makes the matter more clear than I can.

It's necessary to publish first, think later, regardless of whether there is something new to be said, and even as a condition for keeping alive a memory of the old. Where a field begins to run out of things to say, a bunch of French philosophers reinventing the philosophical jargon every five years and demonstrating how to make bogus analogies to physics, etc., becomes a godsend as it allows one to find something new to say about e.g. Shakespeare or even 'science in action'. Not everyone is able to find time to develop a theoretical framework sophisticated enough to comprehend the variety of political and theoretical standpoints people actually have, or to read stuff carefully, so misrepresentations are inevitable (and that's before you add in ideology & wishful thinking!).

Yet all this seems somehow, in our system, a necessary condition of teaching (some) young people how to understand Shakespeare! Moreover, because the humanities have been transformed into specialist publication factories, they no longer serve their traditional historical mission: roughly, providing a basic training in being an intelligent human being for

everyone (or at least everyone considered culturally relevant and capable of paying). So you get, for example, sociologists or STSers who are unable to fully survey the history of even their subfield, who usually lack the conceptual skills and knowledge to decode or contextualise it, still more lack any ability to understand their problems in broader historical context (because, oh yeah, we got rid of metanarratives because they were too ‘uncreative’), and in addition, are under pressure to produce something new and interesting in a situation marked by proliferation of jargons. In such a situation everyone is basically more or less exposed, more or less a fraud (for instance, here I am speaking authoritatively about a historical trajectory I’m actually still feel pretty fuzzy about).

So it’s no wonder that certain uncritical interpretative norms emerge. Don’t press your neighbour’s language too closely lest you be deconstructed in turn (or worse, shown to be incompetent)...

Rather than criticising individual academics who fail to live up to some of their more idealised standards (except in especially egregious cases), it seems to me better to try to articulate the contradictions and use them as a vehicle for consciousness raising among academics—though what we would like them to become conscious of is another matter.

Norrie’s casual tone throughout *Scriptonomicon*, almost like a rambling email from a close friend, endeared him to readers around the world. And the affordable price of *Scriptonomicon*’s softcover edition helped put him on many shelves and tablets.

The impenetrable language of the 4S panel Dreier had deceived a decade before was no empty verbiage or charlatanism. It was the voice of an understanding to which his own institution—the university system in the 21st century—had deafened him. Journals proliferate and disciplines fragment because precariously employed researchers must publish huge amounts of technical material absurdly quickly to remain competitive in the marketplace for tenured positions. These fragmenting sub-disciplines forget how to communicate in each other’s technical language because shrinking university library budgets shed subscriptions to all but the journals in its own faculties’ fields. Faculty rarely have time to read journals from outside fields anyway, since publications proliferate wildly in each of our own.

Anyone who cares deeply about the university system and the disciplines of philosophy and the wider humanities that have grown within it should take these insights to heart. But those insights will also break that heart. What deserves the blame for increasingly lax standards in multi-disciplinary academic gatekeeping is not unprofessional, lazy, or fraudulent gatekeepers. The institutions of knowledge had turned on knowledge itself. By the 21st century, the ivory tower had become catacombs, and researchers were lost in the darkness of this maze.

But there is light.

– *Toronto, Canada, January 2024*

Contact details: adamriggio@gmail.com