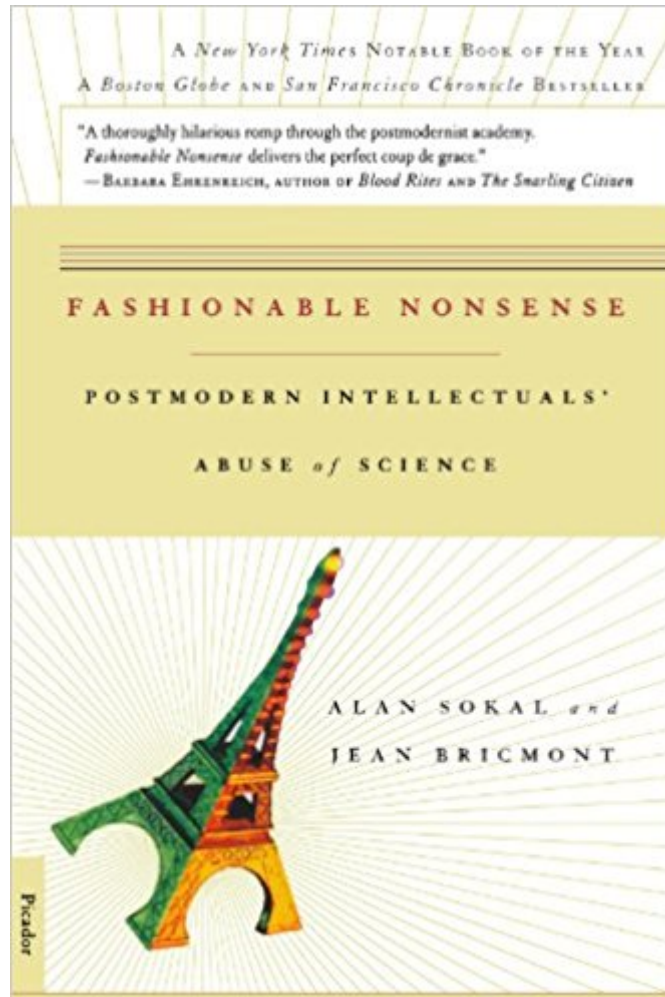


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Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse Of Science



Synopsis

In 1996, Alan Sokal published an essay in the hip intellectual magazine *Social Text* parodying the scientific but impenetrable lingo of contemporary theorists. Here, Sokal teams up with Jean Bricmont to expose the abuse of scientific concepts in the writings of today's most fashionable postmodern thinkers. From Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva to Luce Irigaray and Jean Baudrillard, the authors document the errors made by some postmodernists using science to bolster their arguments and theories. Witty and closely reasoned, *Fashionable Nonsense* dispels the notion that scientific theories are mere "narratives" or social constructions, and explored the abilities and the limits of science to describe the conditions of existence.

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Customer Reviews

Hard work to write, easy to read: instead of vice versa November 2, 2000 This book is not, centrally, an attack on deconstruction, post-modernism, social constructionism and so on. It is instead a tightly focussed attack on some French writers who are often associated with those ideas, Lacan, Deleuze, Kristeva, Baudrillard and others. Without confronting those writers' central ideas, "Fashionable nonsense" devastates their reputations. It shows them claiming authority in various scientific fields, using scientific "expertise" to enhance their authority and credibility, to bolster arguments on non-scientific propositions by analogy with scientific propositions, and to scare away dissenters. For example Lacan makes claims about topology for both his analogy and his argument on some matter concerning phallic psychology. Most readers, like me, would not know whether

Lacan's topology was reasonable or absurd, but Sokal and Bricmont show that Lacan wasn't merely "inaccurate"; he was "meaningless". It's reasonable to ask if Sokal and Bricmont are right about topology (and the other branches of science cited by the book's targets), while Lacan and the others were wrong. In a symposium in the November 2000 edition of "Meta Science", hostile critics of "Fashionable Nonsense" confronted Sokal and Bricmont. But only one critic even attempted to dispute that the book's targets wrote ignorant nonsense about science. This was Lacanian, who attempted to defend Lacan's topology: and that sole attempted defence was clearly and crushingly rebutted. It seems clear that in its science the book's credibility is unshaken. So Lacan's grasp of topology was so vague that he must have known that he couldn't make accurate and meaningful statements about it. But he went ahead, knowing that he didn't understand what he was writing. It follows that he was lazily and arrogantly relying on the likelihood that his readers wouldn't understand topology either. Therefore Lacan is guilty of intellectual fraud, or imposture, as in the original French title. So what? First, if Lacan is prepared to use intellectual fraud to make and support arguments, then some of the intellectual indulgences that academics allow each other, for example too seldom checking references, should not apply. His credibility logically diminishes, to the extent that the only statements by him that should be given credence are those that are backed by specific and checkable references to matters of fact, or based on sound argument from cited evidence. Second, this highlights the reality that Lacan (like the others skewered in this book) is peculiarly vulnerable to the withdrawal of intellectual indulgence. Once you decide to give credence only to those things in Lacan that are based on reasoning from evidence, as those terms are usually understood, what remains is little more than the residue of soap scum after the bursting of a glistening bubble. If I were to use Lacan's method I would write that soap bubble metaphor in more abstruse terms, stretch it for endless pages of waffle, and pretend that it was an argument or proof rather than merely a figure of speech. Also if I were Lacan, I would not look up the physics concerning soap bubbles and iridescence, but make something up and hope to get away with it. This is why the narrowness of Sokal and Bricmont's approach is well chosen. Other writers could not be so damaged by the withdrawal of intellectual indulgence. Nietzsche, for example, can be shown to be wrong on matters of fact, and that where he bothers to reason at all his reasoning is faulty, and that his real attitudes (pro-war, anti-compassion, misogynist, antidemocratic, antisemitic, and so on) are not the fashionable doctrines often attributed to him. But he will survive unscathed because unlike these French philosophists, who write like bureaucrats even when making "jokes", Nietzsche was a great writer. People like his wit, energy and poetic fire, and adolescent readers like the way he makes them feel superior to the "herd". In a different way Frege or Hume (say) are also

impervious to this sort of demolition. They could be shown to be wrong or even dishonest about some particular point, but this would not hurt the remainder of their work because in general their work does not depend on their reputations but on their reasoning. But Sokal and Bricmont's targets are ripe for the "Emperor's New Clothes" effect. Scepticism, once thought uncool and a product of stupidity and the failure to understand these deep writers, is suddenly permissible. Instead of being impressed by thickets of words and assuming that something profound must be in there somewhere, we do the hard work of close reading, discarding the phrases that mean nothing, working out precisely what is being claimed and whether those claims are backed by evidence or reasoning. Sokal and Bricmont (and Sokal alone with his splendid if mildly unfair hoax, also documented here), can reasonably claim to have had more to do with that process than any other writers. Apoplectic attacks on deconstruction by conservatives only strengthened the false appearance that here was something radical, interesting, and probably hip. But when Sokal and Bricmont's French wankers and their American acolytes return to an obscurity as deep as the obscurity of their texts, some of the ideas they espoused will remain. Post-structuralism and social constructionism pose respectable challenges to scientific positivism, that can be expressed clearly, that do not assume that the world is "only text", but that argue that much of our understanding is socially constructed. Sokal and Bricmont did not attack those ideas. They cleared away some writing that is unhelpful to the discussion of social constructionist and related ideas, demonstrating that some Big Names who were until recently considered central to the discussion were in fact merely passengers, and irrelevant to it. Finally, why five stars? It's a narrower book than is sometimes claimed, but the tight focus was well chosen. It is solid and much needed work. It must have been difficult to research and write, but it is easy to read. The exact opposite of the texts they skewer. Cheers! Laon

In 1994, physicist Alan Sokal from NYU, became fed up. A certain postmodernist influence within the academic community was challenging standards of logic, truth and intellectual inquiry. Could he possibly write a sham article bad enough to be obvious nonsense to any undergraduate physics student, yet good enough to get published in a leading pomo periodical? Unfortunately for the members of the screening committee for "Social Text," the answer was "yes." The article itself is presented in the back of "Fashionable Nonsense," complete with explanations about the misrepresented physics and the embedded jokes. It caters to agendas of pomo authorities rather than relying on logic, drips with unreadable prose and has outrageous claims about scientific theories. It includes an illogical train of thought, but apple-polishes the gurus it parodies. Sokal says,

"The fundamental silliness in my article lies in the dubiousness of its central thesis and in the 'reasoning' adduced to support it. Basically, I claim that quantum gravity had profound political and social implications." When Sokal saw that his article was actually going to be published, he began writing his expose of the hoax. They were published in different magazines on the same day. Sokal achieved instant infamy and the fallout lasted for years. In preparing to write his article, Sokal researched writings from many offending authors, but could only use a small part of the data. This book taps the files of his research and attempts to document more completely the repeated abuse of concepts from math and physics by postmodernist authors. This excerpt is from Lacan, a psychoanalyst who compared neurosis with mathematical topology - the study of geometric shapes that become distorted without being torn - a twisted doughnut: "This diagram [the Mobius strip] can be considered the basis of a sort of essential inscription at the origin, in the knot which constitutes the subject. This goes much further than you may think at first, because you can search for the sort of surface able to receive such inscriptions. You can perhaps see that the sphere, that old symbol for totality, is unsuitable. A torus, a Klein bottle, a cross-cut surface, are able to receive such a cut. And this diversity is very important as it explains many things about the structure of mental disease. If one can symbolize the subject by this fundamental cut, in the same way one can show that a cut on a torus corresponds to the neurotic subject, and on a cross-cut surface to another sort of mental disease. I can't follow that, nor any of the other excerpts from Lacan - not if I reread it several times. In dealing with Lacan and other authors, Sokal dissects the math, showing that the authors:

1. Hold forth at length on scientific theories about which they have, at best, an exceedingly hazy idea.
2. Import concepts from the natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giving the slightest conceptual or empirical justification.
3. Shamelessly throw around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant.
4. Manipulate phrases and sentences that are, in fact, meaningless.

Some of the authors, when subjected to Sokal's analysis, are just plain silly and quite entertaining. Others can get tedious. Sokal makes his points in each case, making these authors look ridiculous, to the point of charlatanism. After an analysis that includes consideration of the philosophies of Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend, Sokal tackles a prevalent belief in humanities departments of universities in the United States - that truths are "relative"...that no opinion is "privileged" over another as being more valid than another...that all "facts" claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructs...that there is no clear difference between fact and fiction. Bertrand Russell had many years previously answered that question in this diplomatic way: "Science is at no moment quite right, but it is seldom quite wrong, and has, as a rule, a better chance of being right than the theories of the unscientific. It is, therefore, rational to accept it

hypothetically."Interesting that individuals who would trash science reap the benefits of hard science in their daily routines, without giving due credit to the resultant technologies that make their lives so much easier. A well-deserved 5 stars for the outstanding and restrained expose in this book.

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