

“The conceptual penis as a social construct”:
Some thoughts

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Academic hoaxes are nothing new. In 1768, the Baron d’Holbach published the *Portable Theology, or Brief Dictionary of the Christian Religion* — slyly attributing authorship to the Abbé Bernier — in which he stoutly defended the prevailing Christian dogmas with entries like

Doctrine: What every good Christian must believe or else be burned, be it in this world or the next. The dogmas of the Christian religion are immutable decrees of God, who cannot change His mind except when the Church does.¹

Probably not very many people were taken in by the hoax. But d’Holbach’s mordant satire was brilliant nonetheless, and it circulated clandestinely for decades.

In 1931, the physicist Hans Bethe and two colleagues published — while they were still postdoctoral fellows — a short article entitled “On the quantum theory of the temperature of absolute zero”, parodying speculative attempts to determine the fundamental constants of nature by numerology, in the journal *Die Naturwissenschaften*.² Senior physicists were not amused, and the authors were forced to apologize.³

In 1943, the young Australian writers James McAuley and Harold Stewart hoaxed the modernist literary journal *Angry Penguins* into publishing sixteen poems allegedly found among the papers of a recently deceased — but, alas, fictitious — poet, Ern Malley:

We opened books at random, choosing a word or phrase haphazardly. We made lists of these and wove them into nonsensical sentences. We misquoted and made false allusions. We deliberately perpetrated bad verse, and selected awkward rhymes from a Ripman’s Rhyming Dictionary.⁴

The hoax was quickly outed in the Australian press, and the editor of *Angry Penguins* held up to ridicule. But some critics nowadays claim that “Crazy as it seems, the Malley poems do have merit.”⁵

So there were precedents — most of which I was unaware of at the time — for my parody article, “Transgressing the boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity”, which was published in the spring/summer 1996 issue of the cultural-studies journal *Social Text*.⁶

¹Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach, *La théologie portative, ou dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne* (CODA, Chécy/Paris, 2006). English translation: Baron d’Holbach, *Portable Theology*, translated by David Holohan (Hodgson Press, Surbiton, 2010).

²G. Beck, H. Bethe and W. Riezler, Bemerkung zur Quantentheorie der Nullpunktstemperatur, *Die Naturwissenschaften* **19**, 39 (1931).

³Silvan S. Schweber, *Nuclear Forces: The Making of the Physicist Hans Bethe* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2012), pp. 190–192.

⁴“Ern Malley, poet of debunk: Full story from the two authors”, *FACT*, 25 June 1944, reprinted at <http://jacketmagazine.com/17/fact2.html>

⁵David Lehman, “The Ern Malley poetry hoax — Introduction”, *Jacket* **17** (June 2002), <http://jacketmagazine.com/17/ern-d1.html> See also Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (Faber and Faber, London, 1993).

⁶Alan D. Sokal, “Transgressing the boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity”, *Social Text* **46/47**, 217–252 (1996), reprinted with annotations in Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture* (Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York, 2008).

But in the past few years, academic hoaxes seem to have proliferated. In 2014, the French sociologists Manuel Quinon and Arnaud Saint-Martin hoaxed the journal *Sociétés* — edited at the time by the very media-savvy French sociologist Michel Maffesoli — into publishing a hilarious article gushing over the Parisian rental car Autolib’ as

a privileged indicator of a macro-social dynamics underlying the transition of a “modern” episteme to “postmodern” episteme. Through the analysis of the vehicle aesthetics (which is characterized here as poly-identificatory) and its most salient functional features (for instance, the connected electric car illustrates the contemporary topos of “dynamic rootedness”), the article interprets the various socio-anthropological aspects of the “Autolib’” and finally emphasizes the fact that this small car is, among other things, the product/producer of a new “semantic basin”.⁷

In 2016, the French philosophers Anouk Barberousse and Philippe Huneman hoaxed the journal *Badiou Studies* — “a multi-lingual, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the philosophy and thought of and surrounding the philosopher, playwright, novelist and poet Alain Badiou”⁸ — into publishing an article entitled “Ontology, neutrality and the strive for (non-)being-queer” as part of the journal’s special issue “Towards a Queer Badiouian Feminism”. The abstract gives a bit of the flavor:

Since “gender” has been continually the name of a dialectics of the continued institution of gender into an ontological difference and the failure of gendering, it is worth addressing the prospects of any gender-neutral discourse through the tools of Badiouian ontology. As established by Badiou in *Being and Event*, mathematics — as set theory — is the ultimate ontology. Sets are what gendering processes by reactionary institutions intend to hold, in contradiction to the status of the multiplicities proper to each subject *qua* subject. This tension between subjectivity and gender comes to the fore through the lens of the ‘count-as-one,’ the ontological operator identified by Badiou as the fluid mediator between set-belonging and set-existence. . . .⁹

And so on for 23 pages. (Curiously enough, Alain Badiou himself is a member of the journal’s editorial board. One is left to wonder: if the Master’s closest disciples,

⁷Jean-Pierre Tremblay (pseud.), “Automobilités postmodernes: quand l’Autolib’ fait sensation à Paris”, *Sociétés* **126**, 115–124 (2014); the article has been deleted from the journal’s website but is available at <http://pierremerckle.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/autolib.pdf> See also Manuel Quinon and Arnaud Saint-Martin, “Le maffesolisme, une «sociologie» en roue libre. Démonstration par l’absurde”, *Carnet Zilsel*, 7 mars 2015, <http://zilsel.hypotheses.org/1713>

⁸<http://badioustudiesjournal.org/>

⁹Benedetta Tripodi (pseud.), “Ontology, neutrality and the strive for (non-)being-queer”, *Badiou Studies* **4**, no. 1, 72–102 (2015); the article has been deleted from the journal’s website but is available at <http://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1647/files/2016/03/100-337-1-PB.pdf> See also Anouk Barberousse and Philippe Huneman, “Un «philosophe français» label rouge: Relecture tripodienne d’Alain Badiou”, *Carnet Zilsel*, 1 avril 2016 (!), <http://zilsel.hypotheses.org/2548>; and “L’ontologie badiouienne parodiée par Benedetta Tripodi ou ce qu’il fallait démonter”, *Carnet Zilsel*, 13 avril 2016, <http://zilsel.hypotheses.org/2598>

and even the Master himself, are unable to distinguish between his thought and an intentionally nonsensical pastiche, who on earth can?¹⁰)

So it was a pleasure to read this year’s contribution to the genre, “The conceptual penis as a social construct”, by Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay.¹¹ I’d like to offer a few brief thoughts, first about the article itself, and secondly about what I think its publication does and does not prove. For it seems to me that this hoax, while both amusing and instructive, proves somewhat less than the authors have claimed for it.

The underlying theme of the article — that “hypermasculine machismo braggadocio” can have negative consequences for both men and women — is not, in and of itself, ridiculous; on the contrary, it is by now a commonplace, accepted by almost everyone (including the authors of the parody). So, beyond that platitude, what is novel in this article that makes it worthy of publication in a scholarly journal of sociology?

The answer, in my humble opinion, is: nothing.

The most telling parts of the article, I think, are the passages in which the authors buttress their claims by citing a *provably meaningless* article that they had produced using the Postmodernism Generator.¹² For instance:

This tendency [to use the word “dick” as a verb] is easily explained by extrapolation upon McElwaine (1999), who demonstrates clearly that, “Sexual identity is fundamentally used in the service of hierarchy; however, according to Werther (1977), it is not so much sexual identity that is fundamentally used in the service of hierarchy, but rather the dialectic, and hence the defining characteristic, of sexual identity. The subject is contextualised into a subcultural desituationism that includes sexuality as a reality.”

The reference list cites *five* nonexistent articles by nonexistent authors. Even the copy editors at *Cogent Social Sciences*, it seems, were asleep at the wheel.

¹⁰See also Anouk Barberousse, Philippe Huneman, Manuel Quinon, Arnaud Saint-Martin and Alan Sokal, “Canulars académiques, les «maîtres à penser» démasqués”, *Libération* [Paris], 1 juin 2016, pp. 20–21.

¹¹Jamie Lindsay and Peter Boyle (pseud.), “The conceptual penis as a social construct”, *Cogent Social Sciences* **3**, 1330439, 7 pp. (2017); the article has been deleted from the journal’s website but is available at <http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/conceptual-penis/23311886.2017.1330439.pdf> See also Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay, “The conceptual penis as a social construct: A Sokal-style hoax on Gender Studies”, http://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/conceptual-penis-social-construct-sokal-style-hoax-on-gender-studies/

¹²The Postmodernism Generator is a computer program written in 1996 by Andrew C. Bulhak of Monash University and based on the Dada Engine, a system for generating random text from recursive grammars. See Andrew C. Bulhak, “On the simulation of postmodernism and mental debility using recursive transition networks”, Monash University, Department of Computer Science, Technical Report 96/264 (April 1, 1996), <http://www.elsewhere.org/journal/wp-content/uploads/2005/11/tr-cs96-264.pdf>; and see also <http://dev.null.org/dadaengine/> Visit <http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/> and you get a brand-new, never-before-seen article in authentic postmodernist lingo, complete with (fictitious) references.

Boghossian and Lindsay commit a slight inaccuracy by saying that the Postmodernism Generator was based on my *Social Text* hoax. In fact, the Postmodernism Generator was developed independently from my hoax, and roughly contemporaneously.

But not every sentence in the article is completely meaningless, and not every assertion is made entirely without argument. Even the article’s most amusingly outrageous claim — that “the conceptual penis . . . is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change” — is supported by *some* argumentation, however flimsy:

Destructive, unsustainable hegemonically male approaches to pressing environmental policy and action are the predictable results of a raping of nature by a male-dominated mindset. This mindset is best captured by recognizing the role of [*sic*] the conceptual penis holds over masculine psychology. When it is applied to our natural environment, especially virgin environments that can be cheaply despoiled for their material resources and left dilapidated and diminished when our patriarchal approaches to economic gain have stolen their inherent worth, the extrapolation of the rape culture inherent in the conceptual penis becomes clear.

Let me even go out on a limb: it is *conceivable* that this sketch of an argument — on the connection between masculine psychology and environmental destruction — could be transformed, by marshalling additional evidence, into something halfway convincing. But as it stands, this reasoning would barely merit a C– in a freshman course.

So how did such a worthless article get published? Boghossian and Lindsay opine that

There are at least two deeply troublesome diseases damaging the credibility of the peer-review system in fields such as gender studies:

1. the echo-chamber of morally driven fashionable nonsense coming out of the postmodernist social “sciences” in general, and gender studies departments in particular; and
2. the complex problem of pay-to-publish journals with lax standards that cash in on the ultra-competitive publish-or-perish academic environment.

At least one of these sicknesses led to “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct” being published as a legitimate piece of academic scholarship, and we can expect proponents of each to lay primary blame upon the other.

This last prediction was astute, and it has been amply borne out by the commentary thus far on the hoax. But I would like to add some nuances concerning the two “sicknesses” diagnosed by Boghossian and Lindsay, starting with the second.

Over the past decade there has been a phenomenal proliferation of pay-to-publish, open-access academic journals (and conferences), the worst of which are pure money-making vehicles with zero scholarly standards. This problem affects all academic disciplines, but it is probably worst in the sciences and technology, simply because that is where the money is. Several well-publicized hoaxes — such as SCIGen¹³ and John

¹³“SCIGen is a program that generates random Computer Science research papers” using a context-free grammar, written by MIT graduate students Jeremy Stribling, Max Krohn and Dan Aguayo. “One useful purpose for such a program is to auto-generate submissions to conferences that you suspect might have very low submission standards.” See <http://pdos.csail.mit.edu/archive/scigen/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCIGen> for more details; and see also Philip Ball, “Computer conference welcomes gobbledegook paper”, *Nature* **434**, 946 (21 April 2005).

Bohannon’s sting¹⁴ — have revealed the depth of the problem. University of Colorado librarian Jeffrey Beall has compiled a list of literally hundreds of scholarly journals that he considers “predatory”.¹⁵ (But the problem is not confined to open-access journals: more than 120 SCIdgen-generated papers have been detected in conference proceedings published by Springer and the IEEE.¹⁶)

So I took a closer look at *Cogent Social Sciences*, which advertises itself as a “multidisciplinary open access journal offering high quality peer review across the social sciences: from law to sociology, politics to geography, and sport to communication studies”.¹⁷ Here are the titles of some of their recently published papers:

- Framing leadership: The social construction of *leadership* within the academic field of communication studies
- Service delivery protests in South African municipalities: An exploration using principal component regression and 2013 data
- The effect of single-tasks and dual-tasks on balance in older adults
- Poverty dynamics in Botswana: Policies, trends and challenges
- Death and taxes: The framing of the causes and policy responses to the illicit tobacco trade in Canadian newspapers
- Professional methods of assessments in architectural design projects: A focus on the relevant parametric measures in selected Nigerian universities
- A multivariate analysis of gun violence among urban youth: The impact of direct victimization, indirect victimization, and victimization among peers

I then took a brief look at each of these papers. I don’t feel qualified to judge these articles’ quality or importance, but none of them seemed to be utter nonsense. As far as I can tell, *Cogent Social Sciences* is a run-of-the-mill lower-tier academic journal, *not* a predatory publish-anything-if-they-pay outfit.

Did financial considerations nevertheless play a role in lowering this journal’s academic standards? Without further evidence concerning the internal processes at *Cogent Social Sciences*, it is hard to say. (For what it’s worth, Boghossian and Lindsay apparently never even received an invoice for the putative \$625 minimum charge.) But at a more general level, the dynamics of open access is clear: the pay-to-publish model permits the *existence* of very-low-tier academic journals that on the traditional publishing model would fail to attract enough paid subscriptions to

¹⁴John Bohannon, “Who’s afraid of peer review?”, *Science* **342** (6154), 60–65 (October 3, 2013).

¹⁵Beall’s List of Predatory Journals and Publishers, <http://beallslist.weebly.com/> See also Declan Butler, “Investigating journals: The dark side of publishing”, *Nature* **495**, 433–435 (28 March 2013).

¹⁶Richard van Noorden, “Publishers withdraw more than 120 gibberish papers”, *Nature News* (24 February 2014).

¹⁷<https://www.cogentoa.com/journal/social-sciences>

survive. (*Cogent Social Sciences* no doubt belongs to this category.) So, in this sense, pay-to-publish probably does contribute to a lowering of academic standards at the lowest non-predatory tier: more marginal articles will get published. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? I don't really know. After all, any of the above-cited articles from *Cogent Social Sciences* — even if they are admittedly not earth-shaking — could potentially be of value to future workers on its specialized subject.

This leaves us with the first of Boghossian and Lindsay's "sicknesses":

The most potent among the human susceptibilities to corruption by fashionable nonsense is the temptation to uncritically endorse *morally* fashionable nonsense. . . . [We conjectured that] we could publish outright nonsense provided it looked the part and portrayed a moralizing attitude that comported with the editors' moral convictions. . . . We intended to test the hypothesis that flattery of the academic Left's moral architecture in general, and of the moral orthodoxy in gender studies in particular, is the overwhelming determiner of publication in an academic journal in the field. That is, we sought to demonstrate that a desire for a certain moral view of the world to be validated could overcome the critical assessment required for legitimate scholarship. Particularly, we suspected that gender studies is crippled academically by an overriding almost-religious belief that maleness is the root of all evil.

Do the results of their little experiment vindicate their conclusion that "our suspicion was justified"? I would answer: yes and no, but mostly no.

It indeed seems likely that, at *Cogent Social Sciences*, the flattery of the editors' moral and ideological preconceptions helped to dull their critical faculties and smooth the way to publication of a grossly deficient manuscript. To be sure, Boghossian and Lindsay did not carry out a controlled experiment, but suppose that they had: imagine that they had selected a sample of lower-tier sociology or gender-studies journals and then sent, to a randomly-chosen half of them, an article contending, with equally flimsy arguments, that toxic hyperfemininity is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change. For instance:

Toxic hyperfemininity leads to rampant consumerism and the profligate overconsumption of superfluous luxury goods (for they *are* luxuries to the overwhelming majority of humankind), principally apparel, cosmetics and celebrity magazines. While some of this excess is sustainably recycled via donations of last year's fashion to charity shops, the vast majority ends up unused in closets (to the annoyance of male partners who urgently require the space for sporting equipment and pornographic magazines) or in landfills, or is exported to developing countries by predatory pseudo-charities, undermining the local clothing manufacturers. Furthermore, 30% of non-biodegradable waste in landfills is composed of disposable diapers, which are a direct consequence of toxic hyperfemininity via its exploitation of male sexual weakness. In all these ways, the conceptual vagina — a performative social construct that is isomorphic to an especially toxic strain of femininity — is revealed as the conceptual driver behind much of climate change.

Would the modified article have fared as well as the original? I doubt it.

On the other hand, Boghossian and Lindsay’s experiment also shows that flattery of the editors’ moral and ideological preconceptions is *not* always sufficient to garner publication. After all, they originally submitted the article to *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* — a not-particularly-prestigious journal of gender studies — which *rejected* it (apparently without review) as “unsuitable for publication in *NORMA*”.¹⁸ By contrast, *Cogent Social Sciences* — whatever one may conclude about its overall merit — is a generalist social-sciences journal, *not* a journal of gender studies.

Finally, it seems even less likely that this paper would have been accepted at a more prestigious gender-studies journal, such as *Gender & Society*, *Feminist Theory*, *Signs*, *Feminist Studies*, or *Men and Masculinities*. The bias towards articles presupposing a particular moral and ideological orientation — and the associated dulling of the editors’ capacities for critical thinking — may well persist at this higher tier, but its effects will be more subtle than a hoax like this could demonstrate.

In assessing the conclusions to be drawn from my *Social Text* hoax, I wrote that

From the mere fact of publication of my parody I think that not much can be deduced. It doesn’t prove that the whole field of cultural studies, or cultural studies of science — much less sociology of science — is nonsense. Nor does it prove that the intellectual standards in these fields are generally lax. (This might be the case, but it would have to be established on other grounds.) It proves only that the editors of *one* rather marginal journal were derelict in their intellectual duty, by publishing an article on quantum physics that they admit they could not understand, without bothering to get an opinion from anyone knowledgeable in quantum physics, solely because it came from a “conveniently credentialed ally” (as *Social Text* co-editor Bruce Robbins later candidly admitted), flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions, and attacked their “enemies”.¹⁹

It seems to me that a similar analysis applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Boghossian–Lindsay hoax.

¹⁸It would appear, at first sight, that the editors of *NORMA* nevertheless felt no qualms in passing the article on to their sister journal *Cogent Social Sciences*, one step down in the academic pecking order:

We feel that your manuscript would be well-suited to our Cogent Series (www.cogentoa.com), a multidisciplinary, open journal platform for the rapid dissemination of peer-reviewed research across all disciplines.

The form-letter style of this referral to Cogent suggests that this situation arises frequently; one can only hope that *NORMA* reserves it for articles that they feel have *some* scholarly value. But this seems not to be the case: apparently *all* rejection letters from *NORMA* contain this statement about the manuscript being “well-suited” to the Cogent Series. *NORMA* co-editor-in-chief Ulf Mellström says that he was unaware that their publishers Taylor & Francis — which (surprise, surprise) also owns Cogent — had inserted this paragraph into *NORMA*’s standard rejection letter, and he promises to fix this in the future (Ulf Mellström e-mail to Phil Torres, 24 May 2017, <https://goo.gl/cJtVAU>).

¹⁹Alan Sokal, “What the *Social Text* affair does and does not prove”, in *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science*, edited by Noretta Koertge (Oxford University Press, New York–Oxford, 1998), pp. 9–22, quotation at p. 11.

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