

Cannon-fodder for whose science wars?

John Krige’s review of our book *Intellectual Impostures* (see *Physics World*, December 1998, pp. 49–50) is breathtaking in its dishonesty. Aside from conceding that “the language of some of the authors discussed by Sokal and Bricmont raises disturbing questions about the use of unnecessary jargon”, Krige does not address a single argument presented in our book. Instead, he follows the time-honored tactic of inventing a straw man in order to demolish it.

1) Krige asserts that our book is “lamentably indifferent to the history and philosophy of science” — conveniently overlooking a 47-page chapter (by far the longest one in the book) devoted precisely to the history and philosophy of science, in which we critically analyze some of the principal theses of Hume, Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others. In the same vein, Krige wonders rhetorically whether “Sokal and Bricmont [have] followed the carefully crafted and empirically enriched [*sic*] studies of scientific practice by sociologists and historians of science over the last two decades” — conveniently overlooking the long section (pp. 79–90) that we devote to criticizing the philosophical and methodological presuppositions of some prominent currents in such studies. Why doesn’t he address our critiques, rather than simply brushing the debate aside with self-assigned adjectives of praise?

2) More generally, Krige disdains engaging with our arguments on the alleged grounds that our book “is essentially a political tract”. In reality, we say explicitly in the Preface (pp. xi–xii):

[T]he ideas analyzed here have little, if any, conceptual or logical connection with politics. Whatever one’s views on Lacanian mathematics or the theory-ladenness of observation, one may hold, without fear of contradiction, any view whatsoever on military spending, welfare or gay marriage.

As we go on to explain, our *motivations* for criticizing postmodernism and relativism are indeed both intellectual and political: we think (a) that postmodernist ideas

are based primarily on gross confusions of thought and language, and (b) that they are inimical to the political left (with which we identify). But we, unlike Krige, are always at pains to separate the two questions. Sympathy with an author's motivations (political or otherwise) can never constitute a valid reason for accepting his arguments, and opposition to those motivations can never constitute a valid reason for rejecting them; the arguments must be analyzed in their own right. Krige doesn't bother.

In short, Krige's "review" of our book is a caricature of its contents. Readers interested in an honest summary of our arguments will have to look elsewhere: for example, to the reviews by philosopher Thomas Nagel (*The New Republic*, 12 October 1998), biologist Richard Dawkins (*Nature*, 9 July 1998) or literary critic John Weightman (*The Hudson Review*, autumn 1998).

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