

# SORRY, PROF. SOKAL, BUT YOU HAVE MISSED THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST TRAIN

by  
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This article starts out by presenting Sokal's three basic claims against postmodernism: 1. Postmodernism approbates the abuse of science. 2. Postmodernism approbates epistemic relativism. 3. Postmodernism is inimical to the political left. Through a rebuttal of Sokal's claims, the postmodernist perspective on reality and representation is presented. It is suggested that critical discourse analysis (CDA) is in basic agreement with Sokal's modernism both in its scholarly and in its political premises. The article ends with a taxonomy of structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, suggesting that a post-structuralist option is no longer viable and an incorporation of postmodernist epistemology into discourse analysis as well as into political thought associated with it is now imminent.

## *1. The Sokal Affair and its relevance to linguistics*

In 1996 Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, submitted an article entitled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' to *Social Text* (Sokal 1996a). The article passed the regular procedure of acceptance, and was published in a special issue on the 'Science Wars'. Yet, 'Transgressing the Boundaries' was a hoax. It was a premeditated parody presumably authored by a postmodernist physicist. It combined physical and mathematical nonsense with quotes from some prominent poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers, all cleverly phrased in meaninglessly employed postmodernist jargon. A few days later Sokal exposed the hoax in his article 'A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies' (Sokal 1996b) in *Lingua Franca*. These publications and the heated debates around them are known as the Sokal Affair.

A brief search of the term 'Sokal' on several databases shows that the Sokal Affair has raised little interest in the linguistic community (a noteworthy exception being Hodge 1999). The LLBA (*Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts*), for example, covers a broad spectrum of journals of formalist as well as socially oriented subdisciplines, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, gender studies, pragmatics, and linguistic anthropology. In some of these

subdisciplines, especially in gender studies and critical discourse analysis (CDA), recourse to poststructuralist work is quite extensive. Some streams of gender studies even officially profess post-structuralism. The question is: is there any reason for linguists to feel that this affair is relevant to their work? Should they feel attacked by Sokal's repudiation of poststructuralism and postmodernism? Since there is no school of linguistics nowadays which maintains a postmodernist perspective, this part of the question is easily answered. But why do the poststructuralist streams not consider themselves a party in this debate? Leaving gender studies aside for a separate treatment, I will return to CDA after dealing with his charges.

## 2. Sokal's basic claims against postmodernism

The most detailed elaboration of Sokal's views appears in a book which he coauthored with Jean Bricmont, entitled *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a), and in the USA as *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (Sokal and Bricmont 1998b). Both are (different) culturally adapted renditions of the original French title *Impostures Intellectuelles* (Sokal and Bricmont 1997). Quotations here come from the British edition of this book, and from other articles by Sokal.

Sokal and Bricmont put forward three basic claims. 1. Postmodernism approbates the abuse of science. 2. Postmodernism approbates epistemic relativism: truth is relative to individuals or social groups. 3. Postmodernism is inimical to the political left.

### 2.1. Postmodernism approbates the abuse of science

The bulk of Sokal and Bricmont's book is devoted to a detailed presentation of the ways that Jaques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Paul Virilio have been incorporating in their texts on human and social issues formulas and concepts from mathematics and physics in an outrageously ignorant and nonsensical way. Sokal and Bricmont concede that these authors' abuses of the natural sciences are not 'the central themes of their oeuvre'. Nevertheless,

they suggest that 'when intellectual dishonesty (or gross incompetence) is discovered in one part – even a marginal part – of someone's writings, it is natural to want to examine more critically the rest of his or her work' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:6). Having put in question these authors' integrity, Sokal and Bricmont proceed to further generalizations. The use of the umbrella term 'post-modernists' is justified

... because all the authors analyzed here are utilized as fundamental points of reference in English-language postmodernist discourse, and because some aspects of their writings (obscure jargon, implicit rejection of rational thought, abuse of science as metaphor) are common traits of Anglo-American postmodernism (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:6).

### 2.2. Postmodernism approbates epistemic relativism: truth is relative to individuals or social groups

Sokal and Bricmont's definition of 'relativism' is clear. Relativism is 'any philosophy that claims that the truth or falsity of a statement is relative to an individual or to a social group' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:50). *Cognitive* or *epistemic* relativism, which is what concerns us here, refers to relativism with regard to 'an assertion of fact', i.e. a statement 'about what exists or is claimed to exist' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:50). It is here that postmodernists – as relativists – are 'at odds with scientists' idea of their own practice' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:51), for,

while scientists try, as best they can, to obtain an objective view of (certain aspects of) the world, relativist thinkers tell them that they are wasting their time and that such an enterprise is, in principle, an illusion (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:51).

Scientific knowledge, say Sokal and Bricmont, is not attained without awareness of its complexities. Scientists are aware of Hume's skepticism: that we only have access to reality through our senses, and we have no guarantee as for the accuracy with which they reflect reality for us. If Hume realized this on our behalf 250 years ago, how come, they ponder, we have been doing science all these years quite

successfully? And they answer: 'The universality of Humean skepticism is also its weakness'. In ordinary life, they remind us, we reject skepticism. The statement 'there is a glass of water in front of me' is plainly either true or false, because 'our perceptions do not systematically mislead us'; on the contrary, usually our experience is coherent, so that when vision, taste, smell, and texture tell us all one thing, we feel that 'the outside world corresponds, at least approximately, to the image of it provided by our senses' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:53-54). Scientists do not depart from this everyday practice.

Historians, detectives and plumbers – indeed all human beings – use the same basic methods of induction, deduction, and assessment of evidence as do physicists or biochemists (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54).

If there is any difference between common sense and science, it lies in the fact that science is more rigorous, as it carries out these operations 'in a more careful and systematic way, by using controls and statistical tests, insisting on replication, and so forth' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54). All these properties of scientific practice do not refute skepticism, Sokal and Bricmont admit. It remains irrefutable, but the richness of our scientific method and the multiplicity of confirmation of theory by evidence justify scientists' sense 'that we really have acquired an objective (albeit approximate and incomplete) knowledge of the natural world' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54).

The problem with postmodernism is that the radical skepticism of postmodernists does not derive its powers directly from Hume. Sokal and Bricmont suggest that the 'irrationalist drift' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54) was created by the critiques of Popper's notion of 'falsifiability', developed in order to solve Hume's problem. Popper (among other epistemologists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) tried to 'formalize the scientific method' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54). Yet, although 'science is a rational enterprise', it is 'difficult to codify' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:4); thus a full formalization was doomed to fail. A rational critique of Popper could have amounted to a rejection of the full formalization of methodology, without discarding the notion of scientificity. But in fact, some of Popper's critics have embarked on a 'strong program' in the sociology of science, which denies objective truth, and intends 'to explain in sociological terms

the *content* of scientific theories' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:79). And this is exactly what Sokal and Bricmont mean, when they say that postmodernists maintain that the truth of an assertion is relative to individuals or social groups.

### 2.3. Postmodernism is inimical to the political left

Sokal does not hide his concerns about the practical consequences of postmodernism. Sokal and Bricmont clearly state that they did not embark on this project in order to attack only 'some esoteric philosophical doctrines' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:90). 'Our target is much wider', they say, because 'relativism (as well as other postmodern ideas) has effects on the culture in general'. The third claim in Sokal and Bricmont's book is that postmodernism is inimical to the political left:

Of course, there is also a long anti-rationalist tradition in some right-wing movements, but what is new and curious about postmodernism is that it is an anti-rationalist form of thought that has seduced part of the left (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:186).

A short history of the left in modernity reveals the painful paradox:

The existence of such a link between postmodernism and the left constitutes, *prima facie*, a serious paradox. For most of the past two centuries, the left has been identified with science and against obscurantism, believing that rational thought and the fearless analysis of objective reality (both natural and social) are incisive tools for combating the mystifications promoted by the powerful – not to mention being desirable human ends in their own right. And yet, over the past two decades, a large number of 'progressive' or 'leftist' academic humanists and social scientists (though virtually no natural scientists, whatever their political views) have turned away from this Enlightenment Legacy and – bolstered by French imports such as deconstruction as well as by home grown doctrines like feminist standpoint epistemology – have embraced one or another version of epistemic relativism (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:187).

Sokal and Bricmont see three sources linked to the emergence of postmodernism within the political left. One source is the 'new social movements', such as the black liberation movement, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement, which 'have been underestimated by the traditional political left' and have developed some streams which 'have concluded that postmodernism, in one form or another, is the philosophy most suited to their aspirations' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:187). The second source is the political discouragement which reflects the unique 'desperate situation and general disorientation of the left'. The collapse of the communist regimes, the 'watered-down neo-liberal policies' of surviving social-democracy, and the loss of autonomy in the third world have resulted in compliance with 'the harshest form of "free market" capitalism' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:189). The third source is the need for a scapegoat, an easy accessible target 'sufficiently linked to the powers-that-be' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:190). Scientific rationalism is an easy target, 'because any attack on rationality can find a host of allies: all those who believe in superstitions, be they traditional ones (e.g. religious fundamentalism) or New Age' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:191).

Postmodernism replaces 'objective truth' with 'discourse' and 'narrativity'. But the validation of subjective truth is an obstacle to 'a social critique that could reach those who are not already convinced' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:196), i.e. postmodernism serves as a barrier to effective political persuasion and mobilization.

If all discourses are merely 'stories' or 'narrations', and none is more objective or truthful than another, then one must concede that the worst sexist and racist prejudices and the most reactionary socioeconomic theories are 'equally valid', at least as descriptions or analyses of the real world (assuming that one admits the existence of a real world). Clearly, relativism is an extremely weak foundation on which to build a criticism of the existing social order (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:196).

### 3. *Rebuttal of Sokal's basic claims*

#### 3.1. The abuse of science is not foundational to postmodernism

Assuming that the abuses of science that Sokal and Bricmont present are as bad as they describe, the reasonable conclusion from this should be that *some* poststructuralists and postmodernists have abused science in *some* of their writings. What has not been taken up is a characterization of what the authors consider as 'postmodernism' and/or 'cultural studies' in general, nor have the authors presented a discussion of the impact that such abuses have had on this totality. It will suffice to show that several distinguished postmodernist thinkers have never been involved in such practices, to topple the whole generalization. Sokal and Bricmont could have been on safe grounds with a critique of particular sectors of postmodernism, carefully outlined in specific terms. But this would have fallen short of Sokal's agenda to launch a full-scale attack on postmodernism, an attack which is motivated by deeper politico-cultural concerns. Therefore, although I had no problem to share Sokal and Bricmont's sentiments at the outrageous practices of recourse to pseudo-mathematics and pseudo-physics, I still felt that their sweeping accusation is groundless. Some of these writers' texts have been seminal to postmodernist thought, that is true. But it is precisely not these texts, and often not the conclusions of these texts, that are central. Sokal and Bricmont could have done better homework here. After leveling such severe accusations against postmodernism in general, they cannot get away with their forewarning 'we make no claim to analyze postmodernism in general' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:4), because they do. And they cannot hide behind the claim that 'we are not competent to judge the non-scientific aspects of these authors' work' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:6), because despite their incompetence they do judge them.

#### 3.2. Postmodernism approbates epistemic relativism: truth is relative to regimes of truth

No school of thought is immune against barbarisms produced thanks to freedom of speech, and I have no intention to defend any silly text based on what I consider a misguided reading of the central

breakthroughs of postmodernist thinking. What I will present here is a rather conservative, minimalist view of postmodernist epistemology, which admits many other continuities with modernist streams of thought, and departs from it only in its perspective on reality and representation. I will not present, nor will I critique, other brands of postmodernism, which I certainly do not consider silly or misguided, but which do not inform my own views, such as the approach developed by Deleuze and Guattari. These scholars might view my model as too traditionally 'arborescent', compared to their 'rhizomatic model', which 'contrasts in every respect with the Western model of the tree' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:41). What I consider central to postmodernism is exactly the kind of epistemic relativism that Sokal and Bricmont misunderstand, misrepresent, and criticize as 'philosophical confusions that underlie much postmodern thinking' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:15). To them, I am afraid, my moderate version might seem just as bad:

what we are criticizing is the radical version of postmodernism, as well as a number of mental confusions that are found in the more moderate versions of postmodernism and that are in some sense inherited from the radical one (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:174).

It is time, then, to sort out the issue of epistemic relativism, and to present the version of it that is, in my opinion, most representative of a good deal of postmodernist thinking, especially as practiced in the discipline of Cultural Studies, and to show that Sokal and Bricmont's understanding of it is flawed.

Let me present my case through a discussion of the social entity called 'nation'. This should be, according to Sokal and Bricmont, a simple case of a faithful representation of 'a piece of social reality' by the word 'nation'. A few anecdotes will serve me to introduce its problematics. In 1998, the year of Israel's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, President Clinton happened to be in Israel on one of the peace process signing ceremonies. In one of his speeches (quoted here as I remember it from a television report) Clinton said: 'I am glad to be here on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of your nation'. For a liberal American in the 1990s it is quite natural to fully equate 'state' with 'nation'. The term 'state' covers the political apparatus of a social entity, while the term 'nation' covers the human collective of the same. The terms are almost entirely coextensive, since every citizen of

'The United States' is also a member of the 'American people/nation'. Language practices confirm this: when something is done 'nationwide', it is done all over 'The United States'. Of course, even in the United States this meaning is sometimes challenged, for example, by the proponents of the 'black nation', or by white supremacists, but their voices are extremely marginal in American society. Naturally, Clinton was using the word 'nation' in the sense that is dominant in the United States. But this sense is awkward in the Israeli context, because an Israeli nation exists neither in the collective identities as experienced by most individuals living in Israel, nor in the legal status and official definitions of the State of Israel. My Israeli identity card clearly states that my nationality is 'Jewish', though my citizenship is 'Israeli', and I cannot change this at will. So in fact, it was not a nation that was celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary but a state, which in this case is not coextensive with the Jewish nation. Of course, the Israeli state is officially defined as a 'Jewish state', a phrase which has several meanings, but it does not include the meaning that all its citizens are Jews.

The next introductory anecdote took place a few months later. An Israeli Arab woman from Haifa, Rana Raslan, was named Miss Israel for 1999. On a radio interview, she was asked how she felt, being the first Arab Beauty Queen of Israel, to which she replied (in Hebrew, her second language) that in this role she hoped to represent the entire *am yisra'el* 'people of Israel' ('people' in singular). Now, the term *am yisra'el* in its standard daily usage is synonymous with *ha'am hayehudi* 'the Jewish people'. In the given context, she could not have been understood as saying that she wanted to represent the entire Jewish people. Her preference of the term *am yisra'el* to *ha'am hayehudi* was based on the possible ambiguity of the term in a non-canonical usage, which happens to coincide with Clinton's, but is foreign to the average Israeli ear. Through this statement, Raslan – without forethought and perhaps through what some might view as a slip of the tongue – expressed her predilection for a different definition of the term 'nation' or 'people', based on 'Israeliness'.

In this practice, however, Raslan does not represent a unanimous sentiment among Israeli Arabs. The self-definition of this population's identity is torn between two radical positions spanning a whole range of intermediate ones. On one pole, one finds a wish for a modern liberal state in which Arab (and Jewish) identity is defined in terms of voluntary cultural ethnicity with no legal or official

ramifications. On the other pole, one finds Israeli Arabs who view themselves as part of the Palestinian nation, rejecting the term 'Israeli Arabs' and employing the term 'Israeli Palestinians' instead. They demand official recognition as a 'national minority' with officially and administratively employed 'cultural autonomy'.

Not only in Israel but also elsewhere on this earthly globe the word 'nation' does *not* have one agreed meaning. No single meaning of it can be considered simply true or false, in the modernist sense of 'faithfully representing reality', and therefore no statement that involves the use of this word, such as 'I belong to the Jewish nation' or 'I belong to the Israeli nation' may be simply true or false. To say this is not a denial of reality, since the same people are there, whether they are referred to as X or as Y. But in each case, reality is differently sliced up and given different discursive representations, i.e. meanings. If we now endorse Sokal and Bricmont's correct observation that the basic logic of everyday life also prevails in the sciences, then we may expect to find that not only beauty queens but also scholars in the human and social sciences employ the terms 'nation', 'Israeli', 'Jewish', 'Arab', 'Palestinian' in their research in particular ways, coherent with their political persuasions. Sometimes they are oblivious to this practice, but often still confident of its truthfulness to the exclusion of their competitors'. They will often call this practice 'scientific', and it may appear so to the untrained eyes of an innocent reader, especially when the political inclinations of both writer and reader are in perfect harmony.

Sokal and Bricmont lament that the social sciences 'suffer when fashionable nonsense and word games displace the critical and rigorous analysis of social realities' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:193). Social realities? Does there exist a social reality in advance of its naming? The persons are there, all right. We are keeping track of that. But the *meaning* of social reality is constituted by the speakers. Nations are not comparable to 'the glass of water in front of me'. There is a crucial need to sort out the different terms and the texts in which such terms are used, as part of their 'critical and rigorous analysis'. A failure to do this is a serious dent in scholarly rigor. These are not just 'word games', for if nations are not natural entities given in advance of speech, they must be in some sense constructed non-naturally. Anderson ([1983] 1991) called nations 'imagined communities'. But if we like empirical evidence and wish to be rigorous, we should not claim to have access to human imagination.

Rather, we may consult the texts in which this imagination is encoded, preferring to refer to nations as 'discursively constructed communities' rather than 'imagined'. The variability of terms of social reality made Voloshinov ([1929] 1986:23) depict the 'sign' as 'an arena of the class struggle'. By a relaxation of early Marxist dogma, we may feel at liberty to alter 'class struggle' to 'any social struggle' and to say that the sign is 'an arena of social struggle'. And of all signs, Voloshinov singled out the word as 'the ideological sign *par excellence*' (Voloshinov [1929] 1986:33). In this vein, every statement containing the word 'nation' is an intervention, a little battle, in the ongoing social struggle over words, i.e. over the preferred interpretation of social reality.

Should we conclude from this that human and social studies are in principle different from natural sciences? Yes and no. This is, by the way, also Sokal and Bricmont's answer. On the one hand,

Historians, detectives and plumbers – indeed all human beings – use the same basic methods of induction, deduction, and assessment of evidence as do physicists or biochemists (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:54).

But at the same time, there is also a difference:

It is natural to introduce a hierarchy in the degree of credence according to different theories, depending on the quantity and quality of evidence supporting them. Every scientist – indeed, every human being – proceeds in this way and grants a higher subjective probability to the best established theories (for instance, the evolution of species or the existence of atoms) and a lower subjective probability to more speculative theories (such as detailed theories of quantum gravity). The same reasoning applies when comparing theories in natural sciences with those in history or sociology.[..] This does not mean, of course, that physicists are more clever than historians or that they use better methods, but simply that they deal with less complex problems, involving a smaller number of variables which, moreover, are easier to measure and to control (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:73).

On the whole, then, human logic in all fields of research is one, but the number of variables, and the ability to use controls and to

replicate experiments, is limited in the human and social sciences, compared to physics. But this answer is not complete, for the difference is not only quantitative. Let us consider in what way 'the glass of water in front of me' differs from 'the Palestinian minority in Israel'. Or put differently, is there a difference between the truth values of 'this is a glass of water' and 'I belong to the Palestinian minority in Israel'? In line with my argument above, it might be tempting to say that there is a difference between them, because human and social entities are controversial, in other words, they are constructed in the discourse of the holders of different ideologies, while natural objects, such as a glass of water, are not. But is this really true? Are we sure that what is in the glass is really water?

Alfred Schutz ([1953] 1971) offers us some interesting observations regarding different kinds of knowledge:

All our knowledge of the world, in common sense as well as in scientific thinking, involves constructs, i.e. a set of abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations specific to the respective level of thought organization. They are therefore always interpreted facts... This does not mean that, in daily life or in science, we are unable to grasp the reality of the world. It just means that we grasp merely certain aspects of it, namely those which are relevant to us either for carrying on our business of living or from the point of view of a body of accepted rules of procedures of thinking called the method of science.

If, according to this view, all scientific constructs are designed to supersede the constructs of common sense thought, then a principal difference between the natural and the social sciences becomes apparent... It is up to the natural scientists to determine which sector of the universe of nature, which facts and events therein... are topically and interpretationally relevant to their specific purpose.... The facts, data, and events with which the natural scientist has to deal are just facts, data, and events within his observational field, but this field does not 'mean' anything to the molecules, atoms, and electrons within (Schutz [1953] 1971: 5-6).

Strictly speaking, then, 'water' is just 'H<sub>2</sub>O' with no political strings attached. But 'the liquid in the glass in front of me' might be a mixture of H<sub>2</sub>O with minerals and bacteria. We may, perhaps, find it

hard to imagine the kind of context in which such a challenge would be suggested, because this issue is not socially salient, it is not incorporated into any ideology. If, by any chance, such a challenge would be raised in a research laboratory, the case would be settled in no time at all, since the two meanings of 'water' are readily available to all educated people and are therefore trivial. But sometimes the 'scientific lab' produces situations in which scientists are forced to view the nature of entities (and relations between them) in new ways. For example, the separate existence of the 'magnetic force' and the 'electric force' have been replaced by the unified 'electromagnetic force'. And one day, if the unification of all forces has been fully elaborated, 'gravity' may become part of the unified force.

In science, the scientific method is rigorous enough to allow an eventual transition from an older set of terms to a newer one, or from an older mapping of relations to a newer one. Social ideology rarely intervenes in this process. Lysenko's genetic theory in the Soviet Union is a notorious exception and an ominous warning to any sane scientist. When social ideology intervenes, the results are catastrophic. If we replace the rather clumsy term 'ideology' by 'professional vision' (Goodwin 1994), or 'discursive framing' (Kuzar, forthcoming), we may characterize the occasional blindness of scientists to new evidence as an impairment due to their professional vision (their scientific ideology), discursively framed in their textual universe. This is a direct result of the fact that with all its rationality, the scientific method is unformalizable, in other words it is admittedly only highly plausible, or in Sokal and Bricmont's words above 'subjectively probable'. For the ability to transcend preconceptions and view scientific data from a new perspective is not attained by virtue of formal methodology. But this occasional blindness is not a result of social ideology.

The social negotiability of the meaning of the word is foundational to scientific progress. It allows scientists to rename and remap physical realities. Precisely the same principle also allows us to politically struggle over the meaning of social entities, such as 'nation'. If in some imaginary universe, language would have a fixed set of meanings, then scientists would never be able to rephrase science's terms, hence a word such as 'ether waves' or 'phlogiston' would still have one true and unchanging meaning, that which was assigned to it when it was created. In that universe politicians would actually have a very easy time to work out the true nature of 'nation'.

However, in our world, where language is constructed on the social negotiability of the linguistic sign, also scientificity is never going to be codified once and for all. Final formalization of any logical system can only be carried out in an artificial language with a fixed set of meanings. Such a language may be created as a subset of human language, but we have no language that is extrinsic to human language and can contain it. I wholeheartedly sympathize with Sokal and Bricmont's feeling that 'there does not exist (at least at present) a complete codification of scientific rationality, and we seriously doubt that one could ever exist'. They 'think that well-developed scientific theories are in general supported by good arguments, but the rationality of those arguments must be analyzed case-by-case' (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:56). Take note of the fact that Sokal and Bricmont express a relativist position, according to which the truthfulness of scientific theories is to be evaluated in each case by a plausible yet unstable rationale, named 'good arguments'.

This kind of socially endorsed plausible rationale may be likened to what Foucault (1980) called a 'regime of truth'. In our case here, we are discussing a very special regime of truth, the regime of truth of scientificity. Within this regime of truth, it has been legitimately believed and felicitously stated, at one time, that 'a magnetic force and an electric force exist independently of one another' and later that 'an electromagnetic force exists, which unites them both'. The term 'regime of truth' is useful, because it renders the modernist distinction between objective and subjective truth obsolete. The existence of a magnetic force was never objectively true. The existence of an electromagnetic force at present is not objectively true either. All these terms may be partially replaced and entirely remapped in the future. On the other hand, this does not lead us to the conclusion that all these terms are objectively false. They were not just subjectively true, i.e. credible in the eyes of an individual beholder or a small bunch of them. Within the scientific regime of truth, these were the most accurate discursive encodings of the set of coherent experiences of reality by scientists, carried out in a particular historical juncture.

This kind of carefully stated relativism suggests that the truth or falsity of a statement is relative to the regime of truth encoded in the discourse within which it is phrased. The logic of the scientific regime of truth and the level of coherence between the different senses through which we experience the world (further magnified by

the precision of measuring tools) have made science into a preferred mode of knowledge in the modern world. Rational people in modernity trust science, and for good reasons, and we have all the grounds to believe that whatever postmodern condition prevails, science will continue its sound practice. To see how this compares to astrology or to religion is very easy. These frameworks have their own regimes of truth, within which everything is hermetically coherent. However, its coherence with life experiences is often felt by rational people to be severely defective. The way to convert an adherent of astrology into rational thinking is to somehow force him or her to become aware of the scientific regime of truth, so they can rigorously observe the level of coherence in sensual experience produced in it. This is, in fact, what we all do to save people from obscurantism. The success of such a move depends, of course, on many uncontrollable factors. It is because of these factors, that we often see that similar attempts to convert a rational person into astrology are likewise successful. The comparison between the scientific regime of truth and other ones does not downgrade science; on the contrary, it elevates it to the most rational regime of truth of them all. Nevertheless, as objects of investigation, the texts of science and astrology may be equally subjected to a discourse-analytic study. If this common basis seemed to Sokal and Bricmont as meaning that all narratives are alike in all respects, it is an unfortunate misunderstanding.

The high coherence between experience and reality in science is the reason that human and social scientists have been so fascinated by scientificity. Analogy between natural reality and social reality was a way of operating in human and social sciences as if from within the same regime of truth, in order to make observations and formulate regularities from within this most esteemed mode of knowledge. The ridiculous employment of scientific buzzwords in the humanities, which has been properly critiqued by Sokal and Bricmont, is an immature result of this infatuation with scientificity of the natural sciences.

Scientificity also has a more subtle effect on the human and social sciences. Wishing to treat their objects of knowledge as parts of the natural world, modernist scholars have often been unaware of the impact of their personal views and political persuasions on their scholarly work. They started to use 'psyche', 'race', 'sex', 'identity', 'nation', 'class', 'freedom', 'liberation', 'rights', etc. as scientists would



use 'mass', 'velocity', 'gravity', etc. This practice is called in post-structuralist and postmodernist parlance 'essentialization' ('entification', 'reification', 'objectification'). The scholar acts as if these kinds of entities have a natural essence, as if the word 'nation' has one fixed and truthful meaning mapped onto an unproblematic piece of reality. To be sure, scientists do the same thing when they essentialize 'velocity' and 'gravity', but the good scientists, who are endowed with a significant amount of nagging skepticism needed for meaningful scientific work, also have the ability to de-essentialize the foundational concepts of scientific theory and to replace them with ones better suited to explain reality. Furthermore, they are equipped with fairly standardized mechanisms to empirically substantiate a possible restructuring of terms. This is all built into the scientific regime of truth.

This is not the case with 'nation' or 'freedom' in the human and social sciences. To say that one meaning of 'nation' is true and all others are false is an attempt to fix the meaning of a socially negotiated term within one particular ideology, without admitting it. This is often the essence of what postmodernists call 'modernist practice'. It is perhaps an unfortunate term, because it blurs the relatively felicitous scientificity of the natural sciences with the pretended scientificity of human and social sciences. It is even more unfortunate, because it has sometimes given rise to an unjustified critique of science, due to a misguided mix-up of genuine epistemological problems in science with the more severe problems of essentialization in the humanities. Much of the 'mental confusion' which Sokal and Bricmont quote in their book belongs to this faulty practice. But such practices are erroneously viewed by them as the quintessence of postmodernism.

Since essentializations have an ideological direction they do not appear haphazardly in discourse. Take Zionism as an example. In order to encode a pro-Zionist discursive framing (ideology) in texts, the terms 'Jew', 'Jewish people/nation', 'Jewish history', 'Jewish studies', 'Jewish state', 'exile', 'return', 'homeland', 'Land of Israel', 'ingathering of exiles', 'desolate land', 'redemption of the land', 'national revival', 'revival of the Hebrew language', etc. have to be discursively constructed in meanings that are harmonious with each other. The way to scholarly capture this harmonious multiplicity is to say that the use of this set of terms in a corpus of similarly inclined texts is done within, or constitutes, the Zionist 'narrative' or 'meta-

narrative' or 'discourse'. The Zionist metanarrative unfolds a story of a nation that has been a nation for 3,000 years, and was exiled and living in exile for 2,000 years, but now is returning to its homeland, the desolate and empty land of Israel, in order to redeem it in a process of national revival, which involves the establishment of a Jewish state, the ingathering of exiles, and the revival of the Hebrew language. This metanarrative (obviously simplified for the sake of the argument) is in conflict with the Palestinian national metanarrative (similarly simplified), which tells the story of an autochthonous population of Palestine, which on the eve of its own modernization and decolonialization was massively invaded by agents of imperial forces, was dispossessed, and is now struggling for its lawful right of national liberation and self-determination. It would have been so easy, if one of these stories had simply been true, while the other had turned out to be false, would it not? Yet both are typical nationalist narratives, which harbor essentialized terms. The 'lawful right of the Palestinians to national self-determination' sounds perhaps like an acceptable plea to radical liberals and to people on the left, in light of the oppression of this population for so many decades, but the terms 'self-determination' and 'Palestinian nation' are still not true in any absolute sense.

A narrative does not only consist of terms; there are other ways of encoding ideology which are not purely lexical, but this is not the place to discuss them. The use of the term 'narrative' is an analytic tool, not a judgment of its validity. Therefore, to say that there is a 'narrative of scientificity' is not a put-down; it merely means that from the professional perspective of discourse-analytic cultural studies, the scientific regime of truth is encoded (overtly or covertly) in the scientific text. Its validity may be discussed separately, and may be different for a text on physics and for one on anthropology. This analytic practice is very distant from resembling the accusations by Sokal and Bricmont:

If all discourses are merely 'stories' or 'narratives', and none is more objective or truthful than another, then one must concede that the worst sexist or racist prejudices and the most reactionary socioeconomic theories are 'equally valid', at least as descriptions or analyses of the real world (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:196).

Total confusion! All discourses encode in some way their regime of truth, and in this respect they are all 'narratives'. None is *absolutely* more truthful than the other, but this has nothing to do with validity. The validity of any nationalist narrative in our world today – with all its mass immigration waves, acts of forced exile, and the mobility of work force in the capitalist world – is limited in my eyes, because of the necessary essentializations (and other discursive maneuvers) that it is forced to incorporate as foundational elements in it. The truthfulness of discursive constructs such as 'nation', 'woman', 'African-American' cannot be rigorously assessed, but the discursive devices used to essentialize them are subject to scholarly treatment that analyzes and exposes them. If we refer to this activity as 'deconstruction' then there is nothing dirty about this term.

### 3.3. Postmodernism is indifferent to the left, but postmodernist left may be very effective

Postmodernism is not inimical to the left. Postmodernism may contain very different political orientations. In this respect, it is no different from modernism, which has harbored Marxism and liberalism without favoring or being inimical to either. One thing is true, though: postmodernism will be the home of ideologies which are fundamentally different from the modernist ones. They might not have names yet. They may in some respects resemble their modernist intellectual forerunners, drawing on the ethical and social analyses of these streams of thought. If the de-essentialization of modernist terms is an inimical act, then postmodernism is equally inimical to modernist right and left.

Now the question of utility may be raised: is there any chance that the political practice of a left with postmodernist epistemology might be different and perhaps even more effective than that of 'an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class' (Sokal 1996c: 249)? One angle from which this issue might be approached is the analysis of the situation of the left in the world. Sokal and Bricmont admit to

...the desperate situation and general disorientation of the left, a situation that appears to be unique in its history. The communist

regimes have collapsed; the social-democratic parties, where they remain in power, apply watered-down neo-liberal policies; and the Third World movements that led their countries to independence have, in most cases, abandoned any attempt to autonomous development. In short, the harshest form of 'free market' capitalism seems to have become the implacable reality for the foreseeable future... Without entering into an analysis of the causes of this situation (much less proposing solutions), it is easy to understand that it generates a kind of discouragement that expresses itself in part in postmodernism (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:189).

Note the helplessness expressed in this passage via two discursive devices. The first device is the characterization of the process as unique. Unique processes defy analysis. Zionist discourse makes much use of this device: Jewish history is unique, the revival of Hebrew is unique, Israeli sociology is unique, etc. If 'the general disorientation of the left' is unique, very little can be done about it. The complementary device is the writers' refusal to go into the causes. But if only considerations of space prevented them from a detailed analysis, an intimation with regard to its direction would have been helpful. Without it, the reader might conclude that this unique process has no explanation. But uniqueness co-exists in this passage with another possible explanation: capitalism has instituted a sense of 'implacable reality for the foreseeable future'. The two answers are not compatible with one another: one is fatalistic, based on uniqueness; the other is deterministic, based on a traditional Marxist reading of market forces as the determinant (in the last instance) of consciousness. The unwillingness to 'propos[e] solutions' is motivated by the inability to analyze. What is most strikingly missing here is a self-examination of the practices of the conservative left during two centuries of self-confident all-knowing modernist epistemology. It is easy to say that the communist regimes, the traditional social democracies, and the Third World liberation movements all collapsed due to a mixture of fatalism and determinism, but did they carry a viable promise in the first place? Are they the models for a future left, or did they embody the seeds of the impasse?

Marxism was based on scientificity from its very inception. It knew the difference between 'scientific knowledge' and 'ideology'. It was able to tell 'true consciousness' from 'false consciousness', but it

also had to introduce the notorious notion of 'in the last instance', because the 'meanwhile' was not so glorious: the working class refused to become a self-conscious class. This little problem notwithstanding, the strategy of the left has always been based on one premise: to present the discourse of the other as 'ideology' and to replace it with the true 'knowledge' of reality. *They* manufacture consent; *we* know the truth, i.e. our discourse is an accurate reflection of reality.

For most of the past two centuries, the left has been identified with science and against obscurantism, believing that rational thought and the fearless analysis of objective reality (both natural and social) are incisive tools for combating the mystifications promoted by the powerful (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:187).

In communist countries, this strategy has taken one further step: since reality is now in our hands, we shall change it (nationalization of means of production, state planned economy, etc.), and the result will be a new socialist personality.

But since this discourse used the same unproblematized notions as its rivals, the whole discursive struggle between right and left boiled down to 'who is right?' and 'why don't they understand?'. The attempt to produce highly reductive metanarratives that have the answers to all questions draws on the over-centralized determination of every aspect of life by class conflict, which has been catastrophic to left theory. Very soon after the revolution Lenin had to face the question of self-determination to all nations, but his theoretical framework did not supply him with a clear criterion to decide who was entitled to this honorable right. Neither is it obvious today. Are the Israeli Arabs a nation? Should they be given the right of self-determination? Or perhaps they are a part of the Palestinian nation and they should be granted the right to join their territories to future Palestine? And how about the settlers of the occupied territories? Some of them threaten to unilaterally establish the State of Judea as a sister state to the State of Israel, if Israel ever decides to yield the occupied territories. Do they not have the right of self-determination? But if we understand 'nation' as a political entity, a discursive artifact produced in modernity (and yes, also in capitalism), we will be able to start being really rational about it, to deconstruct it, and to struggle against selected types of its political application.

A well worked out strategy of a left with postmodernist orientation has not emerged yet, but its principle should be quite clear. The struggle is not over reality but over discourse. Actions are extremely important, but reality will always be open to different readings. This is why Israeli Arabs do not have one unified ideology. And the question whether they should become part of a new Israeli collective, a nation in the civic sense, or continue to politicize ethnic notions and be a recognized autonomous national minority within Israel, has no truthful answer, based on 'fearless analysis of objective reality'. But it does have an ethical answer. And my ethics tell me that the civic option dismantles the notion of 'nation' as an ethnic, hereditary, organic concept, and carries a promise of downgrading ethnicity in the political field, while the option of ethnic autonomy perpetuates nationalism and continues to fuel the nationalist conflicts at the expense of social betterment. Now, take your pick. Israeli political discourse will change, if the participant Jews and Arabs speak and perform speech acts – around transpiring or planned events – which de-essentialize blood-based nationalism. Of course, incidental acts, like Raslan's statement, are not enough. There must be a political organization (party, movement, homepage) that collectively articulates such acts, and is able to produce events (demonstrations, symbolic acts), around which to produce this discourse.

Sokal accuses postmodernist principles as being 'academic' and 'detached' from political struggle. They are not more detached than is theoretical Marxism from revolutionary praxis. The translation of such principles to a revised political language of the left has not been worked out yet. This might have been a valid critique, but this is not to say that postmodernism has no promise.

#### 4. *The epistemology of CDA*

It would be very easy to show that traditional discourse analysis is modernist in its assumptions. But a greater challenge would be to examine critical discourse analysis, which reproaches traditional discourse analysis for being 'decidedly "uncritical" if not "apolitical", even when it has focused on the social dimensions of language use' (Van Dijk 1993a:131). This is definitely a promising statement, so let us observe what kind of critical work is offered in this framework.

CDA should deal primarily with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it... Critical Discourse Analysts [should] take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large. Although not in each stage of theory formation and analysis, their work is admittedly and ultimately political. Their hope, if occasionally illusory, is change through critical understanding. Their perspective, if possible, that of those who suffer most from dominance and inequality. Their critical targets are the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone, or ignore social inequality and injustice. That is, one of the criteria of their work is solidarity with those who need it most (Van Dijk 1993b:252).

The first striking thing in this paragraph is the position of omniscience expressed through the fact that the author purports to know in advance what the power relations are: who is the villain and who is the victim, and on grounds of this knowledge he sides with 'those who need it most'. Based on this knowledge, he targets the oppressor as object of investigation, and sets out to analyze the 'discourse dimensions of power abuse'. The suggested strategy is 'critical understanding'. The term 'understanding' indicates that it is based on the analyst's *a priori* 'knowledge', and his aim is to disseminate this knowledge, hoping that the recognition of this objective truth will enhance social transformation.

Their critique of discourse implies a political critique of those responsible for its perversion in the reproduction of dominance and inequality. Such a critique should not be ad hoc, individual or incidental, but general, structural, and focused on groups, while involving power relations between groups. In this sense, critical discourse scholars should also be social and political scientists, as well as social critics and activists (Van Dijk 1993b:252-253).

The knowledgeable analyst works on the 'perversions of discourse' committed by the oppressor, which 'reproduc[e] dominance and inequality'. Unlike the discourse of the knowledgeable analyst, which is based on knowledge and reflects reality in a faithful way, the discourse of the villains is a 'perversion of discourse'. The analyst is also an expert in other social disciplines. Not a word is said about

possible rifts in those disciplines, of the possibility that there are different points of view about knowledge and about reality also there. However, the actual practice of CDA scholars shows that their choice of sociology, political science, etc. is unsurprisingly harmonious with their epistemological choices in CDA.

The 1990s are replete with persistent problems of oppression, injustice, and inequality that demand their urgent attention... They guide the choice of topics and relevancies. Thus if immigrants, refugees and (other) minorities suffer from prejudice, discrimination and racism, and if women continue to be subjected to male dominance, violence or sexual harassment, it will be essential to examine and evaluate such events and their consequences essentially from their point of view. That is, such events will be called 'racist' or 'sexist' if knowledgeable Blacks or women say so, despite white or male denial (Van Dijk 1993b:253).

Now, since the author knows the balance of powers in advance, he can easily recognize the oppressed. Consequently he adopts their point of view. But how would one know what the correct point of view might be? Very simple: just consult 'knowledgeable Blacks or women', and you will know who is the racist or the sexist. Van Dijk does not tell us what he might do if there is more than one candidate for the post of the 'knowledgeable oppressed'. Is it, for example, the liberal-democratic Israeli Arab, or the nationalist-separatist one? But I suspect that the one whose opinion matches the author's *a priori* knowledge of reality will win the race.

And just in case that my conjectures with regard to the authors epistemology were too rash, he spells them out for us:

One crucial presupposition of adequate critical discourse analysis is understanding the nature of social power and dominance. Once we have such an insight, we may begin to formulate ideas about how discourse contributes to their reproduction. To cut a long philosophical and social scientific analysis short, we assume that we here deal with properties of relations between social groups (Van Dijk 1993b:253).

Quite clear-cut: I know reality, and I can tell you how to analyze it, based on social 'groups'. And if you only (uncritically) trust my knowledge, I surely will be able to tell you what and who is a 'nation' (a group). Social groups, then, are not discursive entities socially negotiated in discourse, but quasi-natural entities existing in advance of discursive treatment.

At this point of my presentation, my reader will not gasp in surprise upon hearing Van Dijk's opinion on postmodernism:

Unlike the many present-day fashions of postmodernism and other 'post-'movements, also in discourse analysis, critical research does not profess cynicism, distance and unwarranted relativism, attitudes that often are indicative of the indifference of academics vis-a-vis the remaining inequalities in contemporary societies (Van Dijk 1993a:132).

The association of postmodernism with 'cynicism', 'distance', and 'indifference' with regard to inequalities in contemporary societies harmonizes with similar claims by Sokal, who draws from them the inevitable conclusion that postmodernism is 'inimical to the left'. This means, in fact, that differences of opinion internal to the left have to continue to be sorted out within a framework that continues to lean on the traditional modernist frameworks, without a critical deconstruction of its own terms. Furthermore, since such an approach uncritically sides not only with the oppressed but automatically also with the narratives of the oppressed, it is unwilling in advance to be critical of the politics of the oppressed. I do not deny the importance of the critique of capitalism, racism, sexism, antisemitism, Thatcherism, and many other oppressive ideologies. Such analyses have been carried out within CDA, and they have been extremely valuable despite theoretical flaws. But it is no accident that CDA has not targeted the metanarratives of the oppressed, in order to examine to what extent they are theoretically and ethically sound, and to what extent they are efficient. This kind of anti-intellectual leftism both in academics and in political practice leads to stagnation of thought and is in a very fundamental way inimical to itself.

I have concentrated on Van Dijk's CDA not because there are no others. But his outspoken statements encode – albeit in a harsh style

that may not represent other CDA scholars – the epistemology that underlies *mutatis mutandis* CDA in general.

### 5. Poststructuralism and postmodernism

The practice of lumping together different 'post-'frameworks, typical of many of its critics (including Sokal and Van Dijk), is a discursive device that helps to alienate the public from them but does not serve clarity. On the other hand, there is no agreed definition of these terms, and their employment varies along different criteria. Sokal often speaks of postmodernism and poststructuralism in general, but targets most specifically epistemic relativism. I have restricted my discourse to postmodernist relativist epistemology, but I do believe that many streams of postmodernist theorizing have been premised on such epistemology, though they do not consequently share any specific ethical or ideological grounds.

Another practice that may often be observed in discussions on postmodernism is the conflation of modernity with modernism and of the postmodern condition with postmodernist theorizing. Frow (1997) suggests that one reason why the concept of postmodernism is logically incoherent has to do with 'the question of exemplification':

The literature on postmodernism is notorious for its contradictory assumptions, rarely made explicit, about what is contained in the set of the postmodern. Characteristically it gives almost no examples..., or else is so over-inclusive as to blur all boundaries... The result of this is that much of the polemic around the concept is shadow-boxing. If I think postmodernism means Olson and Heissenbüttel and Pinchon and catastrophe theory, and you think it means MTV, fashion advertisements, political sound-bites, and the excremental vision, and someone else thinks it's hypertext, *trompe l'oeil* façades, 'Oprah', and *Blue Velvet*, then we are probably talking right past each other, since the definition of the concept shifts with the objects taken to exemplify it. This is to say that the concept cannot be thought as the representation of a given field of cultural production, or of a tendency within this field; it is rather the embattled attempt to *construct* the unity of such a field or tendency (Frow 1997:26-27).

Though I do not follow Frow in the details of his analysis, I do agree with his principle that 'the concept of the postmodern obeys a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity: its function is that of a logical operator' (Frow 1997:36), and one of the hinges of this operator, I would add, is the move from structuralism (in its broadest sense) to a discursively regimented relativism.

Structuralism is the prototypical scholarly framework of modernism, encapsulating the promises of enlightenment and rationality. It is positivistic in its pursuit of progress, both in scholarship and in social vision. It is often highly reductive in that it offers a limited and tightly formulated metanarrative for viewing reality, based on a small number of principles that are taken as essentially true. In linguistics, the formalist schools (both Saussurean and Chomskyan) are typical instances of structuralism, and so are traditional Marxism and liberalism in politics. They are all based on the modernist premise that if used correctly, language is transparent, i.e. it can faithfully represent reality. The socially oriented linguistic disciplines (sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, linguistic anthropology etc.) challenged the autonomy of the linguistic system and suggested to enlarge its scope so as to include also social components, but they remained structuralist in their epistemological foundations for quite a while. Ideology was recognized as being encoded in discourse as the non-transparent (distorted, deformed, perverted) reflection of reality, still amounting to the same conception of true and false representation.

Poststructuralism started to examine the foundations of structuralism. A careful deconstruction of basic concepts revealed the internal tensions inherent in them. The 'objective' and 'apolitical nature' of scholarship has been questioned. The power of highly reductive metanarratives has been destabilized. Different theories of ideology have been more finely formulated. It has even been suggested that 'ideology has no outside' (Althusser 1971:175), namely that we are all operating from within ideology. But even Althusser insisted that there was a scientific discourse, which evolved thanks to the absence of the ideological individual (the 'interpellated subject') from it (Althusser 1971:173). Poststructuralism problematized the concept of true versus false representation, but remained within the belief in, and pursuit of, absolute scientific truth.

As postmodernism is premised on discursively relativized truth, it collides with modernism on that very point. Every major break in

tradition contains also continuities with the past. A responsible taxonomy of structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism should be based on more than one criterion. But if we concentrate for the sake of this discussion on epistemology only, we may consider a flexible taxonomy, in which poststructuralism fluctuates between modernism and postmodernism. Both poststructuralism and postmodernism may be grouped together as critical frameworks problematizing the presuppositions of structuralism and using deconstruction tools. But however critical it gets, poststructuralism still adheres to modernist epistemology, transcended only by postmodernism. As such, postmodernism is critical also of its immediate predecessor, poststructuralism.

This very simplified taxonomy is complex enough to offer a trajectory for untangling the disorderly conglomeration of all 'post-' theories, and it accounts for three phenomena that have been central to our discussion. First of all, it explains why some streams in poststructuralism tried so hard to prove their scientificity, leaning on natural science as their ultimate model. After all, they were still modernist at their base. These are the texts that Sokal rightly but inappropriately criticized. Secondly, this taxonomy explains why postmodernists are so fond of their poststructuralist predecessors: they provided postmodernists with invaluable insights as well as with analytic tools of concept deconstruction, which are selectively still used in their own writings. Sokal identified this sentiment, but misunderstood its meaning. Thirdly, this taxonomy, which involves both continuities and discontinuities, explains why a framework that has liberated itself from absolute scientificity, is able to harbor, on the one hand, streams that remain faithful to the values of the left in general and of Marxism in particular, and on the other hand, streams that totally reject them and remain faithful to the ethics of liberal individualism. They take these opposed positions although they share the belief that there are no longer any scientific guarantees anchored in a social reality that is given in advance of the discourse on it. This is why Sokal mistakenly overgeneralized postmodernism as being uniformly inimical to the left.

I do not feel competent to get into a detailed analysis of Sokal's position within physics. However, if we view Popper's *The logic of scientific discovery* (Popper 1959) as a prototypical structuralist work, then Sokal's critique of it, and his recognition of the unformalizability of the scientific method, put him at least in a late-structuralist,

if not in an incipient post-structuralist position. As for his politics, despite Sokal's confession to being an 'unabashed Old Leftist', he and Bricmont believe that

... the challenge [to postmodernism] comes nowadays not only from the rear-guard, but also from people who understand the problems encountered by science, rationality and traditional leftist politics – but who believe that criticism of the past should enlighten the future, not lead to contemplation of the ashes (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:197).

They express their hope for

... the emergence of an intellectual culture that would be rationalist but not dogmatic, scientifically minded but not scientific, open-minded but not frivolous, and politically progressive but not sectarian (Sokal and Bricmont 1998a:198).

This position is fashionably dialectical, but says very little. Yet, it reflects the same kind of dissatisfaction with 'rear-guard dogmatism' in structuralist politics as with structuralist philosophy of science, but it does not know how to approach it and uses vague dialectics to cover it up. In this respect, Sokal's positions are very similar to the general scheme of CDA, which presents vague and obvious truisms as a genuine platform. Toolan's critique of this oversimplified leftism is to the point:

But who is *not* politically opposed to sexism, racism and discrimination? How could one have much intellectual respect for anyone who did not favor equity, justice and liberation?... This is why I suggest there is nothing new or interesting in CDA politics (Toolan 1997:100).

Beyond declarations and slogans, the epistemology of both Sokal and CDA turns out to be quite critical of modernism. Hodge (1999:258) even generously suggests that 'Sokal has a surprising amount in common with the social deconstructivists'. But both Sokal and Van Dijk are not quite there. Meanwhile, the poststructuralist train, which was passing amidst a major shift in train-schedules, is gone. In order to really problematize one's scholarly and political positions,

postmodernist epistemology offers an exciting perspective, imminent in the socially oriented linguistic subdiscipline.

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