

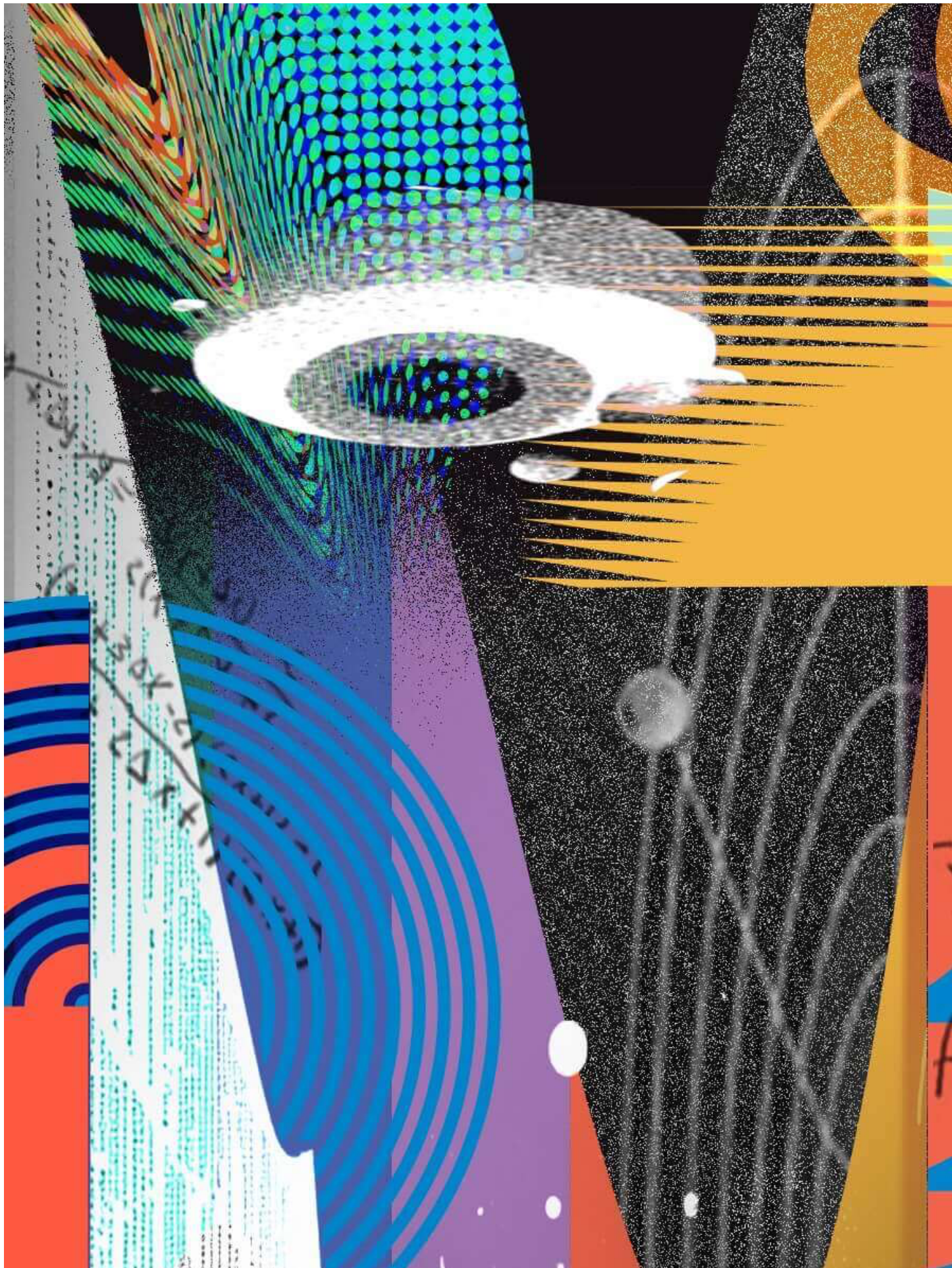
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[no. 81](#)

[November 2025](#)

Belittled Magazine

Thirty years after the Sokal affair



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Social Text still exists. In the spring of 1996, when the journal was the object of an enthusiastically publicized hoax by the physicist Alan Sokal, its survival seemed a bad bet. You published an essay arguing that gravity is a “social and linguistic construct?” Really? The mainstream media, hitherto unaware of the existence of this very little, very marginal magazine, were uncertain what exactly they were mocking. Was *Social Text*’s foolishness postmodern? Left wing? Cultural? Academic? They were certain, however, that what they smelled in the water was blood. On their side, and for a not insignificant portion of the left, jubilation. On the other side, humiliation. (I should know: I was the journal’s coeditor at the time.) We seemed like the stupidest people in the world, or the stupidest people who had been pretending to speak on behalf of the most avant-garde sociopolitical views. One friend of the journal suggested that we fall on our swords. If we owned no swords, swords could be made available.

The journal did not fold. One reason was that it had published a lot of good work, none of it remotely resembling Sokal’s gravity-is-a-construct nonsense, and those who cared about such things knew it. Edward Said’s “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims” had come out in the first issue in 1979; for U.S.-based critiques of Zionism, 1979 was early. Other issues contained Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” and Aijaz Ahmad’s Marxist critique of Marxist (and *Social Text* cofounder) Fredric Jameson.

Another reason why the journal didn’t fold was that, with that era’s culture wars in full swing, the pressure to be loyal to what you saw as your side was stronger than embarrassment at a dumb mistake: accepting an awkwardly written, citation-heavy article in which a physicist seemed to embrace an antirealist epistemology. Yes, errors had been made, and there had been innocent casualties (vulnerable students and junior faculty doing serious research in cultural studies) and not so innocent ones (I was briefly denied a promotion). But war was war. No one seemed ready to concede defeat. Some ingenious and some desperately unconvincing things were said in the journal’s defense.

Standing firm was arguably the preferable option. What was at stake was not a giddy worldview that denied the existence of physical reality. Considered sociologically and politically rather than philosophically, the “X is a construct” platform, thirty years ago, stood for solidarity with the political energies of the 1960s—above all, liberation movements in the name of race and gender. To say that gender was a construct was to make a political point. Ditto for maintaining that race was a construct. Stereotypes (that’s what they were called back then) that kept women and people of color in their place were not the verifiable truth about the world. Depictions of the non-Europeans to whom the imperial metropolis denied independence or whom it excluded from its borders were not the results of objective empirical observation; they were fictive generalizations that served unsavory interests. Circulating them perpetuated injustice. Behind constructionism, a project of denaturalizing categories of thought that were taken to be natural, there were large groups of people who had been trying to rectify how they were described and thus also their unjustifiable situation in the world, which the false descriptions enabled. Imagine the world differently, and you can make it better. Constructionism’s slogan was crude but politically mobilizing. Imagination is a form of politics.

Social science had put much of its authority behind the contrary assumption: “That’s their nature. We have studied the matter impartially. We know.” It was probably inevitable, especially in a moment when the shameful indifference of medical institutions to the HIV/AIDS crisis was still fresh in everyone’s mind, that constructionism would get hyperextended, that some would be willing to identify scientific knowledge, as such, with hegemonic power. That was not a position *Social Text* embraced—it’s not the argument of the other essays in the ill-fated “Science Wars” issue that included Sokal’s. By 1996, constructionism was already seen by many of the journal’s writers and readers as more of a problem than a solution. Diana Fuss had made the argument decisively seven years prior in her book *Essentially Speaking*. After all, who or what does the constructing? Patriarchy, racism, and capitalism are real historical agents, no? The journal’s origins were unapologetically Marxist. For Marxists, imagination is a force, yes, but it’s not imagined constructs all the way down.

Three decades later, an essay identifying science with power would probably fail to get the required votes. (Sokal’s essay got only four readings, but they were positive, and that, alas, was enough.) With the federal government aligning itself with anti-vaxxers and drill-baby-drill climate change deniers and exerting a heretofore unimaginable authority to defund ongoing research and push an antiscience agenda, you would have to be more foolish than *Social Text*’s collective to take science simply as an antagonist. And this is true even if you have your doubts about what has come to permeate common sense as constructionism has faded, like the body as a determining site of unquestioned truth and

genetic and biochemical accounts of identity, which are easier to turn into someone's tidy profits than sociohistorical ones.

Painting the Gown Red

A third and perhaps more important reason why *Social Text* did not disappear is that it was a little magazine. By the 1990s, it probably looked to many like just another academic journal, but it was never peer-reviewed (that issue came up of course apropos of the Sokal disaster), and it had started out thinking of itself as an organ of the left. Cofounder Stanley Aronowitz, who was born into the working class and came to the role of intellectual through the labor movement, was looking back over his shoulder at the littleness of *Partisan Review*, which seemed to define its newfound independence from the Communist Party. (John Brenkman, another founder, was thinking of *Tel Quel*, an even littler magazine.) Littleness was complicated: it could give the magazine a higher vocation, but it could also serve as self-protection, an excuse for not trying to be too political.

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In "The Function of the Little Magazine," first published as the introduction to a 1946 collection of pieces from *Partisan Review*, Lionel Trilling laments that, although politics had not been good for literature, little magazines had saved the day, managing to keep literature from being lowered by politics. Trilling begins by declaring that *Partisan Review's* survival for ten years (with a readership of six thousand!) is a victory. It's a victory because the journal has succeeded in refusing to give its readers what they want, which is a crude literature of political protest. For Trilling, other journals had mendaciously jacked up the excitement level with misplaced metaphors of weaponry and war (implicitly, class war). *Partisan Review*, however, does not pretend, most of the time, to write for "the many," "the working masses." In other publications, quality literature, which for Trilling means modernism, has been losing out both to politics and to the competition of radio and movies. Thus there has been a "general lowering of the status of literature," a loss of literature's social power. The little magazines have recognized, correctly, that literature needs a "cultivated" public. *Partisan Review* in particular has unashamedly addressed "the self-appointed few," yet has somehow squared the circle: it has done so without surrendering its hold on politics. Perhaps a bit half-heartedly, he affirms that the magazine has been doing what needs to be done: showing how politics benefits from being mixed with "imagination and mind." Trilling does not use the term, but what he is championing, in "imagination and mind," is elitism.

Elitism seems a subject worth taking a fresh look at in regard both to *Social Text*'s survival and to what the Sokal hoax means today, if it means anything. The social movements of the 1960s, which gave birth to little magazines and/or academic journals like *Social Text* in the 1970s, may have been weak on class, but they did not like elitism; indeed, they took a lot of heat from the right for their supposed willingness to subvert proper intellectual standards in order to set aside entitlements based on race and gender. It was his unapologetic elitism that kept Trilling from expressing any enthusiasm for the 1960s protests. In the spring of 1968, when protesters shut Columbia University down (as the protesters in the spring of 2024 did not), students circulated a mock arrest warrant for Lionel "Trains" Trilling, identified as a "cultural imperialist." At that time, elitism was cultural imperialism. There has been a reversal. In today's culture wars, it is the anti-imperialists who are accused of elitism; we are advised by columnists like David Brooks to ignore collegiate protesters in the Gaza encampments because they are the privileged.

In the 1960s and after, the assumption was that "the Movement" was in revolt against a structure of elite power sustained by both the existing distribution of money and the existing organization of knowledge. As the word *elitism* functions in political discourse today, money and knowledge have come apart. Much of the time, of course, the word *elite* is used casually to refer to those at the top of whatever group is under discussion. When it is used with political deliberation, however, the word tends to aim instead, these days, at what Trilling called "imagination and mind." What stands accused is not money or the power that money affords. On the contrary, elitism throws up a smokescreen behind which the power of money can hide. The explicit targets today are expertise and education, seen as sources of left-wing or "woke" power (which they are).

Looking back at the hullabaloo over the Sokal hoax, it's surprising how muted the elitism issue appears now. All the pieces seemed in place for a full-blown class argument in the MAGA style that the *Social Text* collective and its allies were not just hypocrites (by virtue of their claim to speak for democracy) but also elitists (by virtue of their jargon and their educational privilege). Sokal made it clear that by being on the side of common sense, science was taking the side of the common man, and this was true no matter how inaccessible the language scientists spoke might be. The journalists who flocked to the hoax were happy to second that motion, which strengthened their bargaining position vis-à-vis the academy (though they neglected to recall the inaccessibility of much scientific language). *Social Text* was funded by a university. The hoax offered irresistible evidence that, as the Republicans would agree today, universities are out of touch, and the writing that comes out of them is deliberately incomprehensible. Conservative columnist George Will, unafraid to use big words of his own, described the journal as "smitten with gibberish," full of "solecism and gaseous philosophical rhetoric, flecked with . . . political jargon."

Janny Scott of the *New York Times* complained of *Social Text*'s use of the word *epistemological* as part of its "impenetrable hodgepodge of jargon, buzzwords, footnotes." She implied that journalists like her are properly impatient with anything but the common tongue. They are accountable to the public. Though they don't use footnotes, they have nothing to hide.

One go-to reference at the time was Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the emperor's new clothes. (The tale was name-checked in the *Los Angeles Times*; the headline in the *News-Press* of Fort Myers, Florida, was "Social Scientists Wore No Clothes.") In presenting *Social Text* as vain and deluded, like Andersen's emperor, journalists were in turn presenting themselves as avatars of Andersen's innocent child, too young to be intimidated by the emperor's authority and thus unafraid to say exactly what he saw: not very fine clothes, but no clothes. The fable must have offered welcome relief from the consciousness of how beholden journalists in fact were to the power and ideology of the editors who had to sign off on their stories, and so on up the ladder. In a time when the prejudices of powerful figures in the newsroom (some with family members in the Israeli Defense Forces) have been visible all over *New York Times* coverage of Israel and Gaza, the idea of journalists as antiestablishment gadflies accountable to no one will sound like more of a fairy tale than Andersen's. But the strangest thing about these Andersen references was the implication that *Social Text* was not merely ridiculous, but powerful—indeed, mysteriously comparable in power to an emperor. Even if *Social Text* was taken to stand for something bigger, like postmodernism or the cultural left, it was a stretch to think of it as somehow the voice of the ruling class, the elite. This was a very little magazine they were talking about. Unless there was more political potential there than anyone was ready to claim.

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Like Trilling, *Social Text* was never unambivalent about its role, as a journal, in relation to politics in the everyday sense. Maybe the times called for politics to be refreshed and even reinvented? According to Stanley Aronowitz, in conversations that would lead to the founding of *Social Text*, he and Fredric Jameson discussed the argument then current on the left that politics was "no longer organized around political parties, but instead around journals." It was a heady thing to believe, and maybe a bit self-congratulatory, but in my experience there was some truth to it. When Cornel West invited me to participate in editorial discussions in the fall of 1984, one thing I noticed immediately was a big difference from both standard academic practice and that of the little magazine as I understood it. West and Aronowitz—both figures who remained committed to politics at the level of parties—were not wary of repeating themselves in talks or in print. The point

was not to produce original, standalone performances of argument or interpretation, as it so often is in the academy or for publications in the vein of the *Partisan Review*. What they were trying to do was to work out the right political line. It was a distinctive thing about West and Aronowitz: they repeated and refined and, when necessary, realigned what they had to say as circumstances changed. At the time, I was a young would-be scholar desperately trying to find a secure niche for myself, and all this repetition with a difference sometimes left me feeling uncomfortable. By the time I came to see the logic behind it, both Aronowitz and West were moving on, as was the journal. As Brent Edwards and Anna McCarthy, two editors at that time, note in their introduction to the one hundredth issue in 2009, the journal had stabilized and solved its funding and logistical issues, and as it did so any pretense that it could indeed function like a political party, or even in loose conjunction with party politics, was fast disappearing. I remember debates in the 1990s over whether to keep a red line along the edge of the cover. People laughed about the triviality, political engagement reduced to an issue of cover design, but the symbolism stood for something, and opinions were divided.

One way to describe the divided opinions is to ask: How little did people think the magazine should be? In the decade and a half that I worked on *Social Text*, there were two moments when I was tempted to take my toys and go home. One came near the end of my tenure there, when Sokal asked *Social Text* to publish his explanation for the hoax. I was the only person on the editorial collective who thought that, as first and foremost an organ of the American left, we had an obligation to publish the new Sokal piece. Yes, feelings had been bruised, and some thought (I didn't) that the hoax was an unforgivable ethical violation. Sokal, too, belonged to the left, I argued, and many people of intelligence and good will thought the hoax in some sense a useful or well-deserved thing. We had to show we were taking them seriously. I lost that debate after two three-hour meetings. Sokal's "Afterword" came out in *Dissent* in the fall of 1996. I drew the conclusion that my colleagues were content to fortify the journal in its littleness, preferring on this occasion at least not to see themselves as part of a wider left that included different epistemologies.

The other moment had come earlier when I proposed an essay I had written on Richard Rorty, violence, and human rights. The essay was rejected by the collective on the grounds that our readers were not interested enough in liberals like Rorty to justify publishing anything on him, however critical. In both cases, the implication seemed to be that we don't need the liberals, we don't even need to *talk* to the liberals. Which I translate, in the year of Zohran Mamdani (hopefully one of many years), as: We don't have any chance of winning, so why try? That's not who we are. Better not to bother with potential allies and the compromises that dialogue with them might entail. Better to hold fast to our purity, our righteousness, our littleness.

Seen from this angle, the littleness of the little magazine meant backing off from politics in the large sense—the sense Jameson was referring to when he likened journals to political parties. It meant the absence of an ambition, even a patient and well-sublimated ambition, to speak for the majority. The mass media were already doing that. In dark political times, it's tempting to content oneself with seeking a refuge for the righteous counterculture, something like (as a friend of the journal proposed, half seriously) the retreat to the monasteries after the fall of Rome. Outside, the barbarians are going to rule. There is nothing we can do about that. Inside our walls, at least, a shred of civilization will perhaps survive. And thus the journal, walled up, can also survive.

Campus Grovel

It is perhaps somewhat unfair to suggest that *Social Text* (like other little publications of the 1970s) gradually opted out of politics in the messier, more public sense, favoring a protective self-marginalization. The journal remained a center of energetic political activities, some of them filling whole issues (as with an issue offering early support for the effort of academic workers to unionize) and some not. The journal maintained its record of engagement with the cause of justice for Palestine. My own engagement with the Palestinian cause began in earnest in 2002, when I had long stopped attending *Social Text* meetings. It came through Alan Sokal.

The culture wars were neither the only wars out there nor the most important ones.

In 2002, I received an email from Sokal asking my opinion of an “Open Letter of American Jews to Our Government” that he had drafted. Sokal and I were not friends. The fact that he had been perfectly civil in our handful of public debates did not lead me to seek his companionship. Still, I did not delete his “Open Letter.” I read it, and I thought it was good. I saw his (possibly unconscious) point in writing to me: together, we could demonstrate that people who disagreed about certain things could still come together on issues of basic ethical principle. I wrote back, proposing a few revisions. I passed it on to others, who did the same. One thing led to another, and by the spring the two of us found ourselves running a campaign to gather signatures from American Jews who did not accept the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the outrages to decency and human rights attendant upon that occupation, or America's unconditional support for the whole package. (This was before organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace became the force they are today.) In July 2002 we published a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with several thousand signatures, paid for by an avalanche of checks mailed in by American Jews who, as their handwritten notes told us over and over, felt unrepresented by lobbying groups like AIPAC and ADL that claimed to speak for the whole American Jewish community. The ad called for the United

States to cut off all aid to Israel if Israel did not adhere to a two-state settlement. We got it translated into several languages, and we published it again four years later.

The introduction to the book *The Sokal Hoax*, published in 2000 and edited by the editors of *Lingua Franca*, observes that almost none of the sentiments about the hoax recorded in that volume “are conciliatory.” Conciliation was not the point of the project on which Sokal and I collaborated, but the project certainly illustrated how much common ground is to be found if you are willing to look. The culture wars were neither the only wars out there nor the most important ones. Nor did they dictate reliably what was worth fighting for.

After all, in some sense *Social Text*, too, was on the side of the elitists. Whatever it became, it was not at the outset an academic journal, and yet publication in its pages could make a professional difference to an academic career. In that sense, the invokers of the emperor’s new clothes were not wrong. This confusion—were we fighting the power, or were we an institutional part of it?—was probably the source of some post-hoax Schadenfreude. Many would-be writers no doubt assumed their submissions would be treated as contributions to the common cause, and then they received rejections framed not to comrades in arms, but to aspirants to that scarce professional privilege, respectable publication. Until the Sokal affair let them loose, I think we were unaware of the slow-burning frustrations we had provoked—the fact that in the eyes of many the journal wore the forbidding face of a gatekeeper. Hence the left-wing glee at our exposure. What better revenge than to see the judges judged and their imperfections so dramatically revealed?

Being a gatekeeper by maintaining high intellectual standards is not what public opinion would associate with *Social Text*, to say the least. Yet that is what the journal practiced, mainly. And it is a practice worth defending, however elitist it might look. All the more so because of how the Trump administration has weaponized both the idea of the hoax and the program of anti-elitism. We know who its targets are. We know what has befallen intellectual standards.

It is true that the Gaza demonstrators at Columbia, many of them recently expelled or suspended in obedience to the demands of, among others, the Republican Party, were probably more privileged on average than other Americans of their age group. But what they were speaking up for, in speaking against Israeli military violence in Gaza and American complicity with it, was not their privilege. They were taking advantage of critical thinking they had learned from the sort of education that ought to be available to anyone who desires it—more widely available than it is at present, as the demonstrators would be the first to say. And they were expressing principles of justice that are universal, not the property of any one class. They were trying to hold liberal institutions like Columbia, which have been notorious in their compliance or collusion with the Trump administration, to

their own stated liberal doctrines. They were doing politics, in what has turned out to be a messy and personally expensive way, but they were also upholding standards of intellectual and moral consistency that the institutions around them were failing to uphold.

In a letter to the Columbia community in July, acting President Claire Shipman wrote that, as part of its new antisemitism initiative, the university “has not, and will not, recognize or meet with the group that calls itself ‘Columbia University Apartheid Divest’ (CUAD), its representatives, or any of its affiliated organizations.” Why not? “Organizations that promote violence or encourage disruptions of our academic mission are not welcome on our campuses and the University will not engage with them.” Like most of Shipman’s missives, this one sounds like it was written by generative AI. But perhaps generative AI would have caught the grammar mistake: “has not *recognized*, and will not recognize . . .” And perhaps it would have caught the small logical inconsistency. It appears that, in Shipman’s eyes, the Zionist supporters of the bombing of Gaza, with whom the university has engaged happily on a daily basis, doing their bidding at every opportunity, do *not* “promote violence.” Is this ChatGPT, or is it Orwell’s doublethink?

One way or the other, the president’s neglect of elite intellectual standards and her crass submission to the moneyed elite need to be called out, as do similar actions by her colleagues at other universities. My former coeditor Andrew Ross at *Social Text* took most of the flak for the Sokal affair (although it was Aronowitz, mentioned nineteen times in Sokal’s article either directly or in footnotes, who pushed hardest for the article’s acceptance). Ross’s main interest in science was, and remains, ecological. It is no surprise to anyone that in laying out the environmental costs of urban projects like supplying water to the city of Phoenix, he relied on the best scientific evidence available. Following an early involvement in the anti-sweatshop movement, Ross’s scholarly work came to focus on offshore labor (for which he was banned from the United Arab Emirates), academic labor, the labor of the incarcerated, debt refusal, and construction workers in Palestine. In December 2024, he was arrested during a Gaza demonstration at NYU; the response of the NYU administration was to declare him *persona non grata* and deny him access to classroom buildings. An NYU spokesman explained, with shameless and characteristic implausibility, “This was not a peaceful protest.” As far as I know, Ross and Sokal have not been in touch with each other in light of recent events, but Sokal has been writing strong statements in defense of the academic freedom that is being denied to Ross and so many others. These days, it’s clear that the academy is no more a refuge from political interference than the little magazines. As any Gazan could tell you, there are no safe spaces.