

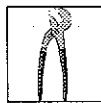
Americans, corporations will continue to try to ensure that they never hear from the young again. Progressives, in contrast, must take this least-indoctrinated cohort and ensure America never hears the end of them.

Thankfully, Madison Avenue's frustration is precisely the left's foothold in these millions while Hollywood and Washington's demonization of youth pushes them still further from the screen. Pulling young people from the brink of paralyzing cynicism to passionate and obstinate engagement will nonetheless require more leadership than has been seen thus far. Coupland, for one, has come out against trying to employ his concepts to produce a new cache of people made of plastic. *Generation X* features protagonists growing up unhappy in a bleak world robbed by Baby Boomers; his later novel, *Shampoo Planet*, suggests that epidemic "McJobs" are the "economic engine of the New World Order." Especially as the media hype dies away, Coupland's essential complaint stands tall. "Old people always win," reflects the star of *Shampoo Planet*, "the system is absolutely rigged in their favor." But in opposition, Coupland offers only "lessness—a philosophy whereby one reconciles oneself to diminishing expectations," which he considers to plague the generation called X. The author called a guru for his age has his finger on something, but engagement it is not.

It must be noted that generalizing among millions, whether X'ers or their parents, is not sufficiently productive to generate any sort of strategy. Nor is a war among generations desirable. But in time-honored tradition, the elites of an older cohort today, in fact, frequently issue pervasive and offensive slurs against their own children. Distrusting the over-30 crowd in response is not a reason-

able option, nor quite practical among a left community populated largely by Boomers. For the moment, then, alternative media must continue to slice through the din, defending the young not only on principal but also to protect their potential to radically influence all sorts of vital issues. Simultaneously, at the heart of this generation retroactively pronounced dead on arrival, alternative media must listen closely to ensure that any rumbling does not go unheard. **Z**

Nat Ives is with Sinestre.



**Society's
Pliers**

Science Wars

By Michael Albert

In the July/August issue I addressed (1) the illegitimacy of extrapolating from the many misuses of science and the bad behavior of some scientists to a claim that science, rationality, or even truth intrinsically produce oppression, and (2) the ill effects of doing this.

I indicated that scientists and scientific projects are sometimes macho, racist, classist, unduly reductionist, and domineering. I decried widespread commercial and ideological sell-out by scientists. But I also offered many reasons for rejecting the rejection of science.

In reference to postmodernism I wrote: "Most pomo is a swamp of needlessly obtuse language hiding (a) sophomoric truisms, (b) patent falsehoods, and (c) meaningless, barely literate phraseology, all melded incoherently together and dolled up to seem like wisdom.

Sure there is some serious work done under the broad rubric of postmodernism, but it is against the grain and beside the main point of the school of thought." This formulation drew some angry response (see letters section) to which I reply here.

Was I too harsh? Maybe I should have indicated that there are many important and useful insights about culture, communications, and gender that come from postmodernists. And that if any of these important insights derive from what I label "patent falsehoods" and "meaningless phraseology," then my labels are misplaced. However, if, as I think, insightful postmodernist work is independent of or contrary to what I see as falsehoods and obscurities, then I wasn't too harsh. The useless stuff should be jettisoned.

Steve Farough and Heidi Bachman wrote that "we see much of the body of postmodernist social theory as not saying that there is no truth, but rather that there are multiple truths." To clarify, they noted that Marxism, feminism, nationalism, etc. reveal multiple truths about oppression, while no one of these perspectives is alone true.

Yes, there are many truths, not just one. But isn't this a truism well known by all. Farough and Bachman added: "It's just to admit that we see the world through culturally mediated ways of seeing, verifying, smelling, hearing; and it's to admit that positivism too, is not immune to this, even in its most pure form." But realizing this doesn't require heavy theory, or the rejection of truth, science, and rationality. Of course people see the world through what they have picked up over the course of their lives in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. This is another truism, it seems to me.

Jack Knutson says "The real import of the pomos...is not their

misguided attempt to junk rationality but their ambitious attempt to point out that rationality and the scientific method are only extremely limited tools in our understanding of the world and our experience." If the "attempt to junk rationality" is peripheral, dump it. As to revealing the limitations of scientific method: Yes, we can't know by science that we love a son or mother, what the color green looks like, or what honesty is and how we feel about it. But no scientist would deny this. What scientists will say, however, is that (1) there are limited areas of inquiry where we can effectively utilize evidence, experiments, and logical consistency—for example, in assessing the impact of lead paint on children, or the trajectory of the moon, or the components of sulfur atoms. And (2) if these methods yield clear-cut knowledge in these areas, then this knowledge should take precedence over what we want to be the case, or hope is the case, or feel is the case, or dream is the case, or just plain experience to be the case (without careful testing). To argue over what areas can be usefully scientifically addressed or whether particular scientists are over-extending or doing a good job or even being scientific at all, or over who should decide what we should do with attained knowledge, is of course desirable. But to say there are only stories, all with equal claim, and therefore science is just another story, is, well, a patent falsehood.

In other words, if pomo is only saying that about love or hate or awe at a rainbow, Dostoevsky, Poe, or Plath is a far more informative read than Newton, Curie, or Feynman, then pomo is only telling people what we already know. But if pomo is saying that Newton, Curie, and Feynman don't take precedence over non-scientific commentators about matters that Newton, Curie, and Feyn-

man can and do scientifically assess, then pomo is saying something new, but patently false.

Linda Schactman decries polarization and says Sokal's "trick" was a "low blow" against a journal in which "academics venture outside their specialties, despite the risk involved in this sort of endeavor." But these academics make highly critical claims about science and rationality. If they know so little about the topic that they can't distinguish ridiculous flimflam from insight, which is what Sokal showed, doesn't this cut through a whole lot of posturing to a relevant truth?

Roger Lindsa says, "It is difficult to follow the logic of an article that simultaneously cautions against condemning all science on the basis of a few examples while doing just that in the case of literary theory." (Others also felt I was pitting the best of science against the worst of postmodernism in an unfair manner.) I agree that this would be a gross inconsistency if it was what I was doing. Perhaps I was unclear. Let me try again.

We have science and scientists. And many scientists do bad things. We have postmodernist ideas and views and postmodernists. And many postmodernists do bad things.

Can we legitimately jump directly from instances of behavior that we don't like by members of some group to a rejection of the underlying intellectual tools of that group, from scientists to science, professors to postmodernism?

Of course not. To critique the underlying part we must show its strong connection to the bad things done. We can't do this for the English language and crimes by English speaking people, for example. What about science? Does using the intellectual tools of science push scientists to design bombs or assembly lines? Does using the intellectual tools of post-

modernism push professors to promote falsehoods and shun activism? I tried to make this case re. postmodernism when I showed how certain underlying views, such as "that there is no truth but only many competing stories," lead directly to political dead ends and to confusions that we find widely among the adherents. Did I do a good job? Maybe not. But do postmodernists even try to make such a case when attacking science? Do they relate being rational, or using logic, or utilizing evidence to being imperial or macho by showing how the former intrinsically yields the latter? If so, I would certainly like to see it.

Jack Miller adds, "By concentrating on the muddled, obscurantist, anti-rationalist side of postmodernism, you do a grave injustice to the powerful ideas that are behind some postmodern analyses."

Many people seem to feel this way, but I don't get it. Isn't critiquing "muddled" nonsense a constructive act that makes room for better more powerful ideas to have more influence?

Suppose someone said about a criticism of Stalinism that concentrating on Stalinism's authoritarianism did "grave injustice" to the "powerful ideas that are behind" Stalinist analyses of the class basis of capitalism. It would be off base because it is precisely the weak, misleading, or wrong ideas that need critique. If the flawed ideas are peripheral to the school, good riddance, small loss, the project continues. If the flawed ideas are at the core of the approach, then supplant the whole thing, and the good ideas will resurface in new forms.

Postmodernists attack oppressive acts of some scientists, and I join them in doing this. Reciprocally, I attack the false claims of some postmodernists. Shouldn't many postmodernists avidly join this critique? If self-critical postmod-

ernists want to defend some core pomo beliefs and say that I go too far with my criticisms, like I want to defend the core scientific method and say that they go too far with their criticism, fine. I would be quick to hear about the valuable insights that shouldn't be thrown out with the bath water. I think this is Miller's perfectly reasonable stance, but what are the core beliefs that I have gone overboard on? I think that the useful ideas we find in postmodern writings, like ideas about the diverse ways culture influences us, will prove to be held independently of the stuff I am attacking and are in no danger of being flushed.

Miller adds that "The claim that science is simply another story serves to point out that scientific inquiry, like any genre of storytelling, chooses certain aspects of a situation to cover and follows certain narrative conventions and evaluative criteria."

Yes, science "chooses certain aspects" and "follows certain conventions and criteria," though I can't see why we need references to storytelling to discern what scientists freely admit. This is just another truism.

Miller continues, "...Pointing out that science is like a literary genre indicates that modern science's emphasis on causality, reproducibility, and predictability is connected to certain (generally imperial and masculine) goals—namely the mastery of the earth which is the centerpiece of both colonialism and capitalism."

Excuse me? First, is writing poetry (another literary genre) connected with imperialism and masculinity? Second, to say that dropping bombs, or spending time designing them, is impacted by the imperial and sexist dynamics of society is one thing. But Miller seems to also say that trying to understand causes, recognize recurrent situations, and to predict, lead

to being imperial or masculine. And certainly many pomos say things like this. But really? Show me a person, anywhere on this planet, who does not act when able to on the basis of knowledge of causes based in part on experience of recurrent situations and their ability to predict. Is everyone thereby imperial and sexist? Does being a "true woman" mean decrying looking for causes? For that matter, I wonder which scientists are motivated by desire for mastery of the earth as opposed to curiosity (on the good hand) and filthy lucre or personal status (on the bad hand). Ecologists? Biologists? Physicists? These claims seem to me to be in the "patent falsehood" and "meaningless phraseology" categories.

It would be absurd to say that a person was racist or classist for speaking English on grounds that English is often used in racist, classist ways. Isn't it clear that it is equally absurd to say that a person is imperial or sexist because they use evidence, logic, reproducibility, and prediction because these methods are often used to further colonial and sexist ends? So is poetry, music, drama, all languages, etc.

Finally, Farough and Bachman write: "To blame pomo academics as even one of the reasons for the lack of campus activism to us sounds highly dubious, baseless, and even reactionary. How many students actually take postmodern courses vs. business and management courses?"

Of course the real PC on campuses is in economics and political science departments where the constraints impeding investigation into the nature of corporate structure and its human implications, are powerful and oppressive. And of course the main anti-activist impetus on campus comes from conformity coerced by an oppressively designed and run context, from

competition to attain corrupted roles, etc. But in a discussion of pomo and activism, other things come to the fore as well.

Tens of thousands of new students arrive at campuses each new semester. Some, for whatever reasons, bring considerable predilection toward social concern and left insight. For the most part, these are the students who provide the initial energy that first gets campus activism going. So what happens to these students nowadays?

I think that on many campuses these young people find the faculty who call themselves leftists, take their courses, and become pals with them. My generation did this with people like Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, and many others who were lesser known but had similar orientations and commitments. But things have changed and nowadays I think that in many places connecting with left faculty means jumping into pomo. I know from talking to students that this is a very debilitating experience for many of them who find pomo horribly opaque, irrelevant, and elitist, and who leave the left in disgust. I also suspect that of the students who stay and get involved in pomo, many sweat bullets to learn the requisite lingo and, in the process of succeeding, "transcend" activism for some of the reasons mentioned in the last issue. I know many will disagree with this view and consider it harsh. But it is what many students have told me. Perhaps more students will write to tell us whether this has been happening or not. For that matter, are most left pomo faculty giving some of their time to the New Party, the Greens, and the Labor Party, to local organizing, to labor struggles, to challenging the corporate university, to anything political, for that matter, beyond classroom deconstructions and pomo conferences? I hope so. I would be very curious to hear. Z