

INTRODUCTION



In July of 2020, *Harper's* published a public letter decrying a supposed increasing wave of intolerance, public shaming, and moral certainty in society. While it exclusively namechecked Trump, the general intention and target was contextually clear upon release: it played into rampant tut-tutting among liberal commentators about “cancel culture” and activist militancy. The letter was signed by a hundred loosely “intellectual” figures of varying fame from David Frum to Cornel West, but most notably by the notorious transphobe JK Rowling, who had organized around it as implicitly a repudiation of the growing backlash she was receiving.

The signatories were a messy lot. Some, like trans activist Jennifer Finney Boylan, later protested that they had been duped by severe misrepresentations of context and Rowling’s involvement, but it’s fair to say for the most part they represented the sort of names a rich boomer with a deep allegiance to the liberal status quo would both recognize and think diverse.¹ The sort of emeritus professors and New York Times columnists that get namechecked by out-of-touch lawyers having dinner parties in brownstones.

Amid the riotous laughter from younger generations on Twitter, one leftist, Jaya Sundaresh, took it upon herself to make a thread working her way through the list of signatories, roasting each tepid liberal, dried out has-been, vapid grifter, and reactionary charlatan in turn.

That is, until she came across the name of her mother, Meera Nanda.

What followed went viral as Sundaresh live-tweeted her shock and apologia as she frantically tried to imagine how her radical leftist mother could have misread the context while trying to reach her. Seemingly the entirety of Leftist Twitter watched the mom and daughter drama play out live, and by the end of the day Nanda had stolen the best line of the entire affair: “*well if I’d known it’d get my daughter to call me twice in one day...*”

But let’s be clear: duped or not, Nanda signed the letter.

For decades Nanda has faced threats as an intellectual critic of hindutva, the fascist movement that has held India in a chokehold since the mass-murdering pogromist Narendra Modi took power in 2014. But her specialization is as a philosopher of science and the attention she grabbed in the anglophone

¹ Amusingly, Glenn Greenwald was barred from signing it, showing that the drafters were conscious about their coalition and inclusions. They wanted to legitimize Rowling, not him.

world has been as a strident critic of *postmodernism*. Nanda was part of a large circle of leftists, anarchists, and physicists—most prominently including Alan Sokal and Noam Chomsky—that formed the other side of a very public and acrimonious conflict in the '80s and '90s called “the Science Wars.”

Ostensibly a disagreement in academia that grew in rancor till it garnered front page newspaper headlines around the world, the Science Wars dragged philosophical questions to the center of political identity. Both the science warriors and the postmodernists agreed that “science” as a social matter warranted robust political criticism, particularly around funding, institutional structure, rhetorical use, and claims on biological essentialism or messy social matters. But sharp hostilities flew around matters of “realism.”

Do our models of the world really reflect it to any degree whatsoever? Is the project of science a struggle for a more accurate account of the regularities of the physical universe? Or is science closer to a purely social game where nothing beyond the social has any relevance or even an underlying reality? Is there a physical world at all?

Many of both the “science warriors” and the postmodernists used language from the radical Left and spoke of being motivated by liberation, but they split dramatically not just on this question of realism, but on what was at stake in it. The science warriors asserted that we can—however imperfectly, partially, and incrementally—grasp knowledge about an external physical world whose structures and universal regularities are not determined by our thoughts. Many postmodernists disagreed, on a variety of points. Both sides thought there were immensely pressing ethical and political stakes to the question, often believing that the other side was, beyond merely being ignorant or naive, functionally aligned with fascism or totalitarianism.

Even if the Science Wars have faded from direct attention or reference, the legacy of these public debates across the '80s and '90s continues to loom large. Their influence can be felt in almost every corner of today's political narratives, preoccupations, and enmities—from the Center to the Far Left and Far Right. But beyond the philosophical questions, even the bare account of *what actually happened* in and around the debate has been massaged and rewritten by a number of remaining camps until competing popular accounts differ so strongly as to be incommensurable.

Most notably, a host of reactionaries and bargain-basement “intellectual” grifters like Bret Weinstein and Claire Lehmann—loosely united in a coalition that goes by “The Intellectual Dark Web”—have attempted to steal the prestige of the '90s leftist “science warriors” while slurring pretty much every struggle for liberation as “postmodernist.” Draped in the flags of “facts and

reason” and “tolerant pluralistic liberalism,” this menagerie of jumped-up podcasters has risen to such prominence as to have retroactively reshaped broad public awareness of the Science Wars and the points of contention.

Second to none in terms of said grifters is Jordan Peterson, a practitioner of the dying pseudoscience known as “psychoanalysis.” Peterson is prone to rambling conceptual free association, slapdash genealogy, motte-and-bailey fallacies, Nietzsche fandom, explicit proclamations of epistemic relativism, fawnishly citing Thomas Kuhn, and even apologia for the nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger. And yet, he has—despite these postmodernist bonafides—somehow branded himself as a fervent *critic* of it. Peterson is infamously unconcerned with actually reading anything, but his main criticisms are obviously copied from Ayn Rand scholar Stephen Hicks’ 2004 book *Explaining Postmodernism*. Hicks’ thesis is basically that the Left reacted to the authoritarian failure that was the USSR by retreating to opportunistic sophism. This is not entirely devoid of historical substance and there are numerous books where leftists of varying ideological backgrounds level the same charges. But in Hicks’ right-wing framing, the central definition and sin of “postmodernism” becomes this *leftist* context and lineage—with liberal, centrist, and conservative postmodernists written out of the history. Thus in Peterson’s hands the core problem with “*postmodern neomarxists*” is the *marxist* part (where “marxism” is treated so generally as to be synonymous with anyone holding egalitarian values or struggling for the liberation of oppressed groups).

This has reinforced a broad narrative among conservatives that goes something like this:

Maybe once upon a time leftists played some small positive role in social progress, but they kept pushing more radical goals, and since their theories have no scientific grounding and their ideal of an egalitarian world is utterly impossible they have turned on anything to do with facts and logic rather than accept a moderate centrist compromise. So when you see strange radicals arguing for unfamiliar things—like saying the US was founded on slavey and genocide, or that gender is fluid and sex isn’t a binary, or that it’s possible to have a healthy society without a state or religion—rest assured that they only say these crazy things because they have entirely abandoned belief in or pursuit of truth for a sophism that valorizes collective self-delusion and has no compulsion against opportunistic lying. Their goal is to establish totalitarian control over society, where everyone is terrified to think differently or even assert that $2+2=4$. This overall phenomenon is called “postmodernism” and you don’t need to examine or engage with it. The absurdity of leftist claims is surely self-evident to you, and that is sufficient to prove they’re all brain-poisoned zombies who are enemies of science.

With this narrative, any anarchist, leftist, or even just progressive liberal

that says something beyond the immediate sensibilities of a conservative is immediately transmuted into a “postmodernist.” And this has fueled an ecosystem of conservative grifters who frame themselves as frustrated liberals whose only allegiance is to “facts and logic,” forced to side with conservatives against the frothing leftists and feminists corrupted by postmodernism. There’s a killing to be made in telling 13-year-old suburban white boys that their initial perplexity at alien concepts like “white privilege” or “police abolition” or “patriarchy in video games” is totally correct by dunking on strawmen, shielding them from more involved arguments, and generally curtailing any intellectual inquisitiveness.

While this generates a dedicated fanbase that can be monetized, it has repulsed pretty much everyone else. The more these reactionaries whine about “postmodernism” the more that most people with a conscience or any ability to smell bullshit are going to be inclined to slide into self-identification with postmodernism or at least grow to instinctively dismiss any criticism of it.

Thus—better than any paid foil—the intellectual ineptitude and mustache-twirling misogyny of Peterson and his friends have polarized younger generations towards their bugaboo and accomplished a stark resurgence of postmodernism’s standing from the disrepute it had increasingly fallen into by the close of the Science Wars. But these grifters have not accomplished this legitimization of postmodernism alone.

While Nanda may have herself been duped on the context of Rowling’s letter, the track record of a number of other prominent leftist “science warriors” has not been great. To say nothing of his other crimes or embarrassments, Chomsky likewise signed the letter, and Sokal has explicitly sided with state repression of trans youth, even praising and helping edit the writing of the far-right grifter and conspiracy theorist James Lindsay.

Meanwhile, with their ignominy in the ’00s dissipating and the political wind suddenly at their back, there’s been a minor explosion of postmodernist media projects and online communities run by an archipelago of minor adjunct professors and failed grad students, excited to capture the allegiances of younger leftists and crush their rivals in old academic culture wars. These winds have buffeted a broader current in activist and radical subcultural spaces where deliberately irrational belief systems like astrology and chaos magick are praised as defensive alternate epistemologies of the oppressed.

Yet, in an era where the solidity of scientific facts like COVID-19 and anthropogenic global warming are simply not up for debate among young radicals, and where epistemic relativism has become the signature move of outright fascists, the stark antirealist or relativist positions of many postmodernists in the Science Wars present a liability. This has motivated the cultiva-

tion of some defensive narratives and reframings.

The current party line is basically:

Postmodernism was never in any important sense a self-recognized body of people and never made any normative claims, it was simply the (neutral) diagnosis that the public had stopped believing in science and society had grown more complex and fractured. There wasn't anyone—certainly not anyone of note or influence—who was outright opposed to the hard sciences, endorsed mysticism, or encouraged epistemic relativism around things like gravity, evolution, viruses, and climate change. Postmodernists merely tried to raise the totally original point that social context and power systems can somewhat influence what gets established as scientific fact! But then some totally ignorant and unserious conservative physicists—who didn't like the leftist political implications, had never read the literature they were critiquing, and were looking to blame someone for their own funding getting cut—got mad that anyone would tread on their academic turf. The only thing they ever did, besides yelling insults, was exploit good faith to sneak a hoax article past peer review. Which obviously doesn't prove anything since journals in every field have lax oversight. This is so embarrassing for them that we should probably be nice and say nothing more about any of this (much less investigate it).

Pretty much every single aspect of this story is an audacious misrepresentation, but it's become ubiquitous in social media and in leftist subcultural spaces.² The extreme antirealist and relativist assertions pushed by many postmodernists in the '80s are obscured, watered down, or handwaved away. Their influence is denied, their critics are wildly strawmanned or selectively chosen and pretty much all of the actual history and context is avoided, as is any sincere coverage of stakes. One uses the sneery Jacques Derrida quote about it being *such a shame* that Sokal will be remembered for a hoax rather than real scientific work, and then end on a breathlessly fake-sincere urge for critics to do more reading. It's all gotten very paint-by-numbers.

The result of both the conservative and postmodernist narratives is to dissuade anyone from looking into the actual history and context of the science wars, as well as to collapse away the existence of the radicals and leftists who opposed postmodernism.

Many of the values and struggles that the reactionary grifters now slur as products of "postmodernism" were championed by anarchists long before it. While a divide within the Left between staid classical marxists and hip contemporary postmodernists is sometimes admitted to even by Peterson's ilk, it was neither dusty marxist economists nor avant-garde postmodernist

2 For a prominent compilation of all the usual bromides that was published when this book was nearly finished, see: "the physicist who tried to debunk postmodernism", *Dr. Fatima*, uploaded April 11, 2024, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESEFUaEA7kk>.

zinesters that were pioneering the political positions and practices that most deeply horrify Peterson. They instead originate in no small part with feminists, antifascists, and anarchists far more radical than their postmodernist contemporaries, albeit usually outside of academia. Most of these very same radicals were furious critics of the postmodernist movement and the philosophical moves towards antirealism and epistemic relativism that infested it.

Both the conservatives and the academics share an incentive to hide all this. The academics tied to the remains of postmodernism seek to sanitize away its messy origins in subcultural spaces of the radical Left, because the philosophical arguments that energized their non-academic base in the '80s are embarrassing when aired directly and plainly. Similarly, the reactionary grifters are desperate to avoid direct confrontation with substantive arguments for things like transgender liberation and the obvious social construction of sex/gender—to give just one example—instead defensively asserting that relativist irrationality surely underpins every social justice struggle.

This cursed dichotomy, and the monopoly that both camps have on the discourse, has a feedbacking effect, pressuring everyone into functionally caucusing with one of these two camps. Even radical activists who oppose climate denial find themselves pulled into coalition with explicit and fervent irrationalists in hopes of together rhetorically resisting the reactionary scumbags wrapping their grotesque assertions in the mantle of “science.” Meanwhile, the intellectual and infrastructural cores of the global fascist movement have explicitly embraced postmodernism, but this threat remains hidden to many on the Left because of the media prominence of the more mainstream conservative grifters.

These issues are all impossibly personal to me.

As an anarchist who came up in the radical left in the '90s and '00s, I'm intimately connected to a number of old comrades who now struggle with lifelong physical disabilities as a result of the batshit spiritualism and medical quackery frequently justified at the time with postmodernist arguments. On the ground, I've repeatedly watched as militant struggles were derailed by folks convinced that abandoning any notion of objective reality was a more profound strike against oppression, a strike against the hegemonic and imperialist metaphysical beast that is truth.

When liberal academics like Paul Feyerabend or Richard Rorty had the gall to appropriate our mantle and present themselves as “anarchists” or “anti-authoritarians”—to write entire books decrying science and realism on moral grounds as supposedly imperialist, totalitarian, and tyrannical—the results on actual anarchists and antiauthoritarians have been deleterious.

Additionally, like Meera Nanda, I grew up in a religious tradition very

different from mainline christianity—one that rejects any objective reality of physical matter and that takes seriously the notion of plurality in reality construction. The result of this pluralism is wildly authoritarian and abusive, a fractal nightmare of constant gaslighting.

I have experienced the epistemic prescriptions of many postmodernists when taken seriously, and the result was not liberation.

At the same time, today I feel nothing but revulsion and betrayal at figures like Sokal who styled themselves as defenders of realism, but have since demonstrated very different priorities. The failures of many science warriors—their alliances with reactionaries and shocking deviations from anything like a radical realism—require at least as much careful autopsy and extraction.

This book is a cantankerous effort to resist the historical accounts pushed by conservatives and postmodernists of the science wars, trace their political influences and impacts, and highlight the radical realist position being obscured by both.

Chapter one, **Postmodernism as a Movement**, traces the cultural, political and discursive context of postmodernism's emergence in the late '70s, centering the story around *Semiotext(e)* in NYC and its many fractious relations with the anarchist movement.

Chapter two, **The Metanarrative of Postmodernism**, summarizes the content of postmodernism, as a rhetorical device, historical narrative, and set of values.

Chapter three, **The War, the Hoax, and the Narrative**, covers the infamous "hoax" of Alan Sokal, the immediate discursive context, and the attempted misrepresentations of it that have become commonplace.

Chapter four, **The Antirealist Constellation**, finally introduces the core philosophical issue of the Science Wars, laying out eight different notions of "antirealism" and citing many examples relevant in the Science Wars.

Chapter five, **The Stakes of Realism**, drills into the variety of sharp political and ethical implications that various factions in the Science Wars thought were at stake.

Chapter six, **The Antirealism Within the House**, talks about the role that certain physicists played in stoking and legitimizing antirealist claims.

Chapter seven, **Just Found out About Object Permanence**, defends a radical realism on grounds common among theoretical physicists, emphasizing the centrality of *reductionism*, properly defined.

Chapter eight, **Realism and Liberation**, discusses the broad conceptual and applied uses of realism for anarchists and liberatory social struggles more broadly.

Chapter nine, **The Reactionary Rot in Postmodernism**, exposes the

extremely reactionary political sentiments and approaches that infested postmodernism.

Chapter ten, **Postmodernism's Influence on Reactionaries**, details all the ways that prominent fascists and other conservatives drew heavy and direct influences from postmodernism.

Chapter eleven, **Fundamentalism and the Warriors**, turns around and traces the reactionary political tendencies among the science warriors, drawing the knives of realism that have been sharpened over each prior chapter and using them to demonstrate how Sokal's attempts to defend laughably simplistic and transphobic accounts of "biological sex" clearly violate radical realism.

Chapter twelve, **The Tepid Liberalism of it All**, continues the autopsy of science warriors turned reactionary scum like Sokal, picking out how from the start their liberal political commitments prioritized civil discursive reason over any actual realism, much less radicalism, leading to inevitable reactionary capture.

And the conclusion draws it all together, summarizing the autopsy of both camps while emphasizing how those who share the radical approach to thought—in particular anarchists and physicists—can learn from one another. The necessity of a realist footing for anarchists, as well as the necessity of an insurgent footing—outside and in conflict with the state and political establishment—for scientists.

I wrote this book primarily to provide a map of the discourse for anarchists, feminists, and antifascists, who maybe didn't follow the Science Wars closely or came of age after it, but have nonetheless found themselves enmeshed in the endless fallout. But academics are technically allowed to read it too.