

**Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science** by Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 328 pp.

Paul R. Gross, a marine biologist, and Norman Levitt, a mathematician, accuse a powerful faction in the “academic left” of “intellectual dereliction” (p. 234). The objects of their disdain include those cultural constructionists, post-modernists, feminists, radical environmentalists, and Afrocentrists who denounce modern science for its alleged gender, racial, class, and/or epistemological bias, seeing it as an ideological prop of the present repressive economic and political order. To add insult to injury, these attacks “are so well received in nonscientific circles academic circles, especially on the left, that they provide the route to publication, tenure, reputation, and academic authority for a growing body of would-be scholars” (p. 106).

In view of its progressive legacy in the United States, why do so many members of the “academic left” embrace this disparagement of science? “To put it bluntly,... it dislikes some of the uses to which science is put by the political and economic forces controlling our society, especially in such areas as military hardware, surveillance of dissidents, destructive and environmentally unsound industrial processes, and the manipulation of mass consciousness through the technologies of popular culture” (p. 2). According to Gross and Levitt, many of these commentators are recycled Marxists or “countercultural” radicals of the sixties still imbued with either the “totalism” of dialectical materialism or with “non-Western” modes of thought, both of which lead to the “higher superstition” of the book’s title. Gross and Levitt insist that to think critically about science, one must understand it at a reasonably profound level, a task requiring the time and labor most of its critics are unwilling to invest. They reproach authors who pontificate about contemporary physics but who “have never troubled themselves with a simple problem in statics,” and those who go on tirades about the semiotic tyranny of molecular biology who have never been near a genetics laboratory (pp. 5 and 6).

Gross and Levitt trace Western science to the late 17th century and the creation of a methodology “that almost unwittingly set aside the metaphysical assumptions of a dozen centuries” producing “a uniquely reliable and accurate way of describing the phenomenal world” (p. 17). Prominent scientists have since emerged in other cultures but, nonetheless, they are “Westerners” in the “most important aspect of their intellectual temperament” (p. 219). The fact that modern science is perceived as “Western” and that Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Halley, Harvey, and Leibniz were white European males has led to the criticism that Western science, being “privileged,” has no right to define reality for others, especially women, non-Westerners, people of color, and the “victims” of Euro-American capitalism. In my opinion, incipient scientific movements could have emerged even earlier in China or the Arab world, but were throttled by conservative religious and political forces; Gross and Levitt could

have blunted some of the invective offered on behalf of the “victims” of Western, patriarchal hegemony had they acknowledged the contributions of these, and other, sources to what became known as “Western” science.

Gross and Levitt employ a clever strategy: they agree with several incisive critiques made by their opponents, then skewer the more outrageous claims. For example, they acknowledge that Western science has been “culturally constructed”; that its projects “reflect the interests, beliefs, and even the prejudices of the ambient culture”; that certain kinds of research get the greatest “funding, recognition, celebrity, and so forth — in response to the recognized needs of society” (p. 43); that certain areas of research “are avoided in obedience to assumptions that are rarely articulated in undisguised form” (p. 44); that scientific opportunities for women have been marred by an “unfair and exclusionary system” (p. 107); and that there have been limited “opportunities or encouragement in the sciences” for black students (p. 205). In addition, “no serious thinker about science, least of all scientists themselves, doubts that personal and social factors influence problem choice and the acceptance of results by the scientific community” (p. 139).

This stance permits Gross and Levitt to ridicule the pretentiousness of Derrida, the contradictions in Foucault’s writings, the muddled ideology of “feminist algebra,” the cataclysmic scenarios of the “ecoradicals,” and the chauvinism of Afrocentrist historians. For example, after identifying the inaccuracies and shortcomings of a book titled *Blacks in Science, Ancient and Modern*, Gross and Levitt predict that if a book of similar ineptitude, *Norwegians in Science, Ancient and Modern*, were assembled, no reputable publisher would touch it. Indeed, one of the contributors to *Blacks in Science* credits the Egyptians with a full panoply of “psychical powers” including astronomical knowledge allegedly attained by some sort of remote viewing!

Gross and Levitt do not deal with the study of anomalies in *Higher Superstition* but whenever they cite a topic that would be of interest to serious investigators of these phenomena, it is done with sarcasm. For example, shamans were (and are) the most empirically oriented members of their tribes, yet the term is used derisively each of the five times it is mentioned. “Channellers,” “faith healers,” “fringe medicine,” and Rupert Sheldrake are cited, always pejoratively, despite the fact that the phenomena associated with them are subject to experimental falsification and repeatability. As a result, I alternated between amusement when Gross and Levitt hoisted the anti-science “academic left” on its own petard, and the realization that if they were to turn their attention to *psi* research, cyptozoology, or ufology, they probably would find additional targets for their scorn and derision.

This situation places me and my colleagues in the Society for Scientific Exploration in a quandary. I, for one, agree with the postmodernists that “power” dictates what becomes “truth” as often as “truth” serves as a source of “power.” I also agree with the cultural constructionists that what passes as “anomalous” in one social framework may find easy acceptance and

incorporation in another time and place. I am sympathetic with the feminist argument that marginalized “ways of knowing” (*e.g.*, intuition) are worthy of consideration. I am in accord with those ecologists who discuss the possibility of “deep connections” between human and nonhuman life forms. But I part company with these potential allies when they proselytize the gospel that science is “just another discourse,” and take sides with Gross and Levitt that science is, above all else, a reality-driven enterprise, albeit one that is *influenced* (but not *driven*) “by culture and by politics, by economics, by aesthetics, even by a species of understated mysticism” (p. 234).

The first edition of this book was published in 1994. The proposal eliciting “more howls of protest” than anything else Gross and Levitt proffered was the suggestion that “appropriate scientists” be among those consulted in judging, for promotion and tenure purposes, the work of humanities and social studies professors who routinely deliver judgments on the content of methods of various aspects of science (*e.g.*, quantum mechanics, chaos theory). Personally, I agree with Gross and Levitt, and in the spirit of their proposal I would suggest that academic parapsychologists be consulted when a professor who writes extensively on psi research is reviewed, that astronomers with research credentials in ufology be consulted when a professor who writes about UFO phenomena is reviewed, and that researchers on alternative and complementary medicine be consulted when a professor who writes about “fringe medicine” is reviewed.

In the meantime, I (and many of my colleagues) would concur with Gross and Levitt’s defense of science and their denouncement of superstition, even though neither term is well-articulated throughout the book. “Pseudoscience” and the distinctions between science and technology are mentioned but not developed, and no penetrating analysis appears of the qualitative research methods (*e.g.*, case studies, field studies, interview studies, questionnaire studies, participant-observation studies) frequently used to study anomalous experience. However, Gross and Levitt, to their credit, point out that, in science, “all conclusions, especially about complex systems, are temporary” (p. 163). Therefore, those of us in the Society for Scientific Exploration and similar organizations are challenged to help demarcate the boundaries of science, and demonstrate that our pursuits fall within these perimeters, rather than becoming relegated to the “conceptual freakshow” targeted in *Higher Superstition*.

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