

Intellectual Dysfunction



Gallo-Roman examples of the fascinum in bronze. The topmost is an example of the “fist and phallus” amulet with a *manus fica*. The English word “fascinate” ultimately derives from Latin *fascinum* and the related verb *fascinare*, “to use the power of the *fascinus*”, that is, “to practice magic” and hence “to enchant, bewitch”.

by Theodore Dalrymple

When did things begin to go wrong? The Garden of Eden is one possible answer, of course. But we nevertheless look for more proximate answers to a question such as “When did transgender ideology become an unassailable orthodoxy in large parts of the academy?”

Personal memory is deceptive when trying to answer such a question: in any case, orthodoxies nowadays become dominant in

a process, rather than by encyclical or as an event. The answer to the above question might well be “Longer ago than we think”: that is to say, at least 6 years ago.

[Retraction Watch](#) is a website devoted to publicising and sometimes provoking the retraction of scientific papers that have been found deficient in some way. The pressure to publish in the academic world of “publish or perish” is a powerful incentive for carelessness, intellectual dishonesty, plagiarism, and outright fraud. There is also honest error, of course: indeed, it is but rarely that I read a medical paper that is completely beyond criticism.

We do not know what percentage of fraudulent or otherwise deficient scientific publications are caught in *Retraction Watch*’s net; it is not even known for certain whether scientific misconduct is increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. But recently, a new jewel was added to the website’s crown: the hoax paper.

In 2017, a philosopher, Peter Boghossian, and a mathematician, James Lindsay, submitted a paper under pseudonyms to a journal called *Cogent Social Sciences*, titled “The conceptual penis as a social construct.” The paper argued, if that is quite the word for it, that the penis is not principally a male biological organ, but rather a concept or mental construct employed in the pursuit of male dominance. I quote a passage to give readers a flavour of the writing:

Penises are problematic, and we don’t just mean medical issues like erectile dysfunction and crimes like sexual assault. As a result of our research into the essential concept of the penis and its exchanges with the social and material world, we conclude that penises are not best understood as the male sexual organ, or as a male reproductive organ, but instead as an enacted social construct that is both damaging and problematic for society and future generations. The conceptual penis presents

significant problems for gender identity and reproductive identity within social and family dynamics, is exclusionary to disenfranchised communities based upon gender or reproductive identity, is an enduring source of abuse for women and other gender-marginalized groups and individuals, is the universal performative source of rape, and is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change.

The journal *Cogent Social Sciences* usually demands money for publication, a common if lamentable practice now in the academic world, though in this case, the authors did not pay to have their paper published and it was peer-reviewed by two academics who recommended publication. No doubt they did so because it is so difficult these days to distinguish spoof from the real thing in academic writing, especially in the social sciences, but also, increasingly, in literary criticism.

The publisher of the journal was Taylor and Francis, a multinational academic publisher with headquarters in England, but with offices in Stockholm, Leiden, New York, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Philadelphia, Tokyo, Sydney, Cape Town, New Delhi, and no doubt other places too. It is no fly-by-night operation, having existed for more than two centuries: evidently, it has moved with the times.

One of the company's editorial directors said, in response to the humiliating exposure of the paper as a satire on the nullity of the field to which it was supposedly a contribution:

On investigation, although the two reviewers had relevant research interests, their expertise did not fully align with this subject matter and we do not believe that they were the right choice to review this paper.

Thus, it seems that we have arrived at the point at which we

need experts to decide for us whether or not a penis is “best understood as a male sexual organ.”

As with so much in the modern world, one is not sure whether to laugh or cry. Deep academic solemnity and utter intellectual frivolity are often combined in the same sentences; academics pore over propositions that no intelligent person could entertain for a moment, as if, with enough study, some valuable truth might emerge from them. Such academics are the alchemists of our times.

In essence, this is state-funded stupidity. Without state funding (or, in the United States, without funding from charitable foundations or endowments that have been deeply corrupted from within), no such drivel could ever have been produced, certainly not in the industrial quantities in which it has been produced: and one cannot blame a commercial company such as Taylor and Francis for profiting from it. If anyone wanted proof of capitalism’s astonishing capacity to turn anything into profit, just read the passage above from the spoof paper that I have quoted and marvel how Taylor and Francis (and, of course, other publishers) have turned a profit on hundreds of pages of such rebarbative prose: that is to say, prose which hides its meaning from the minds of readers as modestly as any woman in a burqa hides herself from the gaze of strangers.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, some academics in the field of gender studies (the alchemy *de nos jours*) have claimed that the authors of the spoof inadvertently enunciated truth in their paper because, presumably, the penis really is best thought of as a “social construct”—meaning that in another society, a penis would cease to be a penis, and become something else entirely.

It has long amazed me that those who engage in “gender studies” and the like never seem to grow tired of reading clotted prose that is to meaning what fog is to clear vision.

Here I quote a short passage from Judith Butler, one of the leading lights in “gender studies”:

That the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies, does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped—as if it could be. If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?

This, incidentally, is the author at her most lucid and succinct; and the ability to wade through hundreds of pages of this stuff is indicative of a determination and endurance of the kind that Ernest Shackleton and his crew displayed during his Antarctic explorations. And since the people who display it are not stupid, in the sense at least of being deficient in IQ, the crucial question is, to adapt slightly Professor Butler’s question, “How do they stick it?” Some explanation must be sought for their determination and endurance.

The most likely explanation, it seems to me, is that their search is not for truth but for power: for in a world without transcendent meaning of one kind or another, power is the only good, the only thing worth having. Truth has no value and nothing to do with it.

First published in [*Law and Liberty*](#).