

Twitter Thread by Yascha Mounk

Yascha Mounk

@Yascha_Mounk



Folks, I know way more important things are going on in the world.

But I honestly find it nuts that so many people in the serious reaches of academia and the thoughtful left are simply dismissing Sokal Squared.

Here's my response to the main criticisms.

(Thread.)

The main pushback I've seen:

- 1) The journals they pranked aren't serious
- 2) No control group
- 3) Other academic fields are also bad
- 4) It's unethical to make people do work under false pretenses
- 5) They are tools of the right in the culture war

I'll take these in order.

2/n

1) The canine rape culture paper was published Gender, Place, and Culture. The authors who contributed to the latest issue teach at UCLA, Temple, Penn State, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Manchester, Berlin's Humboldt University, etc.

3/n

Another paper was accepted for publication in Hypatia. The authors who contributed to the latest issue teach at the University of Michigan, Tulane University, Stockton University, the University of Bristol, and the University of Exeter.

4/n

It's just not credible to claim that these journals aren't highly influential in areas like feminist philosophy, or that publication in these journals would not make a serious contribution to tenure at many departments in well-known research universities.

5/n

Now, two caveats:

First, one of the papers they published was in The Journal of Poetry Therapy. This does not appear to be a serious publication. So let's say that the authors successfully hoaxed six rather than seven real journals.

6/n

Second, some fields of study roundly rejected the hoax submissions. As many pointed out, for example, their track record with sociology journals was 0/7. That's good news.

It also kind of helps to make their point though: Not all of academia is rotten. Some fields are!

7/n

2) This brings me to the "no controls" argument.

To make a *comparative* claim, you need a control group. So this "experiment" doesn't show that gender studies has a bigger problem than psychology.

But the most important claim here is not comparative.

8/n

The most important claim is that parts of academia claim to pursue knowledge but can't distinguish between serious scholarship and fashionable bullshit.

They showed this for fields of study they looked at. They didn't for fields they didn't look at.

Simples.

9/n

Except that, as people inadvertently pointed out, they did kinda sorta run a controlled experiment. After all, sociology journals rejected their entries!

So perhaps there's some prima facie evidence to think that some fields are better than others at detecting bullshit?

10/n

3) What about the flaws in other fields?

Yes, psychology faces a replication crisis. Yes, bad economics papers did huge damage in setting the world on a path to austerity.

So what's the plan here? We all decide to ignore our own flaws because others have flaws, too?

11/n

4) There is certainly a normative cost to making people do work under false pretenses.

But I believe that it is justified—and so, to judge by their other commitments, do most of the serious academics who have suddenly strategically decided to be outraged by this.

12/n

Why, for example, do we know so much about hiring discrimination against women and ethnic minorities? Because researchers send out fake CVs and see how real employers respond.

Do we seriously want to stop these studies? That would be lunacy, in my mind.

13/n

(By the way, there's a bit of self-dealing here. Few academics have worked in HR. Who cares if those people spend time dealing with fake CVs? But they've all served as reviewers, so they feel-oh-so-bad for the grad student who wasted time on reviewing a fake paper.)

14/n

5) Finally, aren't the authors on the wrong part of the culture war?

First off, they're not. Check out Areo Magazine, edited by [@HPluckrose](#). I'm sure you'll disagree with lots of it. But it sure ain't alt-right.

15/n

<https://t.co/n5HDADK47T>

But, yes, some unsavory people have jumped on this hoax—or even retweeted my original thread—because they are anti-intellectual or want to stick it to the libs.

Is that a reason to dismiss a serious critique though?

No.

16/n

To dismiss a critique because some people you don't like happen to like that critique is to be a rank partisan. It is to circle the wagons around an untenable position because you fear that inching away from your tribe might somehow give some idiot succor.

17/n

One last thing: It's a bit weird to want to make this about these particular authors. It's even weirder to make this about the ethics of their hoax. It's super weird to make it about whether some other academic disciplines also have problems.

18/n

Because even if you think the authors are idiots, their hoax was unethical, and other disciplines are crap, it wouldn't change a simple fact: Serious journals in which academics who teach at top universities publish cannot distinguish between bullshit and true scholarship.

19/n

In fact, even threads that criticize the hoax concede this point.

Because how is it not a problem that there is "quite a lot of highly political, not-well-argued, empirically under-supported work even in leading journals?"

The end.

20/20

<https://t.co/0KeHWwGnT9>

... fields in my own work, and I can attest there is quite a lot of highly political, not-well-argued, empirically under-supported work even in leading journals: you don't have to conduct a hoax, you can just read the literature & see for yourself. But I'm an interdisciplinary...

— Brian D. Earp (@briandavidearp) October 4, 2018