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## Winter News, 'Free thinkers' getting their knickers in a twist: Academic hoaxes and anti-feminism in academia

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# Winter News

*Charlotte Knowles reports on the latest in “Grievance Studies”*

As we all know, political correctness has gone mad. To quote the comedian Stuart Lee, “you can’t even write racial abuse in excrement on someone’s car without the politically correct brigade jumping down your throat”. This is, in effect, the sentiment shared by a group of “free thinkers” who have attempted to surgically remove the scales from the eyes of the academy and society at large, by going “undercover” within the field of what they term “grievance studies” (all the scare quotes, because really who calls it that?).

## *So what does this “hoax” actually tell us?*

As James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose put it in an article published in *Areo* in late 2018, their concern was with “certain fields within the humanities” where they believe:

“Scholarship based less upon finding truth and more upon attending to social grievances has become firmly established, if not fully dominant, within these fields, and their scholars increasingly bully students, administrators, and other departments into adhering to their worldview. This worldview is not scientific, and it is not rigorous. For many,

this problem has been growing increasingly obvious, but strong evidence has been lacking. For this reason, the three of us just spent a year working inside the scholarship we see as an intrinsic part of this problem.”

So what “world view” are these people talking about? No, it’s not the hard-line error theorists or those insisting there’s no such thing as a table, just “particles arranged table-wise” (no disrespect meant to that passionate bunch), but rather “those that [for example] make whiteness and masculinity problematic”. Their targets were the feminists, the critical race theorists, the queer theorists: those engaged in “identity studies” and disciplines which seek to challenge and disrupt traditional power structures. And this seems fair, right? Because as we all know, it’s the gay, black, women who really hold all the power in our society, not only in higher education institutions, but across the board.

So, with their “Why doesn’t Jim Davidson have a Netflix Special” placards placed firmly out of sight, these absolute legends decided to take down the Judith Butlers and Kimberlé Crenshaws of this world by attempting to infiltrate the disciplines of which they were so suspicious. Like an increasingly crazed Tom Cruise lowering himself on a suspension wire made principally of limp spaghetti, they hatched their

plan to dangle themselves into the murky depths of “Grievance Studies” (still not a thing).

Over the course of a year, the three musketeers spent their time writing “hoax” papers and sending them to journals in cultural studies, gender studies, critical theory and the like. However, as they admit in the companion YouTube video to the *Aero* article, their first attempts to infiltrate the discipline and reveal it for the unscholarly, ridiculous work that it is, failed. In their own words, they were unable to penetrate their target journals with “poorly researched hoax papers ... we needed to change our ap-

proach, so we walked back from the hoaxing and began to engage with the existing scholarship in these fields more deeply”.

Let’s just take a minute and reflect on this statement. They weren’t able to get poorly researched hoax papers published, so they spent a significant amount of time researching in the fields of human geography, critical race theory, feminist theory, etc. Reading the relevant literature, exploring the arguments, immersing themselves in the theory, then writing papers on the topics they had researched.

As someone who has recently been appointed as an assistant professor of philos-



ophy at a research-intensive university (see below for where to send your congratulation cards), I know a bit about the workings of professional academic research. And, from what they've described, it doesn't sound so much like they've fooled everyone by pulling off an elaborate and devastating hoax, it just sounds like they've, well, written some research papers.

Moreover, their claims to "success" are rather overblown if we look at the actual results of their "experiment". Limited, as always, by considerations of time and space, I cannot go through all the laborious details here, so I strongly recommend you read the article by Daniel Engber "What the 'Grievance Studies' Hoax Actually Shows", published in *Slate*. Engber gives an excellent round up of the "success" (or lack thereof) of the various papers. He notes that of the 21 papers they penned for publication, two thirds were rejected outright. Of the seven remaining, one was a collection of poetry. As Engber observes, the fact that bad poetry gets published is hardly news-worthy and certainly not the academic bombshell they were looking for. He continues:

"Another three plants were scholarly essays. Two were boring and confusing; I think it's fair to call them dreck. That dreck got published in academic journals, is a fact worth noting to be sure. The third, a self-referential piece on the ethics of academic hoaxes, makes what strikes me as a somewhat plausible argument about the nature of satire. The fact that its authors secretly disagreed with the paper's central claim -- that they were parroting the sorts of arguments that had been made against them in the

past, and with which they've strongly disagreed -- doesn't make those arguments *a priori* ridiculous."

This, it seems, is precisely the right point to make. Firstly, boring and confusing things get published in all fields, not just in the humanities, and certainly not just in "grievance studies" (really, really not a thing). And just because you don't agree with what you've written, that doesn't automatically discredit it. If Kant came out now and said "LOL [he wants to be down with the modern lingo, having been resurrected and still not having left Königsberg] all that stuff about the categorical imperative? I didn't really *believe* it, you dweebs, it was meant as a joke! Lololololol #Konigsberg4LyP". Would that discredit the whole of Kantian scholarship and deontological ethics? I think not.

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So finally we are left with three papers, all of which were "presented as a product of empirical research, based on original data". As Engber goes on to argue, "[i]t's true that Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghosian tricked some journals into putting out



made-up data, but this says nothing whatsoever about the fields they chose to target. One could have run this sting on almost any empirical discipline and returned the same result.” Moreover, surely we cannot expect all reviewers (who work for free and review papers as part of their “contribution to the profession”, something they do on top of all their normal teaching, research and administrative duties), to attempt to go out and duplicate all the results cited in the papers they review to check the results are not fake or part of an “elaborate hoax”. That would be both ridiculous and impossible.

So what does this “hoax” actually tell us? My conclusion tends to be the same as Engber’s. The “hoax” doesn’t tell us anything about the state of academic scholarship in certain fields or in what no one calls “Grievance studies” (not least because it’s not a field of study. Still *still* not a thing). What it does show us, is that some people are so anti-feminist that they will do whatever they can – even spend a year writing “bogus” papers – to try and discredit the idea that maybe, *just maybe*, men are – and have historically been – privileged in society, often at the expense of women.

As Engber points out, although the hoaxers purportedly concerned themselves with a variety of “grievances” their main target was,

“clearly focused on the fields concerned with gender. Among the 21 academic journals named in the essay, almost half describe themselves on their websites as venues for ‘feminist’ research; three more refer to gender. (By contrast, just a handful say they’re dedicated to the study of ‘race,’ ‘sexuality,’ or ‘culture.’)

The sham papers, as written, show an even clearer version of this tilt: Going by their abstracts, almost all the fakes (18 of 21) make silly or parodic claims concerning gender; just eight mention race or sexuality.”

This hatred of feminism and feminists – and I’m going to go out on a limb here and say: women – is reiterated in the “real life” of these trail blazers. See for example Boghossian’s tweet of 2017: “Why is it that nearly every male who’s a 3<sup>rd</sup> wave intersectional feminist is physically feeble & has terrible body habitus?” and his subsequent article entitled “Why no one cares about feminist theory”.

So, to paraphrase that giant of conflict resolution and putting-the-toys-back-in-the-pram, Jerry Springer, what have we learned? Well, rather than wasting their time – and everyone else’s – trying to show that those bloody women with their ideas, and their equal rights, and their bloody academic papers *should just get back in the kitchen where they belong*, might I suggest that these three coins take a time-out and perhaps have a read of Kate Manne’s excellent book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, they might actually learn something.

*Charlotte Knowles is a postdoctoral research fellow in philosophy at the University of Groningen, but will shortly be taking up a permanent position at the University as an assistant professor of ethics, social and political philosophy.*