

Postmodernism vs. Science vs. Fundamentalism

Was Thomas Kuhn a social constructionist? Who won the Science Wars, and was the victory the result of a "Trojan Horse" trick? (Think: Stephen Colbert with a Ph.D. in physics.)

Prof. Stephen Brush

In the last quarter of the 20th century, two movements attacked science. Postmodernism, fashionable in academic humanities departments, inspired the doctrine of "social construction of scientific knowledge" (hereafter "social con"), advocated by some sociologists and historians of science. The recrudescence of religious fundamentalism supported the revival of creationism, which opposed and tried to expel from public schools the widely-accepted scientific theories of biological evolution, plate tectonics, and Big Bang cosmology. Science, still a bastion of objectivity in understanding the world, had to fend off attacks from both the left (post-modernism) and the right (fundamentalism).

The question of whether scientists can discover true facts about the world that are independent of their own social environment, or whether all their knowledge is socially constructed, was the cause of the "Science Wars" of the 1990s. Scientists, who strongly rejected social con, did not notice that at least two widely-accepted scientific facts were indeed socially constructed, as can easily be shown by looking at their history. Moreover, there is some similarity between social con and the Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, at least if you know something about baseball.

Stephen Brush is a professor (emeritus) of the History of Science at the University of Maryland, College Park. He was originally educated as a theoretical physicist and did research on topics

such as the solidification of an electron gas ("plasma") at low temperatures and high densities. He contributed to the Harvard Project Physics Course for high schools, using the historical approach. He came to the University of Maryland in 1968 to initiate a program in history of science. His current research is a study of reasons why scientists in different fields accept (or reject) new theories.

**Saturday, Feb 9, 2008
2 - 4 pm**

National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Blvd, Room 110
Arlington, VA 22230
(Ballston Metro stop)

Enter NSF from the corner of 9th N & N Stuart Streets,
Room 110 is on the left
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National Capital Area Skeptics Public Lecture Series

20/20 SINCE 1987



Shadow of A Doubt

THE MONTHLY CALENDAR OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA SKEPTICS

FEBRUARY
2008

A Magical Approach to Problem Solving

March 13, 2008, 7:00-9:00 p.m., Smithsonian Resident Associates Lecture series

When it comes to solving problems, magician David Ben says we must first eliminate the word “impossible” from our vocabulary. That’s why he takes participants behind the scenes of the world of magic, revealing tricks of the trade that magicians, card cheats, and psychics use to perform the seemingly impossible.

For more information call: 202-633-3030 <http://residentassociates.org/ticketing/tickets/reserve.aspx?performanceNumber=87074>

Torn From Today’s Headlines

Our February lecture topic (Postmodernism) is featured prominently in a recent news story about a protest by Italian scientists, led by physicist Marcello Cini, in response to Pope Benedict XVI’s planned speech (now canceled by the Vatican as a result) to open the 2008 academic year at Sapienza Università di Roma. Cini and 66 other scientists at the university petitioned the university’s rector to withdraw the invitation to the Pope because of a 1990 speech he (as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) made in Parma, Italy that included the following passage:

“If both the spheres of conscience [the Catholic Church and science] are once again clearly distinguished among themselves under their respective methodological profiles, recognizing both their limits and their respective rights, then the synthetic judgment of the agnostic-skeptic [and Postmodernist] philosopher P. Feyerabend appears much more drastic. He writes: ‘The church at the time of Galileo was much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself, and also took

into consideration the ethical and social consequences of Galileo’s doctrine. Its verdict against Galileo was rational and just, and revisionism can be legitimized solely for motives of political opportunism.’”

See: <http://physicsworld.com/cws/article/news/32463> and <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1541>

A Magical Macbeth At The Folger Library Theater

February 28 - April 6, 2008 Folger Library Theater

Macbeth is a massively entertaining horror show that is designed to take the audience on a roller-coaster of magic, mayhem, violence, passion, and madness, a supernatural adventure story that should be able to still amaze, shock, scare and enliven audiences.

Aaron Posner, director; magic designed by Teller <http://www.folger.edu/woSummary.cfm?woid=413>

NCAS Board Elections Coming

Are you an NCAS member who wants to take a leadership role in the skeptics movement? The NCAS annual board of directors election is fast approaching. Send a bio sketch by email to ncas@ncas.org for the ballot by March 15.

Needed: Science Fair Judges

NCAS needs science fair judges for local science fairs: March 8, Prince William County and Anne Arundel County; March 15, Montgomery Area Science Fair and DC Math and Technology Fair; March 29, Fairfax County, Frederick County, Prince George’s County. Judging takes only a couple of hours of your time and gives you the opportunity to represent NCAS.

If you are interested in serving please email Walter Rowe at wfrowe@gwu.edu