

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**

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