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Comment

Sokal's Response to Simpson and Srinivasan on Limiting Academic Freedom: A Critical Realist Commentary

David Pilgrim [1,*]

[1] Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK

* Corresponding author: d.pilgrim@soton.ac.uk

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Abstract: Using critical realism as a resource, this response to Sokal (2026) seeks to reinforce, not undermine, his overall critique in this journal of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), referencing their justifications for some limited restrictions on academic freedom. With that supportive intention in mind, his use of some terms, such as 'sociological' and 'epistemic', is brought into question and the omission of a central consideration of ontology is highlighted. Sokal retains an epistemological focus and links this to axiology. If that linkage is also considered in relation to ontology, his arguments would have had greater force. An augmentation of his position with critical realism would vindicate his conclusions but require that positivism, not just postmodernism, is critiqued for the limitations it too places upon truth-inducting activity in higher education. In my view, the defence of academic freedom Sokal adopts would be strengthened by these additional considerations.

Keywords: cancel culture; critical realism; academic freedom

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Introduction

This is a supportive commentary about the doubts expressed by Sokal (2026) in relation to the rationalised defence of restrictions on academic freedom in some circumstances, which was offered by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018). I will stay with Sokal's illustrative focus on the sex-gender controversy. It is not the only example of special pleading about social justice seeking to justify shutting down academic debates. However, it predominates in the academy, with others, such as controversies about Islamophobia

or Israel and Palestine following close behind (e.g., Greer, 2023; Finkelstein, 2022). As another example, 15% of medical researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic reported receiving death threats (Limb, 2021). In other words, the arguments I make below, like Sokal's, could be extended readily to other topics, especially those in which cancel culture can be traced to the competing claims of a range of identity groups (Pilgrim, 2023).

Basically, I argue that Sokal's conclusions would be strengthened by revising his preferred terminology and extending his focus more explicitly from epistemology to ontology. Sokal appears to take ontology for granted and largely focuses on the epistemological and axiological shortcomings in his critique of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), when they offer some justifications for limiting restrictions on academic freedom in some circumstances.

My interpretation is that Sokal is a *de facto* scientific realist, and he has retained some confidence in the norms of academic knowledge production, such as the due diligence of the journal review process and the laudable aims of the advancement of disciplinary knowledge. He does discuss though the competing claims of different disciplines about a topic in hand. Possibly the poor performance of sociology since the postmodern turn has focused the attention of Sokal (and many other critics) on the discipline's clear failures. However, if we revisit what the sociology of science can achieve, this allows us to address the social ontology of knowledge production more fully from a realist, not an idealist, position.

This commentary is offered from a position of Bhaskarian critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008). This has three core axioms: the world exists independently of our thoughts about it (ontological realism); we do though represent the world in a variety of ways (epistemological relativism); and we have the cognitive capacity of make fair judgments about the truth (judgmental rationalism) but those judgments are provisional and warrant epistemic humility. This starting position differs from postmodern accounts as the latter overly focus on epistemological relativism and reject judgmental rationalism in favour of judgmental relativism.

Moreover, critical realism also rejects pre-Popperian positivism for its naivety about surface empirical descriptions (rather than deep ontology in fluxing open systems) and its reliance on unachievable verified truths for all times and places. Sokal may have an implicit residue of positivistic thinking in his critiques of postmodern failures, but this is my tentative interpretation. Alternatively, he may be an implicit critical realist. That interpretation might be warranted given his clear sex-realist sympathies, when discussing publications referring to sexual dimorphism, agreeing for example with Wright (2024).

If we expand Sokal's critical concerns about the work of Simpson and Srinivasan from epistemological and axiological matters to ontology, his doubts about their position would be validated more clearly. For now, he flags but understates social ontology, i.e., what is really happening in the world about knowledge production (cf. Archer, 2012). A fuller consideration would address a fundamental question: 'what must the world have *been* like for restrictions of academic freedom in higher education to emerge and be normative today' (Pilgrim, 2026)? Such restrictions are now commonplace under the sway of postmodern perspectivism that drives claims for social justice evidenced by partisan identity claims for recognition.

For example, take the social context for the emergence of this journal. If the norms of academic knowledge production ensured researchers had full confidence in their disciplinary leaders to always protect all viewpoints, then this journal would not need to

exist. For this reason, a full critical realist account would interrogate the organisation of disciplinary silos, the workings of journals and the cognitive, status and financial interests operating in both. In my view, for now Sokal hints at but does not explore in detail their relevance, leaving his critique underdeveloped. It is the actual social context of knowledge production that makes what Sokal legitimately calls 'truth conducive' activity a needed additional focus. Not to address that focus, as it were, risks letting the granular character of disciplinary interests and the editorial norms of academic journals 'off the hook' and under scrutinised.

All academic activity implicates the needs and goals of funders, with values shaping what questions are asked by whom, how results are interpreted and how they are adopted or not in society. Disciplines and theoretical orientations within them generate their own partisan forms of rhetoric and political leverage in the cut and thrust of politics in the academy. That picture has been made more complex in recent decades by the emergence of managerialism, especially 'virtue hoarding' managers, who are sensitive to their consumer base and the embedded cultural norms of identity politics, which are the rhetorical context of self-righteous cancellation campaigns. EDI/DEI initiatives are now a daily part of a culture, which can give confidence to those campaigns and create the personal casualties targeted and mentioned by Sokal (Liu, 2021). That culture requires a proper realist sociological analysis, which is neither positivist nor postmodernist. Sokal could have pushed on with points such as these to make sense of the conditions of possibility for the competing knowledge claims and academic authority he flags.

Sokal's Critique of Simpson and Srinivasan

If we examine Sokal's critique considering the above summary of critical realism and its implications for academic freedom, here is a sympathetic immanent understanding of his paper. It begins with his own summary introduction about his aims:

> I address the specific claims of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) concerning the situations that could, in their view, justify no-platforming. I raise, and then analyse, three questions: What does it mean for a once-controversial issue to be "settled"? What should be done when two or more academic disciplines come to different judgments about the competence of a scholar or the admissibility of a set of ideas? Which fields of inquiry qualify as genuine academic disciplines, for the purpose of applying the principles of academic freedom? I conclude by addressing the issue "Why does it matter?", setting forth a number of reasons why the curtailment of debate along the lines endorsed by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) is harmful to society, and dangerous above all to the scholarly enterprise.

The alignment of Sokal's articulated arguments here with critical realism is clear. His caution about a 'controversial issue' (I would also argue here ultimately many *uncontroversial* issues at times) is fair comment. What Sokal does in this passage quoted is to raise questions about how epistemological disputes and competing accounts are, or are not, 'settled' and introduces an axiological question about why things matter to people. The latter point is of particular importance for critical realists (Sayer, 2012).

Sokal makes his view on the ontological realism of sexual dimorphism clear, signalling his alignment with critical realism (Pilgrim, 2018). Mammalian sexual dimorphism is an ontological truth or the 'truth of things' given to us by nature

(Bhaskar, 2003, p. 200). When that ontological truth is contested singularly on epistemological grounds, this leaves open the prospect of men *really* becoming women or *vice versa* (Heartsilver, 2021; cf. Byrne, 2022). As Sokal notes, the conflation of sex and gender has been the tactical elision now common in gender studies and in disciplines favouring gender ideology. However, a critical realist view would challenge that elision by focusing on ontology, i.e., the way that the world really is not the way that some but not all of us would prefer it to be. Given this logic, transgenderism involves a fantasy, preferred narrative or delusion, which all parties are expected to always endorse uncritically. The heat generated when that endorsement is not forthcoming (a fractious epistemic dispute) does not alter biological ontology, which is independent of human thought.

In that natural world, biological sex in mammals is determined immutably by the early divergence of developmental pathways—typically initiated by the presence or absence of the SRY gene. Hypothetical interventions, such as inserting SRY[1] or replacing sex chromosomes in all cells, would not reverse established sexual differentiation. The latter comes from embryogenesis and the consequent formation of sex-specific anatomy and reproductive function. This is an example of why Sokal's arguments would be strengthened by an explicit ontological focus, rather than his limited differentiation of epistemic from 'sociological' considerations.

The sex/gender question would only remain 'settled' if there was a proper agreement for all in society that they mean the same thing, i.e., there was a comprehensive and stable epistemic consensus. However, if we are left, as we are for now, with competing constituencies of viewpoint, with one giving sovereignty to the ontology of mammalian sexual dimorphism and the other to the sovereignty of one's felt gender identity, then this is an aspect of social ontology to be described and interpreted. The antagonism is between second wave feminists and their allies, who are gender-critical 'sex realists', and those in the wake of third wave feminism and the postmodern turn (transgender activists and their allies).

Sex realists, including Sokal and this author, argue that a 'sex change' is not *in truth* feasible because of biological ontology, whereas if we leave it as an epistemic matter (the postmodernist and Nietzschean emphasis on 'perspectivism') then it allows a sex change to be *seemingly warranted as a reasonable factual claim*. This requires a belief that sex is 'assigned', not described validly, at birth. For example, transgender activists and their allies will repeat the mantra that 'transwomen *are* (sic) women'. Sokal notes that second wave feminists like Germaine Greer considered this an implausible form of reasoning. She argued that a man can seek castration, put on a dress and demand to be called 'she' but the person *is* still a man (Greer, 1999).[2] The verb 'to be' is the central issue here, as Greer was claiming the ontological truth of mammalian sexual dimorphism,

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[1] The SRY gene exists on the Y chromosome and gene insertion techniques could theoretically alter a female genotype post-partum. It encodes a transcription factor essential for male development by regulating genes responsible for testicular differentiation and underpins the male phenotype in mammals. This fact is not open to human construction (an epistemic matter). It would operate if our species was extinguished but other mammals survived, therefore it is an ontological truth. The latter is taken for granted by gender-critical feminists but denied by transgender activists.

[2] A journalist pointed out to Greer that such a view would be offensive and hurtful to some people. She accepted the point but noted that being offended and hurt is part of living in a democracy, and that as an ageing woman she encountered offensive attitudes quite regularly in her life. How we feel about people saying things we do not like remains underexplored as an aspect of social ontology, but it is

which was just commonsense to the political constituency she belonged to and offensive and preposterous to those disagreeing with her.

Given this difference of emphasis in the contestation about sex and gender, when a matter is not settled, then that is a particular pinch point in academic reflection, when surely, we ought to debate and interrogate *more not less*. This is noticeably the very requirement pre-empted dogmatically by transgender activists, who insist on 'no debate' and they seek to cancel speakers, disparage their character and jeopardise their employability, as well as capture support in journals and professional organisations to silence gender-critical arguments. When any party pre-emptively shuts down debate, suspicions are aroused—a point well taken from Sokal's paper and the views from those he endorses about the contestation about gender, such as Suissa and Sullivan (2021).

Sokal's Omissions

So far so good in me observing Sokal's arguments being broadly aligned with critical realism, using immanent criteria, i.e., his reasoning is consistent with a critical realist account though he does not label it as such. However, if we move from an immanent to an omissive critique, in Sokal's arguments ontological concerns are not explicit; they are absent or hidden.

In my view, his omissions invite the need to justify the accuracy of his terminology and his lack of explicit allusion to social ontology. He is joining a core tradition started by Plato and then encouraged more by Kant to focus our philosophical attention on epistemology not ontology (Cooper, 1997). Ontology is not wholly ignored within Western philosophy, but it is relatively under-scrutinised (Bhaskar, 2008).

Sokal distinguishes between 'sociological' and 'epistemic' grounds, when we argue for or against censorship ever being warranted in academic settings. The first of these terms is an allusion to a discipline (of relative recent emergence, with Comte's positivist version in the 19th century), whereas the second is an allusion to the descriptive and possibly causal powers of words, spoken or written, dating back to Greek antiquity. Thus, the study of knowledge, epistemology, has a much longer history than sociology to appraise, when we consider the legitimacy of each in what the critical realist sociologist Archer (2012) calls the 'reflexive imperative in late modernity'.

Returning to the critical realist axioms of ontological realism and epistemological relativism, Sokal could illuminate his core legitimate arguments by re-working a neater conceptual symmetry. He could retain his preference for a contemporary scrutiny of 'epistemic' matters in academic debates, but he would then be better replacing 'sociological' with a more fitting term, not linked to a particular academic discipline, such as 'socio-ethical'. That connotes the shifting social ontology of the recent normative contexts he wants to interrogate, quite properly. For emphasis here, *sociology has no unique authority over socio-ethical discussions* (all adult citizens with cognitive capacity could, if asked, express a view) or over relevant research, which, amongst others, philosophers, economists, anthropologists, historians and psychologists also conduct.

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one motivational rationale to justify cancel culture, when self-righteous certainty then displaces epistemic humility.

If we consider Sokal's under-scrutiny of ontology, this may well not imply his objection to it. Indeed, most of his writing seems fairly and squarely aligned with philosophical realism. My interpretation here then is that this might reflect a taken-for-granted assumption about reality by Sokal (his personal version of *doxa*). However, a more *explicit* focus on ontology, not epistemology, could illuminate the distinction between naïve and critical realism.

By pushing on, to make the implicit explicit, Sokal could explore further the social ontology of knowledge production. How does it emerge and what interests does it reflect and for whom? In the latter regard, does knowledge enable people to be freer and live more meaningful and reflective lives or the reverse? Might it tend to begin with the ontology of dominant interests (financial and cognitive) but could it be democratised in the future in the interests of ordinary people?[3] Sokal does allude to the question of knowledge for the public good in his piece, but answering these questions would make more explicit what real social forces in the world shape the success or failure of that aspiration. In other words, this is not about a vague aspiration about knowledge in the public interest but a concerted effort to identify the real conditions of possibility for the aspiration to be achieved.

Sokal is concerned to examine 'blatant ideological' distortions and he, like the authors he criticises, accepts the normative legitimacy of academic rituals:

> As Simpson and Srinivasan *correctly observe*, academic freedom does not preclude some forms of "content-based restrictions on communication", such as peer review of journal articles; but it does require "that such constraints serve the promotion of disciplinary knowledge, not some ulterior agenda" (2018: 197, emphasis added).

This point of agreement underplays the broader and real conditions of possibility for knowledge to be published, which reflects interest work (financial and cognitive). For example, the 'promotion of disciplinary knowledge' can also be about the self-promotion of disciplines themselves (at times in competition with others) or sub-groups of academics jostling for theoretical dominance within disciplines. Statuses, salaries and funding sources all interweave as conditions of possibility in this field of power play. They exist in the world, so they are ontological matters for potential scrutiny.

Sokal does begin to discuss inter-disciplinary competition, but he does not extend his exploration to interest work, which is an aspect of social ontology. Moreover, academics themselves are sensitive to the latter, as they get to know the reality of power relationships within their discipline and the gatekeeping role of editors and reviewers. When it comes to 'outputs', academics soon become aware of which journals are 'good or bad bets', when considering a home for their submission. That pre-submission reflection applies to all disciplines but is much clearer in the human sciences.

For example, arguments about the role of memory in legal testimony create partisan constituencies of research, which favour those accused of crimes, versus those who report being victims of crimes. In the first case are journals like *Memory* and *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, and in the second we find journals like the *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* and the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. The social ontology of these

[3] See Bhaskar (2002) for a wider and deeper discussion of the link between academic activity and human flourishing.

journals—how they emerged and whose interests they serve—can be researched (Pilgrim, 2025). All these publications in their own way may well satisfy Sokal (as well as Simpson and Srinivasan) that proper rules are being followed (double-blind peer review, etc.), but they still reflect real differing interests, which themselves could be investigated.

In my view, Sokal may be being too trusting of the normal mechanisms of disciplinary activity and academic publishing being simply warranted and not in need of critique. His allusion to an 'ulterior agenda' is fine but this could be expanded to a scrutiny of disciplinary interests. This is not then just about ideological bias, for example under the sway of the EDI/DEI preoccupations of academic leaders, it is also about an older context that preceded that recent culture shift, largely linked, for now, to identity politics in wider society. That older context, traceable to the emergence of the post-Enlightenment academy, dominated at the turn of the 20th century by positivism, contained forms of disciplinary imperialism and self-protective academic silos (Wilden, 1973).

Accordingly, the word 'blatant' by Sokal above can be extrapolated to more subtle or 'non-blatant' forces of emergence, which are also in play, to explain the published content of papers. The emergence of this journal and its underpinning rationale reflect *inter alia* the social ontological state of academic publishing. Its existence and submissions functionally reflect the residual frustrations authors have with the lack of editorial and reviewer hospitality from mainstream journals in their disciplines, when they advance heterodox arguments.[4]

Moreover, although knowledge production has become increasingly interdisciplinary in the past fifty years (Gibbons et al., 1994), inertia about uni-disciplinary journals and disciplinary silos on university campuses remains. This has slowed down the aspiration to produce and disseminate the types of trans-disciplinary knowledge required to solve major public policy challenges, such as the impact of climate change. This is another example of how interest work, as a source of socio-economic generative mechanisms, influences knowledge production, its dissemination and its application. Again, we need to address social ontological forces, not only epistemological matters. The latter can be quite properly viewed through an axiological lens of fairness and consistent rule following, which was the point of consensus between Sokal and Simpson and Srinivasan. However, a social ontological awareness would widen that axiological lens, when understanding what is, and what is not, published in academic journals and why.

At this point, the use of the term 'sociological' becomes pertinent (cf. my appeal above to Sokal to use 'socio-ethical' not 'sociological' in his piece). When it comes to understanding why what we might think of as 'normal, well-behaved' journals exist and which knowledge they favour, then the sociology of knowledge has provided us with useful insights into how they operate and why (Merton, 1942; Bourdieu, 1988); indeed, Sokal concedes the role of Merton. Moreover, whilst the social sciences are more susceptible to ideological influences, interest work remains relevant when understanding the emergence of forms of natural scientific research, its publication and its successful or failed application (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Pilgrim and Pilgrim, 2021).

A final question relates to whether Sokal may be retaining a positivistic faith in 'disinterested' knowledge. As a post-Popperian philosophy of science, critical realism

[4] See Sullivan (2025) for a discussion of layers of real constraint on gender-critical research and publishing, which for now is at odds with gender ideology normative in the academy.

does not have that faith, but it does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. This is what happened with the postmodern turn, given its linguistic reductionism and misguided confidence in Nietzschean 'perspectivism': 'there are no facts only interpretations'—cited in Kaufmann and Hollingdale (1968). This denial of facts has 'overcooked' epistemological relativism and discounted and disrespected ontological realism. However, what the postmodernists (like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler) got right was the need to consider the under-explored topic of emotions in knowledge production[5].

For example, cancellers are typically furious in their 'moral grandstanding' (Tosi and Warmke, 2020). The culture of shouting angrily, not talking respectfully, is normative in cancellation campaigns (Charles, 2020). Cancellers avoid anticipatory guilt by considering themselves to be morally obliged to 'call out' the wrongdoer, who is in their targeted cross hairs. As for the latter, their disparagement and social ostracization might trigger immediate fear and demoralisation and imply the need for fortitude and bravery in a personal struggle to continue to justify their position and cope from day to day, with a career in jeopardy.

This is an emotionally charged cultural field for all those involved, so it is a part of social ontology to research and report upon. This absence of scrutiny of the evident emotional dimension of knowledge production, in our current climate of intimidation in the academy, bears proper examination. The point made here is not personal at all to Sokal; it reflects the traditional norms in science and philosophy of focusing on cognition (and its products) and a wariness to address emotions. Being 'cerebral' comes with the occupational territory of doing both philosophy and science. However, our feelings are important as well because they are woven into why things matter to us as academics and citizens (Sayer, 2012). Sokal does note this axiological matter broadly. However, linking it to the social ontology of the emotions would bolster his case.

Conclusion

This commentary on Sokal's critique of the claims of Simpson and Srinivasan, about their partial support for restrictions on academic freedom, broadly endorses his claims. However, critical realism has been offered as a sympathetic corrective and improvement to his position. I have argued that his use of the term 'sociological' in parts of his paper would be better replaced with 'socio-ethical' to illuminate his argument. Also, his focus on epistemology, which is philosophically consistent with an approach encouraged in Western philosophy since Plato, and reinforced by Kant, has the disadvantage of backgrounding ontology.

If we foreground the latter instead, then this helps us to understand emergence—in this case the conditions of possibility to account for Sokal's key concerns, which I share, about cancel culture and its corrosive impact in higher education. Whilst Sokal addresses axiological matters, such a consideration would be improved by looking to critical realism to explore the link between academic activity and human flourishing. Given that his arguments reflect scientific realism, his epistemological focus and lack of an explicit

[5] This resonates with Hume's focus on feelings or 'sentiments' in moral reasoning, as an alternative to Kantian moral imperatives, which have shaped today checklists of "do's and 'don'ts", typical in professional codes of practice.

ontological emphasis in my view lead to his rhetoric of justification being underpowered. The link he makes between epistemology and axiology is important, but in turn linking that to ontology would strengthen his case considerably.

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