

HIGHER SUPERSTITION: THE ACADEMIC LEFT AND ITS QUARRELS WITH SCIENCE.

By Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt. *The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (Maryland)*. \$25.95. xi + 314 p.; index. ISBN: 0-8018-4766-4. 1994.

This book offends me. It is a mean-spirited, self-serving attempt to mock and ridicule serious scholars who dare to study science as it is practiced, rather than worshipping it as an ideal. It claims to speak for scientists like me, and in that claim it presumes to own my vote for a platform I totally reject—the notion that experimental science can be free of political content.

I have been a practicing scientist for almost thirty years. I have known only one scientist—Barbara McClintock—who lived by this ideal of purity, and she had to wait an extra forty years for her Nobel Prize for reasons that were entirely political, and not at all driven by any leftist agenda. So I am dubious about their mocking tone, and believe it to

be unjustified. Feminists have criticized this huge area of human endeavor that is all but devoid of female practitioners; a glance at the rolls of the National Academy of Science ought to tell any serious person that science has faltered in the education, training, mentoring and promotion of qualified women. Cultural constructivists too have something to teach us about the reason there are National Institutes of Arthritis and Cancer at the NIH, but no National Institute of Women's Diseases, and we won't learn it from any amount of lab work.

Environmentalists have worked long and hard to enter the mainstream of science, hoping to see a National Institute of the Environment, but after this past election, there is little chance of that. And as for the indictments of science made by our fellow citizens whose ancestors came not from Europe or Asia but from Africa—surely no serious observer of the American scene can believe that biological justifications for the institutionalization of anti-Black racism are behind us, that a Constitution written by the finest scientific minds of the day viewed their African ancestors as anything more than property each worth 60% of a human being, or that there are no lasting scars from the subsequent extra hundred years of slavery.

Beyond the nasty tone of the book (why write about people you despise?) there is a more serious problem—its willingness to play fast and loose with political categories that were, in the academic lifetimes of the authors, matters of life and death, both figuratively and literally. When American jobs have been lost in science for political reasons, they have usually been lost by members of what the authors call, in their subtitle, the “Academic Left,” not by political scientists, nor by scientists who, like the authors, make a political agenda out of the purity of their art. Indeed, the “Political Left” is a category that, in the context of their book, is no more than a belated punch in the noses of a group of academics who do not know each other, do not agree with each other on many things, and do not share any detectable national political agenda.

If there is a national political agenda directed against the interests of disinterested science in America, it is not to be found among scholars of science, who do have the unfortunate habit of talking to each other in hermetic jargon. At best they offer food for thought to serious observers of science, and at worst they can do no more harm than any other self-referential academic fad. The dangers to science in America are real, but they hardly stem from academic discourse of any sort. They can be found in the religious and political groups who insist on the teaching of “creation science”; the government officials who will not allow young people to learn about their bodies in time to understand the consequences of their sexual activities;

the NIH directors who cannot countenance research on human sexuality, and who thereby discard the benefits that ought to accrue from the fact that AIDS is preventable but not curable; the insurance companies who want to learn your genotype and mine for their benefit and not ours; and the cabal of Congressmen (they are all men in this case), executive officers and corporations and farmers from the mid-south, who refuse to allow the major carcinogen for sale in America today, tobacco, to be treated as the addictive drug that it is.

Any practicing scientist who puts this group—shall we call them the “Political Right”—up against the “Academic Left” as portrayed in this cruel and mocking book, will quickly see where her risks really lie. I look forward to a companion volume from the authors on these other risks, but I suspect we will have to wait a long time.

Robert ~~Robert~~ POLLACK, *Biology, Columbia University, New York*