

Selective Quotation¹

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In “Evidence-free forensics and enemies of objectivity,”² science warrior, Paul R. Gross, claims falsely that, by a crafty use of quotation marks, *Social Text* editor, Andrew Ross, put words of Oswald Spengler into the mouth of one of his best known critics, the historian of science, Gerald Holton. More precisely, Gross accuses Ross of “designed quotation,” by which he means

something more sophisticated than simple misquotation; rather, a fabricated statement, enclosed wholly or partly in quotation marks or sometimes not at all, that is meant to be understood as a quotation, even though the intended victim never said or wrote it. (*A House Built on Sand*: 104)

Here is Gross’s whole case.

Ross wrote, in the original introduction to *Science Wars*, that “apocalyptic like Holton see only science ‘falling on its own sword’” (1996: 10). The passage in single quotation marks is not from Holton; it is from Oswald Spengler, to whose *refutation* Holton devotes his chapter 5. After complaints, the false quotation was changed in the book version of *Science Wars* by adding ‘Spengler’ to ‘Holton’ and so making both Spengler and Holton ‘apocalyptic’! (*A House Built on Sand*: 104)

This is a textbook example of selective quotation. If we go only by what Gross shows us, it seems clear that, just as he contends, Ross is saying that Holton sees science falling on its own sword.³ But this is a deception. In Ross’ introduction, “apocalyptic like Holton see only science ‘falling on its own sword’” is merely part of the second clause of a sentence, the rest of which Gross omits! Here is the full sentence in its original form.

Instead of appreciating these critiques as the outcome of scientific self-scrutiny, apocalyptic like Holton see only ‘science falling on its own sword’ and society plunging into unreason.

In Gross’ version, the reference to “these critiques,” which would undermine his claim, is gone. Contrary to what he would have us believe, Ross is not talking about Holton’s view of science but about his view of *certain contemporary critiques of science* that Ross mentions in the paragraph immediately preceding this sentence.⁴ In the first clause, he claims that Holton does not see them as “the outcome of scientific self-scrutiny.” And in the second, he goes further, claiming that, *to Holton*, these contemporary critiques of science are like Spengler’s critique of it, with its vision of “science falling on its own sword” and society plunging into unreason. This gives the lie to Gross’ accusation that Ross is saying that Holton shares Spengler’s apocalyptic view of science.⁵ Is Ross’ claim

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² Chapter 6 of *A House Built on Sand*, Noretta Koertge editor (Oxford 1998).

³ The quotation marks makes it seem that Ross is saying that Holton has used this very expression to convey his vision of science.

⁴ See the appendix.

⁵ In fact, he is not saying that Holton shares Spengler’s apocalyptic view of anything.

about Holton's view of these *contemporary* critiques correct? I have no idea. But here I am concerned only about what Ross is saying, not whether it is true. However, true or not, it is by no means novel. E.g., in *Dreams of a Final Theory* (1990), Steven Weinberg remarks:

I suspect that Gerald Holton is close to the truth in seeing the radical attack on science as one symptom of a broader hostility to Western civilization that has bedeviled Western intellectuals from Oswald Spengler on.

A second charge: Gross also makes another accusation.

After complaints, the false quotation was changed in the book version of *Science Wars* by adding 'Spengler' to 'Holton' and so making both Spengler and Holton 'apocalyptic'!

Gross surely means "attribution" not "quotation." Yes, the attribution was "changed," in the sense that initially there was none but, for the book version, in an attempt to allay Holton's anxiety that some reader of Ross' essay might not know that 'science falling on its own sword' is a famous paraphrase of a sentence in Spengler's *Decline of the West*,⁶ Ross inserted "Spengler's vision of" just before it. As for this making both Spengler and Holton apocalyptic, Ross had already called Holton an apocalyptic and calling Spengler one is like saying that water is wet. But he does not make the absurd claim that Spengler and Holton are apocalyptic *about the same thing!* It is true that, even with "Spengler's vision of" inserted before the quote, when we read only the fragment of Ross' sentence that Gross chooses to show us, it may indeed seem that Ross is claiming, falsely, that Holton shares Spengler's apocalyptic vision of science. But, as with the original version of the sentence, inspection of *both* clauses and the paragraph preceding it shows that Ross is saying that certain *contemporary* critiques of science, which he admires, remind Holton of Spengler's talk of 'science falling on its own sword,' which Holton detests.⁷ And, as before, this gives the lie to Gross' charge.

Appendix: Here is the paragraph from Ross' essay that immediately precedes the sentence from which Gross selected a fragment to show his readers.

With late twentieth-century science so compromised, industrialized, and commodified, the militant resurgence of belief in its pristine truth claims is not hard to understand. But the crusaders behind the Science Wars are not about to throw the moneylenders out of the temple. Their wrath is aimed, above all, at those who show how the temple was built and how its rituals are maintained---the constructionist academic left, which is allegedly driven by resentment at seeing hits politics devalued at the ballot box and is now apparently engaged in a toy soldier crusade to seize some of the academic authority and power exercise by scientists. These resisters include ethnographers, such as Bruno Latour, who dissect the cultural belief-systems of scientists' communities; sociologists of scientific knowledge, which as the adherents of the Edinburgh school, who expose the interest-driven nature of scientific research; multiculturalists, such as Donna Haraway, Sandra

⁶ In *The Decline of the West, Volume One* (Alfred A. Knopf 1939: 424), Spengler prophesizes that "a new element of inwardness will arise to overthrow the will-to-victory of science. Exact science must presently fall upon its own keen sword."

⁷ I assume that this is part of what makes Ross see Holton as an apocalyptic. I also think that if Ross were to read Weinberg's remark quoted above, he would consider it fair to call Weinberg one too.

Harding, and Evelyn Fox Keller, who uncover the gender-laden and racist assumptions built into the EuroAmerican scientific method; philosophers who capsize or redefine claims to objectivity; historians who show the relationship between science's empirical world-view and that of mercantile capitalism; and cultural studies folks who show how the powerful language of science exercises its daily cultural authority in our society. The political aims of these groupings are varied: (a) some simply want to provide an accurate scientific description of empirical scientific practice; (b) others want, more ambitiously, to see science redeem its tarnished ideals from internal abuse and external impurities; (c) others, more normative, would persuade scientists to be self-critical about the political nature and social origins of their research and to engage in advocacy science to combat the risks and injustices that are side effects of technoscientific development; (d) still others want, more radically, to create new scientific methods that are rooted in the social needs of communities and accountable to social interests other than those of managerial elites in business, government, and the military. The last aim is driven by the principle that people whose lives are greatly affected by the effects of scientific superindustrialism ought to have a role in the decision making that determines research. But it also involves taking seriously the proposition that Western technoscience is a highly local form of knowledge and is therefore unlikely to have a world monopoly on good scientific ideas.