By E. P. Hamm

The Sokal affair was a good antidote to the view that publicity is always a good thing. Whatever good it did creating greater public awareness of studies of science and technology was counterbalanced by the bad impressions it left behind. It may have helped perpetuate the view that academics are unable to distinguish good arguments from bad, compelling evidence from hogwash, or that some of us have enough free time on our hands to construct elaborate hoaxes meant to hoodwink earnest colleagues who had already been taken in by trendy theorists. Despite all this there was something much more important than showmanship or academic tomfoolery in this episode of the sadly named ‘science wars’. Jim Brown has now offered us a guide to these disputes, but it is not intended to be a detached analysis. Brown’s argument is that social and economic equality, the politics of the left, and epistemology are linked.

Brown believes the political left needs to have science on its side and he worries that confusion about science undermines the basis for progressive political action. In this respect, at least, he is with Alan Sokal, a self-described ‘Old Leftist’, who confessed he could not see how the people whose work he was lampooning were doing anything for the working class (p. 11). He also wants to offer a badly needed counterpoint to Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s definition of the ‘academic left’ as those who misread science (Gross and Levitt, 1994). The even-handedness of Brown’s approach is much to be welcomed. Though not above quoting a sentence or two of egregious writing by someone who counts as a postmodern theorist, Brown knows that plucking prose out of its context proves little. For the sake of fairness he offers examples of scientists and defenders of science who have made weak arguments or preposterous claims, or given themselves over to wild flights of literary fancy, including, respectively, Paul Boghassian, Steven Weinberg and Max Born.

The science wars are usually taken to have had their start sometime in the late eighties or early nineties, an outgrowth of debates about the relevance of the humanities, the importance of an alleged canon, and multiculturalism. Brown knows that there are more important and interesting things in life than academic politics (Lingua Franca ceased publication at about the time Who Rules came into print) and he chooses instead to start with C. P. Snow’s famous essay The Two Cultures and the attention it drew to the gulf of mutual incomprehension separating ‘literary intellectuals’ and scientists. Snow was worried that the literary culture that dominated English politics was given to muddled and reactionary thinking and that scientists, who tended as a group to be politically progressive, were shut out of power. How things have changed. Scientists are on the inside with money and power, even if not many of them are MPs, and the left, such as it is, has seen better days. Brown knows this and believes that in order to promote its social goals the left needs to marshal all the resources it can, and first among these is science or what Brown calls ‘orthodox science’. In short, progressive politics needs a conservative philosophy of science, for he is more concerned with some sort of philosophical understanding of science rather than the messy details of the practices that we know as science.

The bulk of Who Rules defends ‘orthodox science’ and takes issue with contending views of science, especially social constructivist ones. This book is aimed at a general reader, and to help her along a good portion of it is devoted to explaining the most important events in twentieth-century philosophy of science and the sociology of scientific knowledge, above all as done by David Bloor. The summaries of logical positivism, Popper, Kuhn, and some post-Kuhnian philosophy of science are clear and concise and could be very useful for students taking an introductory course in science studies. Many of the confusions that are all too typical among undergraduates, such as equating positivism with realism, are here effectively dispelled. There are also useful reminders of facts that deserve to be known more widely, such as the politically progressive character of practically all the members of the Vienna Circle. “Dealing with political issues meant as much or more to Neurath, Carnap, Frank, and Hahn as coming to grips with science for its own sake” (p. 54). Logical positivism can be an austere doctrine, but such austerity does not rule out a passion for the messy world of politics.

Brown also draws attention to important aspects of Paul Feyerabend’s thought that deserve attention. Though he will have none of the methodological anarchism of Against Method, he praises Feyerabend’s earlier essay, “Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism”, (Feyerabend, 1962) as one of