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JANUARY 15, 2019

OPEN LETTERS TO PEOPLE OR ENTITIES WHO ARE
UNLIKELY TO RESPOND

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE MATHEMATICAL COMMUNITY

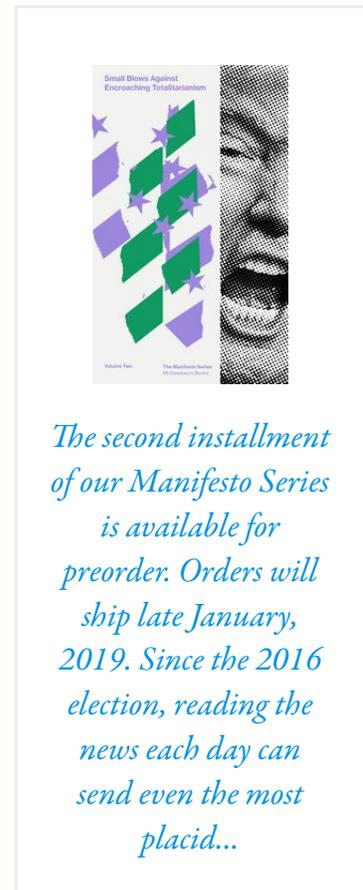
by DANIEL J. WOODHOUSE

Dear colleagues,

There is no escaping the widespread dissatisfaction within modern academia. With neoliberal upper management, bloated administration, recklessly expanded undergraduate programs, and shrinking departmental budgets, there isn't much to be optimistic about. Those joining the ranks can look forward to bleak job prospects, excessive

teaching loads, and writing stupefying grant proposals. All disciplines will have to adjust to the changing landscape. Within the sphere of pure mathematics — the oldest and most successful of humanity's intellectual endeavors — I believe our best chance at preserving the integrity and dignity of our tradition is to return to our Pythagorean roots. We should become a cult.

Let us do away with the job market and mathjobs.com and reference letters. Let us stop pretending we understand each other's respective sub-fields. Let us abandon those fuck-ugly Brutalist travesties we call our department buildings and leave them to those shills in applied math. Let us seclude ourselves in mountain caves and daub mysterious equations in blood across rock-faces to ward off outsiders. Let us embrace our most impenetrable mathematical texts as sacred and requiring divinely distributed revelation.



I am imagining a kind of Gnostic mystery religion. Rather than force hordes of undergraduates to sit through basic calculus, we deny our precious knowledge to those unwilling to undergo a yearlong induction

process involving physical and psychological trials, menial servitude, and a restrictive vegan diet. From a pragmatic perspective, it would also be a good opportunity to ensure that the hopeful novices understand how fucking fractions work.

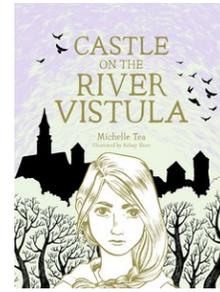
I am convinced that the current system has dulled our understanding of the value we offer through our instruction. Modern mathematical techniques are the foundation of modern science, medicine, and technology, and we should be the literal, rather than metaphorical, high priests of this temple. Only by withholding our insights will we be able to reassert the intrinsic worth of our knowledge. And smaller class sizes would be great.

It is time we did away with “publish or perish” and replace it with “publish *and* perish.” Nothing will be more blasphemous than writing a textbook that anyone can go out and buy. Those who commit such a crime will face expulsion and reprisals. Our CVs won't list the prestigious journals in which we have published, but rather our reputations will be the rumors of our arcane wisdom. And if we write anything down at all, it will be in code.

Practice exams, grade-grubbing, and final mark scaling will a thing of the past. Whatever trials are devised to replace the current examinations, the students will have only whispers to go on. Future

employers won't ask to see transcripts, but rather the strange scars and tattoos borne by those who have survived.

The next time I sit down and write a grant proposal, I will spare the committee my 500 words explaining how I will “disseminate and communicate my results to my peers and the wider public.” Instead, I will give a description of the elaborate ceremony of revelation – a ritual involving head-dresses, body paint, powerful hallucinogens, and animal sacrifice.



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I don't imagine that my vision will be met with enthusiasm by all my colleagues. I fear that too many of us have become accustomed to the trappings of a profession. The office. Job titles. Faculty dinners. A respectable salary. Travel reimbursements. My proposal will not make any of us richer. Financially, at least. But I believe that it will return much-needed vitality to our practice. And while Gnosticism promised an ultimate revelation to those who pursued it, we can offer our own ultimate, most guarded secret: how little each of us really knows.

Best of luck to all of you on the job market right now,

Daniel J. Woodhouse

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