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Long Live Postdisciplinary Studies! Sociology and the curse of disciplinaryparochialism/imperialism

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Abstract

It will be argued that disciplinary parochialism and its near relative disciplinary imperialism are a recipe for misunderstanding the social world, characteristically resulting in reductionism and various forms of blinkered interpretations and misattributions of causality. Depressingly, the approach of the Millennium gives an excuse for somewhat weary attempts to revive aging disciplines and an opportunity for their governing hierarchies to re-consolidate their fast-dissipating power. At a time when many sociologists claim there is a process of de-differentiation in contemporary society, it is ironic that they should want to reverse the process in academia. Of course, disciplinary imperialism is not unique to sociology: outside one of the best or worst examples is economics' public choice theory. But sociological imperialism is not much better, indeed it can lead to strikingly similar problems. It encourages academics to emphasize not what is relevant and important for understanding social phenomena but whatever promises to raise the profile or educational capital of their discipline. Examples of the pitfalls of disciplinary parochialism/imperialism will be given from work in sociology. While all disciplines ask distinctive and worthwhile abstract (i.e. one-sided) questions, understanding concrete (i.e. many-sided)

situations requires an interdisciplinary, or better, postdisciplinary approach which follows arguments and processes wherever they lead, instead of stopping at conventional disciplinary boundaries, subordinating intellectual exploration to parochial institutional demands.

Introduction

It was always a safe bet that, with the approach of the new Millenium, academic conferences would see it as an opportunity to ask how they can redefine and reaffirm the core of their subject, decide how they can regain a sense of a common purpose, gain a higher and more respected profile in public life, enhance their educational capital, and so on. Worse, they may even turn these weary questions into essay titles for their poor students. Having seen this happen in other disciplines I have to say it fills me with gloom and despondency.

I believe we should celebrate rather than mourn the decline of disciplines. We should encourage the development of not merely interdisciplinary studies but postdisciplinary studies. I believe this identification which so many academics have with their disciplines is actually counterproductive from the point of view of making progress in understanding society.

Disciplines are parochial; they tend to be incapable of seeing beyond the questions posed by their own discipline, which provide an all-purpose filter for everything. Where the identity and boundaries of a discipline are strongly asserted and policed, it can stifle scholarship and innovation. One of the worst manifestations of this is the production of lists of 'recognized' journals, as in economics, which are considered by the RAE to count as acceptable for publications. It would be disastrous if this were ever to happen in sociology.

Disciplines are also often imperialist; they attempt to claim territories occupied by others as their own. A well-known example is that of public choice theory in economics which claims to be able to explain things like politics and the domestic division of labour. Disciplinary imperialism is closely related to disciplinary parochialism because both have difficulty thinking outside the framework of a single discipline.

Disciplinary parochialism and imperialism are evident in the tendency for accounts of the world to be assessed not merely in terms of their explanatory adequacy, but in terms of the extent to which they further the aims and favoured tropes of the discipline.

This is easy to see in others, harder for disciplinarians to see it in their own behaviour. Faced with any attractive theoretical innovation, we should always ask - is it attractive because it seems to enlarge the claims of the discipline or because it's a good explanation of the phenomenon concerned. Public choice theory in economics is again an outstanding example. When economists say they can explain the structure and dynamics of families or suicide by reference to a rational choice methodology, does this appeal to them because it's a better explanation than rival ones, or because it reinforces their discipline's imperialism, its imagined omnipotence. (How do economists explain suicide? - people commit suicide when their discounted future utility reaches zero, of course.) Non-economists don't realise it's all explicable in terms of rational choice: the economists do, and they understand it best. When sociologists say science has to be understood as a social construction, does this appeal because it's a better explanation of science, or because it advances sociological imperialism - others don't realise it's a social construction, but sociologists know it is and they understand that better than anyone.

Each discipline likes to flatter itself that it is more fundamental than all the others; sociology as a second-order discipline, therefore so much broader than any of the other disciplines, and capable of studying anything - and, as Bourdieu would no doubt point out - one that gains extra cultural capital by distancing itself from the first-order realm - the substantive and the empirical. Such claims are a way in which sociologists massage their disciplinary egos.

Disciplines can greatly extend their territorial claims by shifting from grounding themselves in a topic or object of study to identifying themselves in terms of ways of seeing. Economics is not just the study of economies, it's a way of understanding every aspect of society, through

the lens of rational choice . . . Geography as an all-encompassing subject which shows how everything comes together in space, so nothing eludes its synthesizing gaze.

Of course, interdisciplinary exchanges can have hidden agendas too and be driven by attempts of participants to raise their standing. An outstanding example of this is the interchange of the last two decades between literary studies and social theory through which both increased their cultural capital, the former through gaining the prestige of theory, the latter through gaining that of culture. Together, they were able to mount an attempt to deflate the standing of philosophy.

I do accept that disciplines ask important questions. But these are abstract - that is one-sided questions - for example, about the problem of social order, or the relationship between society and environment. They are certainly worthwhile questions. But to answer them we need concrete answers that go beyond the bounds of single disciplines. e.g. the problem of order is likely to require us to consider psychological matters, the workings of markets, the spatial organization of society. We have to go beyond sociology to answer one of its most fundamental questions.

Examples of disciplinary parochialism and imperialism

1. A substantive example

In sociology, the grand narrative of Fordism and post-Fordism functions as a way in which the discipline can deal with economies without having to know any more about economics than is needed to read the business pages of the paper. It allows a sociologically imperialist claim to economic knowledge that is impervious to external critique. It's a grand narrative into which many sociologists seem to feel obliged to fit their empirical analyses of anything economic. It's become an account of contemporary economies which - extraordinarily, rarely makes any mention of costs and cash. The fortunes of firms comes to depend not on the bottom line but on their conformity to the post-Fordist model and their development of new work cultures, the extent to which they embrace networks, etc. Some of these things might indeed be relevant influences on their success, but the dynamics of costs which economists prioritise cannot be reduced to these, and can work in quite different directions. Sociologists rightly insist that economic relations are socially or culturally embedded, but that doesn't say everything about them, indeed much eludes such a perspective. Significantly, economists and other students of businesses tend to be a good deal less impressed by the narrative of Fordism and post-Fordism than are sociologists.

(When some sociologists argue that post-Fordism is as much a cultural as an economic concept while there may be something in such a claim, it would be naive not to note that this sort of claim is also typical of power struggles over intellectual territories and the right to speak about them.)

2. Strong social constructionism and the psychology/sociology relation

Ian Craib has been a longstanding critic of sociological imperialism, in the form of its denial of the internal world, the denial of the 'I', which psychology and psychoanalysis attempt to understand. The realm of the 'I' - that is our capability to receive something from outside and make it our own, to make something of what we are constructed through - thus creating something different - has always created problems for sociology (Craib, 1997) .

> "To be a sociologist is often to engage in, implicitly or explicitly, a more or less immense, more or less manic denial of the internal world, and attempt to avoid an inner reality" (1989, p. 196).

Disciplinary boundaries tend to get positioned in a way which allows each discipline to externalise difficult problems, indeed they often deny that there is anything they need to know about on the other side of the boundary. Thus economists treat the determination of consumer preferences and demand as either a given or something which is a matter for psychology and sociology. (That preferences might also be influenced by economic processes themselves is particularly threatening for neoclassical economics because it undermines its extravagant claim that markets allow the consumer to be sovereign (Penz,

1986).) Many sociologists avoid the interface with psychology by various means which deny the 'I' and treat agents as tabula rasa awaiting social construction.

Strong versions of social constructionism imply sociological omnipotence or sociological triumphalism: not only is everything, including what others imagine to be at least co-authored by themselves, actually a social construction, but sociologists can see this so much more clearly than anyone else, though in killing off authors they of course have to exempt themselves.

3. Sociological reductionism

By sociological reductionism I mean the tendency to treat ideas and practices as if the only thing we needed to know about them was their social coordinates, be it 'middle class', 'feminine', 'high culture', or whatever, as if this determined their content. To use an example given by Bourdieu, those who dismiss feminism as 'middle class' are guilty of sociological reductionism. We quite rightly regard it as insulting to treat feminists as merely responding to their class position rather than having ideas which need to be considered in their own right. It's like dismissing someone's argument by saying 'you would say that wouldn't you?' However, as we shall see, Bourdieu appears as both an opponent and a proponent of sociological reductionism (Sayer, 1999).

Reasoning enables us to think beyond the dispositions we have acquired through having a particular location in the social field. It is even possible to arrive at ways of thinking and acting which are at odds with those dispositions, just as it was possible for Marx to think beyond his middle class background, though of course reasoning might lead us to affirm our dispositions. At the same time, as Bourdieu argues, unless we rigorously question our own dispositions and position within the social field we are unlikely to break their influence.

Let's take the question of why sociologists identify so strongly with their institution - their discipline - as an example. As Bourdieu argues, when we commit ourselves to a certain game or form of life, we both make an investment from which we hope to draw profit (not necessarily monetary), and commit ourselves ot its norms and rules. (Of course, that we occasionally distance ourselves from the institution by making ironic comments about it doesn't necessarily indicate that we are independent of it.) The institution offers certain rewards and stakes, and its members consider them worth playing for. The success of the institution and the success of its members' life projects and careers become interdependent.

Looking at someone else's institution, it is hard not to regard their commitment and their belief in the game, their conformity to its rules, as rather extraordinary, as if they were living an illusion. Thus we might feel tempted to say to an accountant or estate agent or economist or chemist at one of their own conferences - how can you invest so much of yourself in something so prosaic, and identify with its petty norms, treating them as worthy standards for your life, indeed as if meeting them were your primary goal in life? All this applies to academics' attachment to their disciplines (Bourdieu uses the term 'illusio' to characterise this situation - not only to draw attention to the illusions but to the its game-like (from the Latin ludus) character). But his own commitment to sociology is not of course explained in this way.

Sociologists are much happier talking in this way about others than about themselves. The example serves not only to remind us of the strangeness of disciplinary loyalties but as an illustration of sociologically reductionist account of them.

In our first person accounts we tend to explain what we do by means of justifications for our actions. We play sociology or whatever because it is worth playing. But they play whatever they play because of their social position. This radical difference between sociological accounts of others and first person accounts sociologists make of their own behaviour is one of the outstanding peculiarities of the discipline.

We could of course, respond by admitting the social influences upon our judgements, showing how they are what one would expect given our habitus, but if this is taken seriously then the admission itself would have to be taken as a function of our habitus, and our justifications could be dismissed, bracketed out or treated as a function of our social position. It would be like saying - 'don't bother to listen to my arguments, it's only my habitus talking.'

However, one way out of the dilemma is to admit that those we study are capable of acting not merely on the basis of their social position but on the basis of their reasoning, which, like our own capacity for reasoning, can take us beyond those social influences. Discourses always extend beyond particular social locations and are open to interpretation from a range of positions, and reasoning involves processes of extension and generalization, and critical reflection, all of which means that the social influences of particular locations can be brought into question and overridden. To deny this is to fall into something akin to behaviourism. This is not to deny the power of habitus but to note its limitations, and that habitus can be partially transcended.

Thus to know how far sociological explanations can be taken, we have to decide how far things cannot be explained sociologically. In one of Bourdieu's books on education - The State Nobility, he analyses the relationship between students' parental occupation and the kinds of comments tutors give them on their essays, showing that positive comments vary directly with class. Only after 130 pages does he acknowledge that the comments might be responding to differences in the quality of the essays. Of course, the quality of he essays might well vary with class too. But I think what his coyness on this shows is his reluctance to concede that the marks might have something to do with whether the students got certain things right or not, and that this indicates a limit to sociological explanation of how they were marked. Again: to know how far sociologically reductionist explanations do work we have to assess how far they don't work. (Equally, to know how far actors' judgements are 'interested' in Bourdieu's use of the term, we need to know how far they are not interested.)

Of course, sociological reductionism might simply be defended in disciplinary terms - that it's only appropriate for sociologists to restrict themselves to analysing the social coordinates of judgements, tastes, opinions actions. Bourdieu himself defends such a position. For such a radical thinker he is surprisingly attached to his discipline, defending sociology, arguing that like any other discipline it should push its questions as far as possible so as to challenge others. In Sociology in Question Bourdieu even says that "every science has to use its own means to account for the greatest number of things possible, including things that are apparently or really explained by other sciences." (1993, p.25). This just accepts sociological imperialism - it invites misexplanation through misattribution of causality.

Why postdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary studies?

Interdisciplinary studies are not enough, for at worst they provide a space in which members of different disciplines can bring their points of view together in order to compete behind a thin disguise of cooperation, so the researchers don't actually escape from their home disciplines - at best they merely offer the prospect of such an escape.

Post-disciplinary studies emerge when scholars forget about disciplines and whether ideas can be identified with any particular one; they identify with learning rather than with disciplines. They follows ideas and connections wherever they lead instead of following them only as far as the border of their discipline. It doesn't mean dilettantism or eclecticism, ending up doing a lot of things badly. It differs from those things precisely because it requires us to follow connections. One can still study a coherent group of phenomena, in fact since one is not dividing it up and selecting out elements appropriate to a particular discipline, it can be more coherent than disciplinary studies.

It's common to say one can only do interdisciplinary studies after one has first got a good grounding in a particular discipline. This is a kind of holding position for conservatives, involving minimal compromise: it also reduces the chances of those who go on to attempt interdisciplinary studies of leaving their discipline. Having formerly taught 17 years at Sussex University where undergraduates are introduced to interdisciplinary studies for half of the studies from the start, I wish to differ; if people work on a coherent group of topics or problems without regard for disciplinary boundaries long enough and a postdisciplinary literature builds up, then that can provide a basis for teaching. Urban and regional studies is a good example of this.

A well-known example of postdisciplinary studies from 10 years ago is David Harvey's book The Condition of Postmodernity. But there are also some well-known examples from 150, even 250 years ago, though of course these were **pre**-disciplinary studies.

And of course, disciplines are a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the late nineteenth century, the founders of social science would roam freely across territory we now see carefully fenced off into politics, psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy, etc. - indeed they would often do so within a single page. A good (local) example of this was Adam Smith. Though now commonly claimed by economists as their founder, he was of course a professor of moral philosophy. He was greatly concerned with the problem of social order, and so might be claimed by sociologists as their founder, but unlike most contemporary sociologists he did not attempt to exclude connections to psychology but tried to inter-relate psychological dispositions and social relations - in both directions, avoiding both psychological reductionism and sociological reductionism. For Smith, economic relations, including market ones, were always embedded in social relations, and he saw the formation of consumer preferences as very much culturally influenced. In other words, unlike contemporary economists, he did not attempt to relegate the determination of demand to individual psychology, to an external discipline from which there was apparently nothing to learn. At the same time, the concept of an invisible hand resists the reduction of the mechanisms determining the division of labour to a matter of the embedding of economic relations, as a sociologically reductionist treatment would imply.

It's ironic that disciplines should try to claim particular contributors as part of their own canon when the strength of so many of them owed much to the fact that they were not inhibited by disciplines.

So I'm certainly not questioning the idea of a canon, rather I would like it broadened to authors outside those claimed by particular disciplines.

So instead of 'Long Live Postdisciplinary Studies', this paper could have been titled - 'Bring back *pre*-disciplinary studies' - but I couldn't resist the temptation to use the post prefix. I would argue that one of the reasons why the founders of social science were so good, is precisely this lack of disciplinary constraint or self-censorship, or disciplinary imperialism. I also suggest we might be better heirs if we shook off our disciplinary chains.