

THE USES OF ACADEMIC IDENTITY

I became intrigued by anthropology for two reasons: its ideas and its iconoclasm. Later I realised that it also offered a closely-knit intellectual community, with the benefits of both status and a vibrant disciplinary identity. This is still its appeal for many postgraduates who aspire to academic careers, despite the paucity of tenured posts, decreasing autonomy and meagre professional rewards. Disciplines like anthropology continue to attract recruits because they offer rich and fertile traditions for thinking and debate. At best they offer a theoretical 'triangulation point' from which to make sense of new horizons and new fields in the world beyond. Well-mapped intellectual landscapes continue to offer up unexpected new riches or perspectives. The less appealing corollary to such images is that of stale scholasticism (Bourdieu 2000), pedantic turf wars and intellectual dead ends.

Can one be too 'disciplined'? Can a discipline's seeming strength and coherence be a weakness, limiting what it is possible to imagine, to think and to say? In this book I have explored the origins of one particular disciplinary terrain. I have described its creation by a few highly ambitious individuals, their dependence on institutional patronage, and their determination to mark out and defend an intellectual patch and methodological approach. Is this story still relevant today? Some are predicting a post-disciplinary episteme for the social sciences. Others urge that we value the academic role of stewarding and reworking disciplines and professional identities. In this final chapter, I reflect on the curious role of disciplinary affiliations (di Leo 2003) in a university sector increasingly governed by the rationalities of the market and the corporation.

Learning to be undisciplined

More than two decades ago, Clifford Geertz (1983) argued that disciplinary boundaries were dissolving and intellectual genres were blurring in the social sciences. A decade later, the Gulbenkian Commission, led by Immanuel Wallerstein, again called for the 'opening up' of the social sciences, questioning what they saw as the outmoded nature of disciplinary knowledge (Wallerstein 1996), building on Gibbons et al.'s influential challenge to discipline-based 'mode 1' knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994). These were the first salvos in a debate that has attracted increasing attention from academics, policymakers and funders. Early visions of a neatly demarcated map of intellectual territories, each inhabited by its own disciplinary tribe (e.g. Becher 1989), have come to seem increasingly static and inaccurate.

There are many benefits to a disciplinary affiliation. As is revealed in the battles fought by Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and their students, an intellectual specialisation can act as a motor for the development of new approaches and fields. Secure in their disciplinary identity, our protagonists were able to champion a particular theoretical paradigm that threatened, and redefined, an existing field of knowledge or practice. One could argue that such disputes are a measure of the vitality of the field. The checks and balances offered by conflicts between rival schools of thought, together with the archival logic implicit within disciplinary journals and books, all serve the vital function of curating, preserving and defending humanistic knowledge. By dint of their ways of working disciplines can protect a space for the unexpected, the tangential and the elusive. In an age of obligatory innovation and seeming standardisation, this remains one of the lesser sung virtues of disciplinary practice.

The conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote a powerful defence of the art of disciplinary specialisation. In an attack on the planners' rush to make universities more utilitarian and 'relevant', he argued that 'each true *techne* is, or involves, a particular manner of thinking, and the notion that you can think but without thinking in any particular manner, without reference to some definite universe of discourse, is a philosophical illusion. Every true *techne*, profoundly studied, knows something of its own limits, because it has some insight into its own presuppositions.' He went on to challenge the possibility that the 'the world of knowledge' could be 'integrated by a Summa', and that those who urged for a generic approach to education and training were 'unreliable guides whose immoderate thirst has conjured up a mirage' (Oakeshott 1989, 134). By this logic, disciplines enable learning, and the more profound the attachment to

one's disciplinary identity, the more one will learn. Disciplines are their own pedagogy, their own rationale.

The very strength of one's disciplinary calling changes over time and place. Some senses of belonging are more powerful than others. Many academics embody more than one identity, and are at ease with the double consciousness that can sometimes result. Social anthropologists tend to be particularly attached to their discipline, perhaps because of its size and distinctive history. In the UK, if not in the USA, the discipline has sought to retain and defend an intimate and close-knit community of scholars. Marked theoretical differences are tolerated because a discipline of small size can easily unite behind the flag of institutional vulnerability. Sociology's identity derives from a more inclusive and reformist history, even if its rival moieties often seem to be perpetually feuding. Cultural studies has loudly advocated an anti-disciplinary approach to knowledge creation, whilst gradually transforming itself from a radical theoretical school to a highly successful institutional 'brand', at the risk of dissipating the political and theoretical energy that drove the original intervention (Appadurai 1996), as I discuss below.

What problems might result from having 'too much' of a disciplinary identity? This is not a question one could have asked even fifty years ago, when the social sciences hardly existed as an institutional presence. Disciplines can risk becoming closed intellectual talking shops, where funding, prestige and influence tend to circulate amongst a narrow group of peers. A curatorial approach to knowledge can lead to professional gatekeeping, where certain epistemological challenges and critiques are kept firmly off-limits. A narrow interpretation of affiliation also serves to reinforce narrow hierarchies of academic status – within the UK the William Wyse professorship at Cambridge remains the pinnacle of disciplinary achievement in social anthropology. A finely gradated ranking of institutional prestige will be an increasingly pervasive aspect of a competitive higher education landscape. Many students and temporary lecturers struggle to get a permanent post that acts as a guarantee of professional status and disciplinary affiliation, at the risk of being exploited along the way.

How are such self-imposed restrictions sustained? Part of it comes from the appeal of all imagined communities. Given the choice, academics, like most people, tend to surround themselves with colleagues who share their predilections and habits. The intimate feuds that result are reassuringly commonplace, even if the self-referentialism of intellectual debates is less appealing or rewarding.

There are other material factors that reproduce the epistemological order – including discipline-based funding, teaching and organisational

structures within universities. Higher education policy is rarely a topic for disciplinary scholarship, unless one is an educationalist. There is much to learn from an ethnography of this policy field, and from what one might call the 'meta-professional' scaffolding that supports and surrounds academic life. For this reason, the nitty-gritty of national and institutional micro-politics – of scholarly associations, funders and universities – plays a prominent role in this retelling of the discipline's history. There remains more to do in understanding the changing nature of disciplinary identities ethnographically, situating this complex of social practices within particular institutional worlds.

I am under no illusions that a set of critically historicised insights into disciplinary pasts should necessarily loosen people's attachment to these affiliations. A sense of intellectual belonging is precious and to be cherished. At best, I hope this work demonstrates the provisional and relational aspects of these identities, highlighting the conditions through which they emerge and get institutionalised, and their political role today in an increasingly hierarchical and globally-stratified university sector.

Interdisciplinary knowledge and its discontents

The rise and rise of interdisciplinary work within the social sciences, and between the arts and sciences more generally, are the subject of constant comment, dispute and research. For some, this marks the coming of age of a set of social sciences that are increasingly comfortable in a post-disciplinary institutional landscape. For others, such forced commingling and explicit hybridity has damaging consequences.

These are not new debates. The expansion of the British university sector and the social sciences during the post-war years meant an explosion in the number of departments, with all the potential for conflict that lay therein. For one extant commentator, 'departmental organisation often reaches a condition of monstrous hypertrophy, falsifying the academic map, and bringing about the herding of teachers into pens surrounded by fences' (Carr-Saunders 1961, 8). For Briggs, 'duplication and dispersal of effort, lack of planning and co-ordination, rivalry and occasionally friction, boundary disputes and far from splendid isolation are familiar features in the twentieth-century university world ... in the modern map of learning within the universities, students and teachers in science and the humanities, literary and social studies all too often figure as inhabitants of separate continents' (Briggs 1964, 73) It was exactly this sense of 'separate

continents' that lay behind the plans for Sussex University, established in 1962, to create a series of interdisciplinary schools (Daiches 1964).

Wallerstein's work represents one pole in the debate over disciplines and their roles. Since chairing the Gulbenkian Commission's report *Open the Social Sciences* (Wallerstein 1996), he has consistently challenged a disciplinary order of things (e.g. Wallerstein 1999), claiming for example that 'the social construction of the disciplines as intellectual arenas that was made in the 19th century has outlived its usefulness and is today a major obstacle to serious intellectual work' (Wallerstein 2003, 454). In order to renew the social role of the social sciences, and to make them more useful, he has argued for major restructuring of universities. Wallerstein identifies the expansion of higher education within what he calls the 'world university system' as challenging 'dubious' disciplinary boundaries in a number of ways. He is dismissive of disciplinary 'originality' that is driven by 'academic poaching' (ibid., 455) as different subfields borrow each other's ideas and concepts. He sees disciplinary reward structures as a curb on innovation and change, limiting wholesale reforms.

Wallerstein offers the reader a thought experiment. If all the existing social science academics were merged into one large faculty and then left to regroup according to their research interests and approaches, he suggests that subdivisions would still be likely to occur, especially between those more committed to a 'nomothetic' epistemology, seeking to build general quantitative laws and rules, and those more committed to an ideographic, descriptive approach. Yet, as he points out, the social sciences are unlikely to be left to themselves. Administrative and financial rationales are increasingly driving decisions about intellectual work as departments are merged, closed or restructured. These are often driven by local and short-term agendas, such as the need to recruit students or to compete for funds. This for Wallerstein, 'militates against the emergence of the kinds of institutions that would facilitate the maintenance of world communities of scholars' (2003, 457). His grandiose and Marxist-inspired vision is for a wholesale reconstruction and reinvigoration of what he calls the 'historical social sciences', with the long-term aim of creating a 'singular epistemology for all knowledge'.

An even more influential challenge to the self-evident nature of disciplinary knowledge and practice has come from those who have identified an inexorable move to what has been called 'mode 2' knowledge production. They have advanced the hypothesis that traditional academic disciplinary 'mode 1' knowledge is increasingly irrelevant in the face of applied, trans-disciplinary and publicly engaged 'mode 2' knowledges (Gibbons et al. 1994, Nowotny et al. 2001, 2003). Whilst the strong version of this thesis has been

dismissed as somewhat over-simplistic, Manichaeic and apolitical, it has become a self-fulfilling funding prophecy. It is particularly appealing to those national governments keen to harness academic knowledge to promote national economic competitiveness.

Coming from a very different perspective Marilyn Strathern and others have challenged the assumptions that interdisciplinary work is in itself a 'good thing' (Strathern 2004). Highlighting the 'interlocking, scale-crossing complexity' of social and policy controversies driving the social sciences, she points to the way these problems increasingly ramify and spread across boundaries of discipline and skill, appearing to necessitate multi- or interdisciplinary expertise. Wallerstein's proposals for restructuring are, Strathern argues, already being carried out, driven by interventionist funders and urgent social policy concerns rather than by autonomous institutional rationales. As a result, she suggests, experts are now positioned rather disingenuously as a 'representative of his or her own discipline', and as a source of 'specialist wisdom assumed to be already in place' (ibid., 2004, 5). The rush to be interdisciplinary, urged on by funders and policymakers, has for her overshadowed the invaluable internal debates and the important 'traditional' ways that disciplines evolve through theory-driven dialogues. Building on anthropology's own strength at conducting a critical self-analysis, Strathern points to the 'need to conserve the division of labour between disciplines, if only because the value of a discipline is precisely in its ability to account for its conditions of existence and as to how it arrives at its knowledge practices' (ibid., 5).

Yet can academics, even in an avowedly reflexive discipline like anthropology, account for every aspect of their 'conditions of existence'? Whilst funding and policy priorities have driven changes within the disciplines, are there limits to the self-awareness and self-accounting that Strathern see as key to disciplinary practice? For the sake of academic propriety, are some things best not discussed? After all, disciplines are emotional embodiments as well as rational demarcations. Loyalty runs deep. Wallerstein points to the very real material interests – disciplinary honours, journal editorships, major research grants and public recognition – that those at the apex of disciplines have struggled hard to achieve. There are many forces that militate against change. Disciplines remain powerful organising identities. This is not just because they offer a valuable epistemological framing for intellectual work. They also represent particular conjuncture of political interests and social fields. The question about self-accounting needs to be rephrased. Can disciplines like anthropology acknowledge the way these material and structural factors shape the intellectual work that results? Can they combine a sense of intellectual provisionality and defend a necessary scholarly

autonomy? More challenging still, can they reach out beyond their institutional homes to engage a diversity of publics? The precedent set by cultural studies is one place to look.

Cultural studies and the future of disciplines

Debates about disciplinary belonging in the social sciences can learn much from cultural studies, an intriguing intellectual interloper that has reshaped both anthropology and sociology (see Peel 2005). In discussion about the origins of cultural studies at Birmingham University in the late 1960s, one of its early cohort of students, Paul Willis (see Willis 1977), laid great stress on the anti-disciplinary rhetoric being espoused by its co-founder Stuart Hall. He recalls his interview for a place at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Mills and Gibb 2001):

I was also *very* attracted by Stuart and by Stuart's emphasis on multi-disciplinarity. As he put it, 'I'm not interested in whether you're a sociologist or an English person or whatever, Paul. What I *am* interested in is that you want to look at youth culture and music and at how young people live now.' And that seemed like a liberation compared with the very restrictive experiences I'd had at Cambridge.

Within the many histories and mythologies that have grown up around the Birmingham 'school', there is little doubt that, in its earliest incarnations, it constantly sought to fashion itself as a radical anti-discipline, rejecting the accoutrements of disciplinary practice. A key aspect of this self-fashioning was its productive juxtaposition of academic work and political activism. The aim was to insist on the politics of theory, on trying to do scholarship that 'made a difference' in the world.

Stuart Hall repeatedly shied away from writing an 'official history' about the Centre and its work. However, he has acknowledged that a key aim was 'to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institutions'. Yet he also admitted that 'there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics' (Hall 1992, 298). Whilst the work at Birmingham was internationally groundbreaking, and has ensured that the study of 'race', gender and the social experience of class has been placed firmly on the academic agenda, it is less clear how cultural studies interventions have reshaped the political landscape of

twentieth-century Britain, or even redefined academic structures themselves.

Part of the problem was the ambitious and ambiguous conceptualisation of 'the political' by cultural studies. At best, its debates developed alongside, and in dialogue with, broader debates around feminism, multiculturalism, the democratisation of knowledge and the need to move beyond narrowly class-based politics. At worst, cultural studies took universities and their potential to enable social change too seriously. From the lofty perspective afforded by ivory towers, it was easy to over-estimate the importance of academic insights. Calls to make the social sciences more relevant, or to apply or popularise anthropology, risk a similar misplaced arrogance if they assume that university academics have a privileged understanding of social realities. Employed to teach and research within universities, social scientists are ultimately defined by their relationship to these institutions.

The social sciences today

The political economy of the social sciences in the UK has changed profoundly since the 1980s. Along with an expansion in staffing, there has been a major increase in international and part-time students, driven by a huge growth in taught master's students. In the UK, the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) has strongly reshaped institutional and departmental priorities – often leading to a more strategic and explicit approach to academic practice and disciplinary consciousness. Repeated regularly since 1986, the RAE has led to a growing imbalance in the dual-funding model, with increasing pressure on academics to acquire grants and publish quickly. The influence of institutional financial and management protocols on academic practice is growing. Whilst institutions have also responded to funding council initiatives to enhance teaching quality, the 'research game' continues to reshape disciplinary and institutional agendas (Lucas 2006). Such policy dirigisme is the inevitable consequence of increased government funding of the sector over the last fifty years, but has led to a political culture of *ressentiment* and defensiveness within the social sciences. These attempts to measure and define academic work in utilitarian and functional terms have challenged strongly held academic vocations, even if disciplines have not always been willing or able to resist these new audit cultures. Corridor conversations can be full of frustration about the involvement of government, its funding councils and university management itself

in academic affairs, and the challenge this poses to imagined ideals of academic autonomy (Strathern ed. 2000, Shore and Wright 1999).

Other challenges to disciplinary self-identity have a demographic origin. There is an increasing pattern of postdoctoral migration between disciplinary fields in the social sciences (Mills et al. 2006). Academic staff trained in what one might call 'exporter' fields like economics, sociology and anthropology find employment in 'importer' fields such as education, management and business studies that have stronger connections to policy and practice. Such trends link to a hierarchy of disciplinary purity and status, where relatively 'closed' research fields are seen as the most prestigious. This has important implications for the funding and content of research training across the social sciences – should doctoral students be prepared for careers in their own disciplines, or for a range of possible disciplinary or post-disciplinary futures? Meanwhile, all the social sciences become 'importers' as they recruit increasing proportions of graduate students – and academic staff – from the EU and elsewhere in the world. This is particularly visible in research-intensive universities, and also challenges established disciplinary imaginaries and practice, in anthropology and beyond.

With the growth in Ph.D. production, more social scientists conduct research for non-university funders, producing knowledge that is an increasingly valuable aspect of the much-touted 'knowledge economy'. The visibility of the qualitative research methods adopted in these multidisciplinary situations is changing the public profile of social research. These changes mark a whole new stage in the debate about the application of disciplinary knowledges. They have profound implications for training, for public responsibility and for understandings of disciplinary autonomy. Other factors are also at work. A directed higher education policy environment is seeking to transform the nature of doctoral training in the social sciences to make it more relevant to the 'needs' of non-academic employers. As part of a broader shift from disciplinary pedagogy to what one critic calls 'perpetual training' (Rose 1999, 160) universities and research funders are increasingly directive about the form, content and purpose of the Ph.D. This sits uneasily with more conservative models of scholarly 'apprenticeship' that tacitly inform approaches to training, stewardship and creativity in the humanities and the social sciences.

There are limits to academic self-reflexivity. Despite the best efforts of Pierre Bourdieu, being part of the sociological object can be extremely hard to acknowledge. We can't assume that a process of making disciplinary structures and literacies more 'explicit' will in itself make academics reflective about the power they hold over students or junior colleagues. New unspoken assumptions replace

older ones. Silence may be a necessary aspect of knowledge production.

Conclusion

The evidence for an emerging post-disciplinary episteme in the social sciences is far from conclusive. The expansion of higher education within a managed market, increasing funding dirigisme, and the new policy fashion for interdisciplinary research are all affecting disciplinary cultures. Yet academics still place a great deal of value in disciplinary knowledge formations and their authorisation of intellectual traditions and possible futures. In this strange new world, disciplinary affiliations are best worn off the shoulder, intellectual garments not to be taken too seriously. A generous dose of ironic self-regard never harmed. Too much ontological security distracts attention from the material conditions of intellectual production in a rapidly changing and increasingly stratified university system.

Is it possible to predict a future for the discipline? Social anthropology's distinctive theoretical contributions look set to continue, and its networks within the UK academic establishment will help it defend its interests. On the other hand, its small size will leave it vulnerable to the whims of the managers and rationalisers of a globally-connected knowledge economy. In this corporatist model, universities and their staff will have to be increasingly entrepreneurial, and not shy away from strategic interdisciplinary engagements when the opportunity arises. Because academic communities hold the key to universities' success, reform-minded scholars are well placed to both defend and redefine their institutions and disciplines. As they do so, social anthropologists will continue to return to questions of relationships, affiliation and belonging, and to ask, 'What kind of knowledge is it?' Their role as 'difficult folk' lives on.