A Discipline in Spite of Itself

Relativism, Reflexivity, and Resistance in STS

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My Charge

- “For the conference as a whole we are trying to maintain a balance between theoretical work and case stories, and I guess we have been hoping that your talk, and the topic of STS, will somehow combine the two, since STS is both an interesting case of the tensions between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in itself, while at the same time possessing the theoretical tools needed to conceptualize its own situation.” (VG, May 7, 2012)
Situating STS in the Field of (Inter)disciplinarity

- The IESBS (2001) classification: an essentializing view
  - A “discipline” – e.g., political science
  - An “intersecting (not applied) field” – e.g., science and technology studies

- Sociology of knowledge perspective on disciplines
  - How are disciplines built and sustained?
  - What is “interdisciplinarity”; are there “interdisciplines”?
  - How can STS analytic concepts expand our (reflexive) understanding of this “intersecting” field?
  - What are the problems and constraints in building STS?
 Discipline Fatigue

• Undergirding the strict disciplinary organization of knowledge is a social organization hidebound by behavioral norms of astonishing orthodoxy. Along with entrenchment in disciplinary silos has come a fixation on abstract knowledge for its own sake as well as the proliferation of increasingly specialized knowledge, which comes to produce diminishing returns on investment as its impact on the world is measured in smaller and smaller ratios. Rather than exploring new paradigms for inquiry, academic culture too often restricts its focus to existing models of academic organization
  – Michael Crow, President, Arizona State University, 2010:52
A Critical Counterpoint

- Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question* (2005)
- Yet the basic problem with interdisciplinary scholarship is the same as that within the disciplines: conformism, gatekeeping, conventions that one should publish in the “right” journals—whether the *American Political Science Review* or *Social Text*—and cite the right people, be they Gary Becker or Homi Bhabha.
- Interdisciplinary studies have their own pitfalls, in particular credulity toward other fields that do not apply to one’s own, such as the historian’s belief that a quotation from Geertz means doing anthropology or that a reference to Bakhtin means mastery of literary criticism. One is likely to fall for conventional wisdom in another discipline, miss internal debates, and pick up tidbits without exploring their relationship.
The Persistence of Categories
(aka “a lesson in humility”)

• Extract from a referee’s report on a (successful) grant application to the US National Science Foundation to study sociotechnical imaginaries in national S&T policy making:
  – “Jasanoff is widely published and well-respected but she is not an anthropologist, historian, political scientist, media scholar, etc., by training. In my view, claiming interdisciplinarity should mean involving people from other disciplines.” (Anon, 2006)
Two Masters of Epistemology
On the (In)coherence of Classification

- Foucault’s order of things (after Borges’ *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*):

A “certain Chinese encyclopedia in which it is written that “animals are divided into:
(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”
Political Science in America

• The components of political science in US departments:
  – American politics (institutions, elections, law)
  – Political theory
  – International relations (interstate cooperation)
  – Comparative politics (political economy)
  – [Public management]

• Where should we place:
  – (Global) social movements
  – Environmental politics
  – Politics of knowledge (science) and technology
Speaking of STS…

Should major universities provide instruction and offer research opportunities in the rigorous, systematic, and (indeed) disciplined investigation of science and technology, two of the prime movers of modernity (Luhmann’s “social function systems”)? A no brainer? But which STS should we be constructing? Where? With what?
Theorizing the Disciplines

- Disciplines as *maps*: representing and intervening
- Disciplines as *discourses*: “ways of world-making” (Nelson Goodman)
- Disciplines as *models*: devices for identifying causes, agents, and mechanisms; making predictions; making tools
- Disciplines as *standpoints*: platforms for questioning and reflecting from particular perspectives
The Interstate Highway
(Disciplines as Sovereign States)
Charting the High Seas (Disciplines as [Volcanic] Islands)
What difference does a map make?

• In the archipelago model we have greater potential for encountering:
  – Uncharted territories
    • New objects
    • New questions
    • New observations
  – Creolization of discourse
  – New modes of exchange
  – Undisciplined (anti-paradigmatic) lines of thought
STS as Discourse

• Construction(ism), constructivism
  – A productive site for theoretical debate (David Bloor’s strong programme to Ian Hacking and beyond)

• Boundaries
  – Objects, organizations, ordering devices...

• Reflexivity
  – Extension beyond the epistemological domain, to institutions for example

• Co-production
  – Bringing normativity (not merely “politics”) back in
STS as Model

- Permits analysis of science and technology as social institutions
- Allows inter-comparability
  - science as one among many modes of sense-making
  - technology as one among many modes of making authority
- Can function as “epistemic thing” (Rheinberger)
  - device for looking into and testing views of the world
STS as Standpoint

• Emphasis on “situatedness” and the local (recall STS as product of mapmaking)
• Critical studies: actual or potential links to
  – Feminist theory
  – Theoretical anthropology/cultural studies
  – Subaltern studies
  – Critical legal studies
• Recovering heterogeneity
  – “Second Enlightenment”
Reflections on “Making” STS

• Can start from many islands, with many mariners
  – Insufficiency of “following the scientist”
• Epistemic charity
  – Beyond “unmasking” – constructive constructivism
• Conversations across disciplines
  – Representation, legitimacy, democracy, reason, performance, morality, temporality
• Synergies and topographies
  – Controversy and closure
  – Materiality
  – Coproduction and emergence
  – Power and authority
Trajectories: Two Contingent Histories

- Cornell: exploiting a niche market
  - Institutional history: insider support
  - NSF funding: outsider validation
  - Normalizing an organizational anomaly
- Harvard: resistance of local power/knowledge
  - A securely mapped playing field
  - Challenging zero sum ideology
  - Building new coalitions...
- “STS” in question
Cornell: Room(s) of Its Own
Harvard: Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Stadt
Resistance from Within

• The *capture* argument
  – Cooper: “the basic problem with interdisciplinary scholarship is the same as that within the discipline”

• The *identity* argument
  – Can’t form an agent noun from STS
  – “Dual citizenship”

• The *professionalization* argument
  – STS degree no use for jobs in history, anthropology, sociology, law, policy, media studies – indeed, even STS!
Strategies: Interstitial Spaces

• Build institutions (changing the map)
  – Department of S&TS, 4S, STS Program(s)
• Build conceptual repertoire (changing the discourse)
  – Edited volumes as a stand-in for textbooks in disciplines
• Build audiences (demonstrating the model)
  – Teaching and teaching, non-academic writing, digital and social media
• Build alliances (display standpoint)
  – With scientists and engineers, with law, with social theory
• Build community (career ladders)
  – Science and Democracy Network
• Accumulate resources
  – Grants, social and symbolic capital
• Make tools
  – ??? (a work in progress)