A POSTSCRIPT ON POST-DISCIPLINARITY

Given postmodernism's determination to break out from the confines of rationalism, in the social sciences it is not surprising that the rejection of the notion of intellectual or academic disciplines and the wish to move to post-disciplinary approaches to topics and problems has been a somewhat tardy afterthought. John Urry (2000 & 2007) has argued the need for a post-disciplinary approach to new forms of sociality emerging in contemporary life, whilst Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (2001) suggest changes in the nature of global political order will require new post-disciplinary analysis.[71] Others have observed that as a result of new areas of study such as tourism, complete disciplines themselves need to be re-constituted (Coles, Hall and Duval 2006). The arguments offered for this re-ordering are broadly two-fold. First, there are claims that the context in which the current organisation and professionalisation of knowledge was developed no longer holds and as a consequence academic disciplines have become blinkered and narrow as well as inclined to invasion and colonisation. Possibly the clearest statement of this position is Andrew Sayer's manifesto *Long Live Postdisciplinary Studies* (Sayer 2003). Second, there are claims made on the basis of ANT's deconstruction of the metaphysics of science and the social sciences to the effect that the ontologies enshrined in academic disciplines are no longer defensible. This line of thinking has been forcefully promoted by John Law (2004). Although both sets of arguments have common features, they are actually quite different. As a consequence, using Sayer and Law as our guides, we will briefly review each in turn.

IMPERIALIST PAROCHIALISM

Andrew Sayer sees disciplines as enforcing a narrowing and over simplifying of topics, issues and problems which, as a result, they are then unable to see beyond. The 'economic', the 'sociological', the 'psychological' perspective (itself a much abused term) is promulgated as the only way to understand whatever the matter at hand. Pointless arguments, then ensue as to which view should be held. Additionally, Sayer sees disciplines as endemically imperialist, seeking to move into and occupy whole domains which other disciplines view as their own. And to be fair, as will have been clear from many of the essays in this volume, we have some sympathy with Sayer's allegation about disciplinary imperialism, at least in so far as it applies to some parts of Sociology. This, we think, is the first thing to say about the whole argument. *Some* parts of *some* disciplines are *sometimes* imperialistic. However, universalising the claim actually robs it of its cogency. A discipline such as Sociology that has open borders and actively seeks to expand them should not be taken as the model for all disciplines. The peculiarities of Sociology and other social sciences (and especially the family squabbles over who has rights over what domain) should not be imposed on disciplines as diverse as English Literature, Theology, Archaeology, Botany, Synthetic Biology, Astrophysics, or even Physics.

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[71] Actually, in the Jessop and Sum case it is not clear whether it is a new or an old approach which is wanted. The authors advocate both!

The second thing to say is that the current disciplinary division of a labour is, of course, a product of particular historical circumstances. The German model developed by von Humbolt and taken up in the latter part of the 19th century in the USA which defined the mission of the university as combination of teaching and research and which sub-divided the domain of inquiry into the famous (infamous) binary of *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft* together with the myriad of professionalised sub-domains subsequently spawned, is obviously not the only way that academic (and intellectual) life could be organised. But although it is an historically contingent model for organising universities, their teaching and research, it is nonetheless the model we have and it does have some advantages. The point is not to become fetishistic about any of the structures of the standard model, but to think with them and beyond them. The main advantages that the current, or indeed any model, brings are first that it gathers together ways of defining and analysing problems and topics which have a family resemblance to each other. They share some things but are not identical. These common features make it easier to engage with and learn from the analytic work carried on in sibling and neighbouring domains. Second, and strongly related, academic life is, at root, collegial. Although there are lonely scholars cloistered in their studies, for the most part academic life is carried out as a social activity. Disciplines make it easy to find and relate to like minded others, which of course is not to say that all members of a discipline are equally like minded! Disciplines are useful congeries of like-minded academics.

The third thing to say about Sayer's critique is that the conventional frames of reference (we will avoid the much overused term 'paradigm') which typify academic disciplines are precisely that, conventional. Consequently, they serve some topics and issues and ways of developing research well, and others not so well. It may be a matter of institutionalised academic politics and an over conformist culture that certain ways of carrying on research within a discipline predominate but such social or sociological facts do not have epistemological consequences, merely important practical ones. The extent to which views that are not in current favour are 'read out' of the discipline is, naturally, a matter of intellectual concern. But nothing epistemological hangs on it.

So, we would propose a little more circumspection in respect of Sayer's claim of disciplinary imperialism and dominance,. Pariochialism and imperialism are, of course, evident, and are simply a reflection of the need for focus and the institutionalised politics of academic life. But having said that, the structure of disciplines we know and get along with (if not love) serves us as well as any other. As far as the claim that because the world is much more complex than any discipline can conceive therefore any structuring of knowledge is inimical to full understanding is concerned, we would want to ask exactly what is being suggested here? That line of reasoning seems to be premised in a conception of how the world must be conceived so that we can fully understand it. This is precisely where John Law begins, so we will now turn to the case that he makes.

A MESS OF METHOD

In *After Method* (Law 2004), John Law deploys ANT's reflexive approach on the social sciences and on their research methods in particular. Not surprisingly, he finds these methods to be riven with philosophical realism and its associated metaphysics. On the basis of insights he draws from the development of the notions of perfomativity and enactment, he insists that method in the social sciences must be re-grounded. Unfortunately, he is unable to say precisely how this might be done. Here part of his concluding paragraph.

> *What does this mean in practice? The answer is that I do not know. But one thing is indeed clear. In the longer run it is no longer obvious that the disciplines and research fields of science and social science are appropriate in their present form. It is no longer obvious that a division of labour is desirable, a division of labour that rests on the parcelling out of truth to different specialists who are then divested of the need to practice other goods. (Law 2004 p. 156)*

Instead of providing the necessary re-grounding, Law offers an array of images and metaphors as stimuli in the search for connections across the multiple realities which science and social science will inevitably now have to deal. Such realities are the product of the processes of *difference* and *multiplicity* revealed as a result of construing method as performative. Differing methods and their practices lead to different realities. Since there a multiplicity of methods then there is a multiplicity of realities. In the glossary he provides for what might well be unfamiliar terms for the casual reader, Law defines these crucial ideas as follows:

> **Difference,** *problem of: the simultaneous existence of different objects that are said to be the same. This arises, as Annamarie Mol shows, if objects are enacted in practices, and those practices are different, then so too are the objects they produce, even if the practices in question are said to relate to, or be aspects of the same object. Problems of co-ordination then arise in the relations between practices/objects......*

> **Multiplicity:** *like difference, the simultaneous enactment of objects in different practices, where those objects are said to be the same. Hence the claim that there are many realities rather than one. This arises because practices are endlessly variable and differ from one another....(Law op. cit. pp159 and 162)*

These definitions reveal the heart of Law's confusion and what has led to his bewilderment as to what to do about disciplines. Notice the important phrase '...are said to be the same'. That is, two things are called by the same name or said to be the same in some particular context. So your motor mower has a choke to enable smooth starting and running. Your dog has a choke collar because he is inclined to pull when out for a walk. Both are 'chokes' and function to cut off air supply when required. But that they have the same name does not mean they are the same thing, or are different things in 'different realities'. In using the term choke to describe both objects, we have a standard for comparison based upon what we are using the description for. Of course, Law and Annamarie Mol are not thinking about carburettors and dogs. They are more interested in cases such as the ordinary pub table as described by the asset register in the accounts of the brewery that owns the pub, the table as an array of force vectors in Physics, the table as a composite of different materials with different chemical properties, or the table as you or we might describe it. In the asset register of the brewery, the table is an 'accountant's object' (Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock 1989). It has its existence, properties and role within the scheme as defined by the chart of accounts. In the pub, the table is an ordinary object on which we might put glasses, laptops, keys and, if badly behaved, our feet. You can't put your feet on the table in the asset register, or on an array of vectors. Thus, on the Law/Mol line of reasoning, if they are all the same table, they have to be the same thing in different realities. The table is the same and different and exists in all of them.

The accountant's world, the physicist's, the chemist's and the ordinary world are different and we can, for the purposes for sociological analysis call them different realities if we like. But this is not to propose there are multiple tables in these multiple worlds. There is just one table and that is being described in differing ways for different purposes. Gilbert Ryle makes the point with his usual crystalline clarity.

> *(The) branches of inquiry are not giving rival answers to the same questions about the same world; nor are they giving separate answers to the same questions about rival worlds; they are giving their own answers to different questions about the same world. Just as physics is neither the foe nor the handmaiden of geometry, so history, jurisprudence and literary studies are neither hostile nor ancillary to laboratory sciences. Their categories, that is, their questions, methods and canons are different. (Ryle 1971 p 195)*

The Law/Mol error is to confuse meaning which is tied to convention and practice with ontology. Rather than feel the need to push a sociological insight about the conventional nature of meaning as a substitute for a philosophical basis to ontology, we can use the conventional nature of meaning in the social world to ask how we construct and organise these 'multiple realities'. The point that Ryle makes jibes closely with what Alfred Schutz (1962) called "structures of relevance". Differing disciplines have different structures of relevance. Structures of relevance circumscribe alternative finite provinces of meaning and their presuppositions. Law's bewilderment over disciplines arises in large measure because, despite his opposition to realism especially in its positivist incarnation, he has not divested himself of the fundamental assumption of positivistic realism; namely that it must in principle be possible to correlate differing descriptions of 'the same object'. For positivism, this correlation was through reductive re-description ultimately into the terms of Physics. For Law it is elaborative concatenation of manifold descriptions, with such descriptive forms all somehow being pinned or woven together. It is only when you think you have got to have a unified description that the social fact of multiple realities becomes an ontological problem.

There is much to improve in the contemporary organisational infrastructure of contemporary intellectual life. Much could be done to ease the inertia of stale ideas and the friction of traditional practices. But none of these things require us to abandon the notion of academic disciplines *tout court* nor to jettison the forms of method that have served us reasonably well till now. The only reason to do either (or both) would be if we felt had found a different way of demarcating forms of knowledge that would serve us better. Gilbert Ryle and Alfred Schutz tell us that thinking we are driven to do this for ontological reasons is misconceived. Andrew Sayer and John Law simply show how right they were.