A disciplinary matter:

critical sociology, academic governance and interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

Calls for interdisciplinary research practice are an increasingly ubiquitous feature of contemporary academic life. However, whilst the claims made for its benefits, or limitations, are diverse in character and provenance, it is possible to identify one significant source as being related to modes of academic governance. This relation has significant effects, but is also obscured by the heterogeneity of wider claims. A critical analysis of the relation is therefore needed in order to assess its significance for sociology: however, the mode of governance in question itself poses challenges to the idea or project of sociological critique. This paper therefore attempts firstly to clarify the specificity of interdisciplinarity as a feature of academic governance, and secondly, drawing upon Boltanski's recent reformulation of sociological critique, to begin a critical analysis of its significance for sociology within this particular governmental context.

Introduction

Interdisciplinarity is an inescapable feature of the academic landscape today, as a dominant theme and priority in research policy, as a widely proliferating form of practice (Biagioli, 2009), and as a field of study in its own right (Frodeman, 2010). It is highly valued in organisations with responsibility for funding research, such as research councils. For example, the removal of barriers to interdisciplinarity was cited as a major reason for the recent reorganization of postgraduate research training in the UK: while it is arguable whether this or administrative efficiency was the key factor, its invocation underlines its current rhetorical value. Its benefits may be taken to be self-evident, since the term of itself seems to point beyond the parochialism and conservatism of work within single disciplines, many of which came into being some time ago and whose formal continuity can be seen to constrain new ideas.

That said, even a cursory look at some of the claims made for it shows that interdisciplinarity is subject to widely divergent assessments of its significance and status, and positively or negatively evaluated in relation to a number of questions and issues: for example, whether the complexity of the world requires it; whether it is essential to innovative or creative work; whether it implies or requires a particular theory; whether it is epistemologically possible; and whether it facilitates or hinders critical social science. The range of claims made for it in turn raises the legitimate question of whether it is coherent to think of interdisciplinarity as one thing: for it is notable that different estimations of its value themselves often rely on different prior definitions of its meaning.

This diversity can obscure the fact that calls for interdisciplinarity may play a significant role in what Gibbons et al (1994) have described as a fundamental shift in knowledge production. While this particular account has been criticised on a number of grounds, it usefully draws attention to the strategic importance of interdisciplinarity for certain forms of academic governance, and consequently to one reason for its frequently positive valuation. Thus, on the one hand, interdisciplinarity can be invoked in many different ways and in the service of many different causes; and, on the other, it has a significant presence

within a relatively dominant form of discourse 'through which we, not quite out of choice and not quite out of necessity, make judgments' (Davies, 2005: 1). This double aspect of interdisciplinarity poses a challenge for critical sociological thought: the diversity of possible meanings resisting clear definition or attribution, and the embeddedness of the would-be thinker within these forms of governance mitigating against clear critical perspectives (cf Latimer and Skeggs, 2011; Boden and Epstein, 2011). The challenge is exacerbated if we accept Boltanski's assertion that these very governmental forms represent a specific type of domination that absorbs critique (2011: 137-8).

This paper therefore considers the question of interdisciplinarity and its significance for sociology today, not in order to establish some definitive meaning of interdisciplinarity (although we try to indicate why that is not possible) but rather to make a contribution to critical thinking about the place of sociology within current forms of governance; and, correlatively, to use the issue of interdisciplinarity to explore the question of critical sociology in the light of some recent objections (see for example Latour, 2004). The paper therefore can be described as an attempt to articulate the relations between interdisciplinarity, governance and critical sociology.

These issues are addressed and approached in the following way. We begin by reviewing some different characterisations of, and claims made for, interdisciplinarity, indicating their diversity, noting some recurrent themes, and briefly considering the possible shaping effects of different contexts. Having indicated the radical diversity of these characterisations and claims, we then turn to the question of academic governance, looking at injunctions to be interdisciplinary and attempting to contextualise their significance for academic knowledge in general, and sociology in particular. In the light of this, we then consider the wider question of the place and character of critical sociology within this governmental context.

Calls to and claims for interdisciplinarity

The relation between interdisciplinarity and academic governance, though significant, does not exhaust the meanings and implied politics of interdisciplinarity, which are highly diverse. We therefore begin by outlining this diversity, not only to qualify and delimit the argument that we will go on to make, but also because this very diversity plays an important role in shaping the ways in which calls to be interdisciplinary may be heard. We note some key issues and criteria that run through the diverse claims made: in particular, epistemological arguments bearing on the nature of the world and the kind of knowledge needed to address it, and evaluative judgments that are based upon them. We also consider the possible relevance of national and institutional contexts for some of the positions adopted.

The term itself is a relatively loose one and can denote quite distinct forms of organization. For example, it can in principle refer to a process of exchanging ideas across given disciplinary boundaries, or to a conceptual space in between those boundaries where work is done: in the former, disciplines are preserved, whereas the latter promises the possibility of new conceptual development outside of the disciplinary framework and suggests the possibility of a dissolution of disciplines and more creative non-disciplinary work (Sayer, 2000). Different evaluations of its worth do not always make clear which of these or other forms are being referenced[i].

One illustration of this complexity is provided by Derrida who, whilst arguing against the constraining nature of disciplines, sees interdisciplinarity as part of that very constraining structure. Making a case to the French Government for a new college of philosophy, he contrasts the potentially radical approach that he is proposing with the conservatism of interdisciplinarity which he defines as: 'a programmed cooperation between the representatives of the established sciences that would study a common object, itself already defined in its contours, with the help of different methods and complementary approaches [..] interdisciplinarity thus understood does not institute a novel problematic and does not invent new objects' (Derrida, 2004: 209). This statement appears to

concur with recurrent research policy formulations that those structures which preserve disciplines act against the possibility of innovative work; however, interdisciplinarity is here taken to entail rather than challenge this very preservation.

This exemplifies what Krishnan sees as fundamental definitional problems associated with 'interdisciplinarity', which is used to describe a 'range of very different concepts […] which are often talked about as if they were just one (2009: 6). Moreover, he notes that there are prior problems about how disciplines themselves are defined, even though their identity is often taken as given. It is therefore not surprising that interpretations and evaluations of interdisciplinarity in turn are heterogeneous.

One response to, and symptom of, this heterogeneity is to distinguish between and construct typologies of the different forms that it can take. Luhmann for example distinguishes three forms: occasional interdisciplinarity, summarised by Wellbery as 'enrichment through contingent encounter' (Wellbery, 2009: 988), problem-oriented interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity, referring to theories that cannot be said to have a specific disciplinary home since they were intended from the outset to have wide applicability (ibid: 987-8). Klein (2010) reviews some key taxonomies to date, elaborates a relatively complex model based on the 'core vocabulary' of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary (ibid: 15), and sets out sub-categories based on forms and degrees of exchange and integration. She notes in passing that taxonomies of knowledge since the late 19th Century 'have been dominated by a system of disciplinarity that demarcates domains of specialized inquiry' (ibid), but that these taxonomies have subsequently been challenged by the rise of interdisciplinarity. Taxonomies of interdisciplinarity clearly have a useful heuristic function, but there is a possible tension between some of the claims made for the value of interdisciplinarity – as creative, as transgressive of systemic organisation for example – and the attempt to classify it in a systematic manner.

The issue of epistemology is central to any assessment of the value of interdisciplinarity, even if it is not always explicitly thematized in discussions. Derrida's statement, above, exemplifies what we can loosely call a constructivist epistemological approach, in which objects of study are in some sense the outcomes of the frames through which they are studied. This can be conceptualised in different ways, from Heidegger's argument that 'every science is based on the projection of a bounded object domain' (2002: 63) to Foucault's assertion that discourses 'are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972: 49). Even some more explicitly objectivist approaches such as Durkheim's, which would take issue with this kind of constructionist argument, would concur that there are specific domains of objects *for* specific disciplines, and that the latter derive their legitimacy from the former (Durkheim, 1982)[ii]. In each case there is a strong sense that what we might call an intuitive model of interdisciplinarity which derives its purported value from the novel combining of different views of a common object is problematised, since each approach (whether we see this in terms of a discipline or something more specific such as a discourse[iii]) creates its own object.

Conversely, some argue that the (actual) complexity of the world necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, and that work within any one disciplinary perspective or paradigm is therefore likely at best to be inadequate, or at worst to actively hinder the possibility of true understanding. Turner has taken issue with arguments that suggest that the increasing complexity of the world requires the formulation of new theoretical resources, including the adoption of ideas from other disciplines. Such arguments, he suggests, confuse formal and substantive theory, and often involve a 'false appeal to topicality' (Turner, 2010: 31). This cautionary note is worth consideration when looking at examples of recent calls for interdisciplinarity.

Contributors to Bhaskar et al (2010) provide one example of the argument from complexity. They see climate change as a challenge for the way knowledge is produced, arguing for the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach: as Naess notes, the nature of the problem, involving as it does 'interactions between

human societies and the natural environment' (2010: 54), makes it imperative that 'disciplinary tunnel vision' is avoided. Latour (1993) makes a – formally – similar argument, in which climate change figures as a prominent example, suggesting that the proliferation and complexity of connections and associations within the world overwhelm the modernist attempt to impose a disciplinary order upon them: such an attempt is necessarily conceptually reductionist, where reductionism is seen to be both problematic and in principle avoidable.

Another important strand of evaluative argument runs though much discussion: namely the assumption that interdisciplinarity is inherently, possibly morally, preferable in that it represents a more open, plural and democratic approach to knowledge production, in implicit or explicit contrast to the dogmatism and conservatism of disciplinary work. Indeed, some argue that simply advocating the value of an overtly disciplinary approach in a domain defined in substantive terms, and already occupied by different disciplines, is in itself highly problematic in this respect. Sayer (2000) for instance, sees the advocacy of a particular discipline in precisely these terms: not only are single disciplines ill equipped to address concrete problems in the world, but the advocacy of their value may lead to disciplinary imperialism, where the sociologist (in this case) loses sight of the partiality of any perspective and claims or assumes privileged insight into the object of study. Some forms of sociology, Sayer suggests, are particularly prone to this. Constructivism for instance, in defining a sociological approach in largely conceptual and epistemological terms, removes the possibility of clearly bounded object domains and is able to claim sociological expertise in all manner of matters. Moreover, if the sociologist then claims an understanding of the constructed nature of reality that is not in principle available to non-sociologists, the problem is exacerbated.

Some of Shove's recent work provides a forceful refusal of this kind of position: she has argued that dominant policy frameworks within the general area of climate change and sustainable living rest upon inadequate theorisations of how people act, and proposed a different model of social practice (Shove, 2010). It happens that the former theorisations are psychological, the latter explicitly

sociological, and it has therefore been argued that her proposal is too doctrinaire given the need for interdisciplinary collaboration (Whitmarsh et al 2011, 262); her response (Shove, 2011) is unapologetic in refusing the appeal to openness and pointing instead to the Kuhnian thesis that paradigms are incommensurable. Shove resists the rhetoric of openness in this context by arguing for its epistemological incoherence.

It can also be argued that Sayer's opposition of constructivist to a-disciplinary problem solving approaches (about which we will say more) may be too simple and that, for all its pragmatism, the call for problem solving can not in fact bypass questions of epistemology. Wellbery usefully notes that the problem-solving variant of interdisciplinarity still involves an epistemological issue, one, we would argue, that receives insufficient attention: that is, the object of study is constituted as a theoretical object within each participating discipline, but also exists as an object within informal natural language (Wellbery, 2009). This double constitution can lead to uncertainties that sometimes characterise the practice of interdisciplinarity[iv].

The possible significance of national and institutional specificities also needs to be considered in trying to make sense of the variety of arguments. Abbott conveys something of the particular significance that disciplines have had in the development of the American University: the disciplinary system of departments is 'uniquely powerful and powerfully unique' and is central to the careers and hiring of academics (Abbott, 2001: 128). This centrality has consequences for attempts to develop interdisciplinarity and certainly would appear to be relevant to some of the arguments made in support of the positive effects (epistemological, critical, moral) claimed for it by some American academics. Biagioli (2009) for example, argues strongly for the value of interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and science and technology studies (STS) – neither of which, we should note, is a single discipline – and in so doing subscribes to the widely held view that working within single disciplines can be constraining, pointing to the success of STS and attributing this largely to its intellectual configuration; and certainly the institutional history of STS centres

and their sometimes troubled relationships with established departments in the USA would seem highly pertinent. If Biagioli's main concern is intellectual vitality, Butler (2009), in a different field, pushes the argument in a more overtly 'political' direction, invoking a form of interdisciplinarity as a source of resistance to instrumental forms of governance, where vested interests can have a deleterious effect on the quality of academic and public debate.

However, the evidence suggests that the diversity of positions is not reducible to national contexts even if the latter play some part in shaping them. Marshall Sahlins (2009) for example joins others who, in locating the call to interdisciplinarity within wider political and policy agendas, take a more critical view of its significance. For Sahlins (2009) and Muller (2009), the move towards interdisciplinarity is a manifestation of new forms of academic governance that embody an implicitly or explicitly critical stance towards disciplines and disciplinary knowledge, and introduce more instrumental forms of value. This contrasts with Butler's position, even though the shared concern is the extension of instrumental forms of governance: the key difference is perhaps where vested interests are seen to lie.

There is then no consensus on the meaning, value or significance of interdisciplinarity, which is constructed in different ways for different purposes; moreover these constructions may themselves bear traces of disciplinarity, while purportedly neutral or sceptical accounts, such as this one, may themselves be interdisciplinary[v]. But if it is fruitless to attempt to specify an essential meaning or make a general evaluation, both Sahlins and Muller do direct our attention to the significance of the institutional provenance of some recent calls to interdisplinarity. Why are academics currently subject to such apparently relentless encouragement to be interdisciplinary?

Innovation, problem solving and governance
For Muller (2009), recent calls for interdisciplinarity are problematic because they originate and derive their value from a new source: the utility of research and scholarship is no longer defined within the academy, let alone disciplines,

while innovation is articulated within a market-derived discourse of production. This represents a turn away from disciplinary knowledge and a move towards other criteria of evaluation and accountability which are external to disciplines within the sphere of research; furthermore he argues that in both research and the parallel sphere of education it can serve more explicit purposes. Stable disciplines can form points of resistance to policy initiatives such as modularisation, curriculum integration, and related structural changes; thus interdisciplinarity becomes an element in such initiatives, at a time when programmatisation and regionalisation – where knowledge production is organised around regions of empirical study – are seen as virtuous policy objectives in themselves (ibid: 211-13). The discipline, in this formulation, is seen as a necessary point of resistance to emerging forms of governance.

Whilst, as we have seen, the very heterogeneity of interdisciplinary discourse mitigates against the possibility of reducing it purely to a feature of governance – but also perhaps obscures the identification of its role within governance – there are two key thematic strands that we have touched on that tie interdisciplinarity to contemporary forms of governance: innovation, and problem solving. We consider each in turn.

The idea that interdisciplinarity is a source of innovation provides one of its most frequently invoked justifications, where the disciplinary matrix, well established as it is, necessarily constrains creative thought. There is a clear implication here that interdisciplinary means modern, although it is worth noting that such claims are by no means new and can be traced back, in the social sciences in the USA, to the 1930s (Abbott, 2001: 131 et seq). However the term innovation, whilst it has a longstanding general meaning, has some very specific connotations today which merit consideration.

Nowotny (2006: 4) asks 'why has the quest for innovation become so omnipresent at the beginning of the twenty-first century?' and argues that it 'fills a conceptual void in our collective imagining of the future' (ibid: 5). The ways in which we think the future in the face of uncertainties of various kinds have

changed, she argues, and are now less naïve and more reflexive in the sense that societies attempt to control rather than simply anticipate: she singles out the increasing sophistication of mathematical tools used in financial markets to illustrate this point (ibid).

In the light of subsequent events this example is unfortunate at best, and raises serious questions about Nowotny's apparent confidence in the ability of technological societies to exert more control over the future; and we might also question her acceptance that innovation is a necessity in the current socio-economic context, or the underlying thesis that the latter is as specific in its mode of imagining as she takes it to be. However, her identification of the key role played by innovation in modern societies and economies seems empirically accurate. 'Today, all highly industrialized nation-states have developed a set of policy tools to foster technological innovation and investment in research' (ibid: 6). The drive for innovation can, then, be related to the perceived need for economically relevant research in particular kinds of economies, and comes to be seen as a responsibility of government. Hence, the governance of research becomes preoccupied with the encouragement of innovation, understood in this particular sense: and the increasingly loud call to be interdisciplinary results from this governmental shift. The link is clearly apparent in Nettelbeck's assertion that: '[i]nnovation is often the result of new combinations of disciplines, collaborations between science and culture at large, between ideas and technological opportunities, and between theoretical and practical concerns' (2006: 192).

Since interdisciplinarity has such a strong link to the 'practical concerns' of governance, it is unsurprising that a dominant theme in the discussion of interdisciplinarity has been problem solving. Calls for interdisciplinarity, explanations of its provenance or necessity, considerations of its value or wider implications – these are frequently constituted within a discursive space in which interdisciplinarity is inextricably linked to problem solving: indeed, the prevalence of this linkage might legitimately be described as a dominant articulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Whilst not all references to problem

solving are endorsements, it is perhaps worth noting that the term, for all its simplicity, has a potentially coercive rhetoric: for although on the one hand it designates a specific approach to knowledge, on the other it implies, in more general terms, the apparent lack of utility of other approaches particularly, within this articulation, disciplinary approaches. Who, on this terrain, would be comfortable defending an approach that could not solve problems?

Hadorn et al (2010) provide an in some ways characteristic formulation: 'Problem solving in the real world is an important driver for integrative and collaborative research' (Hadorn et al, 2010: 431). Here problem solving provides a causal explanation for the emergence of (to use their term) transdisciplinary research. Moreover, as they go on to argue, the 'problem-directed' research that is the result of this process 'transgresses academic cultures and engages in mutual learning with societal actors in order to account for barriers in real life' (ibid). The contrast between 'real world' or 'real life' and the 'academic cultures' that by implication lack connection to these entities could hardly be clearer[vi]. The emphasis here is on the application of knowledge to solve problems, and this is frequently linked to the notion of the complexity of the (real) world already discussed: if complexity challenges individual disciplines' capacity to adequately understand the world, no less does it challenge their ability to solve the problems that it throws up (Bhaskar et al, 2010).

Strathern's (2004) more nuanced account appears to concur that problem solving is a key dynamic for the development of knowledge. One way that the social sciences have always advanced, she argues, is in response to issues and problems using, in the first instance, tools that are to hand. However, she suggests, where these problems acquire a certain momentum and take on the form of a crisis, the diversity of circumstances that constitute them, which we might gloss as complexity, may *require* diverse approaches: and indeed 'such situations are often identifiable by the *multi-* or *interdisciplinary nature* of the expertise they seem to summon' (ibid, 2, original emphasis). Crises then *summon* interdisciplinarity, even to the extent that the emergence of interdisciplinarity can itself be taken as a marker of the emergence of a crisis.

The problem solving formulation plays a key role in Gibbons et al's (1994) influential argument that a shift in modes of knowledge production is underway: they identify, amongst other things, a move away from academic and disciplinary knowledge towards problem-solving research which is carried out in the field of application. Research, here, becomes interdisciplinary by virtue of its essentially pragmatic approach towards knowledge production and use, the movement away from discipline based research being at the same time a movement towards application. Holmwood (2010), in a consideration of the development of this new mode of knowledge production for sociology, presents Gibbons et al's account as a useful description of contemporary forms of governance, but also endorses Pestre's argument that the concept of mode 2 knowledge underplays issues of power and thereby serves to '"naturalise" the processes by which it has come about' (ibid: 653). Similarly, it has been criticised for tacitly endorsing what it purports merely to describe (Godin, 1998); and, we would add, it falls short of critically considering the link between calls for interdisciplinary research and the devaluation of disciplinary knowledge that is implicit, sometimes explicit, in the parallel move towards 'transferable skills' in teaching.

This points towards an important aspect of the alleged shortcomings of the mode 2 thesis, namely its possible complicity with or uncritical stance towards neoliberalism[vii]. We now look at this in a little more detail.

Critical sociology and neoliberalism

Mirowski and Sent (2008) see the mode 2 thesis as a clear exemplification of a tendency within Science and Technology Studies to elide questions of politics and thereby to fail to confront the effects of neoliberal governance on science and knowledge. Thus, they suggest, Gibbons et al tend to uncritically describe a set of characteristics which in their view could and should have been related to the commercialisation of knowledge; while the follow up volume (Nowotny et al, 2001) goes further in 'casting mode 2 as a change in the epistemological presumptions of the actors' (Mirowski and Sent, 2008: 667). Certainly it is notable that Nowotny et al (2001) talk, in relatively uncritical terms, of

transformations in forms of accountability which are seen to result from epistemological developments rather than new forms and structures of governance.

Mirowski and Sent thus cast a more critical light on the contemporary governance of knowledge, with implications for the way we read calls for interdisciplinary work. Invocations about the value of interdisciplinary work are often posed in terms of 'epistemological presumptions' and benefits, but less often related to forms of academic governance. Certainly there are suggestive continuities between the language sometimes used in discussions of interdisciplinarity: we have already considered the key role of 'innovation', but other terms such as flexibility, networks echo the language of management (cf Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005)[viii].

We might therefore be tempted, following Mirowski and Sent, to regard calls for interdisciplinarity primarily as ideological features or symptoms of neoliberal managerial regimes. At the very least, it is surely necessary to question the kind of line taken by enthusiasts such as Klein (2009: 2), who regards the interests of 'administrators' and 'faculty' in promoting interdisciplinarity as being entirely consonant, and who sees problems only in the structural and cultural obstacles to its achievement. However, both the particular character of sociology as a discipline, and recent discussions about what it is to be critical (in general terms, and in the current socio-economic context) need to be considered in order to attempt the formulation of an appropriate critical response.

Sociology itself does not have a unitary or clearly bounded structure (Urry, 1995). Bernstein (2000) describes it as an example of a horizontal knowledge structure, meaning that it comprises a series of specialised codes or languages (corresponding to theoretical approaches) and that, unlike hierarchical knowledge structures, it lacks any integrating codes that could provide for the development of general theory (ibid: 161-3). Abbott's (2001) comments on the fractal structure of the discipline are also apposite in this respect, differences

between sociology and other disciplines being replicated at other levels between different kinds of sociology.

Thus it can be argued that sociology's own structure, the fact that it is already in some respects inherently interdisciplinary (Holmwood, 2010) has particular practical significance for collaboration with other disciplines, and even that its structure helps place it in an awkward position in relation to new forms of academic governance. Holmwood argues that its fragmentation and the fact that it has relatively weak boundaries make it particularly vulnerable to current 'mode 2' regimes of governance, where the emphasis on interdisciplinary applied studies could mean that its role as an exporter rather than importer of knowledge will threaten its continued existence[ix].

Holmwood sees sociology as a definitively critical discipline and his article, like this one, is devoted to articulating an appropriately critical response to the developments in academic governance with which he is concerned. However, the senses in which sociology can be seen as critical are themselves related to the fractured structure of the discipline that he notes; while the notion of a critical social science has recently been contested both within and beyond sociology's boundaries, and in ways that clearly bear on the question of disciplinary identity and expertise.

While we share Holmwood's view that sociology is a critical discipline, there is little agreement about what is or should be meant by critical sociology. In the first place there are sociologies which explicitly eschew the social criticism that many would regard as the purpose of the discipline: ethnomethodological studies, and Garfinkel's warnings that their value is lost if they are 'done as ironies' (1984: viii), constitute the clearest example, even if it can be argued that these warnings themselves are evidence of a critical sensibility redirected towards other forms of sociology. In the second place, those forms of sociology that do describe themselves as critical can conceptualise the task of criticism in very different ways: for example, notwithstanding the frequent conflation of the terms normative and critical, we can distinguish explicitly normative forms of

sociology, where criticism is seen logically to require the elaboration of norms of action and conduct, and forms that either avoid or explicitly argue against this model: Butler (2004: 355), from the latter position, gives a clear rationale for making the distinction. There are also, of course, a number of other approaches which could be partially related to these but diverge in important respects. Bernstein's and Abbott's descriptions of the discipline, in other words, have relevance not only for styles of work but also for foundational conceptions of the discipline's character and purpose, including the sense in which it is critical.

Moreover, the issues of the boundedness and critical character of the discipline have become closely linked in some recent work. The criticism of critique, and particularly of the (ethical and epistemological) problems of assuming a kind of professional expertise that is not available to those being studied is not a new theme in sociology, but it has been recently been articulated in a particular way by Latour (2004) and others in actor network theory (Law, 2008), an approach which could not be easily located either within or beyond the boundaries of sociology, and which questions the identity of the discipline in so far as it relies upon the identification of a bounded domain of study, the social; criticism of the disciplinary claim to expertise, here, is derived in part from scepticism towards the feasibility of a bounded object domain. This influential line of argument however makes the formulation of a critical sociology a more uncertain task, unless we follow Scott in arguing for the preservation of a relatively traditional view of the discipline as being that body of work which studies and understands the social (Scott 2005, 2010)[x].

The formulation of a critical and reflexive understanding of the conditions in which sociological work is produced is thus, perhaps, an increasingly difficult if still important task. The recent work of Luc Boltanski (2011), whose reservations about denunciation provided an important source for Latour, but who retains a clearer orientation to the discipline of sociology and the necessity of social criticism, provides some useful insights: in particular, through his focus on some of the characteristic features of domination in neoliberal regimes, and their significance for the formulation of a critical sociology.

Boltanksi's guiding thread in 'On Critique' (2011) is that, for all the justifiable criticisms (including his own) that have been levelled at critique in so far as it tends towards denunciation, critique in some form remains indispensable to social science, not least because it is part of everyday life. He therefore attempts to specify a form of critique that is attentive to the relation between critique in everyday life and in social science, and crucially which avoids formulating that relation in terms of the deficiencies of the former, or the in principle general unavailability of the insights of the latter. Boltanski regards this as crucial if social science is to construct an adequate and credible 'metacritique of domination' (ibid: 48). A crucial feature of his model is that critique needs to be built from an empirical analysis of the 'the social operations which give reality its contours and the social operations that aim to challenge it' (ibid: 49). This being the case, Boltanski's argument, whilst making some general points, takes the form of a critical analysis of some of the institutional forms of domination that characterise neoliberal governance and the specification of the difficulties that confront a critical sociology in this institutional context.

Boltanski argues that the assimilation between volition and necessity, although 'associated with totalitarian regimes invoking a determinist philosophy of history, is a commonplace of modes of governance of advanced capitalism' (ibid: 130); and he notes that the same rhetoric is a feature of neoliberal styles of management. Change being presented as inevitable, different forms of expertise are then needed to produce an understanding of what that change will be. The rhetorical invocation of necessity serves to legitimate domination, while the work of experts has a performative aspect in that their models constitute and reinforce the reality that is the correlate of necessity. This constitution of reality by forms of expert knowledge, according to Boltanski, renders it more impervious to critique: '[c]urrently, it is the closure of reality on itself that discourages critique' (ibid: 156) and particularly that form of critique that attempts to denounce realities as simply constructs (ibid: 131)[xi].

The world increasingly becomes what can be known through science, which moreover takes a particular form: 'the so-called natural sciences and the human or social sciences, which are increasingly closely combined with one another to the point of confusion' (ibid). Thus, although the topic of interdisciplinarity is not Boltanski's central focus, it can be read as being clearly related to the 'political metaphysics underlying this form of domination' (ibid). Moreover, if this argument is accepted, the recurrent assertion that interdisciplinarity is necessary to solve problems or deal with the complexity of the world can also be located within this metaphysics: that which is said to be complex or problematic being invoked as a given feature of an apparently autonomous reality. Similarly, Nowotny's apparent endorsement, qualified though it may be, that the need for innovation is something that has to be 'recognized' (2006: 6) is discursively equivalent.

It cannot be argued that interdisciplinarity is simply coterminous with neoliberalism, as the diversity of different claims made for it from very different positions should have already made clear. For example, Boltanski notes the increasing reliance upon forms of benchmarking, where organisations or institutions are ranked against a norm, usually one of efficiency. Academics in the UK will clearly recognise this as a description of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), of cognate measurement systems in higher education, and of the criteria that are built into them; but interdisciplinarity often has a problematic status in research assessments, which tend to be organised along disciplinary lines, even if their emphasis on impact sits well with the move towards problem solving and application that provide much of the institutional justification for interdisciplinary work. Given these contradictory features, and the heterogeneous nature of the wider claims made for interdisciplinarity, the latter can not be accounted for purely in terms of its functionality for systems of governance: but that does not negate the significance of the particular way it has been articulated within neoliberal discourse and practice.

Conclusion

We have addressed some of the many different claims that have been made for the merits and demerits of interdisciplinarity, not in order to make a judgment on its value per se, but to pick out one particular thread and trace its connections to contemporary forms of governance; we have also suggested that the heterogeneity of claims made for interdisciplinarity serves to obscure this thread. We conclude by emphasizing some of the difficulties of producing a critical or even considered response to the call for interdisciplinarity when the author is so clearly located within the objects of interest.

As we have briefly noted, but as has been widely debated elsewhere, the disciplinary status of sociology is itself pertinent. This article has argued, from a particular sociological perspective, against *certain* forms of advocacy of interdisciplinarity, but as the reader will have noted, it draws freely on literature from beyond the discipline. Moreover, although this plays a minor explicit part in the article, the author has himself been working on an interdisciplinary research project for five years. Here and elsewhere, there are some elements of paradox; and it is, we hope, empirically evident that this article is not 'against' interdisciplinarity in any simple sense.

Boltanski (2011) notes that one of the hermeneutic contradictions with which critique has to engage is the uncertain relation between the institution and its spokespersons. This is certainly a widespread and recognisable problem in everyday life – witness the interactional difficulty of registering a complaint against an organisation when the phone is answered by an employee in a call centre; but it takes on a further dimension in Higher Education, where many of the functions of (neoliberal) governance are carried out by academics. This does not necessarily imply compliance in a straightforward or ideological sense: it is, for example, possible to disagree with the need for ethics committees but agree to serve on them and try to offset their excesses; but it is an example of 'the complex ways in which we have become embedded' in processes of governance (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011: 393). These forms of governance become an inescapable part of an academic's life, no matter what his or her attitude to some

of its explicit and implicit criteria; and we can observe, perhaps with regret, the way some of the latter become internalised and made manifest in our own forms of talk and practice. This embeddedness in the phenomena of critical interest provides one reason why critique in its older sense has become problematic, relying as it does on the possibility of an external analytical vantage point.

Boltanski concludes his book by noting that critical sociology today, given the problems he has identified with conventional notions of critique and his analysis of the context within which it works, has something impossible about it; but that its role is clear. This is to help 'ordinary' people, with whom it is in constant proximity 'maintain themselves in the state of constant imbalance in the absence of which […] domination would in fact seize hold of everything' (Boltanski, 2011: 160). If, as here, we consider those in some ways even more proximate people working in Universities, his message is surely equally applicable. It is not the intention of this article, nor would it be feasible, to come to definitive conclusions about the general desirability of something that is both very diverse and part of the texture of academic life, and the article would have performatively defeated its author if he had attempted to do this. But it is important to try to be critically vigilant about the governmental terrain that we inhabit, and the relation that this may have to intellectual claims that seek to present themselves as self-evident. However, it is also necessary to consider that the sense and practice of being critical are not given but need continual refinement. Interdisciplinarity is too diverse to be reduced to an ideological effect; but equally, it would be mistaken to neglect its significance for the systems of governance within which the would-be critical sociologist is also embedded.

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[i] A detailed critical analysis of claims made by adherents of interdisciplinarity can be found in
Jacobs and Frickel (2009).
[ii] This is an oversimplication: for indications of why, see Durkheim (2005) and Cooper et al
(2009).
[iii] Wellbery (2009) notes that discourses and disciplines are not co-extensive in the way they are
sometimes taken to be, for instance in Foucault; see also Krishnan (2009).
[iv] The author's experience on a recent interdisciplinary project bears this point out: 'values' for
example, has general intelligibility but different connotations in sociology and social psychology.
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RN0130D.)

[v] Some disciplines are more open to interdisciplinarity than others (Muller, 2009), just as others exhibit in fractal form internal differences that make collaboration within a discipline a project in its own right (Abbott, 2001).

[vi] The model that Hadorn et al set out is more complex than this extract implies, referring to the need for a recursive approach which can, amongst other things, address the unintended effects of problem solving.

[vii] Another key aspect is its historical adequacy: see for example Weingart (2010).

[viii] Even Strathern's (2004) argument that crises play a key role in summoning interdisciplinary work has an interesting relation to the critical role played by crises within forms of managerial domination, as identified by Boltanski (2011).

[ix] Objections have been raised to this aspect of Holmwood's argument (Rosenfeld, 2010; Savage, 2010).

[x] See Stanley (2005) for a critique that stresses the significance of sociology's hybridity.

[xi] However, he later notes that antagonisms between realism and constructionism are characteristic of this mode of domination's dependence on expertise (Boltanski, 2011: 139): this he sees as one of the hermeneutic contradictions of the managerial mode of domination.