

Scholarly Critique Between Institution and Interpretation

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The prefixes “inter-” and “trans-” have become near ubiquitous in the administrative jargon of the contemporary university. To work between or across disciplines is the latest sign of knowledge’s modernization at a moment when higher education is being conscripted in ever more instrumentalised ways into an economic landscape defined by financialization, monetization, and immateriality. This condition, familiar to scholars regardless of their affiliations in the humanities, social sciences, or “hard” sciences, would appear to be the final, determining instance that informs any assessment of the task of “critique” across cultural and / or disciplinary boundaries. So long as we consider inter- or transdisciplinarity mere tools for positivist problem-solving, so long as we see them as nothing more than means toward a fuller understanding of a given research subject, we fail to grasp their stakes at the current conjuncture. Only a properly *political* conception of such potential spaces between disciplines will allow us to preserve and advance a project of critique.

The invitation from H-France to participate in this Salon on “scholarly critique” led me back to the moment of my own entry into the university, now some thirty years ago. The mid-1980s could be seen in many ways as the origin point of the present reconfiguration of the institutions of knowledge, whose contours were signaled at the opening of that decade perhaps most clearly in Jean-François Lyotard’s study of *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979, English trans. 1984). For Lyotard, the combined effect of the crisis of the university, the emergence of a new social class of *cadres* or managerial employees, the impact of technological changes on scientific knowledge—by which we should understand something as capacious as the German *Wissenschaft*, not the delimited natural sciences of Anglo-American academic tradition—and, finally, the translation of that knowledge into quantifiable “information” challenged the very status of knowledge in postindustrial societies. The advent of digitization and telecommunications was compelling a reconsideration of certain aspects of this transformation of knowledge and its political consequences for society and the State. This is not a matter of technological determinism, however; information technologies themselves are not the problem here. What Lyotard helps us to see is that, with the work of the academy yoked ever more closely, ever more instrumentally, to the productive and governmental apparatuses, the very place of scholarly critique has been thrown into doubt: what cannot be quantified and made socially useful—that is, useful to society as presently configured—tends to be marginalized. But, as he argues, such a transformation also raises the question of knowledge’s relation to power:

When we examine the current status of scientific knowledge—at a time when science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing powers than ever before and, along with the new technologies, is in danger of becoming a major

stake in their conflicts—the question of double legitimation [of knowledge and politics], far from receding into the background, necessarily comes to the fore. For it appears in its most complete form, that of reversion, revealing that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: *who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?*¹

In other words, now more than ever, our decisions about the pursuit of knowledge are necessarily embedded within networks of power, whether economic, political, or cultural.

What Lyotard outlined in his 1979 report could be described as the collapse of that system of disciplinary autonomy that had come to define the modern university. Samuel Weber was reflecting in these same years on the constitution of that system of “intellectual and scientific *autonomy*” that was an essential component of the post-Enlightenment professionalization of the disciplines:

The autonomy of a scientific discipline, as traditionally understood—a tradition that still dominates vast areas of academic activity and of its institutions—presupposes a field that is self-contained, subject to its own laws, to principles or rules that are in essence independent of all that surrounds them, of all they are not. In line with this ideal of *cognitive autonomy*, the initial and initiating concern of the established branches of learning has been to stake out territories and to secure borders.²

At their origins, then, academic disciplines sought to establish and consolidate their foundations and demarcate their frontiers, like any other professional field. Once firmly drawn, however, those limits could be conveniently ignored in favor of “the problems and questions emerging *within* the field, the coherence and even history of which was taken increasingly for granted.”³ That cognitive model of professionalism was mirrored in the structure of the university itself, with its division into quasi-autonomous departments; within these units, areas of training and research were established that “could increasingly ignore the founding limits and limitations of the individual disciplines.” In fact, as Weber notes,

the very notion of academic “seriousness” came increasingly to exclude reflection upon the relation of one “field” to another and concomitantly, reflection upon the historical process by which individual disciplines established their boundaries.⁴

“Interdisciplinarity” has never been the force threatening this history of cognitive autonomy; in fact, its rhetoric seems rather to presuppose it. The weakening of the disciplines and of their

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8-9 (my emphasis).

² Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), x.

³ Weber, 30.

⁴ Weber, 32.

institutional supports should be seen instead as the result of purely external forces, notably the increasing subsumption of the university to the demands of an expansive regime of neoliberalism. A “weak” interdisciplinarity seems all too welcome in this dispensation: the undermining of institutional autonomy permits new forms of flexibility in the assignment of intellectual labor. While this is most apparent in the hard sciences, we should not assume it to be limited to them. Transdisciplinary areas, research focuses across departments, and other fashionable administrative verbiage translate this imperative—to cross the borders that had once so securely delimited the various fields of study. Within the State University of New York system, where I teach, I might point to the severe funding cutbacks in the years following the financial crisis of 2008 and the more recent investment in cross-disciplinary hires. While these may seem two contrasting trends, it is more accurate to see the one as conditioned upon the other: a brutal economic and intellectual restructuring affecting in particular areas deemed less profitable clears the way for a “rectification” of entrenched humanities fields—not least, of course, the study of French language and culture.⁵

There is another model, however, whose roots also lay in the conflicted intellectual terrain of the university of the 1980s. Instead of a weak interdisciplinarity, we could call this a “strong” version, which does not seek to cross frontiers but to unmake them, shaking the foundations of our inherited fields of study. This is at once a matter of knowledge and of power, as Weber reminds us: of scholarship that problematizes “the delimitations of the disciplines within whose sphere” it is “necessarily—if perhaps provisionally—situated,” but that also analyzes “the [institutional] procedures by which the disciplines and divisions of science and ‘scholarship’ have demarcated their domains and consolidated their authority.”⁶ If the contemporary university seeks to reorganize the academic division of labor along more flexible lines, a strong interdisciplinarity seeks to abolish it. This was, at root, the implication of that broad range of inquiry that went under the various rubrics of post-critical Continental philosophy; the range of thought that might conveniently be grouped under the title post-colonial theory; gender studies, including feminist philosophy, gay, lesbian, and queer studies; critical race theory; critical social theory; and cultural critique. We may well call their shared project one of “adisciplinarity.”

Less polemically, it might be aligned with what the late Edward Said called a strategy of “contrapuntal” reading, that is, an attempt to bring diverse interpretive voices into conjunction without reconciling them harmoniously. Like counterpoint in music, contrapuntal reading introduces contrasting voices that make visible the gaps inherent in any monolithic interpretive schema by placing it in conjunction with another. We might productively call it a version of negative dialectics—the preservation of the particular from the violence of monolithic identity. For Said, this was primarily a matter of challenging the “insider” perspectives of the metropolitan centers of colonial empire with those from “outside”—with the voices of the colonized. Such contrapuntal readings—in *Reflections on Exile*, Said’s example places Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* alongside the history of colonial domination in Antigua, the basis of the

⁵ On these developments in the SUNY system, see Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche, “Campus américains: le français en déclin,” *Le Monde*, November 2, 2010, 14; and the open letter written by Jean-Luc Nancy in December 2010 and widely distributed around the web, accessed August 3, 2015. <http://defendartsandhums.blogspot.com/2010/12/let-them-speak-java-jean-luc-nancy-in.html>.

⁶ Weber, x.

Bertram family's wealth, although one could multiply instances from throughout his late work—maintain rather than resolve the tension between these voices. The aim is one of redress, of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, a part of it, like the work of women or of blacks and servants, but which had been either denied or derogated.⁷

But, as Said was at pains to point out, this is a matter neither of reinforcing ethnocentric or nationalist claims, nor of fortifying the disciplinary centrality of some putatively “global” study of literature. Rather, the task of contrapuntal reading is a continuous *decentering* of the assumptions, at once intellectual and political, that subtend our understanding of culture—a supplanting of power's monologue with a truly dialogic intellectual process. Within the study of French culture, one could point to examples in Kaira M. Cabañas's *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme: Art and the Performative in Postwar France* and her *Off-Screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-Garde*, Alive L. Conklin's *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*, Hannah Feldman's *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962*, and Kristin Ross's *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, to select only some recent contributions.

A strong interdisciplinary critique, then, involves two moments, or movements. The first is the development of a self-reflexive understanding of the history of one's own disciplinary and institutional delimitations, of the establishment of foundations and borders that constitute the field and its *dispositifs*, along the lines of what Terry Eagleton has done for English literature, T. J. Clark for art history or, more broadly, Régis Debray for the French intelligentsia as a social formation.⁸ The second entails the troubling of those borders through a refusal of the cognitive autonomy of one's field—the aim of critique is not to strengthen a given discipline by annexing the tools of its neighbors but to decenter it, to reveal its structural repressions and silences, as well as to recognize what is particular and specific to a discipline and what is worth keeping.

Of course this is a prescriptive rather than a descriptive account of what the role of scholarly critique might be, but in a context where, within our modern research universities, we are being asked to embrace an instrumental version of interdisciplinarity that accommodates itself to the neoliberal demands for real-world applicability, we should not hesitate to clarify the stakes of debate. Beyond competitive scholarship, beyond intellectual integrity, lies the institutional politics of interpretation. Speaking recently with a colleague, I was reminded of the name for one vital alternative to an interdisciplinarity modeled on the positivist authority of science, logic, and non-contradiction: dialectics.⁹ But that's an almost unspeakable name in today's university. To

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 381.

⁸ See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 17-53; T. J. Clark, “The Conditions of Artistic Creation,” *Times Literary Supplement* no. 3768 (May 24, 1974): 561-562; and Régis Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 1981). Francis Mulhern's introduction to the latter volume productively extends Debray's analyses to the English and American milieus.

⁹ See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976). Thanks to Brian Wall for pointing me to this debate.

return to some key references from thirty-odd years ago is to be uncannily reminded of how we arrived at such a juncture and how we might position ourselves in relation to it.

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