



AFTER DISCIPLINES? CRITICAL ACTIVITY AS ENCYCLOPAIDEIA

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Abstract

In this article, I critically discuss the ambiguous notion of ‘discipline’ and the related constructions of inter-, multi-, post-disciplinarity, from an ‘epistemic’ and ‘socio-political’ point of view. Particularly, I focus on the role of ‘power’ and ‘authority’, and on the consequences that follow by assuming a ‘foundationalist’ or ‘post-foundationalist’ approach. Next, assuming a ‘Critical Theory’ perspective, I try to rethink the meaning of a ‘critical activity’ able to generate a real social and epistemic change. I contend that a new discipline of thought is needed, rather than new disciplines, and a new personal attitude, not only engaged in mere procedures of recording “facts”, but characterised by a serious concern for the role of generalization or theory. A ‘crossing homeless’ attitude is proposed, that is at the same time theoretical, intellectual and practical, concerning the ‘unreasonable’ discipline of a critical activity aimed at putting culture in circle (‘encyclopaideia’) by systematically discontinuing events of subjectification.

Keywords

disciplines; postdisciplinarity; critical theory; epistemology

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*Thought waits for the day that is awakened
by the memory of what was omitted,
and transformed into theory*
Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50

The Disciplines

In the social or human scientific field, research and theories are usually organized under the so called “foundation disciplines” (philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, etc.). The disciplines appear to offer: differentiation between types of enquiry or research, different kinds of learning domains, coherence in terms of internal consistency, and rigour of enquiry. These elements raise forms of enquiry, research or learning domains above the level of popular or received opinion (Bridges, 2006). Disciplines are usually rooted in different, and sometimes radically different, traditions and in different methodologies. At first sight, the differences among communities of disciplined scholars and disciples are as great as anything else they might have in common, except for the fact that these communities may be also seen as forms of academic organization aimed at justifying and protecting (but also at separating and controlling) any field of enquiry, research, and learning, including the people engaged in them.

The notion of discipline is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, its dark side concerns elements such as rules, orders, power, domination, surveillance, punishment (e.g., *disciplinam dare*, from Latin, which refers to corporal flagellation), and includes principles and systems of exclusion, of division and rejection which designate schemas of possible, observable, measurable, classifiable objects. Within the notion of discipline is recognizable a principle of limitation, as Foucault argues, ‘in what is called not sciences but “disciplines”: a principle which is itself relative, and mobile, which permits construction but within narrow confines’ (Foucault, 1971, p. 59). On the other hand, however, it is true that we need discipline (the *conditio sine qua non*) in intellectual enquiry. This is the “enlightened” side of the notion of disciplines, which allows us to rationally connect thoughts and ideas through methods, instruments and data.

The undisciplined Feyerabend, in *Against Method*, while outlining an anarchist theory of knowledge, recommended the well-known and sometimes misunderstood “anything goes” formula, the only principle that, in his opinion, permits and does not obstruct scientific advancement. However, the decision to always be without rules is a rule in itself, and one that has relevant consequences on the construction of knowledge within the community of researchers, and on the public and rational justification of what scientists do. How may inferences be drawn? When and how the results of new enquiries may or may not confirm/refute previous sets of beliefs? We do need some rules (or, if one prefers, a theory of rationality) to answer these types of questions.

“Rule governance” constitutes the discipline of enquiry or research. When a form of governance is developed and differentiated enough, it enables us to refer to the system as a discipline. The problem is that disciplines ‘are essential structures for systematising, organizing, and embodying the social and institutional practices upon which both coherent discourse and legitimate exercise of power depend’ (Lenoir, 1993, p. 73). Once again, the discipline’s dark side. It is true, following Russell, that we cannot separate knowledge from power, the epistemic from the political and the social, and that we must also carefully consider epistemological relativism (the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth), and epistemological pragmatism (the

idea that truth is the same as usefulness). These are both closely linked with authoritarian and totalitarian ideas (see Russell, 1941).

Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity, Postdisciplinarity: New Forms of Discipline?

It seems quiet difficult to disagree with the following argument: ‘Interdisciplinarity is the institutional ratification of the logic of disciplinarity. The very term implies respect for the discrete perspectives of different disciplines. You cannot have interdisciplinarity, or multidisciplinarity, unless you have disciplines’ (Menand, 2001, p.11). And what of postdisciplinarity? The central point here is that it is not sufficient to approach complex issues from any single discipline. Disciplines should change, not disappear or simply (or ingenuously) fuse each other, but instead must create ‘theoretical paradigms, questions and knowledge that cannot be taken up within the policed boundaries of existing disciplines’ (Giroux, 1997, p.xii). Disciplines have to resituate themselves ‘in a way that removes their effects *as unnecessarily constraining foundational structures* [...] so that the pursuit of knowledge is expanded, and the range of possibilities for what constitutes legitimate intellectual activity is broadened’ (Mourad, 1997, p. 86, my italics). So, the “postdisciplinarity” claim is not just a simple or sophisticated overcoming of different disciplinary traditions, a kind of odd or paradoxical change which seems to let things be how they are, but rather something that seems very different at first sight. Problems never consist of simple, single or isolated issues, but are often (or always) interwoven, and the first problem is the unravelling of the plot. One single discipline is not enough, the problem is “complex”, as people usually say, and exceeds a single discipline’s limits and power. Exceeding the limits, going too far beyond the possibilities of a single discipline, means going beyond its foundational structures: postdisciplinarity means postfoundationalism. Let’s have a critical look inside this side of the question.

Foundationalism refers to the general belief that the only way that we can adequately justify our beliefs, the only way we can show that they are rational and true, is to show how they rest on some basic beliefs, or foundations, that do not in themselves stand in need of justification because they are, in some sense, self evident. A belief is justified if and only if, it is either a self-justifying foundational belief or can be shown to be ultimately based on, or derived from, a foundational belief (see Audi, 2003). Foundationalism has a long history with rationalist and empiricist versions, and various candidates to which according the status of foundational beliefs, including logical and mathematical truths, innate ideas, the truth of reason or the sensory experience. All of these candidates were presumed independent of particular historical, social or cultural circumstances. Foundations enable practices (social ones, educational ones, etc.) to be erected on rational principles which are relatively objective, general and rational. Consequently practitioners act on the basis of this free knowledge, and their practice is governed by universal rational principles that apply always and everywhere, rather than in the wake of their local or parochial practical beliefs. Is this the foundationalist discourse of modernity? Is the foundationalist project the modern form of epistemic authority? Bacon and Descartes, noticed Popper, set up observation and reason as new authorities (Popper, 1960). Empiricism is foundationalist, as we can easily see in the following classical statement from Hume: ‘If I ask you why you believe any particular matter of act (...) you must tell me some reason; and this reason will be some other fact, connected with it. But as you cannot proceed after this manner, *ad infinitum*, you must at last terminate in some fact, which is present to your memory senses; or must allow that your belief is entirely *without foundation*’ (Hume, 2000, section v, part I, my italics). A groundless belief is not admitted. Reasons (and theories) must be grounded on a non-contextually dependent or subjective foundational beliefs.

Contrary to this, the “post-foundationalist” critique is persuaded that there are no unmediated facts, no neutral observational language, no view from nowhere. At first sight, one may easily agree with such arguments which have, at their turn, a body of significant and articulated (more recent) traditions. But, we can also observe at our turn, that the post-foundationalist critique cannot be conceived as a view from nowhere, being included as it is in a range of diverse traditions (eg. the American neo-pragmatism, the French post-structuralism). The tradition in which it is embedded is, we could say, the “foundationalist” side of the post-foundationalist critique. The claim and the conviction that the time has now come to abandon the search of epistemological foundations which can guarantee the truth of theoretical knowledge, seems to be very well founded or grounded on rational arguments. The idea that we can occupy a position outside of history and culture is a myth, the post-foundationalists say, because we are always interpretively situated within history and culture. The consequence is that knowledge is never disinterested or independent and there can be no privileged epistemological position that will enable us to transcend the particularities of our culture. It is a futile attempt, as Rorty argues, ‘to step outside our skin and compare ourselves with something absolute [...] to escape from the finitude of one’s time and place, the “merely conventional” and contingent aspects of one’s life’ (Rorty, 1982, p. 6). So, beliefs arguments and theories are, following this perspective, all groundless. Reasons and theories can only be grounded on contextually dependent or subjective beliefs. The local, or the contextual situation, and the subjects now involved in it, are the new post-foundationalist or post-disciplinarian (epistemic?) horizon. A horizon that is limited to the given space of immediate experience. Knowledge is always situated and arises in the context of problems to be solved. This problem, here, in this specific, particular, contextual situation in which this individual or those individuals are now situated. It follows that a single founded discipline cannot do the job alone through its “constraining foundational structures” and its generalizing and theorizing attitude and purpose. A post-foundationalist and post-disciplinary (and post-modern too?) attitude is therefore required. The authority of the general, of the universal is thus replaced by the authority of the particular and of the contingent.

If we have a deeper look at these (new?) authorities, some further considerations can be taken and an ironic paradox emerges. The first authority, which sounds totalitarian, constrictive, conservative, disciplined, aristocratic, distant, severely controlled, and rigorously governed, is after all connected to science, practical judgement, freedom and social change. The second one, that seems to be so near, so closed to reality, to facts, to things how they are, to phenomena, to practices, to peoples’ real and concrete lives and which seems to be creative, libertarian, democratic, open to everybody independent of their talents, is connected to naive empiricism, standardisation, practical chaos, nudity of mind, and social conservatism. From the point of view of global economical powers, contingency is better than generalization. *Think and act locally, remain in the contingency, we dominate globally*, could be the slogan. But when the economic and political power was local or national, their epistemic preferences were, on the contrary, towards the general and the universal. *Think and act generally and universally, we dominate locally or nationally*. Power prefers to be inaccessible, unapproachable and not to become an object of disciplined, founded and rigorous study. This is the source of any powerful authority.

If this is true, both the foundationalist-disciplinarity and the post-foundationalist-post-disciplinarity approaches are ideological in nature. They seem to be no more than a rhetorical discourse aimed at preserving power’s unapproachableness. In fact, power changes its perspective before changing, for example, its school or university systems. A local or national power prefers general, cultural or theorizing schools and universities. Economic global powers prefer local (see the actual myth of “territoriality”), practical, technical, job placement oriented

school and universities, aimed on focus, e.g. on “education and economic performance”. They are encouraged to refer to “theories” about “technologically based learning environments”, where learning (and the so called “learning or information or knowledge society”) is built on a one-dimensional technological foundation and on the highways of global and digital powers of control (see Hamilton et al., 2004). No one imagines the disciplined or undisciplined pursuit of knowledge and understanding to be entirely free from entanglement with structures designed or developed to preserve and legitimate certain orders of power, global, national or local.

A Critical Theory of Critical Activity

A critical activity – if it is to be conducted rigorously and successfully – requires not being a discipline and not aiming to become a new discipline, its own discipline. To manage the global commons we need more wisdom than ever. The adage – know yourself –, imprinted on marble on the temple of Apollo in Delphi, is at the centre of Western wisdom. I am not an Athenian or a Greek, said Socrates, but a citizen of the world, and I know only that I don’t know. Socrates questioned the wisdom of the rulers of Athens, who preferred prostration to protests, a preference he himself came to experience. In his saying that he knew only that he didn’t know anything, he also implied that the rulers didn’t know anything for sure, either. *Insolence!* But, following T. S. Eliot we can ask ourselves, where is the wisdom today that we have lost in data or in information? How much do we really know about ourselves today? And about ourselves in the global world?

If over time Western wisdom tried to interpret or explain the world, then later tried to change it, and more recently tried to adapt to it, now is the turn, after the postmodernist disenchantment of irony and contingency (*les petits récits*), to return to the initial pursuit. A new discipline of thought is needed, not new disciplines. The discipline of *critical activity*. This is not the search for a new principle of control over the production of the discourse or an attempt to fix limits for the discourse through the action of an identity which takes the form of a permanent re-actuation of rules. Modern societies are projects of Enlightenment and, as such, they are projects of learning. Although education may well be, by right, the instrument by which any individual in a society can have access to any kind of discourse, this does not prevent it from following in its distribution, in what it allows and prevents, the lines marked out by social distances, oppositions and struggles: ‘any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry’ (Foucault, 1971, p. 62). The problem today is that projects of learning and their systematically organized schooling are suspected of having helped develop, as ideological tools, “today’s crisis”. Now it becomes clear how inadequate that type of learning, and its inherent concept of technical-instrumental rationality, has been. In 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote: ‘It turned out, in fact, that we had set before ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why humanity, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947, p. xi). Were they wrong? Was this only a deceived or frustrated practice of a “hermeneutics of suspicion”, of which Ricoeur later spoke? Reason signifies the ability to free oneself from a pre-reflective bond with nature and to be differentiated from it. This capacity of distancing, however, contains within it the possibility of transforming nature into an object of domination, so that things become “the substrate of domination”. For those in position of power ‘human beings become raw material just like the whole of nature is for society’ (*ibid.*, p. 79).

Reason thus degenerates into an instrument of domination, ‘the court of judgment of calculation, which adjusts the world for the end of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than preparation of the object from mere sensory material in order to make it the material

of subjugation' (*ibid*, pp. 83-84). No universal history 'leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (Adorno, 1973, p. 320).

Habermas's thinking essentially has to be understood as a continuation of the work of the first generation of Critical Theory. But, is he right when he proceeds on the assumption that the statement of a universal context of delusion is not just an historical diagnosis, but has also been caused by the theoretical means employed, having the goal to explore, as Horkheimer said, the interconnections between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual and transformation in the realm of culture? The first phase of the Critical Theory research programme has to be found in a social-psychological approach that linked Marx's theory of society to Freud's psychoanalysis, and which was expected thus to accurately explain the interdependence of psychic and social foundational structure.

Education has often been conceptualised as initiation into a culture. In societies which find themselves undergoing rapid "change", the reconstruction of a culture through the process of education must at the same time contain elements of transformation available for the next generation, if the process is not to unconsciously allow self-destructive tendencies. Culture, as the way in which human beings find meaning and value in their lives in our historical situation, depends on our attempt to comprehend more completely and with the development of reason, the interdependent elements of our situation and our situations as a whole. Human beings cannot find human meanings and values if, for example, school "change" is conceived in business terms. According to Pring who draws on the language and practices of the business world: 'That means that we look at the changes for the improvement of standards as a "quality circle" in which one defines the product, identifies the means for producing the product, empowers the deliverers, measures the quality, empowers the client and develops partnership between the clients, the deliverers and the managers of the system such that there might be a continuous review of targets and means for achieving those targets' (Pring, 2001, p. 208). School in the era of positivism and "culture industry", Horkheimer and Adorno might argue; school and education in the era of technical reproduction, Benjamin may add. The subjugation of life to the production-process produces isolation and loneliness for every single person and universal objectification.

The discipline of critical activity could (or should) start from the following seminal aphorism; that the concept of what is subjective and what is objective have been completely inverted: 'Objective means the non-controversial side of the phenomenon, its unquestioned imprint, taken as it is, the facade constructed out of classified data, therefore the subjective; and they call subjective whatever breaks through such, emerging out of the specific experience of the thing, divesting itself of prejudged convention and setting the relation to the object in place of the majority decision concerning such, which they cannot even see, therefore the objective' (Adorno, 1951, p.43).

First of all, as an immediate consequence, one must separate oneself from the mainstream conceptions and practices in any field of human or social sciences. A science is human and social, and practices are human and social, if and only if they divest themselves form prejudged conventions that are contingent and temporary rather than universal and inevitable. Some preliminary questions are necessary to make progress in imagining alternatives: What actual tendencies work to marginalise and exclude? What ways of thinking and acting make less possible to engage in or be open to? If, following Foucault, prohibition is the most obvious and familiar procedure of exclusion, another uncomfortable question is: *what is prohibited?*

If in our societies the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures, including disciplined research methods, disciplined learning or training activities, and so on, a critical activity consists preliminarily in

the subjectification process described by Adorno. Speculation has to depart or deviate from the current “epistemic” virtues of advanced industrial societies, from the administrative schema of analysis, from its transformation into neutral material or into a simple fact, ‘which can be filed in one of the branches of classification as a piece of evidence of what is always the same’ (Adorno, 1951, p. 43). In this process, the “inner” dimension of a mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root, is whittled down, and the loss of this dimension ‘in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition’ (Marcuse, 1964, p. 11), and thus reduces the promotion and discussion of alternative policies within the status quo. You are completely free inside the given field of possibilities. The form is given, the frame is established, the content is free. This trend, argues Marcuse, may be related to a development in scientific method: operationalism in the physical, behaviourism in the social sciences: ‘the common feature is a total empiricism in the treatment of concepts; their meaning is restricted to the representation of particular operation and behaviour’ (*ibid*, p. 12). A concept involves nothing more than a set of corresponding operations, and we shall not permit ourselves ‘to use as tools in our thinking, concepts of which we cannot give an adequate account in terms of operations’ (Bridgman, 1928, p. 31). Paraphrasing Russell we could say, Don’t let the people think. Let the “practical” people do, let the researchers accumulate data or evidence, let the teacher use her tool box. The “mere doing” just follows “standards” or “indicators” of “excellence” or “quality” in a narrow performative way. In this situation there is a strong tendency to identify, for example, teaching ability with the use of procedures that yield immediately successful (measurable) results. What is central is to achieve mastery of a particular art, that is to say skills and techniques. A teacher is a good teacher if she or he can use appropriately her or his tool box. As the baker makes breads, the teacher produces measurable learning. And the same occurs to a researcher: he produces data accumulation and “evidence” about “what works” in contingent (educational, social...) settings using her or his research tool box appropriately. Sometimes the same person does both, and this for example is the case of “the teacher as investigator”. But what must be noted here is that in both activities the tool box is central and not the theoretical equipment or the talent of the teacher or of the researcher or their ability to conceptualize.

Is this “new” mode of “thought” predominant in social sciences? If we look at mainstream methods and practices of research and teacher training in the educational field, the answer is yes. In a “natural” way, many of the most seriously ‘troublesome concepts are being “eliminated” by showing that no adequate account of them in terms of operation or behaviour can be given’ (Marcuse, 1964, p. 13). Therefore operationalism is a procedure of exclusion. What is marginalized, or prohibited? The transcending elements of reason. Several modes of protest and transcendence are astutely permitted from the point of view of the status quo because they are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative: ‘They are the ceremonial part of practical behaviourism, its harmless negation, and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet’ (*ibid*, p. 14). To reasonably protest within the given untouchable power (the global financial markets and their non democratic global “institutions” and “political” players), is one of the given possibilities in a democratic and open society. So, the special concern of dialectical reason is to “trip” the healthy opinions about the immutability of the course of the world. Dialectical reason is, as opposed to the ruling one, the unreason that helps the truth of the fool to attain the consciousness of its own reason (Adorno, 1951, p.45). There are three great systems of exclusion: ‘the forbidden speech, the division of madness, and the will to truth’ (Foucault, 1971, p.55). The third system is my focus here.

Encyclopaideia : The Discipline of Critical Activity

A critical activity is an unreasonable practice of thought. Unreasonable, of course, from the point of view of the status quo. It's the not-given possibility - within the given field of possibilities - to transcend them. The not-given possibility is the offering of an unicum which no-one wants to buy, something free from the exchange rationality. It is not a "process" with its mechanical causality, but a "discontinuous systematicity" that introduces 'alea in the production of events', (*ibid*, p.69), and "aura" in the creation of meaningful human face-to-face relations. *Hic et nunc*, here and now, is the time and space of action and human relations, not the time and space of science and knowledge. A critical activity therefore must be founded on a "crossing" attitude, that necessarily includes the incidental occurrence to cross swords, an attitude to pass through, to wander, to make a detour, to diverge, to depart from the given path, and, at the same time, the attitude to follow for a while without being troubled or disturbed by the mainstream, the river flows, having the capacity even to stop and pause in it. Its geometric figure is the circle, the ellipse, not the straight line or the segment. From an epistemic point of view, this means to be homeless but not lost or unable to find the way not knowing where one is, because, as the poet Thomas Dylan said, 'the windows pour into their heart / and the doors burn in their brain'.

The "crossing homeless" attitude is the "unreasonable" discipline of a critical activity aimed at putting culture in the circle by systematically discontinuous events of subjectification. This unforeseeable, "useless" and "unnecessary" conceptual activity (from the technical-rationality point of view) is at the same time theoretical, intellectual and practical. Its practical side is educational, concerning the developing of *Paideia*, in the Greek sense. And *encyclopaideia* is the name of it.

Technologisation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation effectively ensure that education is now construed as a species of "poiesis" guided by "techne", and hence an instrumental activity directed towards the achievement of externally imposed outcomes and goals (see Carr, 1968). A critical activity is not instrumental. Instruments are non-neutral, they are not only the means of making something happen even when conceived as the purest of means at our fingertips. They are, in a subtle and attractive way, "ideological fragments" in our hands, promptly available and user friendly.

The approach to knowledge of a critical activity is not a bare empiricism that, at its most extreme level is simply a recording of individual facts. Without an apparatus of generalization or theory, these bare facts though recorded in the proper or expected manner, lead nowhere. They do not even provide a practical guide for future experience or policy. The links between "knowledge", and the one hand, and power and control, on the other, are equally strong within both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, albeit the nature of the connection is different (see Pring, 2000). Things remain as they are, there is no real change, no real development but only the dull stasis of a perfect and disciplined life. A very busy life, of course, full of activity, filling in questionnaires, accumulating information and data about perhaps the organization and management of protest, social movements, political structures - or in other fields - of schools, school systems, methods of teaching, and so on, but devoid of serious theoretical thrust

The critical activist is a researcher that lives in this time but whose speed is different. He is a researcher, unquiet, ill at ease, one who carefully studies and investigates himself and others and the things in the world, trying to make new orders of sense, while at the same time condemning anti-traditionalism as a futile (and today ideological) attitude. His space of life and action is the space of real and human relationships, but his perception is different, divesting itself of prejudged convention and setting the relation to the subject or to the object in place of the majority decision.

His attitude is not solipsistic, he is not a hermit. The critical activist's research is interested in others viewpoints and perspectives, he is not suspicious of ideas that do not come from his own tribes and trades. To answer the question - "What is the right way to look at this situation?" - a practical judgement is needed, there are no useful rules or algorithms. The wisdom of the *phronimos* must live in the epistemic researcher's wandering mind which apparently seems to be without any special purpose.

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