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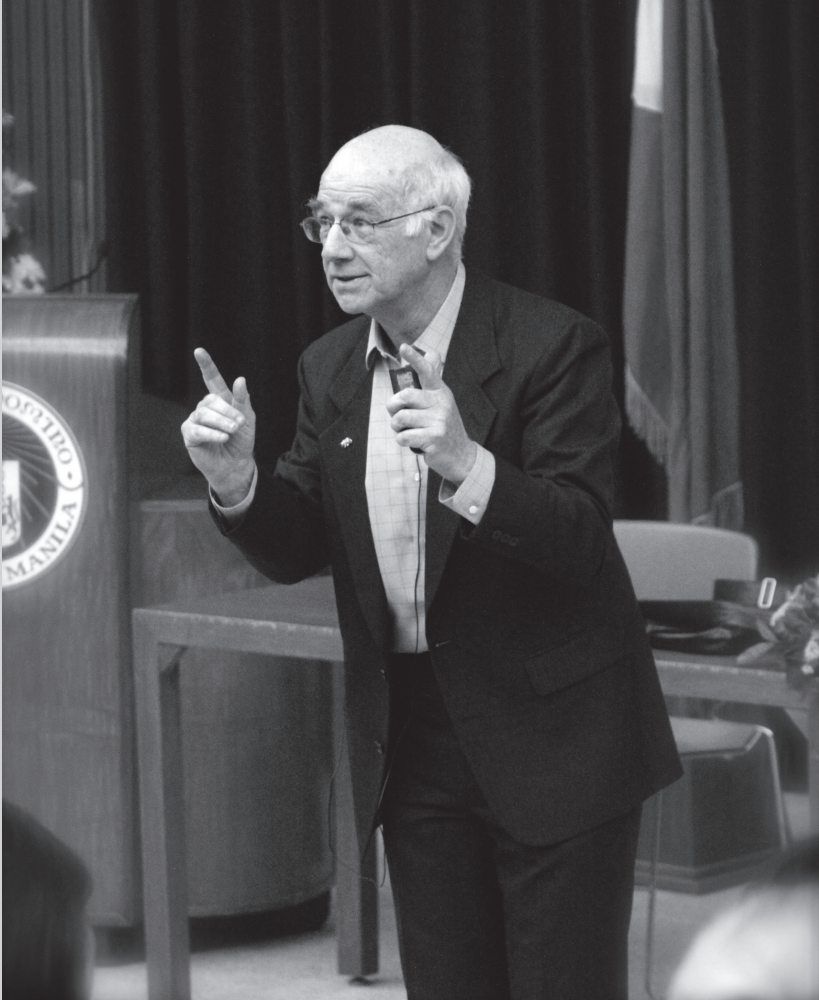
# Sociology and Interdisciplinarity: The Promise and the Perils

Interdisciplinarity has become a fashion in academia but sociologists should tread carefully. Interdisciplinarity is an innocent notion. It simply refers to cementing relations among disciplines. Who could object to the idea of bringing disciplines together to examine the very serious social problems of today, problems such as climate change, such as poverty, such as precarious employment, such as financial crises? Who could object to juxtaposing the different disciplinary lenses to cast light on a complex world? Each discipline, after all, offers but a partial perspective on that world, so interdisciplinarity offers a more complete picture. Interdisciplinarity can only enrich our understanding of the world.

But it is the very obvious appeal of interdisciplinarity that makes it dangerous to weaker, critical disciplines since it can become the Trojan horse for the dissolution of particular disciplines by bringing them into a hierarchical relation with more powerful disciplines. It can become the basis for a narrowing rather than widening of perspectives, especially when the university is in crisis and restructuring is on the agenda. Finally,

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Dr. Michael Burawoy addressing the Philippine Sociological Society at the opening of its National Conference on 17 October 2012, Ateneo De Manila University, Loyola Heights, Quezon City. (Photo by Hannah Glimpse Nario)

it can have the effect of dissolving the very “discipline” required for any serious scholarship or science.

In this paper I start by pointing to the obviousness of the appeal of interdisciplinarity based on my own experiences. I then turn to what I call the hard approach to interdisciplinarity—the dissolution of the disciplines and the creation of a unified social science as proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein and the Gulbenkian Commission he chaired. Here I point to the promise and the perils of overlooking the interests behind knowledge, and proceed to a framework which centers on the question of interests—a framework for soft interdisciplinarity. Finally, I use this framework to understand the consequences for disciplines of the transformation of the university, facing pressures of the regulation and commodification of knowledge.

## THE PROMISE OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

While I was doing my MA in social anthropology at the University of Zambia, 1970 to 1972, I had the rare privilege to participate in exciting research seminars—exciting because everyone was interested in trying to comprehend how Zambia, less than 8 years into independence, was coping with its new won freedoms. No matter what the topic, no matter what the discipline, individuals had something to add to the discussion based on their own research. Recently I returned to Zambia to participate in a conference to assess its 50 years of independence. Again, it was remarkable for its interdisciplinary character—a coming together of sociologists, political scientists, economists, geographers, educationists but also literary scholars, and writers. We traversed the disciplines to engage the somewhat tragic history of dependency that affected every zone of life. The week before, I participated in a similar inter-disciplinary conference in Johannesburg, focused on the politics of precarious society. This was not simply interdisciplinary, although it was eminently that, but brought together scholars from Lebanon, Colombia, India, Germany, the US as well as South Africa. Another exciting event in which each paper contributed to an opening of perspectives on “precarity.” To what extent, then, is such interdisciplinarity a more general feature of Southern scholarship?

I do recall that on leaving Zambia in 1972 and arriving at the University of Chicago to embark on my PhD in sociology, how shocked I

was by the provinciality of Chicago sociology –the texts on the Chicago School we were expected to imbibe, the boring lectures so removed from real issues facing the world, the smugness of its academic disposition. As I experienced it then, disciplinarity was a name for self-referentiality. To be fair, in its heyday, the University of Chicago had been very concerned with the problems and issues of urban development in Chicago and, it has been as interdisciplinary as any major university in the US. Moreover, the teaching of undergraduates is rooted in the famous core which that introduces students to the great works of largely Western Civilization and Western social science. Still, when I arrived in 1972, Chicago sociology was strangely insulated from what was going on around it both within the university and beyond.

I began my teaching career in 1976 at the University of California, Berkeley, which had a long tradition of public engagement before, during and after the free speech movement. The public face of sociology was as well developed there as anywhere in the US, but it was still caught in a disciplinary silo. Having spent the 1980s studying socialist Hungary I came to accept and even appreciate the virtues of disciplinary autonomy, virtues denied in the Soviet world where sociology was an ideological armature of the party state. To be sure in countries like Hungary and Poland a dissident sociology survived underground and sometimes above ground, but my colleagues there operated with very different disciplinary assumptions. It was only when I visited South Africa in 1990, after a twenty-two-year hiatus that I saw a very different sociology, a labor sociology that was deeply engaged with the anti-apartheid struggles. Here disciplinary boundaries were fluid. I tried to propagate this imagination of sociology, engaged with publics, in the US. When I became President of the American Sociological Association I tried to pursue two goals: first, to provincialize US sociology, i.e. make it aware of a world of sociology beyond the US, and second, to defend and expand its public face, that is, its relevance for public issues.

A rule of thumb ties professional sociology to disciplinarity and autonomy while a sociology more engaged with issues and problems beyond the academy, finds those boundaries artificial and often dispenses with them. We need both: disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, autonomy and engagement. There is a danger of a geographical specialization with

professional development taking place in the Global North and public sociology and interdisciplinarity taking place in the Global South, so that each ignores the other to the detriment of both. That's the argument I want to make in this paper, starting with Wallerstein's proposal for dissolving disciplines into a single unitary social science.

## THE HARD APPROACH: DISSOLVING DISCIPLINES

Immanuel Wallerstein is one of the most articulate critics of disciplinary thought. His ideas are most succinctly expressed in the 1996 Report, *Open the Social Sciences*, of the Gulbenkian Commission he chaired. Made up of scientists from all disciplines from world over, they had three criticisms of the social sciences: universalism, which hides the domination of Western thought; positivism, which searches for universal and deterministic laws; and disciplinarity, according to which the social sciences should be divided by their objects of study.

According to Wallerstein this vision of science is an anachronism. These three planks were present at the founding of the social sciences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but their rationale was superseded with the expansion of the social sciences after World War II. Even as structural functionalism and modernization theory had secured their hegemony not just in the US but across the world so in the 1960s there developed critiques from within and without—underdevelopment theory, feminism, critical race theory, and then post-colonialism sought to particularize what had presented itself as universal. Not wishing to endorse a plurality of particularisms, however, Wallerstein proposed what he called “*universalistic pluralism*,” which recognized the contributions of different traditions of thought to a singular universalistic project.

No less important was the assault on the positivist view of science not only because generalizable laws have been elusive in the social sciences, but also because this conception of science had lost ground in the heartland of science, the natural sciences, where complexity and uncertainty had become the reigning orthodoxy. On these grounds Wallerstein argued for *dissolving the separation of the social and natural sciences* since both were converging on a similar understanding of science.

Finally, the idea of disciplinarity was on the retreat, Wallerstein argued, as the world could no longer—if it ever could—be divided up

into neat parcels: economy, state, and society to which corresponded economics, political science, and sociology. This defeat of disciplinarity, Wallerstein argued, was expressed in the rise of area studies no less than in the new trans-disciplinary programs of gender studies, African-American and/or ethnic studies. He concluded that we could now move forward to a historically-based *unitary social science*.

Wallerstein's dream of a unified social science is coming true, but not quite as he expected it. We have been moving toward a singular social science and that social science is economics. It has become ever more powerful as third-wave marketization, or what others call neoliberalism, engulfs the entire planet. The rise of markets has been stimulated and justified by the ascendancy of neoclassical economics. Today market economics is ascendant, providing the solution to all problems through the unregulated commodification of labor, nature, money, and knowledge. Moreover, those who find themselves in other disciplines often aspire to model themselves after economics. Political scientists, in particular, want to hitch themselves to the economics wagon, expressed in the rise of rational choice theory as an imitation of economic theorizing. Politics is seen through the lens of markets, individual actors, following rational action. In sociology, too, there have been those who have sought to turn sociology into a branch of economics. James Coleman, pioneer of mathematical sociology, leading figure in the sociology of education and economic sociology, was the leading proponent of such a move.

While sociology has flirted with economics, it has not got very far since its tradition has steadfastly opposed market fundamentalism. Whether we speak of Marx's theory of the dynamics of capitalism, Weber's theory of the origins and reproduction of capitalism, Durkheim's theory of the division of labor and solidarity, they are all hostile to economism, economic reductionism. We can continue into the present: what Parsons, Bourdieu and Habermas all share with dependency theory, feminism, and post-colonialism is an antipathy to market fundamentalism.

While Wallerstein may be critical of linking disciplines to a particular *object* of investigation, he does not consider the divergent *interests* that lie behind the disciplines. Thus, economics is interested in the expansions of markets, political science with the consolidation of state power, and sociology, from its beginning, has been concerned with the defense of

civil society. Sociology has taken the *standpoint* of civil society *against* the domination of states and markets. Thus, never has sociology been more important than today when state and market are staging a major offensive against civil society, tantamount to a third world war. Indeed, with nation states abetting the commodification of everything, the strengthening of an independent civil society – for all its problematic character—is the best hope for the survival not just of sociology but also of the human species.

So that’s the first danger—that interdisciplinarity becomes a project for a unified social science that will prove to be economics, thereby disarming the academic opposition to neoclassical economics and, thus, to the mischief it has wrought. But there is a more basic danger in dissolving the disciplines and that is simply the loss of “discipline” necessary for any science. Wallerstein may be right to criticize the positivist view of science and its search for universal ahistorical laws, but, again, not necessarily for the right reasons. In the positivist view, science is the induction of laws from the data, but philosophers have long since discarded this view of science, bearing little relation to its practice.

Historians, philosophers, and sociologists have shown—from Popper to Kuhn—that science advances by solving the puzzles of paradigms. Imre Lakatos, the Hungarian philosopher, writes of research programs that possess what he calls a “negative heuristic” (the taken-for-granted assumptions that define the foundation of the program, shared by a community of scientists, and that must be defended at all costs) and a “positive heuristic,” that is the expanding body of theories erected on the basis of the shared assumption designed to absorb challenges, ironing out contradictions, and solving empirical anomalies. Disciplines are, thus, made up of such competing research programs that only advance through disciplined practice that advance the positive heuristic.

The danger of interdisciplinarity, therefore, is to abandon disciplines for a superficial fusing of incompatible frameworks, repressing their elaborate structures that have been created in a painstaking fashion by the collaborative work of generations of scholars. Wallerstein’s dissolution of the disciplines is to return to a spurious positivist framework in which science is said to be founded on an empirical world alone, without theoretical, methodological, value assumptions.



Third, and finally, we come to Wallerstein's dismissal of disciplines as anachronistic, an outdated legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is the danger that the faddishness of interdisciplinarity be foisted on the Global South, subjecting research not just to different but also to lower standards, so that Southern social science works across disciplines, without questioning the disciplines themselves that are imported from the North. If I am correct that we still need disciplines—that knowledge can only grow within frameworks or paradigms we call disciplines—then interdisciplinarity can become a way of leaving disciplinary development to the North, ensuring the continuity of its monopoly of scientific developments. It's not just a matter of the monopoly of the production of new disciplined knowledge, but the knowledge thereby produced, especially in the social sciences, will reflect the specific context and the interests of the North.

It is important, therefore, for disciplinary work to take place in the South. But that's easier said than done. The South may have the interest but it often lacks the capacity to undertake disciplined knowledge production. Academics in the South face enormous pressures to battle on multiple fronts: to teach, to administer programs, to sit on policy committees, to be accountable to publics, and, often, to hold down multiple jobs to survive in addition to producing original research. In these circumstances, the line of least resistance is to abandon disciplined research that should be the foundation of social science in the South and for the South. There are solutions—the creation of Institutes, sabbaticals in the North, migration of Northerners to the South above all the intensification of South-South exchanges—but none of them are without their problems. The challenges have to be recognized and diagnosed if we are to avoid impractical and false solutions.

### **THE SOFT APPROACH: STRENGTHENING THE DISCIPLINES**

Immanuel Wallerstein's project for a unified science, then, obscures the interests behind knowledge and these, in turn, are related to two questions: "Knowledge for Whom?" and "Knowledge for What?" Only by first taking both these questions seriously can we think about the possible meaning of "interdisciplinarity." One way to take these questions seriously is to



make them the dimensions of different types of knowledge and, then, through these lenses think about the meaning of interdisciplinarity.

In relation to “Knowledge for Whom?” there are two audiences—an academic and an extra-academic audience. We can think of students as falling in either of these categories. In relation to “Knowledge for What” I follow a long and venerable distinction in sociology between knowledge that is concerned with determining the best means for a given end, what I call instrumental knowledge, and knowledge that is concerned with the discussion of ends themselves, what I call reflexive knowledge. The result is four types of knowledge. We have two types of instrumental knowledge: *professional knowledge* that advances within research programs by solving puzzles, tackling logical contradictions and absorbing empirical anomalies, as opposed to *policy science* that applies the results and methods of professional knowledge to problems defined by clients. In both cases underlying values and assumptions are taken for granted—underlying values and assumptions that are interrogated by reflexive knowledge. The latter also comes in two types: *critical theory* that disinters the assumptions and values of professional knowledge so that they can be openly discussed in the academic context as opposed to *public knowledge* that brings the values into debates and conversations beyond the academy.

### Knowledge and Audience

|                           | ACADEMIC<br>AUDIENCE                            | EXTRA-ACADEMIC<br>AUDIENCE                    |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| INSTRUMENTAL<br>KNOWLEDGE | PROFESSIONAL<br>Cross-Disciplinary<br>Borrowing | POLICY<br>Joint-Disciplinary<br>Coordination  |
| REFLEXIVE<br>KNOWLEDGE    | CRITICAL<br>Trans-Disciplinary<br>Infusion      | PUBLIC<br>Multi-disciplinary<br>Collaboration |

Connected to each type of knowledge is a particular expression of interdisciplinarity. First, professional knowledge, i.e. that knowledge accountable to peers, the conduct of research published in academic journals, always benefits from *cross-disciplinary* borrowings. Thus,

sociology has benefited from the work of historians. For example, the comparative history of Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann, Barrington Moore, Reinhard Bendix, and Immanuel Wallerstein would not exist were it not for the work done by historians. The importation of geography's concern with space has transformed the study of urban phenomena. The use of psychoanalysis has made important contributions to the understanding of domination—gender, race, and even class. These borrowings do not undermine but enhance disciplinary knowledge insofar as they enhance work done within the strictures of specific research programs.

Second, policy knowledge, i.e. knowledge geared to solving specific problems, defined by clients, in many parts of the world, especially the Global South, is increasingly located outside the academy, the so-called mode-2 type knowledge. Where university education is in retreat, underfunded, the best faculty exit and move into such think tanks where they are paid better salaries to coordinate *joint-disciplinary* research and where research is often short term contract work geared to narrowly defined problems. In as much as knowledge is geared to the immediate issues of the client there is little backflow into the disciplines, but where such policy knowledge assumes greater autonomy, exploring broader issues, so it can indeed redirect interests of professionals, stimulate critical knowledge, and generate public debate.

Third, critical knowledge, i.e. knowledge that lays bare and criticizes the foundational assumptions of professional knowledge, benefits from infusion from other disciplines, precisely because they are founded on different assumptions. These infusions may not come packaged as disciplinary knowledge but are critical of preexisting disciplinary frameworks, assuming a new *transdisciplinary* character. Feminism, Critical Race theory, and Marxism have all contributed to major shifts in professional sociology. They have also inspired and been inspired by public engagement.

Finally, there is public scholarship, a broad engagement with public issues through public discussion. This is not an instrumental but a reflexive relation—an elevated conversation between scholars and publics. This is never easy to sustain, especially in the context of overworked academics of the South but it takes place nonetheless. Very

often the issues demand *multi-disciplinary collaboration*. Take an issue such as climate change, which demands the concerted efforts of not just the climatologist, but geographers, economists, anthropologists, and even sociologists. This knowledge requires the prior development of disciplinary knowledge, but one that is geared to the issues of a specific context.

In all these views of soft interdisciplinarity: cross-, trans-, joint- and multi-disciplinary knowledge –disciplined research remains essential. Where disciplined research disappears we are left with ritualized incantations to interdisciplinarity, generating superficial and often obscure knowledge. Soft interdisciplinarity degenerates into the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity.

## INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE CRISES OF THE UNIVERSITY

So far we have talking in general terms. We must now attend to the meaning of interdisciplinarity in the particular context we now face, the world-over, namely universities in crisis. The university faces a combination of four crises, corresponding to its four types of knowledge. The actual articulation of these 4 crises varies by national context and region of the world, as well as by discipline or school within the university.

At the heart of the general crisis is the *budgetary crisis*, so that the university is no longer seen as a public good, dispensing long-term benefits to society, but as private good that must be self-financing, which is only feasible by commodifying the production, sale, and dissemination of knowledge. So the university encourages its academics to promote knowledge that can be sold. Here the social sciences and humanities (with the exception of economics) are at a disadvantage since only few consumers are ready to purchase our knowledge and our degrees do not deliver secure jobs. Here interdisciplinarity easily becomes the administrative rhetoric for dissolving “failing” disciplines through strategies of amalgamation.

The budgetary crisis is rooted in the redefinition of the university, magnifying a *crisis of legitimation* for disciplines like sociology that do not have an obvious clientele, that do not offer immediate jobs for students at a time when secure jobs are at a premium, and that offer a

distinctively critical perspective on the contemporary world increasingly driven by markets. This prompts the project of relegitimation through engaging with publics whether through organic, unmediated connections, or through various media. It involves teaching in new ways that recognize students' lived experience as an embryonic sociology to be elaborated. Here multi-disciplinary collaboration can, indeed, help forge the relevance of sociology to social problems.

Budgetary crisis goes hand in hand with a *regulatory crisis*. Universities are ranked in terms of their approximation to the great research universities of the world, the Ivy League Universities of the US and a few of the major public universities that have not just successfully weathered the crisis, but have exploited it to cement their domination. For the social sciences this means benchmarking local social scientists against the disciplinary practitioners of the north, publishing in northern ISI journals that emphasize theoretical frameworks, relevant to the North. This can have tragic consequences of bifurcating higher education into a small "cosmopolitan" sector oriented to the prestigious universities of the north, cut off from a large "local" sector, responding to local pressures and impossible academic work loads. This is the negative side of disciplinarity, distorting the pursuit of social science, divorcing it from the local context, local issues and thereby intensifying the legitimation crisis.

The regulatory crisis also creates an *identity crisis* – what does it mean to be a social scientist in this audit culture. It prompts a counter-move against disciplines altogether, a mock interdisciplinarity, which puts the social scientists out of the running in the competition for resources, the downgrading of departments, and sometimes their dissolution. A second strategy is to build entirely new disciplines but these will have difficulty winning recognition. A third possibility is the reshaping of existing disciplines, a selective appropriation from the universal grounding of disciplines, building a Southern version of professional sociology, perhaps with the help of cross-disciplinary borrowings.

In this scheme the leading role is taken by what I call "system" crises, the twin crises of budgets and regulation, orienting the disciplines to market pressures on the one side and rationalization through ranking on the other. Rationalization has the effect of disembedding the disciplines from

### Four Crises of the University

|   | ACADEMIC<br>AUDIENCE   | EXTRA-ACADEMIC<br>AUDIENCE   |
|---|--|--|
| SYSTEM CRISIS<br>Instrumental Knowledge | REGULATORY<br>CRISIS<br><b>Professional<br/>Knowledge</b><br>Cross-Disciplinary<br>Borrowing | BUDGETARY<br>CRISIS<br><b>Policy Knowledge</b><br>Joint-Disciplinary<br>Coordination     |
| SOCIAL CRISIS<br>Reflexive Knowledge    | IDENTITY CRISIS<br><b>Critical Knowledge</b><br>Trans-Disciplinary<br>Infusion               | LEGITIMATION<br>CRISIS<br><b>Public Knowledge</b><br>Multi-disciplinary<br>Collaboration |

their context so that they can be more easily commodified, resulting in a competitive hierarchy. Here interdisciplinarity can be an administrative way of destroying those disciplines that cannot compete for resources.

System crises engender “social” crises in which the disciplines lose their meaning through being disembedded or delinked from their scholarly community (identity crisis) and their public context (legitimation crisis). At this level interdisciplinarity takes on the positive function – an academic defense of the disciplines against rationalization and commodification through the creation of new disciplinary arrangements that renew meaning in the local context and rebuild connection to publics. Interdisciplinarity is, therefore, Janus faced—a vehicle for abetting rationalization and commodification as well as a defense against such destructive forces. It is, indeed, a terrain upon which the major struggles in the university are being played out, expressive of struggles that beset the wider society.

