

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351>

Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society

2015-12-02 01:38:47

By Michelle Pentecost

The latest issue of [Theory, Culture and Society](#) offers a stellar set of offerings on the problematics of transdisciplinarity, through the lenses of philosophy, STS, feminist theory, and gender studies. Enjoy!

[Problematizing Disciplinarity, Transdisciplinary Problematics](#)

Peter Osborne

This article situates current debates about transdisciplinarity within the deeper history of academic disciplinarity, in its difference from the notions of inter- and multi-disciplinarity. It offers a brief typology and history of established conceptions of transdisciplinarity within science and technology studies. It then goes on to raise the question of the conceptual structure of transdisciplinary generality in the humanities, with respect to the incorporation of the 19th- and 20th-century German and French philosophical traditions into the anglophone humanities, under the name of ‘theory’. It identifies two distinct – dialectical and anti-dialectical, or dialectical and transversal – transdisciplinary trajectories. It locates the various contributions to the special issue of which it is the introduction within this conceptual field, drawing attention to the distinct contribution of the French debates about structuralism and its aftermath – those by Serres, Foucault, Derrida, Guattari and Latour, in particular. It concludes with an appendix on Foucault’s place within current debates about disciplinarity and academic disciplines.

[Introduction to Serres on Transdisciplinarity](#)

Lucie Mercer

Excerpted from an article on Leibniz first published in 1974 in *Hermès III, la Traduction*, Michel Serres’s ‘Transdisciplinarity

as Relative Exteriority' offers a synoptic view of Serres's vision of the relationship between philosophy and the sciences. Serres charts four historical strategies by which philosophy has secured its theoretical control over the sciences, four versions of philosophical exteriority towards the scientific field. He contrasts this topography or philosophical 'theatre' of representation to Leibniz's immanent relation to scientific discourse. A systematic whole without fixed metalanguage, the Leibnizian encyclopaedia constitutes, according to Serres, a truly transdisciplinary method.

[Transdisciplinarity as Relative Exteriority](#)

Michel Serres

Extract: Does Leibniz practise the philosophy of sciences? How, in the first place, to define it? Where is it? What does it do? It is apparently any kind of theory of science. Yet a theory is primarily a spectacle, and looking at a theatre presupposes standing in a site exterior to the stage. Leibniz often uses the word theatre (for nature, for envelopments and developments of the living ...), but never for science. He is one of the heroes of an action that cannot become representation without being altered, without losing its essence of direct action. He provides the only discourse that does not pretend, the only judiciary act where the judge must be party in order to give his sentence. Indeed, Leibniz speaks *from within* science. He practises it.

In its relation to scientific knowledge, philosophy seeks a site from whence to speak about the encyclopaedia. But the latter, well constructed, speaks a language closed upon itself. Yet there are four and only four possible sites that philosophers have discovered, defined and practised. One can gaze upon something from *above*, from *below*, from *the front* or from *the back*. Leibniz never adopted any of these points of view: he somehow foresaw that all four were conceivable; he envisioned the alteration they could induce. He glimpsed that the only discourse on science was the discourse of science itself, that its definition could only be objectivized or thematized through its own course. These four sites define four types or modes of appropriation of science, four ingenious ways to acquire a property by illicit means – in other words, to gain a sovereign science without going through science as such.

[Foucault's Point of Heresy: 'Quasi-Transcendentals' and the Transdisciplinary Function of the Episteme](#)

Étienne Balibar

Major difficulties for readers of Foucault's *The Order of Things* concern the historical function and the logical construction of the episteme. Our proposal is to link it with another notion, the 'point of heresy', less frequently addressed. This leads to asserting that irreconcilable dilemmas are in fact determined by the type of rationality governing the emergence of common objects of knowledge. It also introduces a possibility of 'walking on two roads': a dialogical adventure within rationality. Foucault is not content with either accepting or rejecting the 'transcendental' question 'What is Man?': with the help of quasi-transcendental categories performing a 'transdisciplinary' function, he wants to reach the 'heretical' point where anthropology becomes historicity within the horizon of finitude.

[Logics of Generalization: Derrida, Grammatology and Transdisciplinarity](#)

David Cunningham

This article seeks to explore some issues regarding the different modes of generality at stake in the formation of transdisciplinary concepts within the production of 'theory' in the humanities and social sciences. Focused around Jacques Derrida's seminal account of 'writing' in his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*, the article outlines what it defines as a logic of generalization at stake in Derrida's elaborations of a quasi-transcendental 'inscription in general'. Starting out from the questions thereby raised about the relationship between such forms of generality and those historically ascribed to philosophy, the article concludes by contrasting Derrida's generalized writing with more recent returns to 'metaphysics' in the work of Bruno Latour and others. Against the immediately 'ontological' orientation of much recent 'new materialist' or 'object-oriented' thought, the article argues for the necessity of 'different levels of writing in general' through a continual folding back of absolute generalization into historically specific disciplinary crossings and exchanges; something suggested by but never really developed in Derrida's own work.

[Reading Transdisciplinarily: Sartre and Althusser](#)

Nina Power

This article considers transdisciplinarity from the standpoint of reading and readers, rather than as a collection of texts, concepts or proper names. It argues that the humanism and anti-humanism debates of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly understood through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser, was above all a debate about the politics of reading. Understanding transdisciplinarity to relate to a projected model of post-disciplinarity, the article suggests that transdisciplinarity needs to supplement its conceptual and political remit with a theory of reading, such that reading across disciplines simultaneously becomes a question of reading beyond disciplinary boundaries.

[Introduction to Guattari on Transdisciplinarity](#)

Andrew Goffey

Written roughly a year before the end of his life, Guattari's 'The Ethico-Political Foundations of Interdisciplinarity' elaborates an account of transdisciplinary research processes closely informed by his conception of transversality. Tacitly critiquing institutions of research that separate it from the political practices associated with the reinvention of democracy, the paper explores in particular the possibilities of conducting transversal research into urban life, and speculates on the value of information technology.

[Transdisciplinarity Must Become Transversality](#)

Félix Guattari

Extract: Everyone is aware that the complexity of the objects of research in the domain of the human and environmental sciences demands an interdisciplinary approach. But the encounter between disciplines does not permit a decompartmentalization of the

problematics and modes of expression brought together. Signs are made from one domain to another in the absence of any in-depth communication. How is a bridge to be established between living eco-systems? The stakes are considerable, as they condition the possibility of any real efficacy in these matters. Scientific ecology, applied to the environment, will remain powerless if it is not relayed by new social and political components, and the latter will in turn vegetate in immobility and conservatism without a profound transformation of mentalities.

The question of interdisciplinarity thus shifts from the cognitive to social, political, ethical, even aesthetic domains. This is because the ecology of the visible is inseparably linked to an ecology of the virtual, to the problematics of individual and collective choice, to universes of value that are on the way to promotion or to collapse.

Under the protection of a scientific or, rather, scientific paradigm, the human sciences have endeavoured systematically to remove the subjective factors of responsibility and commitment. In fact, what it would be worth calling into question in these registers is a certain formal status given to objectivity. The vision that one has of a 'normal' state of things always depends on a normative point of view. To describe urban life, at the end of the millennium, to appreciate what it tends towards, implies a choice of values relative to the social good, to the position of the imaginary in relation to the media, to the relation between the natural, the cosmic and the artificial, the machinic...

[Structuralism's Afters: Tracing Transdisciplinarity through Guattari and Latour](#)

Éric Alliez

This article analyses Guattari's and Latour's bodies of work as radical developers of a processual and ontological transdisciplinarity. These works impose a definitive break from the history that, in the 1960s, had drawn upon structuralism in order to oppose philosophy with an epistemological revolution from the perspective of a scientific problematization and first transdisciplinary reconfiguration of the sciences de l'homme. It is shown that the second anti-structuralist transdisciplinarity affirms as its *raison d'être* "the necessity to return to Pragmatics" (Guattari), to enact the new significance of the transversal

constructions liberated by the rhizomatic monism of a hybrid social ontology (Latour). Between Guattari, Latour, and the ecologization they share, a total de-epistemologization and re-ontologization is engaged. It leads to the fall of the 'Ontological Iron Curtain' erected by the philosophical tradition between mind and matter, nature and society. The article concludes by critically addressing the final statements of both Guattari and Latour towards a new aesthetic paradigm and a new diplomacy of institutional forms respectively.

[Contradiction of Terms: Feminist Theory, Philosophy and Transdisciplinarity](#)

Stella Sandford

This article addresses the question of the relation between disciplines and transdisciplinary practices and concepts through a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and the emblematically transdisciplinary practice of feminist theory, via a discussion of interdisciplinarity and related terms in gender studies. It argues that the tendency of philosophy to reject feminist theory, as alien to it as a discipline, is in a sense correct, to the extent that the two defining features of feminist theory – its constitutive tie to a political agenda for social change and the transdisciplinary character of many of its central concepts – are indeed at odds with, and pose a threat to, the traditional insularity of the discipline of philosophy. If feminist philosophy incorporates feminist theory, its transdisciplinary aspects thus open it up to an unavoidable contradiction. Nonetheless, I will argue, this is a contradiction that can and must be endured and made productive.

[Identity and Intervention: Disciplinarity as Transdisciplinarity in Gender Studies](#)

Tuija Pulkkinen

Within the past 40 years, feminist studies/women's studies/gender studies/studies in gender and sexuality has effectively grown into a globally practised academic discipline while simultaneously resisting the notion of disciplinarity and strongly advocating

multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. In this article, I argue that gaining identity through refusing an identity can be viewed as being a constitutive paradox of gender studies. Through exploring gender studies as a transdisciplinary intellectual discipline, which came into existence in very particular multidisciplinary historical conditions of the feminist movement, I suggest that transdisciplinarity within gender studies takes on a meaning which results in a radical problematization of the academic goal of 'knowledge production'. Instead of such 'knowledge production', transdisciplinarity in gender studies promotes intervention which reaches beyond the concepts of accountability, innovation and corporate management. I argue that Jacques Derrida's promotion of the Collège International de Philosophie in 1982 in its particular relationship to the tradition of philosophy provides a parallel example of such an attitude. Adding to Joan Scott's and Clare Hemmings's insights on gender studies in terms of critique and transformation, I argue that transdisciplinarity as practice of 'intervention' is crucial for the construction of gender studies disciplinary identity, based upon apparent non-identity.

[Temporal Drag: Transdisciplinarity and the 'Case' of Psychosocial Studies](#)

Lisa Baraitser

Psychosocial studies is a putatively 'new' or emerging field concerned with the irreducible relation between psychic and social life. Genealogically, it attempts to re-suture a tentative relation between mind and social world, individual and mass, internality and externality, norm and subject, and the human and non-human, through gathering up and re-animating largely forgotten debates that have played out across a range of other disciplinary spaces. If, as I argue, the central tenets, concepts and questions for psychosocial studies emerge out of a re-appropriation of what have become anachronistic or 'useless' concepts in other fields – 'the unconscious', for instance, in the discipline of psychology – then we need to think about transdisciplinarity not just in spatial terms (that is, in terms of the movement across disciplinary borders) but also in temporal terms. This may involve engaging with theoretical 'embarrassments', one of which – the notion of 'psychic reality' – I explore here.

AMA citation

Pentecost M. Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society. *Somatosphere*. 2015. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351>. Accessed December 2, 2015.

APA citation

Pentecost, Michelle. (2015). *Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society*. Retrieved December 2, 2015, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351>

Chicago citation

Pentecost, Michelle. 2015. Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351> (accessed December 2, 2015).

Harvard citation

Pentecost, M 2015, *Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society*, Somatosphere. Retrieved December 2, 2015, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351>>

MLA citation

Pentecost, Michelle. "Transdisciplinary Problematics: A Special Issue of Theory, Culture and Society." 2 Dec. 2015. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 2 Dec. 2015.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=11351>>