From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)

The concept of transdisciplinarity is not part of the explicit discourse or self-consciousness of ‘French thought’. Rather, it is used here, imported from the outside as a kind of operator or problematizing device, to begin a process of rethinking one of that body of thought’s most distinctive but infrequently remarked-upon characteristics – its tendency to move fluidly across disciplinary fields and modes of knowledge – and thereby also to rethink some of its main ideas.

Unexamined transdisciplinary dynamics motivate and energize many of the ‘great books’ of postwar European theory. In France one can point emblematically to Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949), the first volume of Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason: Practical Ensembles (1960), Lévi-Strauss’s The Savage Mind (1962), Foucault’s Words and Things, Derrida’s Writing and Difference and Lacan’s Écrits (each 1966) and Deleuze and Guattari’s two-volume Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972, 1980). All are books that cross disciplines with a confidence and facility that belies the complexity of the exchanges between the disciplinary knowledges upon which they are built – in often widely differing and unstated ways. And all have productive but problematic relationships to the varieties of systematic orientation (including anti-systems) that characterize the post-Kantian European philosophical tradition, raising the question of the proto-philosophical character of transdisciplinarity itself.

One way to approach this situation would be to focus on the singularities of such canonical texts as literary works. Another, adopted here, is to approach them via the most general concepts that they construct, and to inquire into the genealogy and trans-disciplinary functioning of these concepts: ‘structure’, of course, and its place within work that was later called ‘post-structuralist’; but also existentialism (whose death was prematurely announced), within which the rethinking of the concept ‘sex’ associated with Western feminism has its philosophical beginnings; along with ideas associated with tendencies that do not fit so neatly into such boxes – like ‘network’; and those that are simply too general to be usefully pegged to particular texts or even bodies of theoretical writing, such as ‘science’.

The ‘entries’ presented below stake out some ground for rethinking these concepts from a transdisciplinary standpoint. By way of introduction to such a project (of which this is just one part of a small national sample – a second part of the sample will follow later in 2011), it may be useful to set out something of the thinking about transdisciplinarity that stands behind it. In particular, it is necessary to make clear what is not intended by the term ‘transdisciplinarity’ in this context, although the unintended usage must nonetheless be engaged if the current institutional conditions of knowledge-production are to be acknowledged.

Trans-, inter-, multi-, hegemonic and anti-

In the context of the ‘post-philosophical’ theoretical heritage of twentieth-century European philosophy, the concept of transdisciplinarity has two main points of reference. The first is the German critical tradition (post-Hegelian and materialist in inspiration), within which it appears as one way of thinking the conceptual space opened up by the critique of the self-sufficiency of a disciplinary concept of philosophy: a universalizing conceptual movement that recognizes (following Marx) that the idea of philosophy can only be realized outside of philosophy itself. Transdisciplinarity is thus, here, the product of a certain philosophical reflection on the limits of philosophy; a result of the self-criticism of philosophy, in a manner that opens philosophical discourse up to the claims of other discourses – a ‘philosophizing beyond philosophy’ as Adorno described it, with reference to Walter Benjamin’s writings. Here, among the disciplines that are crossed, transdisciplinarity thus appears to have a privileged relationship to the philosophical tradition, even if it is primarily one of negation (determinate in each instance, but not necessarily generalizably so).
Something similar may be discerned in the generalizing and often transcendental dynamics of a certain ‘French thought’ from 1945 through to the 1980s. This thought inhabits something of the same transdisciplinary conceptual space as the German critical tradition, but in a variety of radically anti-Hegelian modes. It too exhibits a complicated set of constitutive relations to philosophy – sometimes by its denial (which is not necessarily the same as its negation), but more often through philosophy’s transformation: ‘regenerating itself out of its other’, as Balibar puts it, below, in relation to structuralism. Different ways of being anti-Hegelian in France, one might say, tend to articulate alternative modes of transdisciplinarity.

Currently, however, the term ‘transdisciplinarity’ is most frequently to be found as part of anglophone methodological debates in the physical and social sciences, and in Science and Technology Studies and Education Studies, in particular. It is there, quite reasonably I think, opposed to established concepts of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity – those two multiple-choice boxes familiar to anyone who has filled in an AHRC grant application in the UK. (‘Interdisciplinarity’ is understood to refer to a multiplicity of disciplinary methods employed by a researcher; multidisciplinarity to a multiplicity of researchers with different disciplinary affiliations.) These are now bureaucratic categories. The notion of transdisciplinarity is certainly, in various ways, an advance it relation to these two established ways of thinking disciplinary relationships. However, it has been subjected to a bureaucratic straitjacket of its own.

The notion of transdisciplinarity is an advance, formally, in denoting a movement across existing fields (as opposed to simply a thinking between them or a multiplication of them); and it is an advance in terms of theoretical content, in so far as it locates the source of problems at issue, which are construed in such a way as to be amenable to technological or other instrumental solutions. (Think of the way, in the case of Education Studies, for example, that the concept of ‘lifelong’ learning rapidly morphed into ‘work-based’ learning.) This conception has been summed up by Helga Nowotny and others as ‘Mode-2 knowledge production’. The social organization of knowledges appears here in large part as an administrative issue – as, indeed, does the current reorganization of academic knowledges in British universities along corporate–managerial lines. In this context, ‘transdisciplinarity’ can become one of the things that is ‘happening to us’ in the universities, and not in a nice way.

In the context of the German and French critical traditions, and their anglophone reception, on the other hand, it is not inter- and multi-disciplinarity to which transdisciplinarity is most fruitfully opposed, or the bureaucratic reorganization of knowledges which drives it, so much as the conceptual pair of hegemonic disciplinarity (think of ‘English’) and a resistant anti-disciplinarity (think of ‘text’), which is motivated by a certain politicization of knowledges. In this context, transdisciplinarity is not the conceptual product of addressing problems defined as policy challenges, which are amenable to technological solutions, but rather of addressing problems that are culturally and politically defined in such a way as to be amenable to theoretical reformulation, as a condition of more radical forms of political address. The axes policy/technology are replaced by the axes theory/politics.

The emergent sociological discourse of transdisciplinarity is positive and organizational; the one gestured towards here is, though not wholly negative, at least problematizing and political.

The organizational conceit of the conference from which the ‘entries’ that follow derived is that we might obtain some insight into the relationship between problematization and transdisciplinarity through reflection upon the generalizing dynamics of particular concepts in French thought since 1945: from ‘structure’ to ‘rhizome’… This narrative is not intended teleologically but rather, like the notion of transdisciplinarity itself, as a critical device: a positing of oppositional points, conceptually and historically defined, the relationship between which – and hence the meaning of each – is still very much disputed. Politically, these poles represent two very different decades: those of the late 1950s and early 1960s (‘structure’), and the late 1970s and early 1980s (‘rhizome’), respectively: the beginning and the end, one might say, of a certain period of intellectual and political radicalism, which was definitively closed by the apparent opening of ‘1989’. Today, new openings present themselves.

Peter Osborne

* The conference, ‘From Structure to Rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French Thought, 1945 to the Present – Histories, Concepts, Constructions’, was held at the French Institute in London, 16–17 April 2010. It was organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) – in what were to become its final months at Middlesex University, before its move to Kingston – in collaboration with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy.