

Interdisciplinarity: Desire and Dilemma in Contemporary European Gender Studies

Thursday 21 January 2010
Gender Institute Research Seminar

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Key Words: interdisciplinarity, gender studies, Bologna process, Higher Education, research, GJSS

On January 21st the Gender Institute¹ at the London School of Economics (LSE) held a seminar titled *Interdisciplinarity: Desire and Dilemma in Contemporary European Gender Studies*. Interdisciplinarity is one of the current key terms within the field of Feminist, Women and Gender Studies. Although the term is ubiquitous, a single definition remains elusive, and debates around the meanings and practices of interdisciplinarity are ongoing. The structure of the research seminar fit perfectly within these contemporary and contested understandings.

A glance at the curricula of the three scholars on the panel, Maria do Mar Pereira, Sabine Grenz and Mia Liinason, shows how they have all thoroughly engaged with the issue. Mia Liinason is a PhD student at the Centre for Gender Studies at Lund University. She was one of the editors of GJSS in 2007, when the

Journal dedicated a special issue to feminist interdisciplinarity. In the editorial of that edition, she and co-editor Iris Van der Tuin reflected on the importance of interdisciplinarity within women's and gender studies. Sabine Grenz holds a PhD in Gender Studies and her research interests include feminist criticism of science, the history of sexuality, prostitution and masculinity. The discussion was led by Maria do Mar Pereira, PhD student at the Gender Institute at London School of Economics whose research focuses on the epistemic status of women's, gender, feminist studies in Portugal.

The three scholars engaged in a rich and full hour of discussion, pushing the audience to reflect upon the term and practice of interdisciplinarity. Never missing the wider picture, the panel guided the audience through their "personal career trajectories" highlighting the

point at which the concept of interdisciplinarity became relevant both for their work and for their definition as scholars. Academia operated as both the site in which one shapes her own expertise, and where one meets the criticism to a given set of practices.

From the beginning, the panel tried to unpack the “buzz word” of interdisciplinarity, a term not confined within methodology chapters but which, as Liinason has previously pointed out, has become “a buzz-word in the current higher education policies of the European Union” (Liinason, 2009: 52). The panel provided the audience with an interesting “panoramic view” of how interdisciplinarity became valued within the European Union policy-making process. Focusing on the Bologna process of harmonization of higher education in Europe, they discussed how different countries coped with the request for interdisciplinarity that the European Union put forward. During this process, the ‘buzz word’ became a necessary skill for maintaining a competitive position in the research market².

After an overview of the policy use of interdisciplinarity, Maria do Mar Pereira invited the panel to think through interdisciplinarity as a paradox. As described by Sabine Hark in *Magical Sign: On the Politics of Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* (published in the above mentioned issue of *GJSS*), the “magical sign” of interdisciplinarity is, paradoxically,

used both by critical scholars and neo-liberal inspired European Higher Education Reforms. “Hence, one could indeed argue that inter- and transdisciplinarity function like magical signs (Katie King 1994), that is, as empty signifiers meaning whatever their users want them to mean.” (Hark 2007). The panellists made clear how the neo-liberal definitions and aims produced through the Higher Education policy debates hugely contrast with the definitions and practices of interdisciplinarity that flourished within Queer Studies or Postcolonial studies.

When the discussion moved to the core of the topic: the field of Gender Studies, the audience was presented with another paradox of interdisciplinarity. The panel provided insightful examples of practicing interdisciplinary research, while at the same time discussing “the paradoxical position of disciplining a field of research and education we have proudly dubbed inherently interdisciplinary” (Holm 2003). In what I personally consider the most appealing part of an utterly intriguing talk, the focus on Gender Studies led to an interesting reading both on the practices of the field, and on the narratives that permeate those practices. The speakers explained that, in the last few decades, Gender Studies - the discipline that used to occupy a space within various departments, and hence was “inherently interdisciplinary”- acquired a “physical” independent status through the con-

tinuing growth of departments and programs. Disciplinary boundaries were produced as those physical spaces were defined, leading to the ultimate paradox: the interdisciplinary Gender Studies becoming a discipline. As a result, Gender Studies is beginning to face many of the same disciplinary constraints of the “traditional” disciplines. These constraints resonate with the patriarchal organization of knowledge, a foundational critique of gender studies itself.

Overall, the panellists demonstrated amazing command of the literature, which allowed them to avoid the often-observed ‘short-cut’ of giving ready-to-use answers to the recurring questions within the field. Instead, the panellists provided an appealing picture to the debate, while also challenging the audience to nail and unpack the above-mentioned paradoxes. Those present were left with stimulating questions to reflect upon, questions which resonate with those posed by many of the contributions to the *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences*: Does one need to be grounded in a discipline before ‘moving’ to interdisciplinarity? Is there a limit to interdisciplinarity? Is it accidental that these debates are primarily taking place in Gender Studies?

The debate is, luckily, still open.

Endnotes

¹ The Gender Institute GI at the London School of Economics is undoubtedly one

of the leading European institutions in the field of Gender Studies in Europe. Along side the vibrant post graduate teaching programmes it is characterized by a diverse research tradition. The latter is mirrored in the Research Seminar Series that the GI runs throughout the academic year. The Series provides the academic community with the chances to meet and discuss the later work of scholars both from within and outside the Institute. Looking at the 2009/10 programme it appears evident how the topics addressed in the series reflect the key contemporary debates within the field of Gender Woman and Feminist Studies.

² The Bologna process has been at the core of speculation within Gender and Women’s studies. Clare Hemmings in 2006 in the *European Journal Of Women Studies* (EJWS) discussed the opportunities that the Bologna process was holding for UK Women and Gender Studies. In the same issue Mary Evans appeared more sceptical and less optimistic (2006). In 2008 on EJWS Clare Hemmings resumed the debate and published a interesting note on the Bologna Process in which she suggested “ways forward for women’s and gender studies in its negotiation with European institutionalization of the field” (2008:119).

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