



TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AS A NONIMPERIAL ENCOUNTER: FOR AN OPEN SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT In this article I argue for a transdisciplinary approach to the human or social sciences. There is little ontological or epistemological justification for a division among these disciplines. I recommend that sociology stop worrying about policing its disciplinary boundaries and begin to encourage various forms of intellectual transculturation. I then analyze barriers to transdisciplinarity by comparing disciplines to states and comparing the relations among disciplines to different sorts of imperial practice, or interstate relations. The most common interdisciplinary strategies are analogous to the informal, nonterritorial imperialism practiced globally by the United States. Three other forms of interdisciplinarity are discussed: the annexation of one discipline by another – a situation that is analogous to colonialism; nonhegemonized systems of equal disciplines (analogous to the Westphalian state system); and non-imperial ‘traveling’ and transculturation among disciplines (analogous to the practices of members of weak or declining imperial states).

KEYWORDS academic disciplines • interdisciplinarity • social science and empire • sociology of knowledge • sociology of science • transdisciplinarity

The separation between ‘is’ (*Sein*) and ‘ought’ (*Sollen*) is one of the stakes in any discussion of transdisciplinary social science.¹ Explaining a significant social phenomenon almost inevitably entails passing judgment on that phenomenon and carries implicit or explicit recommendations about whether it should be preserved or absented. The inevitably normative dimension of even the most empirical social science has been occluded, however, by the doctrine of ‘value-freedom’ or value neutrality (Weber, 1949; Rammstedt, 1988). Conversely, normative social and political enquiry has often remained pristinely indifferent to reality. The mainly normative focus of

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political theory, for example, has served 'to produce and protect a space in which the status of facts can be bracketed' by 'favoring the normative high ground' (Mihic et al., 2005: 475).

In this article I will approach the question of sociology's relationship to intellectual hybridity in two steps. Initially I take a normative approach; in the second part of the article I adopt an analytical or explanatory mode of analysis. The normative phase of this discussion deliberately brackets the question of practical constraints against transdisciplinarity. Sociology is not accustomed to such a normative approach nowadays because of its self-induced commitment to 'value-free' social science and because it tends to assume that the important questions about the definition of sociology have been settled. There are other reasons for sociologists' support for maintaining disciplinary boundaries. Throughout his life Pierre Bourdieu defended sociology's disciplinary autonomy for pragmatic reasons even while he promoted a version of 'sociology' that was equally historical and anthropological, and often philosophical. But most of the arguments for maintaining disciplinary boundaries were articulated in historical contexts different from the present ones.

Only once we have figured out what we really want sociology to become can we address the analytical question about the conditions that might encourage these desired forms of knowledge and the obstacles they might face. For reasons that will become clear below, my comments are focused on sociology in the United States rather than sociology globally or in the abstract. But I think that other national disciplinary fields face similar choices.

SOLLEN: WHAT SOCIOLOGY OUGHT TO BE

The first question we need to ask is whether it is even desirable for an existing discipline like sociology to encourage transdisciplinarity. We are familiar with the argument that sociology is already too broad and all-encompassing and that it needs to be defined more narrowly. We have been told that sociology's borders are too porous and need to be fortified, and that disciplines need to become unified or 'paradigmatic' in order to make scientific progress. Political and methodological conservatives have worried aloud that sociology is in danger of being overrun by social movement activists and identity politics.

If what we actually want is a disciplinary form of knowledge – a self-enclosed and paradigmatic field that is attentive to maintaining its boundaries – then it is difficult to see what positive value could be attached to intellectual border-crossing. At the limit, members of a discipline would be encouraged to conduct hunting expeditions or sorties into neighboring territories, returning home with their trophies which could then be processed according to domestic protocols.² Disciplines, it could then be argued, should behave like 'autopoietic' subsystems (Luhmann, 1989).

I believe, however, that sociology suffers from its concern with the apparent lack of definition or fortification of its boundaries. At the most abstract level, the only criterion that can provide an intellectually coherent definition of the activity we call sociology is one that erases its difference from all of the other 'human sciences', including the humanities. This defining criterion would be sociology's object: the social;³ to this we might add a set of very general ontological precepts about the characteristics of social practice and what that entails for the best ways to gain knowledge of such practice. If the social is defined broadly to include all human activities that cannot be fully explained in terms of physical or biological causes, it will include all of the objects currently defined and studied as politics, culture, economics, and psychology. Once we allow that social objects include not only empirical events but also potentials for action or 'untriggered mechanisms',⁴ the spectrum of possible investigations becomes even broader. Purely theoretical work must be admitted to be of central importance. Inquiries into abstract entities or categories like 'social structure', 'the unconscious' or 'forms of legitimate domination' are as crucial as empirical analyses. The implicit ban on theoretical work that has long existed in most of American sociology must be lifted. Theory cannot be subsumed under empirical research because underlying structures may differ from phenomenal events (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979, 1986; Steinmetz, 2004; Lichtblau, 2006b). But highly specific histories and empirical studies of contemporary events and distant or ancient societies are equally important for any social science that wants to avoid becoming 'fact-free'.

The way the world is carved up and distributed among the various social sciences is largely arbitrary with regard to the actual objects of study today, even if that arrangement of disciplines may once have mapped onto 'cleavages in objects of study that seemed obvious to scholars at the time' (Wallerstein, 1999: 221). Disciplinary structures tend to be too cumbersome and inertia-bound to keep up with changes in their external objects of analysis. This is especially problematic since social practices (in contrast to the objects studied by the natural sciences) change more or less rapidly and since they change partly in response to the formations of knowledge that study them.⁵

There is also little symmetry between the disciplines in epistemological or methodological terms or with respect to the way they define their objects of study. Fields like economics and political science seem to be concerned with a smaller slice of the social world than sociology. Some disciplines seem to assume more realistically that human practice is driven by a multiplicity of motives and determinants while others deliberately focus on an artificially narrowed range of causal factors. Sociology tends to be extremely pluralistic in terms of the range of determinants or motives of action that it considers to be legitimate for discussion. This is excellent since there is no reason for sociologists to limit their attention to 'social' motives of action as opposed to 'political' or 'economic' motives. After all, 'social' practices in the narrow

sense may not necessarily be explained by 'social' causes. Sociology also refuses to confine its attention to practices located 'between' the state and the family, as suggested by Hegel's definition of 'civil society'. The main problems in sociology have not stemmed from its choice of objects of study but to its unwarranted assumption that the methods allegedly used in the natural sciences are the right ones for the social sciences.

It is difficult to identify any ontologically compelling borders between sociology and anthropology or history. Anthropology emerged originally in a different context from sociology, one in which biological race theory, imperial travel narratives and colonial administrative needs were of central importance (Leclerc, 1972; Asad, 1973; Stocking, 1987). But these origins have long since been disowned by most research on cultural and linguistic anthropologists. As anthropologists have turned to multi-sited research and to first-world metropolises, and as American sociology has become less focused on the United States as the privileged and unmarked case, the difference between the two disciplines has eroded even further.

The border between history and sociology has long been a fraught one in which sociologists for many years – especially in the 1960s and 1970s – presumed to tell historians how to do their work (McDonald, 1996; Sewell, 2005). But from the standpoint of the underlying ontological and epistemological issues, the distinction between history and sociology makes little sense. Both fields are concerned with human social practice in its capacity for change, willed or unintentional, and also in its capacity to reproduce itself historically in ways that seem unhistorical – that is, in ways that obscure the fact that new strategies are continually being developed to prevent new social structures from emerging. German sociology had emerged out of historical national economics and consisted largely of 'historical sociology' before 1933. (This contrasted sharply to the situation in the United States, where most of the founders of the discipline and of the first sociology departments were oriented toward economics and the natural sciences.) But this historical orientation was destroyed during the Nazi period, when sociologists who had not been repressed or driven into exile oriented their work in a more empirical, quantitative, and policy-oriented direction. As a result, historical research was almost nonexistent in West German sociology after the war. The influence of American positivist empiricism helped to push forward the process of disciplinary 'modernization' started by the Nazis – albeit for different reasons (Kruse 1998; Klingemann 1996).

The varieties of intellectual crossings that result from thinking about sociology broadly as the study of the social, with methods appropriate to that social object, are almost unlimited. Any serious empirical engagement with history will require sociologists to drop any pretence of scientific superiority and follow the historians into the archives and into the past. Any genuine involvement with questions of human subjectivity will bring sociologists into communication with psychoanalysts, philosophers, novelists and

other explorers of the human psyche. Investigations of societies other than the United States will require that American sociologists stop treating the US as the measure of all things. As a corollary, research on the United States will have to become comparative and transnational. Accepting social theory as an activity that can be pursued in partial independence from empirical research will bring sociologists back into contact with philosophers – rebuilding bridges that were of critical importance for members of the discipline's founding generation like Simmel, Durkheim, Cooley and Du Bois, not to mention more recent founders like Bourdieu.⁶ These dialogues with philosophy were interrupted by the empiricist and positivist generation that gained control of US sociology after the First World War.⁷

Sociology should open itself to freer interactions with outside knowledge formations, 'scientific' and otherwise. Sociologists will have to combine the study of the social with ongoing efforts at reflexive self-analysis, interrogating the epistemological and ontological assumptions and anxieties that undergird their scientific commonsense. As concerns method and methodology, there should be no automatic privileging of textual over visual information and certainly no privileging of quantitative over non-quantitative media. Sociologists should work with visual artists and filmmakers, performers and journalists, musicians and playwrights. Even when sociologists stick to a strictly textual mode they can experiment with new ways of presenting information and poetic forms of discourse. One could also make practical recommendations such as this: sociology departments should hire filmmakers and archival historians and offer jobs to writers and literary critics.

What I am recommending is the sort of intellectual transculturation that Michigan sociologist Charles Cooley was advocating in the 1920s and that Columbia University sociologist Robert Lynd advocated in 1939 in his book *Knowledge for What?* Cooley argued that sociologists' belief that 'only quantitative methods should be used' was 'an idea springing . . . from an obsolescent philosophy', one that 'physicists themselves are beginning to discard' and that statistics could never approach the level of 'descriptive precision that may be attained by the skilful use of language, supplemented, perhaps, by photography, phonography and other mechanical devices' (1928: 248–9). Other good models for sociology included psychoanalysis, anthropology, photography and literature (1928: 250–3; Cooley, 1919–25: 51). Lynd suggested that the social sciences should emulate the humanities and seek a closer rapprochement with 'novelists, artists, and poets' who would provide 'insights that go beyond the cautious generalizations of social science'. Similar recommendations were made more recently by the Gulbenkian Commission (1997).

SEIN: WHAT SOCIOLOGY IS

However laudable the vision of Cooley and Lynd, it did not in fact set the agenda for most of US sociology during the 20th century.⁸ After 1945

Talcott Parsons attempted to organize a very different sort of relationship between sociology and several other disciplines in the Harvard Social Relations department. Here sociology would retain a kind of soft hegemony over the other fields. In the two decades after 1945, American sociology was dominated by an epistemological formation I have called methodological positivism (Steinmetz, 2005a), one of whose characteristics was its aspiration to a kind of scientificity patterned on an imaginary vision of the natural sciences. Parsons muted and even partially recanted his prewar antipositivism during the 1950s, such that the archpositivist sociologist George Lundberg (1956: 21) could write in the mid-1950s that there was now 'considerable agreement among the systems' of Parsons and Lundberg's scientific colleague at the University of Washington, Stuart Dodd. This was associated with specific preferences concerning the sorts of interdisciplinary moves that were now considered desirable. Robert Angell, chairman of the Michigan sociology department during and immediately after the Second World War, followed Parsons in hiring anthropologists and psychologists (Steinmetz, 2007a). A comparable relationship between sociology and history characterized the beginnings of the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, which began in 1958. Historian Sylvia Thrupp introduced the first issue of *CSSH* in 1958 by advocating comparison and arguing that 'there is a definite set of problems common to the humanities, to history, and to the various social sciences'. She insisted that 'no group has a monopoly' over these problems. Eventually the journal moved away from sociology. But the initial volumes are suggestive of the effort among sociologists in that period to become hegemonic. At a 1962 seminar at the University of Michigan on the theme 'What Does History Offer Sociology', Sylvia Thrupp's lecture topic was 'the influence of sociology on history' – and not, for example, the influence of history on sociology.⁹ One of the members of the *CSSH* editorial board was Edward Shils, Parsons' frequent collaborator and coauthor in the postwar positivist decades. Shils was arguing at this time that the 'aim of general theory' was 'to become genuinely universal and transhistorical', rendering it 'equally applicable to *all* societies of the past and present' (1961: 1424, 1417). This cut against the long-standing disciplinary commonsense of historians, who were the first to embrace a 'relativist' epistemology and to avoid sweeping causal generalizations (Noiriel, 1998).

Despite a few calls in the early 1960s for a new opening to the humanities (Bierstedt, 1960; Schlesinger, 1962), sociology's prevailing doxa remained scientific until at least the end of that decade. During the 1970s some American sociologists started engaging with new forms of historical research and epistemology and entertaining critiques of the earlier hegemonic positivism (Gouldner, 1970; see also Giddens, 1975, and Bourdieu et al., 1968, for similar critiques in this period in Germany, Britain and France). By the 1980s, however, critical and historical sociology was already being 'domesticated' by the positivist mainstream (Calhoun, 1996). At present, American

sociology is more difficult to summarize as a field. While I perceive openings for post-positivism (more on that below), Somers (2005) sees a continuing dominance of positivism in a new depth-realist guise (seeking universal general laws of human behavior), with economics rather than the natural sciences as the leading model. It is remarkable that many sociologists who decry any turning toward the cultural and humanistic disciplines are quite willing to open the floodgates to the natural and biological sciences, or to fields like economics. Such epistemological warriors decry the 'barrage of the bobble heads' (Horowitz, 2005: 489) – that is, the influx of what they see as postmodern relativists and political critics – and warn 'promising young researchers' of the 'danger' of 'not taking sides' against 'the theoretical nihilism embraced by . . . postmodern theory' (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2002: 24).

All of this indicates that we cannot claim that US sociology today is generally open to 'hybrid' forms of knowledge. American sociology at present is riven by differences of opinion about the most fundamental questions. Each sociologist has different views about the sorts of interdisciplinarity that are desirable. Nonetheless, it is possible to ask about the conditions that could encourage the flowering of unbridled nondisciplinary curiosity and give greater latitude to unorthodox voices and strategies. An even more utopian goal would be an abolition of institutionalized disciplines in favor of a fluid structure of overlapping fields of knowledge production. New fields of knowledge could emerge, old ones could merge or disappear freely, as intellectuals adapt to changes in the ontology of the social. Sociology might not even retain a distinct identity as a field of knowledge production. Conversely, we can also ask about the situations in which sociology is likely to engage in hegemonic moves to incorporate other disciplines or to throw up barriers against exterior influences.

American sociology has varied over the course of the last century in its *fieldness*, that is, in the extent to which it is consolidated around a commonly recognized definition of distinction or excellence (on the concept of 'field' see Bourdieu, 1985). In some periods there has been widespread consensus inside sociology, even among unorthodox thinkers, about what counts as symbolic capital and proper *métodos* governing the pursuit of knowledge (Steinmetz, 2007a). But disciplines are not always full-fledged fields in Bourdieu's sense. At the opposite extreme from a well-established and settled field we can imagine a discipline that is still called 'sociology' but that is characterized by tremendous diversity and multivocality with respect to everything from basic ontological assumptions and preferred topics of study to vocabularies and styles of knowledge production.

For the sake of argument, let us assume as a 'stylized fact' that American sociology today is *more* fieldlike than in the 1930s, when Lynd presented his plea for hybrid knowledge (and also more fieldlike than in the years before the First World War), but *less* fieldlike than in the postwar period when Parsons tried to organize the social sciences around a hegemonic sociology.¹⁰

This variability in sociology's fieldness has several implications for the question of *transdisciplinarity* – a situation in which the borders of disciplines are eroded and new intermediate spaces or fields emerge – as opposed to *interdisciplinarity*, a condition in which disciplines retain their distinct borders. Relations among disciplines during periods like the 1950s tend to be organized as hegemonic ventures toward the outside. Efforts are made to enlist other disciplines as allies or satellites, as in Parsons' Social Relations model. These periods are characterized by a less anxious relationship toward interaction with other disciplines precisely because the well-structured field is internally unified and its elites are not frightened by the prospect of being subjected to external forces and being pulled off its main course. Hybrid forms of knowledge among sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s tended to take an *interdisciplinary* form in which sociology retained its distinctive identity and subjected external inputs to its own logic, rather than a *transdisciplinary* form in which both parties to the relationship undergo change and interact in a new, 'third' space characterized by a minimum of symbolic violence (Bhabha, 1994; see also Arendt, 1968, and Herzog, 2004, on cosmopolitan 'visiting' and Arnason, 2006, on a 'phenomenology of civilizational encounters').

Sociology nowadays is less fieldlike, and positivism is less doxic than in the 1950s, even if the latter is perhaps still dominant as a form of orthodoxy (Bourdieu, 1977). There is greater leeway for unorthodox sociologists to experiment with new forms of knowledge production. Historical and cultural sociologists no longer tend to agree that it is preferable to emulate pseudo-experimentalist modes of research, or that they should confine themselves to a sort of 'hyphenated sociology' rather than trying to infuse social knowledge in general with cultural and historical epistemologies (see Sewell, 1996, and Lichtblau, 2006a; also Perrin, 2004). Sociologists' relationship to history, the humanities, cultural anthropology and to nonacademic politics and culture is less encumbered than in earlier decades.

What is missing in Bourdieu's approach to the sociology of science is the possibility of a transition from practices that improvise within the strategic limits set by fields and practices that catapult themselves out of these logics, engaging across fields or in inchoate social spaces that may not congeal into fields at all (see De Certeau, 1984; Eyal, 2005). More specifically, we might imagine a gradation of knowledge systems. At one extreme all knowledge production is organized into disciplines; the opposite extreme is intellectually anarchic. I think a preferable solution would be located between these two poles. This space would include 'fields' of knowledge production, but without the institutional features and strictures of disciplines. These fields would still be organized around competition and demands for recognition of excellence. They would still exhibit evolving understandings of proper methodology, of canonical works, and of interesting topics of investigation. Some historical models for this form of intellectual productivity would

include, first of all, the entire period before the disciplines arose (that is, before the 19th century). Other experiments in transdisciplinarity include the Institut für Sozialforschung in interwar Frankfurt (which included philosophy and the humanities but was overly focused on Marxism), and perhaps the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (see Revel and Wachtel, 1996).

Now that US sociology is more weakly hegemonized than in the past it has become easier for individuals to move into such border spaces, leaving behind the unattractive forced choices of mimicking orthodox forms of knowledge or resisting them through a simple inversion of orthodoxy (e.g. by insisting on 'qualitative' sociology against the 'quantitative mainstream' or pure 'theory' against crude 'empiricism').

RELATIONS BETWEEN FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION MODELLED ON THE RELATIONS AMONG POLITICAL UNITS

Can one compare zones of contact among heterogeneous formations of knowledge to the relations among states in the world system?¹¹ My point is not that all border-crossing knowledge ventures are imperial in nature, as Said (1978) seemed to suggest, or that the only alternative to intellectual imperialism is 'local knowledge' (Geertz, 1983) or 'minor literature' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). At least four distinct possibilities appear (see Steinmetz, 2005c, on these different types of empire).

First, interdisciplinarity is sometimes analogous to the relationship between a loosely structured empire like the Roman one with its satellites, or to a nonterritorial empire like the current American one, which tends to eschew direct territorial annexation and to preserve the sovereignty of its client states. This form of interdisciplinarity is reminiscent of Carl Schmitt's concept of the political *nomos*, or geospatial ordering principle, whose prototype was the Monroe Doctrine (Schmitt, 1995, 2003 [1950]). This sort of empire tries to lead those in the peripheral area to understand themselves in terms of metropolitan concepts. As Schmitt remarked, 'Caesar . . . is also the ruler of grammar' (1994 [1940]: 202). Friedrich Naumann described the satellite states in an imperial system in similar terms: 'these states have their own life, their own summers and winters, their own culture, worries and glories, but in the grand world-historical scheme of things they no longer follow their own laws but work to reinforce the leading group' (Naumann, 1964 [1915]; in Blindow, 1999: 74).¹² Between 1945 and 1965 American sociology not only translated the knowledge of other fields into its own disciplinary codes, but to some extent other disciplines began to speak the language of sociology. The relationship between US social historians and sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s is revealing in this regard (Sewell, 2005).

Second, in extreme situations one discipline may treat another as if it were a territorial colonial dependency, attempting to abolish its sovereignty outright. Current efforts in some universities to merge national literature

departments into comparative literature departments are suggestive of this pattern.

In the third situation, which is the one that university administrators generally seem to have in mind when they encourage interdisciplinarity, the relationship among disciplines resembles the Westphalian system of legally equal states. No single discipline dominates any other discipline; each discipline deals with inputs from the others on its own terms. No discipline relinquishes power or fundamentally alters its identity as a result of interactions with its intellectual outside.

Finally, states that are in decline, empires that are relinquishing imperial ambitions, and political unities that are losing control over their own borders can be compared to knowledge formations that lack internal unity or fieldness. In the case of states and empires, the collapse of sovereignty may open up the possibility of a kind of nonimperial traveling or visiting, of border crossing without any imperial intent. This characterized Arab or Chinese travelers to Europe during the colonial era and Europeans who set out from weak states to visit the non-west. Anticolonialism and anti-imperialism flourished in France during the political crisis of the 1930s, in Germany after the loss of the First World War and during the turbulent Weimar Republic, and throughout Europe and the US during the sociopolitical crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s.

During the early modern period, when Germany did not yet exist as a political entity, German travelers and theorists may have been better equipped than Dutch or British ones to describe nonwestern cultures in open-minded ways. I am thinking of the writings by Leibniz (1990) and Christian Wolff (1740 [1726]) on China, by Peter Kolb (1719) on South Africa, and by Georg Forster (2000 [1777]) on Oceania, as well as Herder's (1985 [1784]) remarkable cultural relativism. These sorts of anomalous perceptions became less typical after the Napoleonic wars and especially after German unification and the onset of explicit colonialism at the end of the 19th century. Even in these conditions of triumphant imperialism, however, individual European ethnologists and voyagers were sometimes able to shed their epistemological prejudices and Orientalist blinders and enter into open-ended and non-hierarchical processes of communication with the non-European other in ways that were productive of new kinds of knowledge.¹³ My hypothesis is that individuals more readily engaged in these kinds of ventures when they were located within a relatively weak or crisis-ridden national state, and where visions of imperialist grandeur were correspondingly less compelling.

By the same token, sociologists in the present situation might be able to take advantage of their field's relative structural disunity, its long-lasting 'crisis', to promote transdisciplinarity.¹⁴ The collapse of the regularizing social patterns of postwar Fordism means that the spontaneous social epistemologies of sociologists are less likely to conform to the strictures of methodological positivism (Steinmetz, 2005b). These changes inside and outside the

discipline could empower sociologists to shed long-standing disciplinary prejudices about topics like science, the humanities, theory, and the ideographic versus the nomothetic, and to enter into open-ended and deterritorialized encounters with various intellectual others.

SOCIOLOGICAL SELF-REFLECTION AND DEPROVINCIALIZATION

I have deliberately focused on desirable possibilities and intellectually empowering sociohistorical conditions. In doing so I do not mean to deny the existence of hard constraints on transdisciplinary or nondisciplinary endeavors – constraints imposed by the economics of academic hiring, the control of journals by specific gatekeeping groups, the agonistic dynamics of academia, and the need to justify a discipline's existence to funders and university administrators (Gulbenkian Commission, 1996: 70–91). In other articles I have focused on just these sorts of barriers to unorthodox sociology (Steinmetz, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a). And if the present situation is conducive to 'visiting' and 'traveling' outside the discipline, disciplinary conservatives are likely to become more aggressive in policing intellectual boundaries and even less tolerant of interactions with fields viewed as subjective, unscientific or lacking in practical application. But many of the supposed barriers to nondisciplinarity are self-imposed. There is something like a discipline-wide 'hysteresis of habitus' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 130): the sociological conditions that gave rise to a positivist social-scientific habitus have partly faded away, but the old practices persist. The 'postmodern' absence of intellectual and moral foundations, the 'post-Kuhnian' tentativeness of even the most solid forms of scientific knowledge, and the 'decisionistic' state of emergency in the political realm may lead to something like a security-centered backlash in the realm of sociological epistemology. As Carl Schmitt remarked about legal positivists in a similarly uncertain situation (1991 [1939]: 28), the positivist confronted by decisionistic complexity may feel he is 'losing the ground from beneath his feet' and react defensively. This makes it all the more imperative that sociology continue to reflect on its own disciplinary identity, looking inward even as it also gazes outward in an effort at all-encompassing deprovincialization.

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Notes

1. This article was prepared for the session on 'Discipline and Hybridity' at the 2006 meetings of the American Sociological Association in Montréal. It benefited from discussion with members of the workshop on disciplinarity at the University of Chicago Center in Paris in March 2007.

2. See the comments by one sociologist:

Boundaries bolster academic identities and professional solidarity, settle jurisdictional disputes, and help police the disciplinary division of labor. But they also create unusual opportunities for the adventurous, as the etymology of the word entrepreneur suggests. Life on the disciplinary frontier offers the possibility of breaching barriers and transgressing boundaries, what we might call 'constructive misbehavior.' Intellectual entrepreneurs can wander into foreign territory, bringing back tales of wondrous sights and strange baubles. They can, in short, perform a kind of arbitrage: taking ideas or facts from where they are commonplace and bringing them to where they are scarce, rare, or new. (Carruthers, 2005: 3)

3. I realize that political theorists from Hegel (1942) through Arendt (1958) have sharply distinguished the social from the political. In the critical realist philosophy of science, however, the sorts of practices these theorists call political and social all fall under the rubric of the 'social'. For Bhaskar (1979) the psychic and the social are distinct ontological levels, but not the political, economic, sociological and anthropological. His insistence on the distinction between the psychic and the social is based on his concern to define human agents and social structures as irreducible to one another.
4. For definitions and discussions of mechanisms see Bhaskar (1975, 1979, 1986), Little (1991), Elster (1998), Machamer et al. (2000), Steel (2004) and Collier (2005). A lengthy list of mechanism-related social research from just a single philosophical perspective, critical realism, is provided by Collier (1994) and Archer et al. (1998). The disadvantages of the term 'mechanism' are obvious. No matter how often social scientists and philosophers have tried to separate the term from its association with machines, mechanical causation, and the like, the rest of the world automatically makes these sorts of linguistic connections. Modern physics avoids the term mechanism because it is associated with the mechanical worldview of the 17th century. Most of the alternatives are also problematic, however. 'Essences' and 'entities' sound like Platonic forms, or like forms that remain unmixed. This forecloses what in my view is one of the most important problems, namely, the need to theorize the mixing and condensation of mechanisms. Some critical realists prefer the term 'structure' to mechanism, but this carries the theoretical baggage of 'structuralism'. The word 'system' brings with it the connotations of systems theory. The word 'process' is problematic because processes are located at the ontological level of 'events'. Events are the things sociologists are trying to explain, not their explaining

elements. The words 'determinant' and 'cause' are too general and all-encompassing. The word 'mechanism' has thus gained favor as an alternative to atheoretical empiricism, even if it is constantly in danger of slipping into a sort of positivism.

5. The humanities disciplines may be more open to change than the social sciences, however. This may be because these disciplines emulate their objects of study practices in which creative invention and eccentricity is often highly valued.
6. Simmel studied philosophy and history and wrote his doctoral and habilitation theses on Kant, published on philosophical problems like aesthetics, metaphysics and the philosophy of history, taught in philosophy departments at Berlin and Strassburg, and married a philosopher, Gertrud Kinel, who published under the pseudonym Marie Luise Enckendorf. Durkheim taught philosophy (Durkheim, 2004), published on the philosophy of science (Schmaus, 1994), and is treated as both a philosopher and sociologist by his biographers (e.g. LaCapra, 1972). Cooley's master thinkers included William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Goethe, and he had taken courses with John Dewey as a student and was acquainted with George Herbert Mead (Cooley, 1930: 6; Coser, 1977, 319, 343). W. E. B. Du Bois studied with philosophers as an undergraduate and with professional historians as a graduate student at Harvard and was deeply influenced by Hegel (Gilroy, 1993: 134), even though he chose to study mainly political economy while in Berlin in the 1890s despite the fact that the university was 'full of Hegelians' (Barkin, 2000: 92).
7. Indeed, orthodox sociology became increasingly disdainful of philosophy. Sociology's methodological commonsense was codified in the philosophically oxymoronic doctrine of 'middle-range theory' (Merton, 1968; see Steinmetz and Chae, 2002, for critique). Most American sociology departments stopped discussing philosophy altogether, or taught only the (neo)positivist philosophical lineage using texts like Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg's influential *Language of Social Research* (1955), Abraham Kaplan's *Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (1964), or Ernest Nagel's *Structure of Scientific Explanation* (1961). And if Parsons' sociological theory was philosophically informed by Kant, the 'conventional attitude toward [Parsons'] theory' was 'one of critical aloofness' (Munch, 1981) even in the era of his greatest influence. The only other philosophical tradition of which sociology retained any awareness was pragmatism, which continued to influence symbolic interactionism – but this was a 'dominated' sector of the discipline.
8. As I have argued elsewhere (Steinmetz, 2007a), American sociology was much more evenly balanced in terms of the relative prestige of different epistemologies during the 1930s than in the postwar decades. Lynd's approach was nonetheless far from dominant before 1945.
9. Robert Angell papers, University of Michigan, Bentley library, Box 2, folder 'Outline of Talks'.
10. I provide some evidence for these claims in Steinmetz (2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b).
11. For the notion of 'contact zones' see Pratt (1992).
12. Somers (2005) suggests that US sociology may be subordinated to economics without realizing it, via a sort of soft hegemonic takeover.
13. One particularly interesting example of this is the German China missionary

turned Sinologist Richard Wilhelm, who became a critic of German and European colonialism during his posting to the German colony of Qingdao/Jiaozhou and apprenticed himself to a group of Confucian literati (Wilhelm, 1914; Hirsch, 2003). Other examples from this period include the journalist and playwright Alfons Paquet (1912) and the traveling philosopher Herman Graf von Keyserling (1925). A counterexample was Max Weber, who selected the most extreme Orientalist literatures era in his analysis of China (Steinmetz, 2006). The French surrealists (Lebovics, 1992) and Malraux (Sapiro, 2001) took a relativist and anticolonial stance after the First World War.

14. On the trope of sociology's 'crisis', inaugurated by Gouldner (1970), see Steinmetz and Chae (2002).

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