From Disciplinary Boundaries to Areas of Study
Towards a Critique of the Discourse
of Modernity*

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Academic disciplines don't create their fields of significance, they only legitimize particular organizations of meaning. They filter and rank—and in that sense, they truly discipline-contested arguments and themes that often reach them. In doing so, they continuously expand, restrict, or modify in diverse ways their arsenals of tropes, the types of statements they deem acceptable. But the poetics and politics of the 'slots' within which disciplines operate do not dictate the enunciative relevance of these slots.[1]

Instead of thinking of knowledge as part of a larger process of self-realisation, self-awareness and self-transcendence, it has been perceived as a means of streamrolling the entire world into a set of uniformities...If interdiciplinarity is not making much headway despite persistent advocacy of it by both men of science and men of affairs, it is because it is still being pursued within the dominant worldview and the role of technical experts in it. It is imperative for us to come to grips with the particular tradition of science and technology influenced by the homocentric worldview which put man at the center of creation and exhorted him to use knowledge to enhance his power.[2]

The Problem:

When we study anything, our object of study is part of a broader field. While located within it, our units and objects of study do not exhaust this field. When we look at our object of study with a particular perspective or from a specific vantage point our way of looking at it neither constitutes nor characterizes it.

It reflects our interest and our spirit of inquiry as knowing

subjects rather than the essence of either the object or the field. But such a perspectival understanding seems to be lacking in the agenda of modern sciences—natural and cultural. Modern modes of inquiry into the human condition has been characterized by what can be called a 'disciplinary mode'. We make sense of the world through particular, specialized and bounded disciplines. We look at the world through the eyes of the disciplines to which we belong and tend to think that the whole world is characterized by the significance of our respective disciplines. If one is a sociologist one tends to firmly believe that the world is sociological and that sociology holds the ultimate key to the understanding of social reality. Similarly for a psychologist the ultimate reality of the world would appear to be psychological. Indeed modern disciplines have been endowed with essential meanings and have acted as cultural wholes for the subjects of inquiry, thus making them blind and tending to close off the prospect of transcendence from within and without.[3]

The boundaries of the disciplines are however, contrived ones and their specialization and expert knowledge were part of a modern academic division of labour. In deciding these contours or boundaries the self-styled builders of disciplines and proponents of disciplinary essentialism had very small role to play. For instance, if anthropology were to be the disciplinary and disciplined caretaker of the 'savage' then this 'savage' slot was not of anthropology's own choosing. It was assigned by the discursive project of modernity, where the thematic object of anthropology, viz the 'savage', was part of a broader discursive field, constituted by the regime of economy and power, which had at least two other more determinant themes—namely those of order and utopia.[4] In the discursive field of modernity the 'savage' made sense only along with a construction of an utopia while 'utopia itself made sense only in terms of the absolute order against which it was projected, negatively or not'.[5] In fact, the search for the primitive in foreign lands was preceded by the search for order at home. Thus in constituting an area of study around a thematic unit such as the 'savage', 'the internal tropes of anthropology matter much less than the larger discursive field within which anthropology operates and upon whose existence it is premised'.[6]

In this archaeology of modern disciplines the case of anthropology is interesting for another reason. It sensitizes us to the problematic relationship between units of analysis and the

field of study; a relationship which is constructed harmoniously and homologously by the architects of modern disciplines.[7] Even when anthropology studied solely such apparently simpler forms of societies such as primitive societies its objects of study and units of analysis such as 'tribe', 'caste' and 'village' did not correspond exactly to the field of study. For instance, the conceptualization and the study of tribe as a 'self-contained unit' does not recognize its inherent and essential links with castes and civilizations.[8] Though the assumption of an exact match between an unit of analysis and the field of study was a crucial one in modern anthropology and in its 'invention of primitive society', such assumptions are subject to fundamental criticism. This is because the world which created anthropology is itself subject to funda-mental structural change and cultural criticism. These processes also compel anthropology to distance itself from its providential 'savage' slot and to turn to advanced industrial societies. In place of an uncritical assumption about an exact correspondence between an unit of analysis and an area of study, anthropologists are now beginning to see both of them as parts of a 'discovery procedure' and as a discursive field. It is now helpful to realize that even 'Though units of study are properties of 'analysis', they must correspond to the 'emergent' properties of the system. The effort of formulating appropriate units of analysis must be linked to a discovery procedure'.[9]

From Disciplinary Boundaries Towards Conceptualizing Our Areas of Study as Discursive Fields

Our units of analysis and objects of study have a complex constit-ution. They are, in fact, constituted of a dialectic between the local and the global, the internal tropes and the pervasive discur-sive themes. These also point to the contemporary inadequacies of the bounded disciplines in making sense of the human condition where the manifestation of forms of life exhibit more the properties of flow, mutual penetration and movement rather than fixity and stasis. Processes of structural and discursive trans-formations in our contemporary world have forced the bounded disciplines to participate in a flow of consciousness, what anthro-pologist Clifford Geertz once termed 'blurred genres'.[10] Crisis in both the existent forms of social organization and cultural representation has heightened the urgency for broadening ourselves by going beyond our chains of disciplinary illusions.

Indeed, contemporary processes of transformation—structural as well as cultural—reveal the inadequacy of modern disciplines in making sense of the human condition through the vantage point of any single discipline. These transformations challenge us to conceptualize our disciplinary grounds not in terms of any essential boundaries but as areas of study. Compared to the organization of disciplines the idea of an area of study, both as a concept as well as a metaphor, provides us a wide-angle vision as well as a more expansive ground where we stand with our doors and windows open for communication, and where, the world of knowledge is not broken into fragments by narrow disciplinary walls. But having made this move from disciplinary boundaries to areas of study it is helpful to conceptualize these as discursive fields. Instead of leaving the idea of 'area of study' unexamined we ca. look at this as an area where some discursive waves flow. We can conceptualize our areas of study as permeated and characterized by certain discursive themes, though not determined by them.

When we look at our objects of study and units of analysis as part of a discursive field it requires of us some shifts in our method of study. In making sense of our object of study we are more interested in variables which can explain it causally as a product rather than the processes which characterize its nature as well as its emergent unfoldment. Our usual method is one of model-testing, based upon deductive theories in our conceptual repertoires. We are rarely interested in describing the processes atwork in our study of the phenomenon at hand. But conceptualizing an area of study as a discursive field requires us to pay more attention to the processes at work; to describe them, and build contextual and ecological explanations based upon such descriptions.[11]

Among the contemporary thinkers Michael Foucault, to whom we owe the notions of 'discursive field' and 'discursive formation', has been more insistent in his emphasis on description in the study of a discursive field.[12] For Foucault, what defines a discursive field is not any single or homogeneous proposition about truth but the persistence of a theme. This persistence is not simply a synchronic equilibrium of elements at a particular time. It is also a movemental persistence where a focal theme persists in its continuous flow and widening of horizons. Foucault challenges us to go beyond the either/or construction of a discursive field. For him, an analysis of the discursive field

'would not try to isolate small islands of coherence in order to describe their internal structure; it would not try to suspect and reveal latent conflicts; it would study forms of division'.[13] In the study of a discursive field the challenge is not simply to 'reconstitute chains of inference' and 'draw up tables of differences', but to 'describe systems of dispersion'.[14]

But this practice of description in our pursuits of objects in our areas of study, conceptualized as discursive fields, must be accompanied by a shift in our explanatory habits. Conceptualizing our areas of study as discursive fields calls for a rethinking of the idea of theory and the prevalent idea of an area of study as a laboratory for testing the truthfulness and falsity of claims of a deductive theoretical enterprise. What a recent observer has written in this regard is noteworthy:

> The first step is to recognize that we are essentially dealing with a probabilistic world and that the deterministic perspective in which most sociological theories are couched and which underlies the notion of a critical test is more than unrealistic, it is inappropriate. If theories are posed in probabilistic terms i.e. specifying that a given set of conditions will alter the likelihood of a given outcome, not only will the reality of social life be correctly described, but we will also be freed from assuming that negative evidence automatically means that a theory is wrong.[15]

In fact, the challenge for explanation in our times requires us not to be preoccupied with definite or conclusive explanations, but to explain process and reality in an ecological context and in a mode of probability. Probability calls for a flexibility of mind. In fact, there is an 'elective affinity' between a correct description of social life and a probabilistic mode of explanation.

For the above author, 'Explaining an event is very different from evaluating or testing a theory....It means describing the most likely processes that could have led to a given outcome'.[16] Thus a phenomenon can also be explained in a probabilistic manner by means of description of the ecology where it occurs. As another recent insightful commentator tells us, 'An ecological constructionism thus fits with and is informed by....a contextual logic'.[17] In the words of this author:

> When the observer is placed within her or his inquiry, we have a beginning for a reflexive methodology for research. In

attempting to hear their voices in our stories, and to provide
for the mutualness so necessary to contextualize our research...
we take seriously the idea of ecology...I mean ecology here in
Bateson's sense, of a 'context' constituted by a fitting together of
ideas....I have proposed that we understand the various
mirrorings involved in locating the researcher in such an eco-
system. It is this premise that allows the idea of a co-
construction to be doubly relevant, in that both the relational
processes of the researchers, as well as the reciprocator/
researcher interaction are 'understandableṣ' that allow for our
claim to emerge.[18]

Such a research practice of description, co-construction, and
ecological explanation, however, requires of us to be reflexive
about the discourse and method of modernity since the regime of
modernity is built upon dualism between the subject and the
object, culture and nature, phenomenon and its ecology.[19] The
discourse of modernity with its in-built bias towards dualism and
against ecology does not help us very much in coming to terms
with the contemporary challenge of description and ecological
explanation. Hence, the need for a widening and transcendence!

Towards a Critique of the Discourse of Modernity

The problem with modern disciplines in coming to terms with
the challenge of knowledge has also led to the need for and the
agenda of interdisciplinary research. It has been hoped that
interdisciplinary research would not only help us go beyond our
disciplinary limitations but also would help us in achieving the
integration of knowledge. But in reality this agenda has not
made much headway, either in North America or in India,
because the agenda of interdisciplinary research has been
articulated in the same egoistic idioms of modern disciplines. If
the global and discursive nature of our units and objects of study
make the interdisciplinary mode of inquiry a necessity, then
putting it into practice requires an 'alternative process of
knowledge formation'[20] where the subjects, though firmly rooted
in disciplines as holding grounds, transcend their disciplinary
egos and confront the human condition in terms of its essential
richness and mystery, not in terms of the 'partial truths' of one's
own discipline.

The same problem of old habits haunts us in so far as the

striving for integration of knowledge is concerned. Even while speaking of integration of knowledge what we really mean is building some kind of unified knowledge—our goal is to realize the Enlightenment project of unification of sciences. We are anxious for a synthesis of knowledge without subjecting the idea of integration and synthesis to a closer scrutiny. The key question still remains what does integration of knowledge mean and how to achieve it? Here it must be noted that integration of knowledge does not mean either aggregation of knowledge or mechanical integration. It means a creative synthesis of perspectives. Even speaking of integration it must be realized that there are two kinds of integration—mechanical integration and differential integration. Elements within a field might be part of a co-ordinating arrangement as differences and maintain their identities as differences, without becoming part of a systemic and mechanical integration. Integration of knowledge is an instance of differential—not mechanical—integration. This entails a process of integration within the life of the scholars concerned. Thus in coming out of the crisis of modern disciplines in coping with the challenge of knowledge merely chanting the virtues of interdisciplinary research is not enough. We need to invoke the integral and integration-seeking being within us and make it the seeker of knowledge and perform the function of bricolage.Interdisciplinary research, indeed, is a transdisciplinary seeking, which has to be accompanied by the transcendence of our ego—'a transcendence from within'.[21] It requires a willingness to transform oneself as an initial starting point and as the ultimate ideal. But this agenda of self-transformation has been poorly articulated in the discourse of modernity which has been preoccupied with the 'technology of power' and has been least interested in the 'technology of the self'.[22] Indeed, the very idea of discourse has been constructed narrowly in terms of political significance of utterances, which has not taken into account the spiritual dimension in the work of self, culture, and society and the emancipatory project of value-seeking and culture as a perennial quest for meaning, which has the potential to criticize and transform power, not merely helplessly reproduce it.[23]

This political construction of the very idea of discourse has had its most deleterious effect in our comprehension of morals and the practice of education. In fact, in the politically constructed world of discourse, morality itself has been constructed politically

where 'the purpose of moral practices is to secure and maintain for men mutually advantageous social arrangements' and 'the content of "morality"... is a product of the requirements of the "polis".'[24] As Edelman tells us, 'In none of the accounts of morality belonging to this tradition are the needs, interest, and desires whose satisfaction is at issue themselves characterized as specifically "moral" needs, interests or desires. That is to say, we don't begin with any moral discrimination concerning them.'[25] In fact, such a politically constructed discourse not only removes morality from the field of modernity but also removes the 'inner life from the sphere of the moral'.[26]

This banishment of the inner life has nowhere been more total than in the practice of modern education where the object has been solely to provide skills and rational frames of world-making to the apprentices rather than develop their inner life and enable them to grow spiritually as they learn how to master the world through 'knowledge and human interests'. In fact, the discursive field of modernity has conceptualized knowledge only in terms of power and has systematically denigrated and eroded the essential relationship between knowledge and love, knowledge and *Bhakti*. As contemporary transformations challenge us to locate our disciplines in a wider context and conceptualize our areas of study as discursive fields, these processes also challenge us to broaden our idea of discourse by breaking away from its political essentialism and incorporating the transformative strivings in the work of self and culture, and the spiritual praxis which embodies them.

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