

## **Introduction: Translation and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity**

GURMINDER K BHAMBRA AND JOHN HOLMWOOD\*

The collection of articles presented here address specific epistemological and methodological challenges associated with interdisciplinary research undertaken in an international and cross-cultural context.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, these substantive and methodological issues are seen as integrally related. For example, while the focus of social science research has historically been delimited by national boundaries, it is now increasingly international and cross-cultural. This is, in part, as a consequence of increasing recognition that the issues that affect us within national communities are international in their nature and source. Further, such issues are rarely of concern simply to one discipline and are taken up within different disciplines, but often without any dialogue across the boundaries of those disciplines. There is frequently no address of the unique methodological issues raised by interdisciplinary research, nor reflection on the challenges of building knowledge systematically across disciplinary boundaries.

One common approach to interdisciplinarity takes the substance of disciplines as given and as a repository of competences to be applied to a given problem. These competences are held to reside in valid procedures and conceptual frameworks that are not context-specific, but allow different contexts to be approached via concepts and methods that are themselves regarded as “universal” (McLennan 2006; Scott 2005). While there are areas of overlap across disciplines that make such an approach seem plausible, even in its own terms there are issues that must arise when the competing epistemological and methodological assumptions of disciplines are recognised. For example, in typical representations of social science disciplines, there is a distinction made between methodological individualism and methodological holism which conventionally distinguishes disciplines like psychology and economics from disciplines like sociology and anthropology. From the perspective of each epistemological position the claim is universal, but since they cannot be taken together or aggregated, each must

\* Dr Gurminder K Bhambra is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Social Theory Centre at the University of Warwick (Contact email: g.k.bhambra@warwick.ac.uk). Professor John Holmwood is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham.

call into question the claim of the other. Although disciplines may be strongly associated with one or other of these positions, there are minorities within each discipline that advocate the alternative position. Thus, sociologists and economists can engage in an “interdisciplinary” manner sharing rational actor assumptions, or heterodox economists can work together with sociologists of the economy. But it is not clear that either of these combinations would represent a deep interdisciplinarity. At best, then, “universalism” is something that might be achieved by future efforts, rather than being the secure basis of interdisciplinarity in the present (see articles by Demir, Vazquez, and Restrepo this issue).

A second approach to interdisciplinarity locates the development of (social science) disciplines within a nation-state centred framework and argues that as globalisation has shattered the boundaries of the nation-state so the boundaries of disciplines are also broken down. This approach leads to a new “cosmopolitan” universalism where the adequacy of the concepts and analytical frameworks to the past is assumed and all that is required is a new way of addressing present and future problems (Beck 2000; 2006; for discussion, see Fine 2007). For Wallerstein and his colleagues, the methodological nationalism of standard disciplines like politics, sociology and economics is to be replaced by *trans*-disciplinarity (in the sense that the claim to transcend disciplines necessarily transcends interdisciplinarity as well) (Wallerstein 1996; Taylor 2000). The substantive research problems engaged with in the articles collected here suggests that such analyses are also flawed. If moving beyond the boundaries of nation-state centred social science has implications for the boundaries of disciplines, it would seem to follow that how knowledge production is located in time and space (who is recognised as a producer of knowledge and which sites are privileged?) is also a crucial matter when addressing interdisciplinarity (see Bhambra 2007b; Taylor 2000; Vazquez 2009).

For example, “globalisation” has a history as old as modernity and, indeed, is a condition of modernity. Modernity emerged in colonial interconnections and, paradoxically, if any period can be called the period of the nation-state it would be our present period *after* processes of decolonisation and the formal dismantling of imperial regimes (see Barkawi 2004; Bhambra 2007a; Dirlik 2003). In this context, where conceptual structures of the disciplines are seen to be tied to particular historical circumstances, issues of interdisciplinarity cannot be addressed simply by “looking forward” to a new phase of globalisation, but also by looking backwards at how the conception of a “new phase” of globalisation is itself a construct of particular, located ways of making the world visible

(and, simultaneously, some aspects invisible) (see Vazquez, Slate, Shilliam, Margree and Bhambra). A core concern of this special issue, then, is that globalisation is an issue *of the past in its relation to the present*, as much as it is an issue *of the present in relation to the future*. If current approaches to social science suggest that globalisation is a present and future challenge, then a proper appreciation of that challenge will require us to work backwards to understand how processes previously thought to be adequately represented in sociological and historical categories are now seen to be in conflict with them.

In the post second world war period of decolonisation, the post-colonial critique has brought the perspective of the world outside Europe more prominently onto the agenda of the social sciences. This is also allied with a shift in geo-politics following on from the collapse of communist states and the rise of India and China as new economic powers. If globalisation is a key issue for Western social science it is surely not because the world was not previously “globalised”, but because the erstwhile “subjects” of globalisation now experience themselves as its potential “objects”. The articles in this special issue suggest that the social sciences need to be open to new voices and a potential flattening of the hierarchies within which knowledge is produced (see Restrepo, Shilliam, Zeybek). This is what Chakrabarty (2000) has called the provincialising (rather than universalising) of knowledge claims, that is, that any “global” approach needs to recognise the different local contexts from which global interconnections might be addressed (see Holmwood 2009). It seeks to provide an account of how we might learn from others without assuming a “centre” of universalist categories through which communication and learning should flow (Burawoy 2005a; 2005b; 2008; Connell 2007; Holmwood 2007; Stanley 2005). Connected sociologies must operate from all directions across times and place in their construction and reconstruction of sociology’s objects, relations, and identities. The emphasis of this project on *connections* – of connected histories and connected sociologies – is precisely to address the issue of how connections newly found in the present often also require us to rethink the connections assumed in the past (see Bhambra 2010).

If other approaches to interdisciplinarity seem also to introduce a further aspect of incommensurability, our approach introduces incommensurability in terms of cross-cultural (and other) forms of location. However, *we want to invert this problem and say that incommensurability is not a problem for interdisciplinarity, but it is its condition*. Difference is integral to learning; it is only if the “other” has something different to offer that learning from others could be possible. Of course, there must be something that each

shares – for example, a problem in common where each party may be interested to reflect upon and learn from the response of the other (see Shilliam this issue) – but this need not be a shared perspective or set of common meanings. It is only if that difference made a difference to our previous understandings that we could say that we have learnt from another. Nor do we propose that learning need end in mutual agreement for the engagement with the other to be significant. We approach interdisciplinarity as a *form of translation across differences*. A “mutual” language evolves in the process of translation, but this language will not be a universalistic set of categories (as analytic approaches to interdisciplinarity propose), or a common agreed problem (as applied interdisciplinarity proposes), it will be closer to a “language of practice” alongside the more familiar languages of disciplines (see Demir 2008).

Interdisciplinary research, and international and cross-cultural collaborative research all require some degree of translation; translation not just across languages, but across disciplinary and cultural boundaries as well. The idea and concept of translation is not only much written about and discussed, but has become, in of itself, a whole research field. This special issue, while drawing on the insights and developments within Translation Studies (see, Bassnett and Lefevre 1998; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Liu 1996), opens up the idea of translation as a metaphor for thinking about the challenges of researching across differences more generally – be they linguistic, disciplinary, or cultural differences. The perceived scale and complexity of the problem of globalisation frequently gives rise to claims that it can only be addressed by cooperative effort across different disciplines and the articles in this special issue offer innovative and critical ways of looking at the problems that arise. This special issue, then, not only addresses fundamental questions of interdisciplinarity, seen as a form of translation, but does so in the context of thinking and rethinking understandings of globalisation, or perhaps more appropriately, of the global, also as a form of translation (including of the past into present).

The articles in this special issue tackle one or more of the questions posed above from a variety of (cross)disciplinary and (cross)cultural locations. The first three articles are grouped around the theme of “Methodological Issues of Translation”. All three articles, in different ways, address the issues at play in using the “idea” of translation as a way of thinking about interdisciplinary and cross cultural research. Demir contrasts the concepts, or “epistemic tools”, of “translation” and “second language learning” and assesses their advantages and limitations in enabling us to understand better the processes of interaction and exchange across boundaries. She argues that while standard understandings

of translation are enmeshed in problems of “mappability” and the *accuracy* of the translation, the “second language learning” thesis instead focuses on the “strategies of exclusion” and “inclusion” in the *process* of policing borders between frameworks, be they cultural or disciplinary, separated temporally or spatially.

Vazquez is similarly concerned with movement at the borders of epistemic frameworks, or territories, as he calls them. Instead of looking at the process by which this happens, he examines the consequences of that process: first, in terms of erasure, and second, in terms of plurality and dialogue. Vazquez is concerned to demonstrate the doubled nature of translation, that is, how it increases the epistemic territory of modernity at the same time as it enables us to challenge the hegemony of the borders that designate the system of modernity / coloniality. Restrepo addresses the methodological issues of translation, in a very direct and self-reflexive way, by examining her own biases and limitations in undertaking anthropological research in Latin America. She states that such research always involves a *relationship between* an anthropologist and a group of people and that such an experience needs to be viewed as a dialogue where learning occurs in both directions. Restrepo’s article, then, describes an encounter between an anthropologist (Restrepo) and a group that did not permit her to “research them”, but instead, allowed her to learn from and with them.

While these articles can be seen as meditations on the concept of translation, the remaining four articles use the idea of translation, and translation as practice, to explore specific problems in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research.

Slate examines the complexities that surround the translation of seemingly analogous concepts in different settings. In particular, he focuses his study on the ways in which Indian and African American social activists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries used the language of race and caste to establish similarities between the injustices in colonial India and the segregated United States. He suggests that in drawing attention to the commonality of injustice faced, the internal complexity of these ideas was lost. This was particularly the case when race/caste comparisons were used defensively against the pressure of international opinion for the reform of practices justified in their name. In his article, Shilliam addresses the inter-cultural translations that are at play when “(post-)colonized subjects speak to each other rather than address the colonizer”. His article focuses on the historically colonial character of “south-south” cultural circulation and communication as evidenced in the tour of a Black theatre group from London to Aotearoa New Zealand. Shilliam moves beyond the usual binary of

colonizer-colonized in this context and seeks to understand the contemporary significance of this dialogue between (post) colonized subjects.

Both Slate and Shilliam seek to make apparent those aspects of history that have, largely, remained in the minor key. Zeybek continues this theme, but the subject here is geographical more than historical. In his article, Zeybek investigates the place of the small provincial towns within Turkish Republican geography and history – a geography and history that is circumscribed by the known relation to modernity. While both cities and villages have their place in such geographical histories, whether as protagonists or antagonists, the small provincial town, for Zeybek, is made invisible and disappears altogether from our view. The final article in this special issue continues the theme of historical silences and works across the disciplines of literature and sociology to bring to light hidden understandings of American democracy in the context of suppressed histories of slavery, colonialism, and race. Margree and Bhambra assess how Tocqueville's sociological account of the emergence of democracy in America is transformed when read together with the novel, *Marie*, written by his friend and travel companion, Beaumont, which addresses issues of American slavery and racism. Their interdisciplinary project proceeds by considering the possible contributions to historical sociology of analysis of literary narratives, and by exploring the translation of social realities into fiction.

The contributors start from different disciplinary and cultural locations and from there, and traversing these differences, they seek to address the specific problems with which they are engaged. This endeavour in interdisciplinarity emerges, at least in part, from a belief that, as Buck-Morss argues, the establishment of disciplinary boundaries allows “counter-evidence to belong to someone else's story” (2000: 822). Uncomfortable facts can be ignored as issues pertinent to other domains and their omission or silence in yours is thereby excused. Translating across disciplinary boundaries enables our focus to remain on issues otherwise silenced.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> These articles emerge from an ESRC funded research network on “Connected Histories, Connected Sociologies: Rethinking the Global” and, in particular, from a symposium on “Translation and the Issue of Methodological Difference”, held in December 2009. The Network is convened by Gurminder K Bhambra. Not all the papers presented at the symposium were able to be published here, but the conversations and discussions over the three days certainly informed the development of the published articles. I would like to thank all those who contributed over the three days,

but who are not part of this special issue: Sarah Easterby-Smith, Margot Finn, Satya Mohanty, Søren Rud, and Georgie Wemyss. This introduction brings together the themes of the Network with the insights on inter-disciplinarity presented by John Holmwood during one of the master-classes in the symposium. For further details about the Network, see: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/esrcchcs>

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