

Transdisciplinarity Must Become Transversality

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Everyone is aware that the complexity of the objects of research in the domain of the human and environmental sciences demands an interdisciplinary approach. But the encounter between disciplines does not permit a decompartmentalization of the problematics and modes of expression brought together. Signs are made from one domain to another in the absence of any in-depth communication. How is a bridge to be established between living eco-systems? The stakes are considerable, as they condition the possibility of any real efficacy in these matters. Scientific ecology, applied to the environment, will remain powerless if it is not relayed by new social and political components, and the latter will in turn vegetate in immobility and conservatism without a profound transformation of mentalities.

The question of interdisciplinarity thus shifts from the cognitive to social, political, ethical, even aesthetic domains. This is because the ecology of the visible is inseparably linked to an ecology of the virtual, to the problematics of individual and collective choice, to universes of value that are on the way to promotion or to collapse.

Under the protection of a scientific or, rather, scientific paradigm, the human sciences have endeavoured systematically to remove the subjective factors of responsibility and commitment. In fact, what it would be worth calling into question in these registers is a certain formal status given to objectivity. The vision that one has of a 'normal' state of things always depends on a normative point of view. To describe urban life, at the end of the millennium, to appreciate what it tends towards, implies a choice of values relative to the social good, to the position of the imaginary in relation to the media, to the relation between the natural, the cosmic and the artificial, the machinic. That does not signify that one has to remain in the vague, the approximate, but that in the course of authentic research one is always caught up in a constructivist process. The object of research has a feedback relation with the latter. In these conditions, social experimentation and action-research ought to be imbricated much more frequently with the objective analysis of social

facts. In fact, in many domains, the research process is called on permanently to modify, to reconstruct, its object.

Human life can only be maintained on the planet thanks to its reliance on science and technology. The death race between science and AIDS is a dramatic illustration of this: without the development of a vaccine or medication, hundreds of millions of individuals will find themselves at risk in the decades to come. And in this particular sphere, interdisciplinary research imposes itself. It is the same in the spheres of education, family life, neighbourhoods: their social legitimacy, their cultural consistency, seems lost. They involve a more and more frequent recourse to public intervention (the police, social work, the legal system, etc), or mass media intrusion (the role of television series, opinion polls, advertising). The third and fourth age henceforth arise almost exclusively from specialized collective equipment.¹ There has thus been a general deterritorialization of old social territories, ways and customs, traditions, self-regulating representations, an appeal to the welfare state, social work, to specialists and professionals, that has become more and more pressing. One may find this regrettable but one must make the best of it, at least in current conditions.

In the long term, it will become more and more necessary to rethink human life in terms of a generalized ecology – environmental, social and mental – that I have called *ecosophy* and, as a consequence, also to rethink the status of research in all these domains. The [UN] Charter of Human Rights ought to include an article on the right of everyone to research. All social groups, all professions, minorities... have a need of the research that concerns or implicates them. Creating a pole for the singularization, the particularization of research, balancing out the pole of the universal rationality of science seems indispensable. It is a matter here of the affirmation of a new paradigm of processual creation, linked to aesthetics in the social domain. Its axiological target would cease to be the Truth with a capital T but instead a localized modelling, incarnated in a social body whose destiny is in question.

The enlarging of the horizons of research, its being taken in charge by social relays that are always more numerous, does not, however, imply a loss of rigour, but a change of attitude with regard to its interlocutors. Let's take the example of urban ecology. Here the interlocutor must sometimes be completely fabricated. This is the case with the concept of urban space of the 'new cities' type, where it is advisable to prefigure or simulate the populations or professions called on to have an investment in a given social territory.

Let us flag up in this regard the interesting experiences that have developed in the USSR, in the context of situations that were for a long time blocked by bureaucracy and in the context of *Perestroika*. Self-managed groups have constituted themselves with the aim of opposing the immobility of the local Soviets, particularly in the domain of

architecture, urbanism, and the defence of the environment. (These experiments/experiences were coordinated by a centre for regional research created by the Academy of Sciences under the direction of Victor Tischenko.) The activity of these groups led to the putting into place of cooperatives, which constructed apartments in Moscow, Leningrad and in other cities of a much better quality than those constructed by the state. In 1987, at Boris Yeltsin's request, a large-scale collective game on the theme of the social becoming of the city took place in the city of Moscow, with the participation of 150 people from every level of the social hierarchy, in order to define a new methodology in this domain. The aim of such 'role-playing' games was equally one of making the group of participants understand that power can be transformed and become an instance with multiple partners, operating by alliance and negotiation, and not a relation of domination between hierarchical instances. Thus an entire political culture finds itself called into question through such research. Although western democracies and Japan find themselves in very different situations to that of the USSR, one can think that in other forms, in different modalities, it will become equally necessary here to invent what one might call collective assemblages of enunciation, balancing out the technocratic visions that reign too frequently in these sectors.

Interdisciplinarity, which I prefer to call transdisciplinarity, in my opinion thus passes/takes place by a permanent reinvention of democracy at different stages in the social field. During the execution of programmes of urban development, the renovation of old neighbourhoods or the conversions of 'industrial wastelands', significant contracts for research and social experimentation should be established not just with social science researchers but also with a certain number of future inhabitants and users of these constructions and equipments, in order to study what might be new modes of domestic life, new neighbouring practices, practices of cooperation and solidarity, education, culture, sport, looking after children, the elderly and the handicapped, etc. A collective awareness of the fact that the means of changing life and of creating a new style of activity, new values, are within reach, at least in our developed societies, has not yet been gained. (Besides, there would be many lessons to learn from certain already existing experiences in Third World countries!) Desire and the will to move in the direction of such transformations depend in large part on the orientation of social labour and research. It is not legitimate to study a neighbourhood in difficulty without at the same time working for its regeneration. Cognitive elaboration here is inseparable from human commitment and the value choices it implies.

Envisaged from this angle, the broadening out of transdisciplinarity goes without saying. To stick with our example of the remodelling of urban life, it is evident that no desire for change, no collective emulation, can be born if it is not inscribed against the background of a will to

transform the human condition on the planet. Environmental ecology, social ecology and mental ecology will never be able to result in major creations if they are only cultivated in one country, one neighbourhood, indeed even just a continent of the well-off. Taking into account the developments of informatics, of robotics, of telematics, the planetary division of labour is becoming more and more cruel. Numerous zones in the Third World have been marked by unbelievable super-exploitation (marked in particular by child labour), whilst bigger and bigger regions of the world are the object of a sort of economic and cultural desertification. For the majority of social, urban and ecological questions, transdisciplinarity would thus also consist in stepping back at a planetary level and problematizing local questions on the basis of horizons that put the whole of life and of international relations into play.

Another axis for the broadening out of transdisciplinarity would consist in escaping from traditional visions starting systematically from the white, adult male, competing on the market of dominant values. Seen from the emancipatory point of view of the condition of women, how many new questions would be posed? Ethnology has remained essentially masculine. There remains an immense domain to be deciphered concerning myths, rituals and collective female practices. Equally, looking at the world through the eyes of children, the elderly, the disabled . . . In short, [it is a matter of] breaking with the standard, mass-mediatized gaze, which corrupts our intellect and our sensibility.

Transdisciplinarity must become transversality between science, the *socius*, aesthetics and politics. If, as Marxists with their historical materialism believe, there is no science of politics, there is by contrast a necessity to rethink a politics of science. As a dialectical counterpart, politics ought to be rethought as a transversalist domain; it ought to leave its usual arenas and its focus on the media, so as to arrive at a reappropriation of technique and science (which are oriented solely towards profit, and lead to aberration and catastrophe, particularly in the ecological domain) by the fabric of the social: a politics that is closer to the eco-systems of everyday life and yet with a grasp of the major stakes for the planet. At this point in history, humanity is for the first time responsible for its destiny as a species, and beyond that, for the all living species and the future of the bio-sphere. But it is worth adding a necessary protection and optimal development of incorporeal species to living species. Cultures and forms of sensibility alike are threatened. Science cannot content itself with studying these evolutions passively. It is required to intervene, to commit itself.

From a more prospectivist perspective, one may also envisage the possible evolution of transdisciplinarity in the context of the development of new technologies. In the first place, it will be possible to liberate a greater and greater quantity of activity and of labour from repetitive material tasks and to devote it to study, research and culture, which will

establish new junctions of all kinds between themselves. In the long term, one can imagine investment in these domains will take precedence over all others. It goes without saying that such an overturning of values would imply considerable geopolitical, social and economic transformations (in particular, modes of valorization of human activities and machinic productions). In the second place, the evolution of informatics, its junction with television, telematics, data banks and the image, will develop a sort of machinic transdisciplinarity. This is already largely the case with every major discovery, every major technological innovation, which does not just irrigate neighbouring domains but frequently has fallout in the most distant of domains. Whether one considers the extreme imbrication of informatics, spatial technologies, communication techniques, physics, astrophysics, biology, etc. . . . In the third place, one might think that the era to come will lay down a profound transformation of the means of expression, knowledge, coordination and sensibility. To a great extent, the rapid expansion of science in the Renaissance was linked to the discovery of printing.

Today a new kind of informatic writing is perhaps starting to take shape. A writing that will not restrict itself to transcribing written and oral signs, but whose semiotic segments will possess their own richness, their own autonomy. I refer in this regard to the illuminating work of Pierre Lévy on 'dynamic ideography' [published by Éditions de la Découverte], which demonstrates that it is possible for a transdisciplinarity to be born internal to the language of informatics, a transdisciplinarity that would enable the problematic of one model in relation to another to be clarified (Pierre Lévy, precisely, takes the example of the transfer of knowledge between heterogeneous ecosystems), a transdisciplinarity that would, in a way, position research 'astride' science, art and social communication.

As an internal movement of the transformation of the sciences, an opening onto the social, aesthetics and ethics, transdisciplinarity will not be born spontaneously. International scientific life is often tangled up in formal rituals, in a sham interdisciplinarity. Its deepening implies a permanent 'research into research', an experimentation with new paths for the constitution of collective assemblages of enunciation. To this end, conditions must be created. It is not just that pluri-disciplinary teams have to be put in place, sometimes for long periods, or according to appropriate temporal rhythms, but the question of their implantation, of their fields of investigation, of their interaction with a human environment will be frequently posed. For example, in the domain of cooperation with developing countries, experts have too frequently been 'parachuted' onto social terrains which were not prepared to receive them, and which weren't prepared to encounter them. In this register, the analysis of failures should be most enriching. Agronomic, medical, ecological, architectural knowledge must somehow be reinvented in each concrete situation. Hence the corollary importance of the putting together of monographs tracing

out the trajectories initiating an experiment, its positive and negative phases, the bifurcations that have characterized the formation of what I have called collective assemblages of enunciation.

There is no general pedagogy relative to the constitution of a living transdisciplinarity. It is a matter here of initiative, the taste for risk, for exiting pre-established schemas, the maturing of the personality (which can concern very young people). Once again, much more will be gained in this register by referring to processes of aesthetic creation than to the standardized, planned, bureaucratized visions that reign too frequently in centres of scientific research, laboratories and universities.

Translated by Andrew Goffey

Notes

This is a translation of a typescript dated April 1992, entitled '*Fondements éthico-politiques de l'interdisciplinarité*'. It is translated with the kind permission of Emmanuelle and Bruno Guattari, with thanks to IMEC for their provision of a copy of the manuscript. It has been retitled here – using a phrase from within the text – in line with its main argument, and terminological resonance with other pieces in this issue.

1. Guattari uses the term *équipements collectifs* both here and in other writings. It does not translate easily into English. I have followed Rabinow in his simple rendering of the French term as 'equipment' [AG].

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Félix Guattari (1930–1992) was a psychoanalyst by training and a political militant by vocation, and worked from 1955 at the La Borde clinic alongside Jean Oury. Achieving prominence most notably for his elaboration of a philosophy with Gilles Deleuze, he wrote numerous texts of his own, including *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, *Molecular Revolution*, *The Machinic Unconscious*, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* and *Chaosmosis*. Guattari considered his theoretical and analytic work to be inseparable from his political activities and was a key figure in the development of numerous organizations that fused research and political struggle, including most notably CERFI (the Centre for Institutional Study, Researching, and Training).

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