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#3 Reflections on Interdisciplinary Social Science History

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A Forum on Interdisciplinarity

Harvey J. Graff, Ohio State University
Jerry A. Jacobs, University of Pennsylvania
Mary Jo Maynes, University of Minnesota, and
William H. Sewell, Jr., University of Chicago

January 2017

Two author-meets-critics sessions were held at the 2014 and 2015 Social Science History Association meetings on the topic of disciplines and interdisciplinarity with the same set of commentators. Both were organized by Harvey J. Graff. The 2014 session at the Toronto meetings focused on Jerry A. Jacobs' book, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). The same set of commentators reconvened in Baltimore in 2015 to discuss Harvey Graff's book, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). The panelists at both of these sessions were John Guillory, New York University; Mary Jo Maynes, University of Minnesota; Janice Reiff, University of California at Los Angeles; and William Sewell, Jr., University of Chicago.

The Forum on Interdisciplinarity presented here includes the edited and revised comments of Mary Jo Mayes and William Sewell, Jr. on both books, and responses and an exchange from Harvey J. Graff and Jerry A. Jacobs. **This paper is one of the 4 papers in this series.**

Keywords: disciplines, interdisciplines, interdisciplinarity, social-science history

Reflections on Interdisciplinary Social Science History

Mary Jo Maynes

“The Social Science History Association is an interdisciplinary group of scholars ...” Thus begins the “About the SSHA” section of the organization’s website. Nevertheless, these two books discussed at recent SSHA meetings are surprisingly critical, if not of interdisciplinarity itself, than of some of the hype about it and some of its more troubling consequences. Moreover, as Graff notes, the two authors “agree fundamentally on the centrality of disciplines.”

I found that Jerry Jacobs’s arguments often corresponded with my experiences as a scholar and teacher, in particular a historian, who has operated around and across disciplinary borders even while I treasure my disciplinary and departmental communities. Consistent with Jacobs’ findings, these communities have not felt like silos, even if they do have their peculiarities, and even if border crossings do require excess documentation. Since history journals were not included in the empirical examination of cross-disciplinary citation practices that Jacobs relies upon, I don’t know exactly where history fits in his case for open cross-disciplinary communication, but I am persuaded by his argument that overly generalized criticisms of disciplines as intellectual ‘silos’ is not borne out by his evidence.

But, ironically, I also came to the conclusion that his is not the sort of book that is likely to persuade many of the anti-disciplinarians I know best, in part because his style of argumentation and the nature of his evidence (especially journal citation patterns as a readily quantifiable measure of cross-disciplinary communication) are more effective and meaningful within the social-scientific framework, but less so for other disciplines or for the sub-disciplines within history from which the anti-disciplinary stance has emerged.

That said, I will still be running some of his arguments by my favorite anti-disciplinarian colleagues and among colleagues in and beyond history who are involved in ongoing discussions of institutional politics. Of the many provocative issues that Jacobs raises here, one I find myself most wanting to think through and discuss more fully, is the question of faculty governance and university restructuring. Jacobs draws connections between attacks on disciplinarity as a way of organizing knowledge production, on the one hand, and disciplinarity as an organizing principle in universities and thus, of university power relations, on the other. Faculty governance has been steadily eroding. Most of us have observed and discussed it, but the simultaneous rethinking and critique of disciplines is usually not brought up in the same conversations.

Jacobs is interested in disciplines as they operate in producing knowledge and in questions about how disciplinarity encourages or constrains intellectual vitality. But he is also concerned with the organizations of communities of scholars in universities and in questions about what encourages the autonomous functioning of such communities — in departments, in nondepartmental curricular programs, and in research centers. Jacobs suggests that strong discipline-based departments are conducive to intellectual vitality because they allow communities of scholars/teachers better to organize the conditions for their work and to engage in the long-term planning, community-building, and training that any sustained knowledge production requires. In this regard, the most successful interdisciplinary ventures generally become more discipline- or department-like over time. Such departments are also units of self-perpetuation: an autonomous intellectual community is one that controls hiring — usually hires colleagues holding Ph.D.s from within the discipline; controls the teaching of methods; makes judgments about what constitutes good research; and controls the curriculum that teaches future generations.

Critiques of disciplinarity of course argue that these very characteristics are what discourage intellectual exploration beyond the borders. But Jacobs makes a plausible case that organizational forms that implement interdisciplinarity at the same time often undermine faculty governance. He

mentions, for example, newer forms of hiring such as cluster hires or joint hires that remove control over position definition and hiring from departments, where decisions are made primarily by faculty, and hands them over to college- or university-level administrators and committees they appoint. This may give administrators more flexibility in responding to new intellectual areas, but at the same time such practices channel resources and power away from long-term planners, scholars, and teachers at the department level. This general argument strikes me as plausible and well worth considering as we act as institutional citizens.

But there are some aspects of this story of disciplines/departments and power relations that are less clear in the analysis. These questions concern the relationships between knowledge-producing aspects of disciplines and other institutional power dimensions as they come across in Jacobs' treatment of economics, education, and American studies; I will just look at economics for now. In Jacobs' relatively brief discussion of economics, this discipline appears according to various measures as the most silo-like of all the social sciences; articles in economics journals rarely cite work from other disciplines. This seems consistent with an institutional history not really addressed here: as economics developed as a discipline, many departments tended to push out colleagues who were not engaged in the discipline's hegemonic approaches and methods. Substantial numbers of unorthodox economists are in interdisciplinary centers, policy institutes, applied economics departments and the like. Intra-disciplinary epistemic battles have not just occurred in economics, of course. They were a very important dimension of the late-twentieth-century history of many disciplines. But economics stands out among the social sciences in enforcing coherence, thus reinforcing the walls of its silo, and going it alone.

In Jacobs' account, economics is — in some sense not unsurprisingly — regarded as a tremendously influential discipline, but how this "influence" fits into his larger argument is not clear. This discipline apparently exerts a different sort of influence from the intellectual allure measured by cross-disciplinary citation flows, which in the cases of economics are meager. I'm sure this is a question of other forms of power, both within and beyond the university, but the connection isn't made explicit. Jacobs at times conflates the "influence" of economics with "intellectual dynamism" which also begs clarification — that economists don't read outside their field is seemingly equated with, or at least compatible with, intellectual dynamism, even while the overall argument has presumed that cross-disciplinary communication is a sign of vitality of which disciplines are fully capable. The larger point — that we should be skeptical of arguments against disciplinarity both because they don't adequately recognize that disciplines can be intellectually open and because discipline-based departments are the basis of faculty power — should not imply that the economics model of disciplinary strength is the one to strive for.

In contrast with an argument employing measures of cross-disciplinary practices, Harvey Graff deploys a historical case study approach; the cases — moving or not toward interdisciplines — are drawn from an impressively wide range of disciplines. As the book moves through time and comparative cases, the logic of Graff's general argument emerges: more than stories of intellectual breakthroughs, or great discoveries (though those play an important role), the stories of evolution of disciplines and interdisciplines, their successes and failures as intellectual enterprises, rest heavily and repeatedly on several key explanatory factors: organization, location, institutionalization, and relationships among scholars in and across locations. Moreover, these important dimensions of disciplining intersect through specific historical processes that, while never inexplicable, are also never reducible to lawful behavior. The outcomes are contingent, never to be understood teleologically. Graff's critique of teleological accounts reflects his aim, not only to tell the history of interdisciplinarity in the twentieth-century U.S., but also to debunk the myths present in many existing narratives about interdisciplinarity.

In terms of which comparisons are most persuasive, I suspect the answers will vary among us, perhaps themselves varying according to disciplinary location. From my point of view, the most successful and persuasive comparisons were chapters 4 (in which the "New Histories" were

compared with neuroscience) and 5 (material sciences and cultural studies). An example of a comparison I found less persuasive was chapter 1 (comparing genetic biology with sociology). Briefly discussing these chapters will point to some elements of the complex and ambitious methodology that constructs analyses that are comparative at each historical moment, while also move across time, both within and across chapters throughout the book.

There's a lot to be gained by comparative case studies. Within each chapter, we are given some logics that drive the particular comparison in focus. But I wasn't entirely clear about the overall case selection method and the larger grid of logics of comparison. Part of the reason I found some comparisons more persuasive than others is the very ordering of the chapters in the book — the more case comparisons I had read about, the clearer the overall argument became. But there was also something else going on: in each of the two chapters that I found especially informative, the comparison was between a late-twentieth-century interdisciplinary formation with which I am familiar ("the New Histories" and "cultural studies") and a second interdiscipline that, while far afield from mine, has been much touted, discussed, and held up as a model in the institutional world I inhabit (neuroscience and material sciences).

When I was chairing my history department in the early 2000s our liberal arts dean (a political scientist who was also an advocate of the arts) was gung ho about neuroscience; precisely following Graff's account, he saw it as a particularly exciting interdiscipline because it brought scholars from our liberal arts college together with brain scientists (presumably even better than rocket scientists). And it promised models and resources for a brighter future for the liberal arts through cross-college collaborations, especially important for an under-resourced liberal arts college like ours that did not include natural sciences and was therefore weaker in the larger university power complex. So, I understood the case — neuroscience — being compared with "New Histories" and, to some extent, had even engaged in a research problematic that crossed these boundaries (research that connects personal narratives, human memory, and child development). I liked that the comparison here emphasized that cognitive science or neuroscience is not a unified interdiscipline, and that associated sub-disciplines still operate very autonomously. Alternatively, "the New Histories" have found niches within departments where their practitioners manage to act interdisciplinarily within disciplined departments. The larger point is that these particular cases drew on history and institutional politics I knew rather well and that already engaged me enough for me to understand and follow and appreciate the details of Graff's enlightening comparisons.

Chapter 1 was something of a different story. It presented a history of one familiar discipline — sociology — with one about which I knew little — genetic biology. In terms of the one I knew, I found myself resisting some of the claims Graff makes about sociology's history — for example, concerning the early-twentieth-century "narrowing" of the discipline, a claim that goes against the grain of many studies of individual departments and leading figures that locate this narrowing somewhat later, often in the post-WWII era. I also missed reference to important works about the history of the social sciences in the era around 1900, especially works that gendered this history. I also found myself pushing back against Graff's claims about "spin-offs" such as criminology. In many sociology departments there is concern that criminology takes up too much room, especially in the undergraduate curriculum, a tendency that may even have grown in tandem with rates of incarceration. This no doubt is truer of some departments than others, but I cannot see how criminology is really a spin-off from the discipline's mainstream.

I had somewhat different, even opposite, problems with the case with which sociology was compared — the very complicated interdiscipline of genetic biology, intriguing but hard to present to the uninformed in a short two-case chapter. This case, in my view, needed more explication, framing, and evidence. I kept asking myself as I read this chapter what constituted evidence for or against the argument. For example, tables summarizing the relative institutionalization of biology and sociology in the 1920s and '30s, at least insofar as naming patterns of departments and programs serve as an indicator, were inconclusive.

This sort of skepticism did not trouble me as much in most of the later chapters, but I'm not sure if this is because I came to them with more of a shared context as the time period being covered moved closer to the present, or because, as the book progressed, the nature of Graff's method and style of comparative argument had become clearer and more persuasive. As for the more general nature of the historical project here, Graff seems more bent on refuting usual teleological accounts of the triumph of interdisciplinarity than about substituting an alternative one. His arguments are indeed historical; change over time matters in each chapter. But there is no single historical narrative about interdisciplinarity as such. Moreover, if we think there is one, we have been overawed by the claims of our colleagues in the natural sciences, or of liberal arts deans with science envy. In any event, after having read these two books and discussed them with the "interdisciplinary group of scholars" at the SSHA, I am most appreciative of and provoked by their complicated and helpful reflections on disciplines and interdisciplines.

Mary Jo Maynes is Professor of History at the University of Minnesota. Her interests include women's history and the history of the family. Her numerous publications include *Telling Stories: Analysis of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, by Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce and Barbara Laslett, Cornell University Press, 2008.