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Review: Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences

Edited By Andrew Barry and Georgina Born

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Barry, Andrew and Born, Georgina, eds. *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014. Xvi, 278 pp. ISBN: 9781138843349, paperback. US \$42.95. Illustrated, ISBN: 9780415578929, 2013, hardback. US \$140.00. Part of the *CRESC: Culture, Economy and the Social Series*.

Now available in paperback, this edited book relies heavily on interdisciplinarity from countless perspectives and combinations. Comprising eleven commissioned chapters, it begins with an in-depth discussion about the many conceptions of interdisciplinarity (and by extension transdisciplinarity) conducted by the two co-editors (p. 9). In itself, this core chapter represents one fifth of this innovative book (pp. 1-56). Relying on pioneer thinkers like Jean Piaget and Edgar Morin who wrote extensively on interdisciplinarity from the 1970s, co-editors Andrew Barry and Georgina Born conceive three conceptions or “modes of interdisciplinarity” (p. 10). As such, they argue that “interdisciplinarity practice should not necessarily be understood additively as the sum of two or more ‘disciplinary’ components or as achieved through a synthesis of different disciplinary approaches, whether through a process of integration or negotiation” (p. 11). In their ability to link natural science to social sciences, they also explain that social scientists are expected to address some impalpable dimensions that engineers cannot master or develop: “Social scientists are expected to adopt the “correct” natural science definition of an environmental problem and devise relevant solution strategies” (Pieter Leroy, quoted in p. 11). Further on, Barry and Born also claim that environmental issues just cannot be isolated into one single discipline because the “...hybridity of environmental problems resists purification into distinct natural and social elements...” (p. 26).

Each chapter of *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences* is truly engaging, even for the reader familiar with the core discussions about interdisciplinarity. For example, the second chapter (titled “How Disciplines Look”) begins with the interesting assertion that “Every discipline tells a story...” adding that this specific story “...provides a rationale and means for the pursuit of the disciplinary enterprise...” (p. 57). Many authors are quoted in Simon Schaffer’s essay for claiming that “scientific disciplines are inventions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, since when ‘scientists continue to believe in the cognitive rationality of an overreaching disciplinary identity’ ” (p. 59).

This book's articles are neither case studies nor "How To" practical essays (even though many portions rely on empirical research); it is rather made of theoretical discussions based on recent writings about interdisciplinarity. Many chapters gather environmental science and sociology within an interdisciplinary approach, e.g. Gisa Weszkalnys and Andrew Barry's essay (titled "Multiple Environments") centred on the keyword "integration:"

"Our discussion shows that instead of bringing nature and society together into a neat and coherent whole, integration offers a number of pragmatic solutions to researching the problem of the complexity and heterogeneity of the environment and the uncertainty of its future development..." (p. 191).

In sum, *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences* will be of interest to graduate students who want to question and advocate the possibilities of interdisciplinary research beyond the usual theoretical frameworks. This is the kind of jargon-free book that can truly pretend to renew the research practices and as well as question the way we routinely do our research within our usual reflexes and schemes. This reason alone is sufficient to justify this book's presence in university libraries. Not for undergraduates, it will rather be rewarding for those doctorate students (in natural AND/OR social sciences) who dare to challenge the opaque discipline borders in our academic world that is often founded on the strict protection of the academic fields and the formation of the future guardians of our discipline's limits.

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