Book Review

Academic Tribes and Territories - Intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines

At a time when governments are pressing for greater efficiency and accountability in higher education, apart from anything else Becher's worm's eye view of academic life in the different disciplinary communities comes as a timely and refreshingly valuable answer to intrusive managerialism. Working from the premise that discernible patterns exist within the relationship between knowledge forms (epistemologies) of the academic disciplines and their associated knowledge communities (sociological features), Academic Tribes and Territories embarks on a somewhat daunting but fascinating exercise of demonstrating that the ideals and practices of academic communities and the way they organize their professional lives are intimately entwined with the nature of the intellectual tasks they pursue. In a systematic and coherent way the study provides an ethnographic account of the disparate cognitive and social properties of twelve disciplinary fields and their associated sub-fields -- physics, chemistry and biology (pure sciences); mechanical engineering and pharmacy (applied sciences); economics and sociology (social sciences); history and modern languages (humanities) academic law (applied humanities); and geography and mathematics (hybrids of the social and pure sciences respectively) -- and succeeds not only in constructing a discourse by which their idiosyncrasies can be publicly formulated but in spelling out clearly practical implications of their differentiated nature. For these reasons the book should be of interest to a wider readership than for those only in the fields of higher education, history and philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge. Ethnographers, educational administrators and leaders of academic institutions and systems in particular would be well advised to sift through the wealth of material the study provides. So too would aspiring careerists in academia!

Data are based on the testimony of practising senior academics in elite departments of selected elite research universities in Britain and the United States. The study thus has an elite, male dominated research bias and this is openly acknowledged. By way of addendum in chapter 6 (thankfully not forgotten) there is some apology provided for the noticeable absence of reference to women who constituted only 0.1 per cent (22/221 respondents in the sample). Their marginalized status is given due recognition although no literature later than 1979 is cited. Also openly acknowledged is the artificiality of the epistemological/sociological distinction and the demarcation of disciplines whose boundaries are not only blurred but constantly shifting. However, for purposes of analytical abstraction, these concepts serve well.
Chapter 1 helps to bring some order into an otherwise "chaotic configuration of features" which constitute the diverse terrain of academic knowledge and sets the scene for discussing a number of themes at different levels of aggregation. It plots features of the largely undifferentiated landscape of broad disciplinary groupings by delineating both cognitive and social characteristics of their knowledge categories. While the two independent dimensions applied to the cognitive aspects of knowledge -- hard and soft, and pure and applied -- are well established familiar ones, those used to depict the social realm -- convergent (tightly knit configurations), divergent (loosely knit and schismatic), and urban (high people to problem density) and rural (sparse concentration on many problems) research modes -- are less familiar but very well illustrated throughout the study. Acknowledging the problems of transience of knowledge and the dangers of simplistic categorization, Becher treads warily here.

Depicting the specialist area as "the fundamental unit of analysis" as this is where links between the social and cognitive aspects of the academic research enterprise are seen to be most clearly manifested, chapter 2 moves to a more specific, localized view of segments within specialist areas. Structural, epistemological and cultural features such as induction rituals, career patterns, criteria for professional recognition, professional activity, values and attitudes are explored in quite a revealing and systematic fashion.

Specialist areas are subjected to further microscopic scrutiny in chapter 3, leading to provision of "a more finely meshed set of explanatory concepts". Internal and external boundaries are explored revealing close intellectual neighbours, contrasts in style or emphasis, patterns of division of intellectual labour and distinctions in conceptual frameworks. The impression is given here that, despite the state of constant flux created by fragmentation of knowledge and symbolic disintegration, stability across disciplinary subspecialties occurs in a similar way to how cells of an active biological culture subdivide and recombine but manage to retain their integrity, creating the vision of reintegration of the whole, "e pluribus unum". This functional and somewhat romantic notion sits uneasily with the anarchical and centrifugal tendencies inherent in the university world as portrayed by a number of organizational analysts. It also appears inconsistent with a comment made further on that disciplines may be viewed as "engaged in a constant Darwinian struggle for power and status, in which the hardest and most adaptable flourish while the weakest go to the wall" (pp.141-2).

The emphasis swings in chapter 4 from territories inhabited by academic tribes to key features of their community life. The quest for recognition, how to get on, ranking practices, establishing and guarding standards, influencing new directions, peer review, networking, and responsiveness to paradigm shifts and new ideas provide a framework of analysis.

Communication patterns related to certain kinds of research activity (urban and rural scenarios) are analysed imaginatively in chapter 5. Urban researchers are seen to work in specialisms that have a high people-to-problem ratio, high levels of resources and technology, a fast pace of activity, highly competitive arenas and close cognitive links with convergent-type knowledge. The corollary is said to be true for rural type researchers. In other words, hard and soft knowledge types are said to give rise to characteristic social behaviour as manifested in communication patterns such as publication modes and styles, citation practices, competition, collaborative ventures and the like.

Chapter 6 covers a smorgasboard of "life-cycle" type features such as mid-life crises, maturation levels, migration patterns and levels of job satisfaction which are compared and contrasted