Old Roads and New Pathways: Reflections, Conclusions and a Way Forward

This book began with some key questions about the sociology of health and medicine. We asked for a definition of the speciality field, for information about the individuals and groups working within its boundaries, about possible national differences in sociological knowledge about health and medicine, and whether there might be variations in organisational or institutional practices from one country to the next. The quest for answers has taken us on a journey through the history of the discipline in three countries and included an empirical study of a set of research publications from its practitioners.

The whole endeavour has been situated within the principles set out in the programme of the sociology of knowledge. This has brought into focus the social and cultural processes behind scholarly knowledge, and led to an examination of the institutions and social structures within which that knowledge is produced, exchanged, legitimated and transmitted. This search for the connections and inter-connections between scholarly knowledge, social practices, institutions and social structures has revealed new knowledge about sociology and its speciality, the sociology of health and medicine.

Central to the study has been a re-conceptualisation of the nature of disciplines. The conventional approach has been to define a discipline as a cognitive domain or ‘parcel’ of formal knowledge which immanently ‘emerges’ or ‘unfolds’ over time and differs from others in subject matter, perspective or methodology. This is the approach taken in most introductory textbooks of sociology. As a consequence, sociology has been granted an identity based on its ‘object’ of study, usually described as the realm of ‘the social’ (Wilson and Kolb 1949:59; Naegele 1965b:148). Such approaches continue to have value in orienting students towards the discipline and encouraging a common
disciplinary identity among practicing sociologists, but are inadequate for the theorising of disciplines. Indeed, the lack of reflexivity about the discipline has been a point of contention, albeit mainly from individuals critical of the ‘mainstream’ (e.g. Gouldner 1970; Connell 1997).

In the post-Kuhnian era, when the social sciences can no longer be viewed as offering ever-progressive, cumulative steps towards the ‘truth’; it is increasingly imperative for disciplines to be regarded as social forms produced through social processes. Yet only a handful of sociologists have raised questions about whether disciplines even have legitimate ‘objects’ of study and unique methodologies (Therborn 1976:424, 426), and whether there might be inherent difficulties in regarding the scholarly landscape in terms of cognitive divisions:

The differentiation of disciplines…will rarely map onto any scheme of intellectual differentiation. Attempts to differentiate disciplines by their concern with particular and exclusive intellectual problems are doomed to failure. Real life is messier than our intellectual schemes (Scott 2005:137).

Putting aside the more conventional approaches of the past, disciplines have been theorised within this volume as multi-dimensional social forms. Primarily sites of social relations, created over time through the interaction of individuals and groups, disciplines have been shown to provide members with the opportunity for meaningful activity, forms of identity and ‘ways of life’. Within these dynamic, constantly shifting domains, human actors construct and re-fashion the terrain upon which they operate, and act to defend and maintain the boundaries between themselves and other disciplinary sites. As institutional forms, disciplines have been shown to structure the behaviours, roles, rules and norms of human actors, and regularise and pattern these into an hierarchical ordering of individuals and groups. Moreover, as domains of social action and social structure, disciplines are themselves situated within a broader social field and thus subjected to the organising effects of other social structures. As such, they operate within the institutions of the capitalist social system, organising academic labour and the production of valuable resources for national and global markets.

Disciplines and specialities

This theoretical framework has provided for new definitions of the relationship between disciplines and specialities. In the past, disciplinary