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Crossing borderlines: beyond the logic of parallel worlds

On 18 November 1987, a disastrous fire broke out at King's Cross St. Pancras station in London, 31 people died in the fire and more than 100 were seriously injured. In the months that followed, an investigation was initiated, which lasted from February to June 1988, to understand the causes and dynamics of that incident.

The investigation concluded that the fire was caused by a lit match thrown on the escalator. The small outbreak of the fire that had resulted had suddenly increased to the point of projecting a tongue of fire towards the upper floors where the ticket office was located. This was the so-called trench effect, not known until then, capable of causing an increase in temperature of as much as 150 degrees in half a second.

The final report of the investigation (Fennell 1988[1]) highlighted the responsibilities of the London Underground for fire prevention and management. Subsequent investigations have highlighted a number of issues which closely intercept the themes of this book. I propose, therefore, to recall them briefly.

1. A few minutes before the fire became unmanageable, a passenger noticed a burnt handkerchief near an escalator and reported it to a subway employee. The man, however, did not follow up on the report. He hadn't told anyone about it, nor had he called the fire department. In fact, he knew very well the strict internal regulations of the London Underground and he was aware that no one should be stepped on. Moreover, even if he had wanted to intervene, the Undersground's chain of command would not have allowed him to contact another department without the direct involvement of a superior. There was, then, a sort of tacit rule within the workplace, so it was known that it was better not to use the word "fire", so as not to cause panic among the passengers;
2. Inside King's Cross subway, no one had understood how to use the fire extinguishing system and no one was allowed to use fire extinguishers, controlled by another department (See Duhigg 2014);
3. One of the factors that led to the rapid acceleration of the combustion process was the different layers of painting on some of the subway walls. It seems that, in the past, the director of the subway had suggested that all that painting could represent a danger in case of fire. However, the painting of the walls was outside ~~of~~ his specific competence and, for this reason, he withdrew his suggestion, also to avoid that it could be understood as interference in the work of others;
4. The firefighters, who arrived on site, could not connect the fire trucks to the internal hydrants, since none of the metro employees was aware of their location. But even if this information had been available instead of being locked in an office, it could not

[1] In addition to the already mentioned official investigation, the details of the accident are derived from several sources: P. Chambers, *Body 115: The Story of the Last Victim of the King's Cross Fire* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2006); K. Moodie, "The King's Cross Fire: Damage Assessment and Overview of the Technical Investigation," *Fire Safety Journal* 18 (1992): 13–33; A. F. Roberts, "The King's Cross Fire: A Correlation of the Eyewitness Accounts and Results of the Scientific Investigation," *Fire Safety Journal*, 1992; "Insight: Kings Cross," *The Sunday Times*, November 22, 1987; "Relatives Angry Over Tube Inquest; King's Cross Fire," *The Times*, October 5, 1988.

have been used, since the fire brigade's regulations required them to use fire hoses at street level;

5. King's Cross employees had not been trained in the use of fire extinguishers because the equipment was under the supervision of another division. In addition, the station's safety officer had never read a letter previously sent by the London Fire Brigade to inform about fire hazards. That letter had in fact been sent to another operational unit which had not considered appropriate to circulate the information.

It should be stressed that no procedure or activity, mentioned in the five previous points, was arbitrary or without reason. Each of them was designed for a reason. What happened cannot therefore be attributed to negligence. However, in the five points mentioned we recognize a series of elements that have much common with our aim in this book: to examine the disciplinary *versus* interdisciplinary problems in diverse contexts.

On the one hand, it is true that specialization and the value of the individual's independent and responsible engagement, the rejection of any interference in each other's action are important values. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that these very elements are capable of erecting walls of incommunicability that do not allow us to see beyond what is proper.

When we look for a matrix of interdisciplinarity, that is, a primary reference or an essential dimension of all complex phenomenon we are surrounded by, we think exactly about the need to break in with respect to disciplinary self-restraint in which, often completely inadvertently, many of us lock ourselves up, remaining anchored to our own competences, ignoring every thing that goes beyond our own sphere of reference.

Disciplinary self-reclusion gives rise to self-referential parallel worlds in which it is entirely plausible that the laws and/or regulations of one world may be ignored in another parallel world.

Now, in the case of the King's Cross fire, disciplinary confinement has led to a disastrous outcome that is all too easy to stigmatize. If there had been real communication between the different departments of the London Underground there would probably not have been such a dramatic outcome. In hindsight, it is therefore easy to come to such a conclusion.

What we are interested in pointing out is how today, often silently and insidiously, that same logic is still functioning in the most varied contexts. That is, fragmentation and walls are still in operation. They, invisible though they may be, no less hinder real collaboration between those engaged in working on the same task or project, albeit on different fronts. In these cases, the deleterious results of such an absence of interdisciplinary interaction are not easy to grasp, because they are placed in contexts or according to scales of intervention that escape determination.

The disciplinary rootedness obviously has several reasons and a respectable history. It would be unwise to ignore its scope and value. In scientific activity, the disciplinary structure and methodology provided the most relevant results. However, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that many of the problems we face today require us to abandon the reassuring logic that locks us within established boundaries. We need real and sincere cooperation between experts from different disciplines, tasks and fields of activity. For this to happen, we need a real breakthrough of the very idea of the border behind whose idealization we have buried our false security, no longer in need of confrontation, collaboration, contamination. For this to happen, we need courageous theories and new engaging practices that may give the measure of a renewed reference to the theme of interdisciplinarity.

These are the assumptions that we are pleased to present this volume. It brings together a selection of the best contributions presented at the IASC *Crossing Borderlines: Controversies and Interdisciplinarity* conference held in the University of Lisbon, in June 2017.

As we were able to write, already in the call of that conference.

In front of the dramatic effect of the problems that humanity is facing today, more and more deep collaboration between scholars of different disciplines is necessary. Problems like deprivation, war, cannot be faced by only one disciplinary domain. They are too big and too complex as to claim for an interdisciplinary approach.

However, interdisciplinarity is still a vague concept and a much demanding practice. It claims not only to a mere juxtaposition of theoretical positions, in which any scholar is isolated in her/his own language. Interdisciplinarity supposes the continuous search of convergent theoretical perspectives and methodologies, the definition of common spaces and grammars as well as a true dialogical and open mind attitude of the several scholars.

For these reasons, ID is closely connected to the *ethics of communication*. Before proposing any hypothesis, the scholar must put in place her/his not obvious *listening* attitude, which is one of the fundamental dimensions of a new form of communication.

On the other hand, controversies are a special mode of discussion able to show the way to new and innovative solutions to all kind of problems. In fact, controversies are not an eminently philosophical phenomenon. They are distributed among different areas, both in theoretical and in practical life, both in academia and in ordinary day life. Inevitably, the proper study of controversies is interdisciplinary, requiring the cooperation of scholars focused on the art of controversies as well as researchers in communication, mediation, diplomacy, linguistics, logics, rhetorics, history, anthropology, psychology, etc.

Let us conclude by recalling that "Crossing Borderlines" was not only the title of the IASC Conference in Lisbon, but also the title of the introduction to volume 4 of the series of books *Controversies* (See: Dascal and Zhang 2007). That introduction was written not only by Han-liang Chang, but also by Marcelo Dascal.

To his memory, this volume is dedicated.

References

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