

ACCIDENTAL INTERDISCIPLINARITY:
ON EXPERIENCING THE WORLD AND DISCOVERING THE FUTURE

What is interdisciplinarity? What would we like it be in our scholarly pursuits? Everyone is talking about it, but that has not produced a greater understanding (see Z. Kloch, 2007). We can make a list of what it is not (a favorite method of mine), but this does not lead to desirable conclusions. Hence the idea to present “my view on the best practices of interdisciplinary research” as practical advice, i.e. an explanation why I think the work I do is an interdisciplinary undertaking, and how I came to think that. Naturally, as a scholar humanist, I work in a variety ways. I do not rule out working within one discipline. I respect disciplines, in my case, history. I also try not to renounce my discipline, when I go beyond my field. It also requires that I myself have to be disciplined. Interdisciplinarity does not mean rummaging at will and out of control in other disciplines! I emphasize from the outset that when speaking of interdisciplinarity I do not see it as a collaboration of experts from many disciplines gathered to solve a given problem.

My interdisciplinarity is accidental. What I mean is that it was not shaped by conscious intent. It was not the result of appropriating a specific idea. Interdisciplinarity was fashionable already in the second half of the 20th century, for instance among people interested in Third World topics. In the 60s interdisciplinary seminars were conducted at the University of Warsaw and in the 80s a fully functional interdisciplinary team held "Dialogues on the Third World." Yet, in principle, nobody went beyond an awareness of the need to join forces of many disciplines with the intention of dealing with the complexity of issues surrounding the Third World. I participated in these discussions but questioned the soundness of this category (*Dialogi o Trzecim Świecie* I, 29; cf. Solarz, 20).

I created my interdisciplinary program more than forty years ago while preparing my habilitation. I did not possess the same level of awareness that I do today, but that is how I defined my ecological-systems approach to researching non-European societies. Born of necessity, rather than of some methodological premises, it was founded upon three practical considerations.

I was convinced that:

- 1) Systemics (that is systems analysis derived from general systems theory – see von Bertalanffy, Laszlo, Weinberg) applied to the humanities could somehow help overcome Eurocentrism and thus create a possibility of comparing phenomena occurring in distinct and different civilizations;
- 2) regardless of the level of abstraction, most research focuses on human beings, and must therefore

take into account the fundamental relationship between society and the environment;

3) while studying human history, every time one revisits the past one must have a prospective gaze, that is one must look toward the future.

I implemented this program during the fifteen years that followed my habilitation, which I defended in 1974, and slowly became convinced that my work was interdisciplinary. The results were my books *The History of India* (1980) and *From Expansion to Domination* (1986). But can one truly consider these works to be the result of interdisciplinary research? It is debatable. Here I will discuss both my intentions and the results of my work. An examination of this sort from an interdisciplinary perspective demands the abandonment of the safe niche that an education confirmed by academic degrees affords us, and I was considered successful. I earned my doctorate at 28, obtained my habilitation at the age of 36, and a year later secured an administrative position at the University of Warsaw, outside my faculty "of origin." And I didn't belong to the party. Interdisciplinarity was probably not necessary to achieve this success, but perhaps was its reason?

At the time it seemed that, functioning in concert; disciplines could expand one's horizons, but could not resolve my fundamental problem. Professionally, one could undertake historical and sociological research, or combine history and economics, as Marcin Kula and Jacek Kochanowicz did. One could also apply knowledge gleaned from various disciplines in historical research (see Antoni Mączak and Jerzy Topolski). But this was not enough for me. The problem I am talking about is best described as some kind of unease caused by the helplessness vis-a-vis the otherness of the non-European world.

This unease was a direct result of having decided to focus my academic energies on the worlds beyond Europe, something that my time at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes only confirmed (1964). My study of history at the University of Warsaw (MA, 1960) gave me a respectable skill set, an interest in economic issues, as well as a readiness to go beyond both Poland and Europe. My doctoral dissertation (1966) was, however, most definitely written within the boundaries of one field of inquiry. The problem arose later, when I definitively decided that I would become a student of the non-European world. This was a result of having become aware of the limitations encountered when using exclusively European sources. I was also well aware of the risk a researcher takes when using even the most refined methods of various disciplines (for example, psychology, anthropology or econometrics), but remains bound by his own cultural frame of reference. For me Paris was a vivid experience of the existence of the "Third World," while at the same time the impetus to give up focusing on the problematic of the "Third World." *Tiers-mondisme* did not become my passion; I was somehow lacking a *progressive* element and I was not particularly attracted to the herd mentality. In fact I was looking for

an effective means of shedding the limitations imposed by Eurocentrism. That was also fashionable, but at least it was not *progressive*. When I began my independent research, I only knew that a familiarity with different tools and a foundation in a variety of disciplines were absolutely insufficient.

India became that strange unknown reality and I had to resolve the problem of its otherness not being an Indologist, and, as it turned out, without the possibility of actually encountering India first hand. This lack of experience sharpened my sense of uncertainty, forcing me to explore intensively my sources. For me, interdisciplinarity was initially an instinct, then later the result of an emotional imperative. Here I have in mind contact with my colleagues outside Europe. Especially female colleagues. My awareness of the necessity of going beyond not only my Eurocentric conditioning, but also the limitations of the authors of my sources, played a deciding role in my endeavors. I had realized that their way of seeing the world differed entirely from my own.

My first step in the direction of interdisciplinarity was the result of my desire to eliminate that which my sources had imposed on the reality understood and experienced in the sixteenth century, that is in a time when *Orientalism* had not even existed (Said first presented his concept in 1978, and I had wanted to research an "Uninvented India" at the beginning of the 1970s). I took that step thanks to my simultaneous introduction to the concepts of ecology and systems.

My interest in biology was the result of socializing, not something I had studied. I became friends with biologists, animal physiologists in particular, who worked on the other side of the wall in the same building, called "the former museum" (because it had been a museum at one point). I spent also a lot of time in the laboratories of the Szkoła Główna, and not only in March 1968, endlessly discussing the bleak reality of the times, among other things. These conversations and friendships probably led to my initial interest in the environment, which became a hot button issue during the time of the first reports issued by The Club of Rome. I became a self-taught environmentalist, knowing that my knowledge was clearly limited. I had only my intuition, that I was just as much a part of the environment as any foreigner, just as the witnesses of centuries past were. Man is influenced by the environment; influences it himself and he cannot exist outside of it. I also knew that one could describe all of this in terms of material, energy and information. These fascinations led me to the issue of homeostasis. The solutions were provided by another field of inquiry beyond the humanities: systems theory. It is certain that at that time everybody was reading Lem, but not very many had delved into *Summa Technologiae*. My ignorance of mathematics prevented me from making any unfounded historical conclusions. I was simply passionate about Toffler, Dumont, Monod and Mazur.

Such impulses led me to seek out systems interpretations of relations, such as those that bind people from various parts of the world, and this was before Wallerstein's world systems appeared in

1974, but Braudel's work certainly played an essential role. I think that Braudel's influence was a deciding factor in that it didn't block my own intellectual exploration. I accepted world systems naturally, without the baggage that accompanied its various interpretations and the ideological controversies that followed. If at that time I found myself under anyone's influence, it was that of Richard Wilkinson, a relatively unknown British economist. I obtained a copy of his book *Poverty and Progress: an Ecological Model of Economic Development* (Methuen & Co, 1973) before I wrote my work about the origins of backwardness. I cannot avoid mentioning the fact that at the time I was extremely interested in the problems of economic growth and theories of backwardness. It was an intellectual mishmash, and I was reminded of this fact by specialists from a variety of fields. Thankfully I was stubborn.

In my view, interdisciplinarity was the result of both a holistic approach to reality and the recognition of the limitations of the sources I had available to me at the time. It was based on working on an approach to researching the problems found *between* disciplines, yet not looking for their synthesis. I do not think I ever aspired to become competent in the fields of economics, sociology, ecology or cybernetics. In these fields I was looking for impulses and inspirations that I could somehow connect to my own work in order to move it forward. Forty years ago, this approach was but a possibility on the horizon.

This interdisciplinarity was born of the conditions of the time. I had no chance of receiving a scholarship or fellowship, or of having permanent access to the key archives and libraries – none of this was particularly out of the ordinary for those times. Despite this, I was lucky enough in that Małowist arranged for a scholarship from non-ministerial funds that took me to Paris. I am indebted to Braudel for having arranged for me to work at the Venetian archives, while my family enabled me to spend time in archives in London. It was, however, clear after my habilitation that I would not become a historian of India. I wrote *The History of India* because it was needed in order to teach students. My imagination had to suffice. On the other hand, I addressed the issues of European expansion, assuming that I would be able to describe them differently than it was being done at that time. During the fifteen years after my habilitation, I forced myself to try and reconcile accepted notions of the non-European world with a systems-theory interpretation of the phenomenon of European expansion.

At this stage of my research, I expressed interdisciplinarity as a detachment from my initial fascination with economics, ecology, systems and the Third World. I had the ambition of constructing a new theory, a comprehensive system of research, an interpretation of reality born of moving beyond the borders that separate worlds. I first tormented my students with this. I took my work ever further beyond the boundaries of various disciplines. I did not follow the main trends of the time, that is post-

colonial and postmodern, not so much out of ignorance, but rather out of stubbornness. They flourished in the 1980s, and I also considered them to be interdisciplinary fields of inquiry, yet somehow I never found them terribly convincing.

My interdisciplinary experience was further enriched again and again by returning to the basic problem that haunted me from the beginning of my academic path. It was an attempt to recreate the processes that comprise the phenomenon of confrontation – of multifaceted confrontations, with various etiologies and heterogeneous consequences, between people from Europe and those people living in their own completely different worlds. For me, in the 1980s, the World of the Indian Ocean presented this contrast. My experience indicated that you could not simply apply any version of world systems to the World of the Ocean, i. e. to the hundreds of societies living on the coastline of "The Great Circle." But that was the dominant trend in academia. My experience dealing with the fate of the Portuguese in Asia and the evolutionary paths of the peoples of Kerala indicated the possibility of an alternative interpretation. In both cases my interdisciplinary approach contradicted the mainstream, but it was also met with some interest. When I finally presented my complete thoughts on the relationships between peoples of disparate civilizations, fate led me in another direction.

At the very moment (after my return from India in December 1989) when I started writing a book about intercivilizational encounters in Malabar, I accepted an offer to become the Polish ambassador to Spain. This was a conscious decision. It was not entirely by chance, as I had had professional ties to Spain for over a decade. This work was not at all interdisciplinary. I conducted rather conventional historical research, writing about Spanish-Polish relations. I did not look for the opportunity to create anything new. Indeed, when undertaking the task of organizing and writing the independent *History of Poland* (Paris, 1986, as well as numerous underground editions), I did not seek out a space for expressing my thoughts on methodology. When leaving academia for the diplomatic corps, I had not supposed that I would leave my interdisciplinary research for much longer. In August of 1990, while ambassador, I took part in the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Madrid, presenting two papers. This was supposed to be my entrance onto the world stage, but it turned out that it served to close a chapter in my life.

Despite my experience in Spain, in an unexpected way, it turned out crucial for the strengthening my notion of interdisciplinarity. I ought to correct that thought, adding that this reinforcement of my beliefs took place also because of my engagement in public affairs during the 1980s. I think my experience as a humanist scholar led me to focus my attention on Poland after martial law. I approached public affairs from an interdisciplinary perspective, engaging in the world beyond academia as a direct result of my experience as a scholar.

Initially interdisciplinarity was to help me overcome the handicap of the lack of direct contact with the part of the world I had chosen to research. Now it seemed to be the other way around. Understanding Spain was a continuation of my Polish work and it turned out to be fruitful thanks to my experience with interdisciplinary research. I would hasten to say more. My unexpected involvement allowed me to apply my theoretical assumptions “in practice.” At that time I was doing both, studying a different culture and representing my own country in that very same culture. This activity proved to be very stimulating and bore unexpected results. It seemed that in halting my work on the concept of the Encounter with people from different cultures that I was ending my intellectual work, though not necessarily my academic work. It turned out differently. I discovered the possibility of testing in the real world that which Morin calls the Dialogue. In this way I found a place for myself in the Center for Research on Ancient Tradition at the Warsaw University. Here I joined the practice of dialogue between cultures with my research experience on encountering the peoples of different civilizations. Thanks to this I returned to conducting research for which it was necessary to employ interdisciplinarity.

In discussing this experience I want to stress that for me interdisciplinarity presents itself as a practice that does not demand methodological justifications. I believe I was successful in two ways: first, I was able to conduct my research according to my own ideas, which was greatly satisfying; second, the research methods I developed worked well in practice.

It is rather bold of me to call my own way of conducting research in the humanities a form of interdisciplinarity. It is, however, how I worked from the beginning. I would add that after forty years I see the arguments that confirm I was right. The essence of this approach, my understanding of the humanities, is a respect for the disciplines tempered by a freedom to choose one's own approach. For me, history, as a profession and as an art, remains a frame of reference, a test of both the effectiveness and honesty of one's conduct. When I undertake interdisciplinary work, I do not act as an historian. I do not introduce interdisciplinarity to the disciplines. I do not question the disciplines. I do not try to combine them. I am; however, ready to undertake a holistic approach to solving apparent problems. Thanks to my fascination with confrontation, I began to reflect upon the process of change within social systems.

Is this the whole truth? Maybe not completely. I avoid my interdisciplinarity when I write texts that remain within the confines of one field of inquiry, because they otherwise are difficult to understand. An overuse of terminology is not only a barrier, but it also gives the impression of replacing real solutions with mesmerizing words. I, however, think exclusively in terms of these categories. For me interdisciplinarity became a conceptual apparatus, a means of perceiving reality, and not only in research. Perhaps it is the proper approach. I am not, however, certain because translating

interdisciplinary thought using natural language is risky, just as it is when translating between cultures.

Interdisciplinarity is not a panacea, and it is best not to treat it as a general theory of everything. In the humanities there are vast areas that are difficult to research within the confines of individual disciplines. It is not always possible to create teams with members from various departments. At the same time it is not uncommon to be lacking a paradigm that would integrate fields of research. Man and his surroundings, people in their environment, those are typical interdisciplinary areas of research. Does this mean that such an approach is either impossible or unnecessary in other cases? Not at all. I believe that interdisciplinary experiences enormously enrich the methods and techniques of a given discipline.

Understood as such, interdisciplinarity is most effective when attempting to reconstruct human events in a broader historical perspective and in a multicultural context. Many roads lead to such a solution. My experience with systems theory and ecology, or a developed conceptual apparatus, does not explain things on their own. They are simply tools to be used in practice.

This results in a variety of consequences of a more general nature. Certainly what I do academically has left its mark on the way I see the world. I have also indicated just how grateful I am for the practical experience gleaned from my own culture, as well as foreign cultures. In the end, however, a well developed and effective conceptual apparatus is not the most important thing. Interdisciplinarity was from the very beginning an instinctive response to a challenge with otherness. At the same time it did, however, leave a lasting focus: man in time and space, and his role in the world. Hence the conviction that "futurology is a consequence of conducting history; it is its essence" (*Kerala. Od równowagi do zacoiania* p. 176). Today I would say it more precisely. The humanities are always concerned with the future of man, but there is no way to secure this future other than through reaching for the resources created in the past. Interdisciplinarity is the practice of learning this process.

LIST OF WORKS CITED AND OF FORMATIVE IMPORTANCE

- Amin S., *Le développement inégal. Essai sur les formations sociales du capitalisme périphérique*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1973.
- Bertalanffy L. von, *General Systems Theory*, New York, G. Braziller, 1968.
- Braudel F., *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen*, Paris, 1949.
- Braudel F., *Historia i trwanie*, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1971.
- Dasman F. R., Milton P. J., Freeman H. P., *Ecological Principles for Economic Development*, London, John Wiley & Sons, 1973.
- Dubos R., *Tyle człowieka co zwierzęcia*, Warszawa, PZWL, 1973.
- Dumont R., *L'Utopie ou la Mort!*, Paris, Seuil, 1973.
- Frank G. A., *Capitalismo y subdesarrollo en America Latina*, La Habana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1970.
- Kieniewicz J., *Kerala. Od równowagi do zacoiania*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwa UW, 1975.

- Kieniewicz J., *Drogi do Indii*, Warszawa, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984.
- Kieniewicz J., *Od ekspansji do dominacji. Próba teorii kolonializmu*, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1986.
- Kieniewicz J., *Wprowadzenie do historii cywilizacji Wschodu i Zachodu*, Warszawa, Dialog 2003.
- Kieniewicz J., *Ekspansja, kolonializm, cywilizacja*, Warszawa, DiG 2008.
- Klir G. J. [ed.], *Trends in General Systems Theory*, New York, J. Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972.
- Kloch Z., *Interdyscyplinarność w naukach humanistycznych*, Tekst wygłoszony na seminarium Wydziału I Nauk Społecznych PAN i Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN: „Interdyscyplinarność w naukach społecznych i humanistycznych - możliwości i ograniczenia” (21.11.2007), strona internetowa Wydziału „Artes Liberales” UW <http://www.al.uw.edu.pl>
- Kochanowicz J., *Backwardness and Modernization: Poland and Eastern Europe in the 16th-20th Century*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006.
- Laszlo E., *The Systems View of the World*, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1972.
- Latil P. de, *Sztuczne myślenie. Wstęp do cybernetyki*, Warszawa, PWT, 1958.
- Lem St., *Summa technologiae*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967.
- Mazur M., *Cybernetyczna teoria układów samodzielnych*, Warszawa, PWN, 1966.
- Meadows H. D., Meadows L. D., Randers J., Behrens III W. W., *Granice wzrostu*, Warszawa, PWE, 1973.
- Monod J., *Le Hasard et la Nécessité: Essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne*, Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1970.
- Morin E., *Le paradigme perdu: la nature humaine*, Paris, Edition du Seuil, 1973.
- Morin E., *Penser l'Europe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986.
- Odum T. H., *Environment, Power and Society*, New York, Wiley Interscience, 1971.
- Oltmans L. W. [comp.], *Debate sobre el crecimiento*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1975.
- Sachs I., *Stratégies de l'écodéveloppement*, Paris, Les Editions ouvrières, 1980.
- Said E., *Orientalism* Vintage Books 1978.
- Solarz M. W., *Trzeci Świat. Zarys biografii pojęcia*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwa UW, 2009
- Stefański B. [red.], *Dialogi o Trzecim Świecie*, t. 1-3, Warszawa, Instytut Krajów Rozwijających się UW, 1984-1986.
- Tamames R., *La polémica sobre los limites al crecimiento*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1974.
- Toffler A., *Ekospazm*, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1977.
- Wallerstein I., *The Modern World-System. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974.
- Weinberg M. G., *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking*, New York, J. Wiley & Sons Inc., 1975.
- White A. L., *The Concept of Cultural Systems. A Key to Understanding Tribes and Nations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1975.
- Wilkinson R., *Poverty and Progress. An ecological model of economic development* London, Methuen & Co, 1973
- Williams C. G., *Adaptation and Natural Selection. A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1966.