



W 40 lat po pierwszym wydaniu

W 15 lat po śmierci Autora

Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej Witolda Kuli po angielsku

W lutym 2003 r. minęło 15 lat od śmierci profesora Witolda Kuli, twórcy i długoletniego kierownika Katedry Historii Gospodarczej naszego Wydziału. W 2001 r., nakładem wydawnictwa Ashgate, ukazało się angielskie tłumaczenie Jego książki *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej* (PWN 1963, 1983; wyd. włoskie Cisalpina 1972, wyd. hiszp. Península 1973).

Dzieło przetłumaczył dziś już nieżyjący profesor Richard Szreter z Uniwersytetu Birmingham, uczestnik Powstania Warszawskiego. Pracę edytorską wykonał i wstęp napisał jego syn, dr Simon Szreter, historyk-demograf z Cambridge. Miło nam, że Wydział Nauk Ekonomicznych także mógł się przyczynić do wydania książki, pokrywając choć część kosztów całego przedsięwzięcia.

Promocja *Problemów i metod...* odbyła się w lutym 2002 r., w St. Johns College w Cambridge, w obecności licznych historyków oraz ambasadora Stanisława Komorowskiego. Poniżej drukujemy przemówienie, wygłoszone z tej okazji przez panią profesor Pat Hudson z Uniwersytetu w Cardiff, przewodniczącą Economic History Society of Great Britain.

Redakcja

Talk presented by Pat Hudson on the occasion of the launch of *The Problems and Methods of Economic History* (Ashgate Press 2001), St Johns College, Cambridge, Saturday 9th February 2002

I am very pleased to be here to represent the Economic History Society in celebrating publication of this remarkable book.

Despite the long delay since it first appeared in Polish and since the English translation was prepared, the central message of the book is as important as ever. The present generation will benefit enormously from its availability.

One might argue that economic history has become infinitely more sophisticated since the 1960s and that economic historians must grasp the opportunity to incorporate neo institutional advances, bounded rationality, asymmetric information, myopic choice and game theoretic models into their analyses. Of course these can be both interesting and useful. But, rereading *The Problems and Methods* it becomes clear that not so much has changed since 1963. Economic historians may have more power tools at their disposal but the central issue which concerned Witold Kula of course remains: we need different tools for different jobs. Analysing economies and societies remote in time and culture from our own requires one to recognise just how ineffective modern economic theory can be for historians (despite the fancy gymnastics alluded to by Eric Hobsbawm in *On History*).

As Kula emphasises (p. 36): there is “a peculiar a-historicism about the majority of economic doctrines today (which is only aggravated by) their frequent claims to universal validity”.

In *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (which was translated into 6 languages to become the most widely quoted work by a Polish historian) Kula was particularly concerned with finding an appropriate approach to a time when markets were very limited and imperfect and when they had not great influence on the economic life of the non market sector or upon society in general. Was rational economic activity (of the kind identified as such by modern economies) possible in this context? In addressing this question Kula subtly demonstrates that in any economic system “choices are never determined by considerations exclusively related to economic calculation”. And in a wonderful passage dismissive of the economic historians’ obsession with comparative studies of purchasing power, he suggests that one should consult the work of novelists such as Zola or Balzac rather than comparative statistics because the value of money always depends upon the cultural milieu and the context. (Kula would have little time, I think, for the “What’s it worth now?” section of the American Economic History internet service: at EH.net.)

Fernand Braudel referred to *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (much of which is presaged in *The Problems and Methods...*) as “an example of a Marxist problematic mastered, assimilated and elevated to the level of a lucid and intelligent humanism”. “Its account of the daily economic calculations of peasant, lord, magnate and squire is an important event for historians”.

The concerns and interests more fully explored in Kula’s later book *Measures and Men* can also be found in *The Problems and Methods*. In this, my favourite work of his, Kula’s strong ethnographic and cultural intelligence shines from the page. His account of the cross cultural salience and durability of anthropometric measures is exemplary and entirely ahead of its time in its anthropological leanings. A foot between seed potatoes, the finger joint, an outstretched arm, a stone’s throw, the carrying distance of the voice, a day’s walk distance seen from a horse’s back: how important were these in

bridging the gulf between the self and the social. And the most important implication: that the emergence of man's metrological concepts and habits represented a sea change of mentalities.

Most fascinating is the link between this work and Kula's concern to critique the universal claims of price theory. The value system of pre-capitalist times did not insist that measures be immutable, in fact quite the reverse. After bad harvests with scarce grain supplies, bakers got out their smaller tins. The price of bread stayed the same, loaves just became smaller, partly so that there could be more equity in their distribution. In this way Kula helps us to get inside another world: a cultural otherness where conventional present centered ideas are of little value.

In LSE library I found a book of Kula's with which I was unfamiliar. It was jointly written with Nina Assorodobraj, and with Marcin Kula and appeared in Polish in 1972. Under the title *Polish Emigrants' Letters*. It is a poignant translation and commentary upon more than 300 letters written by Polish emigrants to the US and Brazil in the 1890s. They are written to families and friends in the Old Country, often describing the harshness of immigrant life and sending monies, steam ship tickets and information so that their wives, children and parents could join them. All came from the area of Płock.

But none of the letters had reached their destination. All had been confiscated together with their valuable contents, by the Tsarist Censors. Only these 367 had survived of the hundreds of thousands found by Kula in boxes in a Warsaw warehouse in 1941. The rest were destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising.

Reading the letters in the footsteps of the man who had rescued them was an emotional experience, particularly knowing their fate. Several asked their families to send song sheets and music. Frank Filarski writing from Pennsylvania asked for a black woollen kerchief and for song sheets for several pieces. It is appropriate that we celebrate the importance of music in Polish culture this evening¹.

I have long had a personal fascination with Witold Kula's generation of East European intellectuals who did so much to unsettle ways of thinking about social science and the arts in the West.

This was endorsed in the early 1970s when I visited Poland several times on a student's back-packing journey of self discovery. Łódź was a particular revelation, like stepping back to Bradford or Manchester during the industrial revolution: cobbled streets, horse drawn delivery vehicles, and the air heavy with the sound and smoke of factory chimneys and shunting steam trains. The textile museum there contained looms and condensers made in Lancashire and Yorkshire in the 1820s, which stimulated my later research interest. And, in the overgrown Jewish cemetery amongst the giant damaged

¹ Aluzja do koncertu, przewidzianego w dalszej części programu wieczoru promocyjnego.

Mausoleums of the textile entrepreneurs: Poznański, Geyer and others, I caught a glimpse of an entirely lost world which I wanted to study.

Most of the readers of this English edition of *The Problems and Methods*, including younger members of the Economic History Society, will live in a world far removed from Kula's generation: raised in post war affluence in countries with no history of occupation or holocaust. But this makes his work all the more important and compelling. It reminds us that in social science people, and what Marc Bloch called "modes of feeling and thought" must always be placed alongside, if not before, abstract models.