

WOJCIECH PIASEK
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń
ORCID: 0000-0002-5997-5844

WITOLD KULA'S CONCEPT OF ECONOMIC HISTORY UNDERSTOOD AS HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

Abstract

The article presents the concept of the economic history of Witold Kula. He understands economic history as historical and comparative anthropology. However, he does not see the need to change the name of the discipline because he understands anthropology in a traditional way. This name refers to a separate discipline of knowledge which is primarily interested in primitive societies. Taking account of the existence of different research styles in anthropology, it must be stated that Kula's research on the economy represents the scientific style of researching culture.

Keywords: Witold Kula, economic history, anthropological perspective, scientific anthropologisation of history

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN RESEARCH ON THE ECONOMY

Kula's views on the economy may help reconstruct his views on economic history¹. According to the researcher, both disciplines remain in close relationship due to the same nature of the questions posed, outlining the common research subject. These are questions relating to management. An economic

¹ I analyse Kula's concept of history and economic history in more detail in: Wojciech Piasek, *Anthropologising History: A Historiographic and Methodological Case Study of Witold Kula* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2018).

historian should draw on theories and research methods from economics². Kula presents his views on this topic in more detail in his article entitled *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo (Antropologiczny punkt widzenia)*. In this article, he addresses the issues of various economic systems and their consequences for their cognition. He also argues with Maurice Godelier, a representative of economic anthropology.

Kula thinks that it is fundamental for researchers to realise that the phenomena they study, regardless of where and when they occur, constitute a fragment of a totality, which is society and culture. He notes that anthropologists dealing with economic phenomena in primitive societies understand this fact. He claims that researchers dealing with the economies of modern societies should also understand this fact. Kula agrees with Godelier about the cultural nature of human economic activity, yet he accuses him of a lack of consistency in the way he treats the modern European economy. According to him, paradoxically, the anthropologist does not take into account that the economy is also a fragment of a wider anthropological totality³. Therefore, his understanding of the economy is naive. According to Kula, Godelier is wrong when he contrasts the economies of primitive peoples with the economy of our civilisation. He is wrong not when he speaks of primitive peoples, but when he speaks about us⁴.

For example, Godelier writes that work in primitive societies is not only an economic factor, but it is also an economic, political and religious act and it is experienced as this kind of act. According to Kula, work is not only an economic act also in our society. One goal of this mono-economic character of work would be to maximise earnings. Artists are the only exception mentioned by Godelier in this context. Kula thinks that this is not true.

Are we not all artists in this respect? Is it not a general phenomenon that workers could potentially work in their free time, but they do not do this as they prefer other values to additional earnings? Is it not common that workers who are offered a better paid job do not take it as they are tied to other values (working conditions, hygiene, cultural environment, the prestige of the plant they work for, respect for professionalism, friendly environment, etc.)?⁵

² Witold Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 2nd edition (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983), 58. According to Kula, the subject of economics understood in this way covers the entire cognisable history of mankind including, as he particularly emphasises, primitive societies. Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 87. (The book has been translated into English: Witold Kula, *The Problems and Methods of Economic History*, transl. Richard Szeleter, ed. by Simon Szeleter (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001). However, as the translator decided not to translate all the chapters and excluded many sections of the original work, all quotations are translations of the original Polish version of the book).

³ Witold Kula, "Ekonomia a społeczeństwo. (Antropologiczny punkt widzenia)," in *O gospodarce mieszanej w krajach „trzeciego świata"*, ed. by Czesław Bobrowski, Stefania Tajerowa (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967), 49.

⁴ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 25.

⁵ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 29.

Similarly, it is a mistake to see modern civilisation as striving to maximise production, considering the fact that primitive societies exhibit a different attitude to this issue. Kula refers to the example of a tribe described by Godelier. The tribe devoted the time saved from the introduction of a steel axe to non-economic activities (feasts, wars and travels) rather than multiplying their material means of existence. Kula writes:

...from what some (not all) economists write, it might be deduced that our civilisation aims to maximise production, ...to increase economic income, having a monetary aspect.... However, this leads to obvious absurdities! Do we really devote the entire benefit of technical progress to "multiply our material means of existence"? Do we not, just like the Siane people, devote a great part of it to "feasts, wars and travels"?⁶.

An economic act is thus presented as an act of various meanings and functions. Referring to Godelier's statement, Kula agrees that this is the source of the multiple meanings of phenomena, such as exchange, investment, money and consumption in various societies⁷. Including ours, he adds⁸.

Godelier's statement about the autonomy of the economic field of life in contemporary societies and the lack of this autonomy in primitive cultures is the synthesis of misunderstandings. According to Kula, the French researcher was influenced so much by the economic works he read that he could not see the obvious facts of experienced reality. He believed, writes Kula, "in common... clichés about mono-economic motivations, not realising that they are scientific conventions, artificial abstractions that are undertaken for specific research tasks, then start to live their own lives and are accepted as empirical statements"⁹.

According to Kula, Godelier became a victim of conventions, which are widely disseminated in economic science and most often unknowingly accepted by economists. However, the autonomous treatment of economic phenomena should be perceived as a kind of idealisation, which may at times be prolific and limiting at others. If generalisation is the goal of science, its most significant task, according to Kula, it is possible to define basic categories and, consequently, formulate economic laws only through such relative autonomisation¹⁰.

Referring to Godelier's words, Kula points to the importance of anthropology for economists. It can "give economics a perspective [emphasis by W.P.] that the latter often misses so that it can determine its scope and the field of the theoretical and historical applicability of its theses"¹¹. This perspective involves looking at human economic activity as at any other as a field of culture, as it is in the case of anthropologists. Moreover, "it can suggest *terrae incognitas* in the area of political economy..., it can suggest examining the problems of political

⁶ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 30.

⁷ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 31.

⁸ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 31.

⁹ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 30–31.

¹⁰ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 80–81.

¹¹ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 40.

economy in the way that ethnologists would do”¹². It should be noted that Kula clearly separates the anthropological perspective from the way in which research is conducted by the anthropologist¹³.

According to Kula, researchers of economic phenomena who adopt the anthropological perspective must face two consequences. When conducting economic analysis of these phenomena, they must always take account of their cultural character and their multifaceted nature in particular, as well as the existence of cultural boundaries which are a specific framework for research findings.

According to the author of *An Economic Theory*, when conducting research, economists must take as a starting point their own economy and theory developed on its basis. “«A starting point»”, Kula writes “is almost the same as a «reference scale»”¹⁴. As a consequence, economists may fall into interpretive naivety if they measure all societies examined by “their own measure” and treat their own society as something obvious¹⁵. This is often the case among researchers dealing with economic issues. This can be avoided by realising the cultural nature of reality and questioning our society as a universal, supra-historical reference point. This involves ‘questioning the prevailing hierarchy of values, ...questioning all conventions in the way it [the society] thinks about itself’¹⁶. This attitude is typical of anthropologists and should be the basis of the research approach adopted by all those involved in studying human issues.

Researchers of the economy should be aware that the theory they have adopted has been developed based on specific socio-cultural material and that during the research the theory is referred to as a reality formed by the cultural diversity of human economies. This was not noticed in traditional economics and so scientific ideas constructed by the representatives of this science were absolutised. Economic laws formulated in the course of these researchers’ work were considered universally important, and every other historical system was treated not as a particular social and cultural being but as a set of unreasonable obstacles that did not allow these laws to operate¹⁷.

ECONOMIC HISTORY AS HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

According to Kula, economic history is a science that deals with the economic aspect of social life in various societies and cultures. It is an integral part of economics and history¹⁸. Kula’s *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej* are

¹² Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 40.

¹³ Witold Kula, “On the Typology of Economic Systems,” in *The Social Sciences. Problems and Orientations* (Paris: UNESCO, 1968), 130.

¹⁴ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 27.

¹⁵ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 26.

¹⁶ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 35.

¹⁷ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 25.

¹⁸ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 94.

the introduction to economic history understood in this way. In the introduction, Kula writes about the history of this work. He recalls that when he started work on it for the third time in 1956, before finally completing it in 1961, he had to start it all over again due to the development of historical and economic research in the post-war period. The changes that had taken place in economic sciences and social anthropology played a huge role¹⁹.

It seems that for Kula, the creation of theories and research methods in the field of so-called economic growth was of particular significance in economics due to the need to cover long periods of time and developing countries. This made researchers realise that research is always conducted within certain socio-cultural assumptions²⁰. Anthropologists, however, became particularly interested in economic issues, which subsequently led to the emergence of economic anthropology²¹. In the introduction, Kula explains what ideas guided him when he was working on his book *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej*:

When I was considering various problems and methods of economic history, of course, not all matters related to them interested me to an equal degree ..., the main issue that draws my attention is different economic phenomena in various systems. This issue comes to the fore in all chapters. I try to translate into specific facts the often repeated (and yet true) cliché about the historical volatility of different forms of management and the historical character of economic laws. I try to show further that in the pre-capitalist and pre-industrial economy, the price was something else and the measure was something else and the enterprise was something else... and the market, etc. ...I am somehow obsessed with tracing these differences in economic phenomena. If it had not taken so many years to create the book, it could have evolved into another book devoted to these issues. As it is now – the main issue is discussed in many places in the book²².

According to Kula, since economic history is an integral part of history, which formulates laws and studies societies and cultures, it can give economic theory developed within economics a broader character to make it the theory of economics in general, rather than the theory of modern economics²³. He refers to Joan Robinson to indicate that the analysis of economic phenomena conducted as part of economics 'needs to be supplemented by a kind of historical and comparative anthropology, which remains in its infancy as a science'²⁴. Only historians can do this. While historians and economists share many essential

¹⁹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 8.

²⁰ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 91, 93.

²¹ When writing about the emergence of *Problemy i metody*, Kula mentions that, when writing the work for the first time, "ethnology developed under the dominant influence of Malinowski's great individuality and it almost did not touch upon the issues of the economy of primitive peoples." Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 8. Vide Krystyna Romaniszyn, *Świat gospodarek ludzkich. O kształtowaniu się przedmiotu poznania antropologii gospodarczej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 1994).

²² Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 6.

²³ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 83.

²⁴ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 93.

characteristics, one cannot forget the differences in their education, the materials on which they are able to work, the methods they use, their approaches to sources and the assistive techniques they have mastered²⁵.

THE FORMALISING AND DRAMATISING PERSPECTIVES OF RESEARCH INTO THE ACTS OF ECONOMIC CHOICE

Kula emphasises that the task of economic history, understood as historical and comparative anthropology, is to understand how people managed in different social situation²⁶. This general statement acquires meaning when we trace Kula's views on issues dealt with by economic history.

In his *Problemy i metody*, the scholar writes that economic history explores the economic life of societies²⁷. There are two aspects to the economic life of societies.. The first includes human actions – and more precisely, the economic aspect of human actions – involving management, that is, acts of economic choice²⁸, determined by social conditions (institutions)²⁹. Acts of economic choice always show different (depending on culture) regularities that can be examined (observed and explained)³⁰. The second aspect includes the social results of the mass scale of these acts – the intended or unintended results³¹. According to Kula, management is synonymous with acts of economic choice and “social situations” are synonymous with the resulting social conditions³².

Every choice involves making judgements. The content of the acts of economic choice is therefore valuation, and their essence is values, which are of main interest to Kula. The subject of the analysis, however, is not the acts of choice themselves, but the social conditions that determine them³³. This indirect nature of the analysis results primarily from the social character of the human psyche and the entire human reality³⁴. Kula's research subject is social choice regularities and hence social values rather than individual acts of choice or individual values³⁵. According to the scholar, they must be detected and interpreted at the social level. This means that the subject of analysis can only be the

²⁵ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 86.

²⁶ Kula, *On the Typology*, 130.

²⁷ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 195.

²⁸ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 195.

²⁹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 195.

³⁰ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 195.

³¹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 195.

³² Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 221.

³³ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 70.

³⁴ Kula was sceptical about the direction defined as collective psychology, the very name of which was “anthropomorphism in sociology.” Elsewhere he writes about “distrust towards anthropomorphised approaches to social psychology.” Witold Kula, *Rozważania o historii* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958), 93.

³⁵ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 222.

social factors that are responsible for the fact that choices made do not produce a chaotic image but contain observable regularities. At the same time, these factors determine choices.

The study of social choice regularities, which is synonymous with the study of social values, involves analysing the entire socio-cultural situation in which people make choices. Institutions – responsible for the social standardisation of choices – determine these choices at the same time. Hence, the study of social choice regularities must be a study of social institutions as determinants of social choice regularities.

Kula distinguishes two aspects of institutions: structural and that related to action. Institutions relate to both the organisational form of actions and their standardisation³⁶. However, it is not the framework in which actions are performed, but actions themselves, that are crucial for Kula³⁷. He recognises the relationship between institutions and social values and conceptualises standardised actions as socio-moral patterns³⁸.

While commenting on his study of economic phenomena, Kula emphasises that “every human event contains a formal element and a dramatic element.... Both must be tracked by historians”³⁹. He refers this statement to the study of a socio-cultural totality, which consists of social institutions, and notes that it can be examined from a dramatising perspective by analysing socio-moral patterns and identifying related social values, or from a formalising perspective by analysing mechanisms that govern institutions. In the context of this division, he writes about dramatising and combines this approach with his *Measures and Men* and about formalising, which is related to *An Economic Theory*. “As you can see, when considering historical metrology, I try to dramatise it. However, when considering the functioning of the national economy, I try to formalise it”⁴⁰.

THE FORMALISING PERSPECTIVE OF RESEARCH

The study of acts of economic choice from the formalising perspective involves identifying laws governing the functioning of the system, which consists of social institutions⁴¹. These acts, according to Kula, are governed by numerous

³⁶ Kula, *Rozważania o historii*, 113. Vide Grażyna Skąpska, Marek Ziółkowski, “Instytucja społeczna,” in *Encyklopedia socjologii*, vol. 1, ed. by Zbigniew Boksański, Andrzej Kojder (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 1998), 317–321.

³⁷ Witold Kula, *Historia, zacofanie, rozwój* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983), 203–204.

³⁸ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 405–406.

³⁹ Witold Kula, *Rozdziałki*, ed. by Marcin Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 1996), 195 (p 27 II 1966, “Idę pod prąd”).

⁴⁰ Kula, *Rozdziałki*, 195.

⁴¹ Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy 1500–1800*, 2 impr., transl. Lawrence Garner (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 182.

identifiable regularities⁴². Social choice regularities should therefore be understood through theory relating to the reality in which they occur⁴³.

A theoretical understanding of social choice regularities requires a model approach to the reality under investigation. These two perspectives are an inseparable whole for the researcher. The relevance of any theory depends on the degree to which it describes the reality to which it relates. If reality is perceived as culturally and historically diversified, a question must be asked about the place and time in which theory complies with the reality examined. A model is a simplified construction corresponding to the historical stage of development of a specific culture. By examining its functioning, we create a theory of culture. Thus, we have the only opportunity to create a universal model of cultural development in general⁴⁴.

Kula came up with the idea of applying model reasoning in research while working on his *Problemy i metody*. Its practical application on the material relating to the modern history of Poland was meant to be the seventeenth chapter of the book concerning the pre-capitalist economy⁴⁵. This was the result of Kula's interest in the process of cultural uniformity, conceptualised as the world taking over cultural patterns and the hierarchy of social values created in Europe in the course of industrialisation. This is the genesis of the aforementioned famous work, which was finally published under the title *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy 1500–1800*. In this book, the researcher explicitly outlines his views on how he understands the model approach. He describes them in the subsection of *Problemy i metody* entitled *Economics and the Plurality of Civilizations* and in the quoted article entitled *On the Typology of Social Systems*.

According to the author of *An Economic Theory*, the structure of a model begins with adopting assumptions for analysis. When adopting these, researchers should aim to reflect the characteristic features of the economic reality under examination. Kula writes that "...model analysis as we understand it...has nothing to do with the tendency, fashionable in some circles, to build abstract models, based on arbitrary assumptions. Even if useful for teaching purposes, these models are of no scientific value"⁴⁶.

Referring to Jerzy Topolski's classification, we note that Kula's model is always an ontological model, i.e. the opposite of an instrumental model, and a proper, that is, wider, model, the opposite of which is a narrower model. Models referred to by economic historians often only include a certain number of statements about reality, that is, its characteristics, and exclude statements about its functioning⁴⁷.

⁴² Kula, *An Economic Theory*, 172.

⁴³ Kula, *On the Typology*, 134.

⁴⁴ Kula, *Historia i ekonomia: długie trwanie*, 241.

⁴⁵ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 7.

⁴⁶ Kula, *On the Typology*, 135.

⁴⁷ Jerzy Topolski, *Marksizm i historia* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977), 132–148.

To create the economic theory of a particular system, which makes it possible to understand its functioning, i.e. its duration, change and decline, means “to empirically establish the most complete combination of interdependent elements characteristic of it, and explain the way in which they depend on one another”⁴⁸. In other words, it involves working out “a set of interdependent equations, composed of parameters, and independent or dependent variables”⁴⁹. Parameters (variables) are subject to continuous reversible and permanent changes in the course of adaptation. Therefore, the theory will be useful as long as parameters stay constant, or change little enough not to affect equations⁵⁰. If this is a directive (cumulative) change, it should be introduced into the system of equations in order to enrich it.⁵¹

According to Kula, the most general statements of historical materialism concerning all human management should be set aside in this analysis. It is not necessary to include statements belonging to the general theory in the theory of a specific system. For example, he includes definition of a given system in this category. In the case of *An Economic Theory*, this concerns the definition of feudalism, which belongs to the theory of socio-economic formations and so it is part of the general knowledge about human management⁵².

Adopting this guideline, the researcher defines what issues every theory of a system should address: “the task of every economic theory of a system consists in formulating the laws governing the volume of the economic surplus and its utilization ... and that these problems have to be explained in the short-term and in the long-term”⁵³. Laws are discovered by observing regularities in socially determined decisions as they occur in the implementation of choices made and decisions taken. Conclusions about the functioning of a system can be drawn from the behaviour of its actors – a feudal lord (a landowner), a serf peasant (a peasant farm) and a craftsman (a craft workshop) and from their short- and long-term adaptation to changing conditions⁵⁴.

For example, when analysing short-term dynamics and hypothesising about the dependence of the size of global production on the number of workhands in relation to a manorial farm, Kula writes:

The efforts to combat the flights of serfs, to collect and retain runaways and protect them on one's own land, to lure away peasants belonging to others, to encourage peasant men and women belonging to others to relocate through marriage, to bring together “voluntary” serfs, to found (“Dutch”) colonies, in short all the “demographic politics” pursued by the large landowners can be explained only by this fact: the production is limited by the number of peasants⁵⁵.

⁴⁸ Kula, *On the Typology*, 128.

⁴⁹ Kula, *On the Typology*, 128.

⁵⁰ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 180.

⁵¹ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 180.

⁵² Kula, *Economic Theory*, 15–16.

⁵³ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 16–17.

⁵⁴ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 171.

⁵⁵ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 46–47.

Elsewhere he states:

[I]f the number of serfs was greater than the need for labour (which happened more rarely), a part of the corvées was handed over to the owner of the neighbouring demesne, what, in Little Poland, exchange for “monetary services”. The lord gave up temporarily the services which were due to him but demanded that the peasants should pay him in exchange a certain sum of money. Since the assignment of corvées to neighbours – rather rare in Poland – did not represent anything other than a transfer of manpower from one demesne to another, we can state that, apart from certain cases of limited importance ..., the number of workhands available set the overall limits to the dimensions of agricultural production⁵⁶

In his analysis of long-term dynamics, Kula indicates the tendency to consolidate, isolate and naturalise the economy of great landed properties. As he begins his analysis, he writes, “[t]hat this tendency existed is beyond doubt. Every demesne attempted not to purchase indispensable things, but instead to produce them from their own resources, without spending money”⁵⁷.

It can be concluded from Kula’s words that the model of the Polish economy built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should form the basis for formulating a general model of the economy at a particular stage of cultural development⁵⁸.

Model research attempts to understand social choice regularities from the perspective of the social mechanisms of the functioning of an economic system. In striving to discover these, Kula subordinates socio-moral patterns to this overarching goal. His analysis focuses on the identification of these mechanisms and treats these patterns only as indicators of these mechanisms. As a consequence, socio-moral patterns and related values are not directly present in the study. As has been already pointed out, Kula is aware of this omission. However, the discovered mechanisms of the functioning of reality are considered indirectly because they occur only because of the axiological character of this reality.

According to Kula, economic theory concerning specific cultures is created based on the fact that, like all areas of culture, the economy is also subordinated to social values. As he writes, “individual members of society are never guided by different value criteria. Every society shows some regularity in its economic activities..., and so it is possible to create an economic theory of such a society”⁵⁹. Examining the mechanisms of the functioning of the economic aspect of culture becomes synonymous with studying values. This sheds light on the importance of “economic behaviour”, the cognition of which is the goal of economic history perceived as historical and comparative anthropology in its formalising analysis of the acts of economic choice⁶⁰. It should be understood as

⁵⁶ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 46.

⁵⁷ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 52.

⁵⁸ Kula, *Economic Theory*, 194–195.

⁵⁹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 164, 176.

⁶⁰ Kula, *On the Typology*, 130.

a kind of model of social choices under specific socio-cultural conditions in the area of production, exchange and consumption, reflecting the prevailing hierarchy of values of the society studied.

Kula's works contain no detailed characteristics of the concept "economic behaviour". In the light of the historian's previously reconstructed beliefs about the perception of reality, It seems that the apparently obvious relationship between this concept and behavioural psychology should be definitely rejected. However, its importance is undoubtedly related to human consciousness, which is filled with acts of choice. The use of this psychological nomenclature in the behaviourist spirit in relation to this perceived consciousness is not unfounded. I believe that this terminological procedure is used to stress the link between the consciousness and the social environment, to indicate the character of social choice regularities as specific reactions to external stimuli, and to understand them as adaptation to changing social conditions⁶¹. Adaptation is understood as active adaptation, as the causative factor is located in the human psyche. "Economic behaviour" perceived in this way gives rise to a social system, which in turn determines "economic behaviour" with imperative power⁶².

In *An Economic Theory*, Kula writes:

We want to know their [men's – the author's note] economic behaviour, out of which recurring dependent relationships emerge, as an involuntary and unconscious result – a specific system which in turn determines their economic behaviours. The "economic system" is precisely this system of enduring and recurring dependent relationships⁶³.

Discovering these dependent relationships should be identified with the accomplishment of a goal which, in his opinion, guides all those who investigate economic phenomena. He writes about them and about himself in the following way: "...we study the social hierarchy of values"⁶⁴. Ultimately, it "is the subject of...study, the hierarchy and the way it changes"⁶⁵.

Kula thinks that the formalising perspective of research into economic phenomena cannot take account of the entire richness of reality, but its advantages are intellectual content and explicative values⁶⁶. For these reasons, he gives priority to this perspective, which constitutes the basis for economic history, understood as historical and comparative anthropology. This is also evidenced by the aforementioned fact that *An Economic Theory* was planned to be one of the chapters of *Problemy i metody* containing this concept of economic history.

⁶¹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 136.

⁶² Kula, *On the Typology*, 130.

⁶³ Kula, *An Economic Theory*, 182.

⁶⁴ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 406.

⁶⁵ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 711.

⁶⁶ Kula, *On the Typology*, 298.

 THE DRAMATISING PERSPECTIVE OF RESEARCH

As has been already pointed out, the formalising perspective of research into the acts of economic choice is not the only perspective that Kula proposes in the study of economic history as historical and comparative anthropology. In addition to it, there is the dramatising perspective. It forces us to abandon the model view of social choice regularities. Here, “economic behaviour” is replaced by specific social choice regularities, referring to specific socio-moral patterns related to the economy. In his research practice, Kula adopts this approach in *Measures and Men*, among others. He also summarises this book in a chapter of his *Problemy i metody*. Here, he focuses on socio-moral patterns referring to measures as social institutions.

As in *An Economic Theory*, actions are the main subject of Kula’s analysis in *Measures and Men*. This time, however, they do not refer to anything but themselves and their creators – men. They are therefore perceived as what they are, that is, socio-moral patterns, rather than regularities – indicators. It is necessary to consider their consciousness-related aspect during analysis. Switching the focus of research from actions perceived as indicators to actions perceived as socio-moral patterns does not completely eliminate formalising analysis. Although the approach to the problem differs from that in *An Economic Theory*, the essence of the analysis is the same: to understand how people managed in different socio-cultural situations. This can be done by linking human activities with the socio-economic totality in which they occur. This enables understanding of their social, human meaning.

The study of measures in pre-industrial societies is aimed at a specific type of society. It is focused on one of the stages in the development of metrological concepts. In particular, the analysis involves the stage following the anthropomorphic measures⁶⁷. This is in line with Kula’s interest in feudalism, its values and their transformation. In the study of social choice regularities related to measurements, Kula uses materials concerning different cultures being at the same stage of development of metrological practices. Poland in the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries is the basis for making comparisons. *Measures and Men* contains many similar observations:

We have thus concentrated on the situation and practices prevailing in the grain trade in Poland, but our findings and analysis, in the main, apply equally to other countries...The same system in principle creates the same or very similar institutions ...in an analogous situation, people act analogically and take on analogous methods of behavior...finally, some features in relation to measures and measurements are connected with mentality prevailing in a given epoch and with the dominant ideology⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ Witold Kula, *Measures and Men*, transl. Richard Szyreter (New York: Princeton University Press, 1986), 5.

⁶⁸ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 62. A large section of this quotation has been omitted by the translator of the English version of the book and is thus my translation.

Kula's arguments for why the analysis of the anthropomorphic stage in the development of metrological concepts is treated fragmentarily are interesting. In his opinion, this stage should be studied by anthropologists because he is not competent to undertake this task⁶⁹. He is only able to pay attention to a few issues⁷⁰. The criterion for this division of competences is the aforementioned historicity of societies. Historians are interested in "societies with history"⁷¹.

In his study of measures in the pre-industrial stage of social and cultural development, Kula focuses on one of the most important groups of measures, namely agrarian measures for measuring arable land and crops. When analysing these extensively in the first of the four parts of *Measures and Men*, he deals with the general characteristics of the metrological system used at this stage. While discussing the formation of these measures, he also points to other measures which are based on the same principles governing the mentality of feudal societies. This inclines him to treat the issue in more general terms and refer to the mechanisms which organise human thinking and are manifested in the formation of measures.

In this part of his work, we also learn about realistic and symbolic images of measures shared by men. Moreover, the scholar mentions the non-economic contexts of culture in which measures are used. These are the religious context (beliefs) and the political context (the problem of measurement patterns, guarantees of their stability, measures as power prerogatives, efforts taken by central authorities to standardise measures and, finally, the introduction and dissemination of the metric system). While discussing these issues in relation to the non-commercialised aspect of the economy, Kula devotes a separate chapter to measurements in the pre-capitalist commodity and credit economy. Finally, he discusses the attempts to standardise measures and their social determinants. It seems that this part of the book essentially deals with all problems of measures and measurement. The next two parts contain a detailed analysis of the problems already outlined.

Among the agrarian measures used in Europe, and elsewhere, Kula refers to those based on the amounts of seed sown and labour time. The qualitative properties of the objects measured are of major importance in the formation of these measures. He notes that when measuring land, one of its many quantitative properties (its square dimensions) were "the least taken into account, and qualitative aspects were of major importance. When the numerous relevant quantitative aspects were due for assessment, the real task was therefore to agree on measurable criteria for nonmeasurable values"⁷². In the first case, measurement was made based on the amount of grain sown by the sower, who "depending on the quality of the soil, ... would take larger or smaller steps and cast tightly packed or loose handfuls of seed. ... more or less seed should be

⁶⁹ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 24.

⁷⁰ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 24.

⁷¹ Kula emphasises the fact that anthropomorphic measures began to take shape in the prehistoric history of mankind. Kula, *Measures and Men*, 28.

⁷² Kula, *Measures and Men*, 42.

sown depending on the quality of the soil and the topography of the terrain”⁷³. In the second case, measurement could be based, for example, on working time in the field with one or two horses or an ox, that is, ploughing time and mowing time in the case of meadows. This principle of mensuration “tells us that the input of labor needed to yield a harvest was of paramount importance. Correspondingly, ... [in – the author’s note] the other primary system of mensuration – that by the amount of seed required – the characteristic most heavily emphasized is fertility”⁷⁴. Their choice was dictated by “the knowledge, acquired by empirical experience over generations, of the relationship of man to nature, mediated through work”⁷⁵, and was expressive of “the main factors in the balance between man, climate and land”⁷⁶.

Man enters into this intimate relationship with nature not as an isolated being but as a member of a differentiated society, which also determines the usual unit of measurement, affecting its size. This differentiation “would result both from the social division of labor and the existence of an ever-changing social hierarchy”⁷⁷. In the feudal system, man established his contact with nature, through his agricultural work, as a member of three social structures: a member of a village community (parish), a serf in the estate of a given lord and a subject of the state. The interdependence among other members of the community would engender levelling tendencies in the case of surface measures within the community itself. The feudal lord’s aspirations to influence measures were determined by the structure of the dues he wished to levy on his serfs. If he preferred to receive rent, he had to create much larger farmsteads for the peasants than would be the case if he preferred the *corvée* system. From the landowner’s point of view, farmsteads needed to be large enough to provide for self-consumption and rent for the landowners. The state would attempt to standardise measures for the sake of a “just” apportionment of taxes⁷⁸.

The final effect of these activities, that is, the binding metrological system, is the result of conflicting interests between a village and a manor, within a village, and between a landowner and the state⁷⁹. It is therefore not surprising that the geometric surface of a given unit of measurement, despite its identical name, not only changed over time but, above all, had to be different at a given moment of time in every province, in every village and sometimes in different farmsteads within the same village⁸⁰. What appears to be chaos is a rational system of human actions. Kula also claims that it is difficult to consider this traditional

⁷³ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 31.

⁷⁴ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 30.

⁷⁵ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 36.

⁷⁶ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 36.

⁷⁷ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 36.

⁷⁸ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 36.

⁷⁹ Kula devotes a great deal of attention to these issues. He devotes separate chapters to them, constituting the second and third parts of his work, in which he deals with the class struggle over measures and the state’s unification efforts.

⁸⁰ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 35.

system to be less perfect than the metric system. It can even be said that it proves to be better in some economic situations⁸¹.

In pre-industrial society, the concept of measure is based on the quality of the object measured. According to Kula, in this concept, a measure is something that results from the quality of the object and is in an intimate relationship with this quality⁸². In his opinion:

The concept of measure being abstracted as but a single quantitative property of the objects measured ... is fraught with difficulties and requires great intellectual effort from man in society, in the face of an unequitable social structure. For traditional measures and ways of measuring have always been associated with sectional interests of particular social groups The final resolution of the problem of uniformity can only be effected by the adoption of the metric system coming in the wake of wider social reform, as, indeed, the system was first born of the events of the night of 4 August 1789 in France⁸³.

This would have been impossible without the abolition of feudal laws and the development of the market-commodity economy, in other words – without the transformation of productive forces and production relations⁸⁴.

By focusing on human actions, which involves the reconstruction of their consciousness, Kula does not exclude the social conditions in which they occur – the objective aspect of culture. From the dramatising research perspective, they constitute the “background” of the main analysis. This enables the reconstruction of the objective side of reality, which is a system that generates human actions and the accompanying consciousness⁸⁵.

INTEGRAL INTERPRETATION IN ECONOMIC HISTORY UNDERSTOOD AS HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

The above-mentioned methods of studying acts of economic choice involve two strategies for studying human actions: “from above” and “from below”. When adopting the “from above” strategy, researchers can only make their objectivising interpretation. They abstract from the actor’s intentions, do not take account of the subjective-rational and subjective-social determining, as is the case with

⁸¹ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 35.

⁸² Kula, *Measures and Men*, 89.

⁸³ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 70.

⁸⁴ Kula, *Measures and Men*, 70.

⁸⁵ Economic phenomena are also dramatized in the last of Kula’s works co-authored by his wife and son: *Listy emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych 1890–1891*, ed. by Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, Marcin Kula (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1973). The book has been translated into English: *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States, 1890–1891*, ed. by Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, Marcin Kula, transl. Josephine Wtulich (New York: Boulder, 1986). However, the English version of the book does not contain the extensive “Introduction.”

the “from below” humanistic interpretation of actions⁸⁶. The subjectivising analysis of actions that occurs in humanistic interpretation involves treating them as the implementation of intended goals resulting from the knowledge possessed by men. Kula aims to simultaneously take account of both of these cognitive strategies in interpreting economic phenomena. He has worked out two ways of examining acts of economic choice which take account of the subjective and objective character of human reality, though not to the same extent.

Objectivising interpretation prevails in the formalising perspective. Actions are treated primarily as “indicators” of certain hidden content (regularities), referring to the objective aspect of reality. However, since the *interpretandum*, that is, mass-scale actions, refers simultaneously to social values behind these actions, the interpretation is “mixed” and involves mass-scale actions and social values.

In the case of the dramatising perspective, the *interpretandum*, that is, actions do not refer to any further, so-called objective, determinants and the subjective aspect of reality is therefore highlighted. This is a humanist interpretation of social actions, which explains them through the knowledge and norms shared by actors. At the same time, however, these actions are interpreted through a social system, which is tantamount to their objectivisation. Thus, the situation is similar to that described above, except that in this case the humanistic interpretation is primary and the objectivising interpretation is secondary.

Kula adopts this method of interpretation to connect the subjective and objective aspects of historical reality. It can therefore be said that the interpretations are combined and an integral interpretation of the past is built⁸⁷. The purpose of this interpretation strategy is to understand social values by learning about mechanisms governing a socio-cultural reality, whose identity is maintained and transformed every time through conscious human actions.

THE HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE METHOD IN ECONOMIC HISTORY UNDERSTOOD AS HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

Kula devotes a lot of space to the comparative method in his *Problemy i metody*. He notes that, in principle, there is no point in undermining its *raison d'être*. The debate takes a different character. It concerns the possibilities and limits of the method's application in time and space. Kula claims that nowadays the debate is taking place in a new framework outlined by a number of new factors:

[These factors are] the changes taking place in the present-day world and scientific progress. The scientific “emancipation” of many countries which have been the subject of European

⁸⁶ Wojciech Wrzosek, “Interpretacja a narracja,” in *Metodologiczne problemy narracji historycznej*, ed. by Jan Pomorski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1990), 136, 139–140.

⁸⁷ Wrzosek, *Interpretacja*, 152. Vide Jerzy Topolski, *Rozumienie historii* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978).

science so far, the introduction of the historical method and historicism to science, ethnological progress and a new approach to evolutionism resulting from the decline of European domination in the world, attempts to industrialise the so-called less-developed countries and the resulting achievements of economics and sociology – this is the framework in which the discussion about the comparative method is taking place in social research in general and in historical science in particular⁸⁸.

This framework determines research proceedings when making comparisons. The use of the comparative method requires respect for certain rules. An arbitrary use of examples from different countries and eras has nothing to do with science. Kula claims that:

The application of the comparative method must be based on a specific theory of sociological evolutionism. The first condition for the correct application of the comparative method is the comparison of comparable stages of the process of social evolution. However, this is not sufficient. The process of development of individual societies does not consist in a mechanical repetition of stages experienced by previously developed societies. The uniqueness of historical events in their entire individuality is an undeniable fact⁸⁹.

According to Kula, in this situation, historians are obliged to use the simplest method of generalisation:

...after considering all past events...historians have to extract all that which is common to them. Certain repeatability is simply a matter of definition. ...But the list of these general patterns can of course be increased many times. The second stage of the generalisation process is to classify the past events into subgroups and repeat the above-mentioned procedure in relation to each of these. The list of established regularities will, of course, be longer and the scope of their application will obviously be narrower⁹⁰.

The basis for comparisons must be specific cultures, having a specific place in time and space.

The general process of cultural transformations should be constructed by comparing various transformation processes taking place in a specific place and time – in specific cultures. It is necessary in this situation to deal with individual cultures that have their own history, which, however, can be subordinated to universal laws of development. These laws should take account of the diversity of development in specific cultures. The study of culture involves diachronic-synchronous analysis. Individual cultures as integral synchronic constructs are seen as sequences of a general developmental process⁹¹.

⁸⁸ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 648–685.

⁸⁹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 715–716.

⁹⁰ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 716.

⁹¹ This kind of attitude can be found in one of the trends of the so-called New Economic Anthropology as a consequence of applying the theory of dialectical materialism to anthropological research on the economy. Romaniszyn, *Świat gospodarek*, 85.

As Kula emphasises cultural specificity and diversity, he finds it insufficient to use the comparative method to compare what is common to a series of specific historical events and develop generalisations. In his opinion:

The most valuable...advantage of the comparative method is that it allows regularities in dissimilarities to be determined. It is true that, for example, every industrialisation process is 'different', individual and unique. However, can we find any regularities in these differences in addition to identifying elements common to subgroups of this class of phenomena?⁹².

However, it is the task of economic history alone to detect these dynamic generalisations⁹³.

The basis of all comparisons, as has been mentioned above, is the framework in which they are made. According to Kula, the best framework is offered by the materialist theory of social development, which, at its very foundation, implies a variety of ways of organising economic life. As he writes, "It is probably impossible to find a relative, historical approach to economic laws", writes Kula, "in the history of economic thought before Marx"⁹⁴. According to the historian:

It is obvious from Marx's writings that he was firmly convinced of the existence of diverse economic systems, and that he approached the problem diachronically. Also, it is now clear – from the recently published documents, as well as from the present discussion on the so-called Asiatic mode of production – that he was much more aware of the complexity of the problem than has so far been thought⁹⁵.

As is known, Marx did not use the term "culture", which, in turn, is constitutive for Kula's perception of reality. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to introduce this concept into his theory and interpret it in a culturalist way. This is exactly what Kula does. For him, socio-economic formations are the result of the interpretation of social reality, seen through the prism of its economic aspect. Individual formations should be understood as integrating all socio-cultural phenomena regulated by the laws of historical materialism.

Kula claims that "socio-economic formations (and their individual stages) are integrating concepts which embrace the whole of social life and its manifestations based on the problems of productive forces and relations of production"⁹⁶. As these concepts refer to stages of historical development, they characterise the development of culture in its global meaning. The very theory of socio-economic formations is a diachronic theory of culture in general. It consists of theses of general application and of various chronological and spatial ranges. Those that belong to general knowledge about human management

⁹² Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 717.

⁹³ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 717.

⁹⁴ Kula, *On the Typology*, 110.

⁹⁵ Kula, *On the Typology*, 108.

⁹⁶ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 188.

constitute a minority. Most theses are limited by space and time and can be found within frameworks defined by socio-economic formations⁹⁷.

According to Kula, the theory of historical materialism (socio-economic formations) respects socio-cultural diversity in the maximum possible way without giving up theoretical cognitive ambitions. It helps avoid the risk of using two half-truths together that do not create the truth in order to learn about this cultural diversity. If only differences are seen, the opportunity to learn and understand a completely heterogeneous reality is sacrificed on the altar of diversity. If only similarities are seen, special features are lost in a homogeneous whole, in which nuances are at most revealed⁹⁸. Kula asks 'where to find... a "common denominator" enabling comparisons between different cultures, countries and epochs?'⁹⁹, and obviously replies that "[t]he suggested directive is to adopt the limits of socio-economic formations as the limits of comparability"¹⁰⁰.

Socio-economic formations are categories that define a certain type of culture. They enable intercultural comparative analysis. Despite their realistic character, they remain constructs which imperfectly grasp reality. According to Kula, on the one hand, the limits of formations perceived as the limits of acceptable comparability are too broad:

[F]or example, the feudal formation lasted 1,000 years. During this millennium, changes obviously occurred more slowly than in later epochs, but these were major changes. The range of permanent elements that allow the entire period to be called "feudalism" is inherently narrow. ...Capitalism has lasted for a much shorter time so far, but changes are much faster in this system¹⁰¹.

On the other hand, they are too narrow due to the difficulties that arise in considering transition systems¹⁰². According to Kula, the theory of socio-economic formations solves many basic methodological problems as long as it is used carefully¹⁰³.

*

When building his concept of economic history understood as historical and comparative anthropology, Kula saw no need to change the name of the discipline he practiced. This was due to his traditional understanding of anthropology. Primitive societies, understood as "societies without history" and studied synchronously, meant to be the subject of anthropology's interest¹⁰⁴.

⁹⁷ Kula, *An Economic Theory*, 12.

⁹⁸ Kula, *Ekonomia a społeczeństwo*, 49.

⁹⁹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 367.

¹⁰⁰ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 368.

¹⁰¹ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 368.

¹⁰² Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 368.

¹⁰³ Kula, *Problemy i metody*, 368.

¹⁰⁴ I write more about this in Chapter II of the work: Piasek, *Anthropologising History*, 69–102.

Kula turned to anthropology and its research to understand the diversity of life and forms of management that he observed in his studies. Thanks to it, he began to perceive this diversity as cultural diversity. The anthropologists he quotes appear not as representatives of specific directions and theories of culture that should be used in historical research, but as representatives of a discipline of knowledge that perceives the diversity of the world and sees it as cultural diversity. It should be noted, however, that his views on the study of culture are very similar to the scientific style of the study of culture present in anthropology¹⁰⁵.

Historians of anthropology distinguish two approaches in the history of this discipline. They define them in a variety of ways. One approach is referred to as being particularistic, historical and relativistic, and the other as scientific, generalising and processual¹⁰⁶. The particularistic style is considered dominant in anthropology. Most considerations relate to specific cultures or phenomena within a selected culture. The possibility of generalisations is not excluded here, but they are made after detailed research. However, by showing the infinite diversity of the world, research evokes doubts as to whether the right time for generalisations will ever come. Researchers who prefer the scientific style take a decisive attitude on this matter. They assume that all efforts should aim at a superior goal, which, they believe, is to create general laws using the comparative method.

When describing the key processes that shaped historiography in the twentieth century, Wojciech Wrzosek writes, *inter alia*, about the relationship of history with anthropology and about anthropologising history¹⁰⁷. Undoubtedly, Kula's concept of economic history understood as historical and comparative anthropology is related to this process. It is the result of scientific anthropologisation of history.

Translated by Barbara Komorowska

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Kula, Witold. "Ekonomia a społeczeństwo. (Antropologiczny punkt widzenia)." In *O gospodarce mieszanej w krajach „trzeciego świata”*, ed. by Czesław Bobrowski, Stefania Tajerowa, 22–58. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967.
- Kula, Witold. *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy 1500–1800*, 2nd impr., transl. Lawrence Garner. London and New York: Verso, 1987.
- Kula, Witold. *Historia, zacofanie, rozwój*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983.

¹⁰⁵ Piasek, *Anthropologising History*, 69–102.

¹⁰⁶ Ewa Nowicka, *Świat człowieka – świat kultury. Systematyczny wykład problemów antropologii kulturowej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1991), 114.

¹⁰⁷ Wojciech Wrzosek, *Historia – kultura – metafora. Powstanie nieklasycznej historiografii* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Leopoldinum, 1995), 124–131.

- Kula, Witold. *Measures and Men*, transl. Richard Szepter. New York: Princenton University Press, 1986.
- Kula, Witold. *Problemy i metody*, 2nd edition. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983.
- Kula, Witold. *Rozdziałki*, ed. by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, Marcin Kula. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 1996.
- Kula, Witold. *Rozważania o historii*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958.
- Listy emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych 1890–1891*, ed. by Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, Marcin Kula. Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1973.
- Nowicka, Ewa. *Świat człowieka – świat kultury. Systematyczny wykład problemów antropologii kulturowej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Piasek, Wojciech. *Anthropologising History: A Historiographic and Methodological Case Study of Witold Kula*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2018.
- Romaniszyn, Krystyna. *Świat gospodarek ludzkich. O kształtowaniu się przedmiotu poznania antropologii gospodarczej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 1994.
- Skąpska, Grażyna, Marek Ziółkowski. "Instytucja społeczna." In *Encyklopedia socjologii*, vol. 1, ed. by Zbigniew Boksański, Andrzej Kojder, 317–321. Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 1998.
- Topolski, Jerzy. *Marksizm i historia*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977.
- Topolski, Jerzy. *Rozumienie historii*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978.
- Wrzosek, Wojciech. "Interpretacja a narracja." In *Metodologiczne problemy narracji historycznej*, ed. by Jan Pomorski, 129–156. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1990.
- Wrzosek, Wojciech. *Historia – kultura – metafora. Powstanie nieklasycznej historiografii*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Leopoldinum, 1995.

