

ARTICLES

Małgorzata Słodowa-Helpa (*Poznań University of Economics and Business, Poland*)¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7312-3453>

m.slodowa.helpa@gmail.com

ON THE NEED AND METHODS OF RESEARCHING VARIOUS ASPECTS OF POVERTY IN THE LIGHT OF THE REFLECTIONS OF JERZY TOPOLSKI

Abstract: The decision to present selected research problems of poverty in this article through the lens of Professor Jerzy Topolski's views was primarily motivated by the conviction that, despite the passage of several decades and changes in certain concepts and attitudes towards research in this field, many of his postulates have not lost their relevance and may still inspire not only historians but also researchers from other social science disciplines.

The article consists of four parts, two of which, directly relating to the categories of poverty and destitution and the methods of their study, are based on the Professor's position presented in a lecture delivered in 1991 and published a year later (Topolski, 1992). In the remaining sections, edited on the basis of other works by the Professor, selected theoretical and methodological guidelines and postulates are signaled, which, although no longer directed specifically at poverty researchers, are worth considering from the perspective of their studies.

In the first part, against the backdrop of conceptual dilemmas clearly visible in the literature of the subject, the Professor's stance on treating poverty and destitution as theoretical categories and the boundaries between them resulting from the relationship between needs and the possibilities of meeting them are presented.

The second part of the study contains the Professor's postulates regarding the necessity of moving away from descriptive accounts of poverty and subordinating the narrative to the pursuit of regularities, as well as the role of explanatory and theoretical questions in such proceedings. The third part presents the so-called directive of integral explanation, that is, combining the so-called objective side of the historical process (the effects of human actions) with its subjective side (the actions themselves). The subject of the fourth part is the need to transcend disciplinary boundaries, that is, the interdisciplinary integration of research, of which the Professor was a passionate advocate.

¹ Professor Emeritus.

Keywords: poverty, indigence, destitution, relationships between needs and the possibilities of meeting them, explanatory and theoretical research questions, directive of integral explanation, role of interdisciplinary research.

<https://doi.org/10.14746/sho.2025.43.2.002>

INTRODUCTION

Several reasons led to the proposal to include in this 43rd volume of *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, dedicated to presenting research on various aspects and faces of poverty, its causes and consequences, a review article presenting the position in this field of the late Professor Jerzy Topolski.

Firstly, despite the passage of several decades and changes in some attitudes towards poverty research and ways of overcoming it, most of Topolski's views formulated in the second half of the twentieth century have not lost their relevance and may continue to inspire not only historians but also researchers from other disciplines.

Secondly, although within Professor Topolski's extremely plentiful body of published work – comprising more than 1,100 items published in Poland and many other countries – the subject of poverty did not constitute the main focus of his research, the position he presented in his 1991 paper entitled “Nędza, ubóstwo, dostatek jako kategorie teoretyczne w badaniu historycznym i ich wartość eksplanacyjna” [Destitution, poverty, affluence as theoretical categories in historical research and their explanatory value] (Topolski, 1992) has been drawn upon not only by historians (Kukło, 2020), but also by researchers from other social science disciplines, particularly sociology (including: Tarkowska, 2000; Kanasz, 2015; Kolasa-Nowak, 2001; 2009; 2021; Ćwikła, 2006; Sosnowska, 2004; Kończal and Wawrzyniak, 2011), even though, compared to many of the Professor's flagship works, the aforementioned paper might be regarded as a minor contribution.

Thirdly, it is also significant that Professor Jerzy Topolski himself, an advocate of disseminating the research achievements of Polish scholarship, was instrumental in launching this journal, which, through numerous publications in foreign languages, has for over 50 years provided a forum for dialogue with the global scholarly community – not only

for economic and social historians, but also for researchers from other disciplines. The Professor was not only an initiator, but also a long-term co-editor of *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*. He was often among the contributors, and in 1998, following his death, volume 23 of SHO was dedicated to him (Janicki, 2017; Janicki and Graban, 2019). For these reasons, the author considered it appropriate and interesting, in this volume of SHO presenting studies resulting from last year's conference entitled "Poverty through the ages – causes, faces, consequences," organized by the Department of Economic History of the Faculty of History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, to include the voice of Professor Topolski from over 30 years ago and to look at the issue of poverty through the lens of his views presented in the aforementioned paper, delivered during the session "Destitution and affluence in Polish lands from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century," organized in 1991 by the Institute of Material Culture History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The arguments cited above determined the shape and scope of this review article.

The work consists of four parts, of which two, directly addressing the categories of poverty and destitution and the methods of their study, are based on the Professor's position presented in the aforementioned paper delivered in 1991 and published a year later (Topolski, 1992). In the remaining sections of the article, compiled on the basis of other works by the Professor, selected theoretical and methodological guidelines and postulates are signaled, which, although no longer addressed directly to poverty researchers, are nevertheless worth considering from the perspective of their research.

The first part, against the backdrop of conceptual dilemmas clearly visible in the literature, presents the Professor's position regarding the treatment of poverty and destitution as theoretical categories and the boundaries between them, arising from the relationship between needs and the possibilities of meeting them.

The second part of the article contains the Professor's postulates concerning the need to move away from a descriptive account of poverty and to subordinate the narrative to the pursuit of regularities, as well as the role of explanatory and theoretical questions in such an approach.

The third part presents the so-called directive of integral explanation, i.e., combining the so-called objective side of the historical process (the effects of human actions) with its subjective side (the actions themselves), a principle Topolski promoted in many of his works.

The subject of the fourth part is the need to transcend disciplinary boundaries, that is, the interdisciplinary integration of research, of which the Professor was an ardent advocate.

All the issues addressed have been set against the positions of other poverty researchers, especially sociologists, as well as the Professor's students and collaborators.

INDIGENCE, POVERTY, AND DESTITUTION – CONCEPTUAL DILEMMAS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEEDS AND THE POSSIBILITY TO SATISFY THEM

Although research into poverty has a long tradition and has been carried out with increasing intensity for over a century, as evidenced by the abundant publication output in this field, researchers generally agree that contemporary science still faces clear problems in developing a coherent definition of poverty, as well as precisely identifying the causes of this phenomenon and the methods for its measurement and alleviation (Ślodowa-Helpa, 2001: 489–492). Poverty, like many other categories used in the social sciences, is a complex, ambiguous, unclear and imprecise concept, defined and measured in various ways (Tarkowska, 2000: 19).

Many authorities in the global and Polish literature have addressed the dilemmas and definitional discrepancies of poverty. According to the Indian scholar Amartya Sen, recipient of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 1998, described by Robert Solow (also a laureate of this prize two years earlier) as *the conscience of economics*:

poverty is a complex, multidimensional world that requires in-depth analysis in all its aspects (Amartya Sen and the thousand faces of poverty 2001). It is (Szymczak, 2016: 91) [...] a lack of the minimum elementary capacities.

According to Sen, the analysis of poverty should focus on the individual's capability to function, not on the outcomes an individual achieves through such functioning. He emphasized that:

because of the intersection of ethical and economic reflection, it is difficult to unambiguously determine who is poor, and therefore, in describing inequality one should seek an answer to the question: what are poor people deprived of?

In the opinion of Julia Szalai (1997), a Hungarian poverty researcher, poverty is never and nowhere an obvious phenomenon or self-explanatory.

Meanwhile, Paul Spicker (2007: 230) stated that:

in the social sciences, poverty is commonly understood in at least twelve distinct, overlapping senses. [...] the debate on poverty has been expressed in an artificial academic formalism that insisted on the necessity of a common semantic core. Consequently, examples of contradictory uses of terms have been used to show that some of them are correct.

He also added that:

moreover, many of the main protagonists of the debate hold two or three positions simultaneously. They are distinct because they can be logically separated in such a way that circumstances applicable in one meaning do not necessarily apply in others.

Raywat Deonandan (2019) points out that competing methods of defining and measuring poverty complicate how this phenomenon is presented. Furthermore, comparative analyses are made more difficult by the different definitions of low-income thresholds used by countries and organizations.

According to Stanisława Golinowska (1997), there is no universal concept of poverty, as it has a specific content embedded in a broader economic and social context. Moreover, poverty varies depending on context, place, time of occurrence or the ability to cope with it. What is more, it can refer to entire societies, particular social groups, or individuals. She emphasizes (Golinowska, 2012: 96) that:

every language allows for the gradation of indigence: destitution, poverty, deficiency. Therefore, definitions and indicators have been suggested according to the degree to which one is "afflicted" by this "disease".

She also points out that

beside the dispute over whether poverty should be measured in mono- or multidimensional terms, the debate also revolved around the nature of indicators separating the poor from the non-poor, known as poverty lines. Should these be indicators of absolute poverty, or relative poverty, or poverty described objectively or subjectively.

A similar position was taken by Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000: 233), who stated that: "there is no single poverty – there are many forms of it, differing in depth, duration, and ways of coping with it." She also empha-

sized in her works that every poverty is defined by two characteristics: its depth, meaning the measurable quantitative degree of unmet needs, and its duration, that is, whether it is temporary, prolonged, chronic, or even hereditary.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2006: 17):

Research by historians, anthropologists and also sociologists shows that attitudes towards poverty and the poor, as well as the image of the poor person at a given time and place, always depend on the broader social, cultural, economic context, on politics and ideology, and on the changes occurring in these areas.

The contextuality of poverty, already mentioned, is reduced to several interrelated elements: relativity, subjectivity, the perspective of the individual, social and structural conditions (Kalinowski, Łuczak and Szczygiel, 2024: 25). It may concern not only a lack of financial and material resources, but also a lack of education, access to culture, power, respect or dignity. Thus, it covers various aspects of life such as health, education, culture, housing, and social relations.

Tatiana Kanasz (2015: 305) stated that:

poverty is linked to unmet individual needs and limited opportunities for social participation.

She also quoted Z. Bauman's view that:

poverty is also a certain social and psychological condition: since the quality of human existence is measured by the standards of decent living adopted in a given society, the inability to adhere to them is itself a cause of stress, suffering and humiliation (Bauman, 2006: 77).

The issue of the boundaries separating the categories mentioned in this subtitle remains debatable. While the concepts of indigence and poverty are often used interchangeably by researchers, there are also opinions that the category of poverty is broader than indigence, most often associated with a lack of sufficient financial means (Kalinowski, Łuczak and Szczygiel, 2024: 16). The interpretation and placement of the concept of destitution is different, as it is neither a synonym for indigence nor for poverty and therefore should not be used interchangeably.

In this context, against the background of the positions outlined above, it is worth considering the standpoint of Professor Topolski (Topolski, 1992: 12–13), which has not escaped the attention of sociologists and economists and has been reflected in their work (e.g. Tarkowska, 2000: 14–18).

In Topolski's view (Topolski, 1992: 12):

What we call destitution, poverty, affluence or wealth is, in a sense, the external manifestation of the relationship between needs and the resources available to people to satisfy them. Destitution can be considered a state of existence in which basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, especially food, are not met, resulting in mere survival, the wasting of the body, vulnerability to disease, and increased mortality. Destitution may be caused by structural factors in a given society (for example, overpopulation with a traditional economy) and may permanently affect larger or smaller social groups, or it may be a temporary phenomenon (caused by specific factors such as war, repression, natural disasters) for particular population groups. In such cases, there is a rapid shrinking of resources available to people and their lives change drastically.

By contrast:

Poverty is a state in which basic needs are met in one way or another, enabling a person at least to reproduce the life force necessary for a certain expenditure of energy in daily life and work, yet social needs enabling the individual or group to live according to their socially ascribed model of consumption are not met, to a greater or lesser extent.

The Professor also emphasized that:

the state of poverty can easily pass into destitution, and for this reason the boundary between these states is quite fluid, especially when it concerns social groups that can afford to meet basic needs only in the simplest and most modest forms. In such cases, for example due to crop failure or price increases, it is easy to move from need to hopelessness, that is, destitution (Topolski, 1992: 13).

He also explained that:

while destitution is to a large extent something absolute, independent of the model of consumption ascribed to or represented by someone and their aspirations, poverty is something much more relative.

In the paper presented here, Topolski also acknowledged that:

we do not know at what point the disparity between income and needs stimulates economic activity, and when further increases in economic activity begin to diminish. [...] Probably, the state of permanent, or structural, destitution lies beyond this boundary. People living in destitution are deprived of the will to act.

Professor Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000: 14), the undisputed leader in the community of Polish sociologists of poverty and the driving force behind such research, referred to the original distinctions drawn by Professor

Topolski between the categories of need and destitution. In the introduction to her already cited book *Zrozumieć biednego* [Understanding the Poor], with the telling subtitle *O braku i potrzebie perspektywy przeszłości w badaniu biedy w Polsce* [On the Lack and Need for a Historical Perspective in the Study of Poverty in Poland], she emphasized that a sociologist interested in contemporary need should, for at least several reasons, look to the past. However, she clearly associated the gradation used by Professor Topolski with a practice characteristic of historians. She also stated that the division between poverty and destitution used by historians is not fully translatable into economic measures. While the definition of destitution (that is, a state of existence in which basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, especially food, are not met, resulting in mere survival, the wasting of the body, vulnerability to disease, and increased mortality) is somewhat close to the concept of the minimum standard of living, it is difficult to find a quantitatively measurable equivalent of poverty, which is a state in which basic needs are met in one way or another, enabling a person at least to reproduce the life force necessary for a certain expenditure of energy in daily life and work, yet social needs enabling the individual or group to live according to their socially ascribed model of consumption are not met, to a greater or lesser extent.

THE NEED FOR RESEARCHERS TO MOVE FROM DESCRIPTION TO EXPLANATION – THE ROLE OF EXPLANATORY AND THEORETICAL QUESTIONS IN THIS PROCESS

In the paper cited here, Jerzy Topolski emphasized (Topolski, 1992: 10) that categories such as poverty, destitution, or, at the opposite extreme, wealth, which characterize the situation of individuals and societies, are elements or, more precisely, factors of the historical process, i.e. components of the mechanism of historical change in various spheres, especially in the economic domain. He thus stressed that the point is not only for the researcher to focus on some more or less clear margins of historical mechanisms, but on the relationships within the historical process. In his view, with a descriptive approach, the category of poverty becomes an element of the description of reality, which indeed enriches the image of the

past, but does not facilitate or suffice for its explanation. He therefore underlined that, alongside an interest in poverty or wealth as elements of historical reality and as "products" of historical development – which often directs historians' attention towards indicator and causal analyses – these categories can and should also be studied from another perspective, which, as he claimed, has not yet attracted sufficient attention from historians. He referred to the conviction that merely creating a description of the past, however interesting, is sometimes insufficient. He considered it necessary to explain why certain states emerged, and for this a demonstration of poverty, as well as wealth, within the context of broader historical connections and historical changes is required (Kolasa-Nowak, 2001: 34).

In many other works, Topolski pointed out the exhaustion of the scientific possibilities of traditional historiography guided by "common sense" and the emergence, in the analyses of some historians, of the barrier of conceptualization and the lack of a comprehensive theoretical concept. He also saw dangers in researchers remaining at the level of describing the past.

Therefore, highly valuing theoretical attempts, Topolski attached great importance to the ability to formulate research questions, especially explanatory questions (Domańska, 2016: 21). He emphasized their significance, their connection with historical material, and the ordering of this material according to the interpretative key provided by economic theories and sociology. He expressed this in the presented paper, treating poverty and destitution as theoretical or theoretical-historical categories, which precisely have explanatory value, allowing for a better understanding of the course of history, and not just a better description of it.

In other works, Topolski even stressed that sources answer (if at all) only those questions that are put to them. At the same time, he stated that if a historical source does not essentially differ from the product of the historian's work, namely the historical narrative, then there is no real transition from the truth concealed in the sources to the author's interpretation. In such conditions, the author constantly moves within the same sphere of interpretation (Topolski, 2016: 114).

In the context of Topolski's views presented here, it is worth referring to at least a few opinions on his position.

Returning to the previously cited opinion of Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000: 14), it must be considered unfortunate that she quoted the statement that the historian uses in their analyses categories such as destitution, poverty, or affluence simply out of a desire to "enrich the historical description",

because without further explanation and embedding in a broader context, and simultaneously with a reference to Topolski (Topolski, 1992: 10), it may be incorrectly interpreted by readers and associated with his promotion of descriptive research.

Meanwhile, Mariola Flis in her interesting article “O myśleniu diachronicznym, wyjaśnianiu historycznym w socjologii i wyjaśnianiu socjologicznym w historii” [On Diachronic Thinking, Historical Explanation in Sociology and Sociological Explanation in History], published in 1993 in *Studia Socjologiczne*, actually emphasized that:

the view that historical research is exclusively idiographic is increasingly difficult to maintain in the light of the developmental trends of contemporary humanities. It is true that historians do not engage in constructing general laws. Nevertheless, they can refer to them, and Jerzy Topolski is precisely an example of this (Flis, 1993: 70).

In Szymon Malczewski's opinion (2009: 98), Topolski was convinced that, in historiographical practice, there is no escaping theoretical thinking. He promoted “theoretical and explanatory” history (Malczewski, 2009: 91).

THE DIRECTIVE OF INTEGRAL EXPLANATION OF JERZY TOPOLSKI

The directive of integral explanation, already mentioned in the introduction and also referred to as integral history, was how Jerzy Topolski described the necessity of considering both the subjective and objective sides of the historical process, encompassing various aspects of human activity. This very principle of theoretical and explanatory history was presented in his work *Theory of Historical Knowledge* (Topolski, 1983), the most “authorial” of his methodological achievements, as described by Malczewski (Malczewski, 2009: 102). In several other works, Topolski claimed that it is precisely human actions that constitute the essential factor and content of what we call past reality. In the 1990s, this directive became the basis for his proposed concept of a minimal characterization of reality (the past), which includes: time, space, and specifically human actions, to which, considered in both subjective and objective aspects, Professor attached the greatest importance (Domańska, 2016: 16).

Properly understanding the historical process as a link between the subjective creation of history by people and the processes resulting from these actions, Topolski repeatedly pointed to the need to connect the effects of human actions with the actions themselves. As he wrote, it is only the combination of the so-called objective side of the historical process (the effects of human actions) with its subjective side (the actions themselves) that gives a chance to grasp this mutually connected activity of the past. He believed it was important to perceive historical conditions both objectively, when they are rooted in a historically and spatially differentiated material base, and subjectively, when they are present in the consciousness of inhabitants and influence their motives, value systems, etc. According to Jan Pomorski (2017: 62), the directive of integral explanation is indispensable among Topolski's principles of theoretical and explanatory history.

THE NEED TO TRANSCEND DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES AND INTENSIFY INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

It is difficult to overlook the fact that Professor Topolski was a fervent advocate of transcending disciplinary boundaries and integrating research. He was not only a supporter, but also a pioneer and promoter of interdisciplinary research, even before it became popular in Poland. As early as 1966, he wrote that in his works he appeared *as a historian wishing to realize the postulate of scientific integration* (Domańska, 2016: 8). He described himself similarly in *Methodology of History* (Topolski, 1968: 10). In his research practice, he emphasized the assumption of the equality of all sciences and the closest possible relationships between them. This is reflected in his aforementioned prolific body of work, which includes studies not only in history and economics, but also anthropology, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, art history, psychology, and even literary studies. A few examples suffice.

Anna Sosnowska (2004 and 2021), interested in the sociological dimension of historical debates and their social significance, considered the rapprochement of historians and historiography with sociology to be crucial for the formation of historical sociology, which, simply put, is the encounter in research practice of sociology with history (Sosnowska, 2021: 10).

She emphasized that the 1960s, when heated debates on the causes of Poland's economic weakness and, more broadly, the backwardness of Central and Eastern Europe took place, were a period of flourishing sociology-informed historiography in Poland. She included Jerzy Topolski, a participant in this debate, among sociology-informed historians. She stressed that his circle, alongside the circles of Marian Małowist, Witold Kula, and Andrzej Wyczański, played a significant role in this process (Sosnowska 2021: 16), and she considered the publication of Topolski's 1994 book, *Polska w czasach nowożytnych. Od środkowoeuropejskiej potęgi do utraty niepodległości (1505–1795)* [Poland in the Early Modern Period. From Central European Power to the Loss of Independence (1505–1795)], as the end date of this debate. According to Krzysztof Brzechczyn (2007: 256), this closing date can be shifted by six years to 2000, when Topolski's book *Przełom gospodarczy w XVI wieku i jego następstwa* [The Economic Turning Point in the Sixteenth Century and Its Consequences] (Topolski, 2000), prepared before his death, was posthumously published.

Professor Topolski also had a clear impact on defining historical consciousness, important not only from the perspective of historiography. In the introduction to *Świadomość historyczna Polaków* [Historical Consciousness of Poles] (Topolski 1981: 5–6), he defined historical consciousness as *the body of knowledge and system of evaluations concerning a society's past, functioning in the course of human action (both individual and social)*. According to Małgorzata Kmak (2012: 119–120), he thus drew attention to knowledge of historical facts, which has significant consequences in the form of evaluations. Knowledge, in his definition of historical consciousness, is the most important premise, as it determines the reality and importance of events and the relationships between them. In Topolski's concept, historical knowledge, as one of the two components of historical consciousness, influences its state. He believed that historical consciousness, shaped on the basis of shared historical experiences, is the foundation of national identity and one of the key elements of social cohesion. Moreover, Topolski emphasized that historical consciousness is shaped not only by historical writing but also by other forms of expression, such as artistic activity inspired by the past. It is these forms that convey and reinterpret knowledge of history, influencing their recipients. The higher the quality of knowledge, the more developed the historical consciousness, which in Topolski's concept means the closer the ideas and evaluations of the past are to the scholarly findings of historians (Filipowicz, 2002: 23–24). For Topolski, historical consciousness is a dynamic and grad-

able phenomenon. History, as he stressed, indicates fields of alternatives resulting from various conditions. Thus, the more those creating history know about them, the more conscious this creation becomes. The mistake of many historians, he believed, lay in trusting that reality looked exactly as the contemporary observer saw it. And yet, the historian's "informants" could not operate with theoretical categories; their observations and comments referred only to facts.

In the opinion of Kornelia Kończal and Joanna Wawrzyniak (2011: 24), the historical consciousness dominant in Polish sociological reflection since the 1960s became an important "meeting place" for Polish sociologists and historians, as both disciplines were united by the need to interpret the past in the context of contemporary social and political problems. However, whereas sociologists worked with surveys and studied the current state of social consciousness, historians analyzed, among other things, school textbooks, pedagogical concepts, the level of historical knowledge and interest in history, as demonstrated by the 1981 publication *Historical Consciousness of Poles*, edited by Topolski, whose introduction presented his views on the need for research into historical consciousness (Piasek, 2017: 56–57). According to Topolski, for a long time school education was the most important, but now its competitor is the mass media: radio, television, and film.

As both a historian and economist, Topolski also attached great importance to the links between these two disciplines. He emphasized that what we extract from past phenomena and economic processes for economics depends primarily on the purposes and methods of investigating the past, on the extent to which the narrative is subordinated to tracking regularities, discovering the principles of human action, and building theoretical constructs. In his opinion (Topolski 2016: 89), concern with the past of societies not only connects these two disciplines, but is also a platform linking history with other social sciences. He saw the need and potential for the symbiosis of disciplines and sub-disciplines, a bridge between them, including the marriage of retrospective economics with research into mentality. He demonstrated this by analyzing the importance of mentality for the beginnings of capitalism (Topolski, 1965; 2020; Flis, 1993). Like George Homans, to whom he referred, he emphasized the usefulness of the laws of social psychology for explaining historical facts. He also recognized the dangers resulting both from the limited – due to methodological constraints – possibilities of quantitative analyses, and from exclusive or excessive quantification.

It should be emphasized that Professor Topolski was among those Polish historians who were known and published throughout Europe, the USA, and other countries (Ligenza, 2018: 466). Moreover, perhaps more than any other contemporary historian, he was esteemed and maintained direct contact both with Western European economic historians representing a more humanistic, anthropological dimension of research into the past – shaped largely by the work of Marc Bloch (1962), Fernand Braudel (1999), and the Annales School – and with representatives of the New Economic History, the American school also Brzechczyn known as cliometrics, considered by some to be one of the greatest phenomena in the development of twentieth-century science, by others as one of its greatest intellectual scandals. The main representatives of this school, Professor Robert Fogel of the University of Chicago and Douglas North of the University of St. Louis, received the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 1983. Topolski was open to new trends in historical writing, even if he did not share certain fascinations. He engaged in critical dialogue with them, presenting to the Polish reader what was new and current in the humanities (Topolski, 1980). In his opinions on the apparent “discord” between opponents of dehumanized history – as cliometrics was considered in Europe – and its advocates, Professor pointed out that the anti-integrative influence of New Economic History stemmed from the one-sided application by some of its representatives of economic theories and models based on them. He simultaneously emphasized that, although this allowed for many important scientific findings, it clearly distanced historians of this school from the possibility of synthesis and, by eliminating non-economic factors, impoverished the entirety of their research (Słodowa-Helpa, 2013).

Jerzy Topolski also had numerous connections with archaeology, as extensively presented by Janusz Ostoj-Zagórski (1982). Inspired by him, prehistory began to pay attention to the role of extra-source knowledge, which, according to Topolski, in the research process serves as a “specific steering system”.

It should also be mentioned that Professor Topolski even highlighted the significance of literary fiction as one possible source of inspiration for scientific analysis (Ćwikła, 2006: 143). He stated that:

The novel [...] has sometimes preceded science, for it captures and presents matters that must wait a long time for scientific treatment. This is clearly seen in the example of two sciences that only emerged in the nineteenth century: one is the science of the hu-

man psyche – psychology; the other, sociology, deals with the collective life of human beings. The issues they address had already appeared in the novel since the seventeenth century, which thus paved the way for scientific inquiry (Topolski, 1978: 13).

CONCLUSIONS

Although in this brief article, focused on the issue of poverty, it was difficult even to signal the multifaceted research legacy of Professor Jerzy Topolski – and therefore, reading this text may understandably leave a sense of insufficiency, one not unfamiliar to the author – even on this modest basis, it can be concluded that his achievements continue to be a source of inspiration for representatives of various research schools. It is therefore hard not to agree with Mariusz Ligenza (2018: 467) that Topolski's work is far too significant a component of Polish and global historiography to confine its familiarity to a narrow circle of specialists. On the other hand, however, the vastness of his oeuvre makes it difficult to become thoroughly acquainted even with its most fundamental premises.

It should be added that Topolski presented his position not only in his immensely rich and highly inspiring interdisciplinary scholarly output, but also in many interviews, which introduced and convincingly justified the links between the present, the past, and the future. The Professor argued that adding the perspective of the past to the analysis of the present provokes certain conclusions about the future, transforming the time horizon into a triad of past–present–future. It also enables one to bring an integral point of view and link economic elements with social ones.

According to Szymon Malczewski (2009: 89–90), Topolski, associated primarily with the methodology of history and rightly regarded as a co-founder of this field, as well as with such areas of historical reflection as economic history or historiography of the modern era, was a co-creator and active representative of the so-called Poznań methodological school.

The broad reflection on Topolski's theory of historiography is, from the perspective of historiographical practice, something unprecedented and still very rare today. An important methodological innovation in his research, generally unheard of in strictly historical works, is precisely the interdisciplinary approach presented here, as well as the inclusion of the sphere of mentality and the inquiry into the motivations behind individual decisions.

Jerzy Topolski's contribution to the issue of historical narrative is worthy of note. The publication, shortly before his death, of the work *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię* subtitled *Tajemnice narracji historycznej* [How to Write and Understand History. The Secrets of Historical Narrative] (Topolski, 1996), is considered by many as the crowning achievement of his research. In many respects, it constitutes a continuation, development, and supplement of the themes discussed in his earlier works.

It is impossible not to appreciate the importance of Jerzy Topolski's work, and his role in Polish and world historiography is beyond dispute. The Professor was, after all, one of the very few historians who could combine the history of Poland with global history and analytical thinking with the construction of a theoretical image of the historical process.

Professor J. Topolski wrote that history is still the *magistra vitae*, but in a different sense than the originators of this expression understood it, when they believed that it was enough to refer to an example, since the background does not remain identical on the stage of history – the scenery changes even when, on the surface, the facts appear similar.

For readers who are not yet familiar with Professor Topolski's achievements, the best guide on the path to his solutions for the many problems they face will undoubtedly be the numerous works of his pupils and collaborators (including: Malczewski 2009; Pomorski 1985; 2017; 2019; 2020; Piasek 2017; Wrzosek 2010, Zamorski 2020). These are cited in the belief (and hope) that reading these texts will lessen the sense of insufficiency mentioned above, which arises from the nature and scope of this article.

The author herself, also finding herself at a crossroads and facing dilemmas, has often turned to the work of Jerzy Topolski (e.g. Ślódowa-Helpa 2006; 2013: 18). His works are also cited in an article previously published in SHO (Ślódowa-Helpa 2020: 5).

According to Jan Pomorski (2017: 125), it is especially worth turning to Topolski's legacy when we – individually and as a community – must face the difficult challenges that the present poses to researchers of the past.

As for the issue of broadly understood poverty, which, after all, served as the inspiration for the preparing this article, it is now the category of social exclusion that clearly dominates in social research drawing on the French tradition, and above all in approaches aligned with the policy practice of the European Union. Social exclusion is considered more suitable for describing contemporary social issues, although it is not synonymous with the concept of poverty (Golinowska 2012: 99). These new circumstances have caused the debate at the conceptual level to change

its character. Earlier comparative analyses, such as those undertaken in Professor Topolski's text (Topolski 1992), have given way to discussions about the similarities and differences between the categories of social exclusion and poverty. However, as these questions clearly go beyond the issues and scope of this article, I will limit myself here to signaling their relevance and refer readers to several selected works (e.g. Broda-Wysocki 2021; Golinowska and Broda-Wysocki 2005; Kalinowski 2018; Szukielojć-Bieńkuńska 2005).

In these new conditions, the concept of destitution, which was precisely the focus of Professor Topolski's interest (Topolski 1992), has almost disappeared from the area of interest of contemporary researchers. It is therefore worth emphasizing that his reflections presented in points 1 and 2 of this article have not only not lost their relevance but have, in fact, become even more significant. That is why, after several decades, they have been deemed worthy of being recalled.

Małgorzata Słodowa-Helpa, Professor Emeritus in Economic Sciences at the Poznań University of Economics, former head of the Department of Economic History and the Department of Macroeconomics and Development Research, long-time academic and teaching staff member at this university, author and co-author of many monographs and articles in the fields of economics, socio-economic policy, and economic history, in particular the issues of integrated development, the economy of moderation and the common good, the role of the historical background in the process of transformation, as well as the competitiveness of regions, their territorial cohesion and specialization, and regional and local development policy.

REFERENCES

Literature

- Bauman, Z. (2006) *Praca, konsumpcjonizm i nowi ubodzy*. Obirek, S. (transl.). Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Bloch, M. (1962) *Pochwała historii, czyli o zawodzie historyka*. Jedlicka, W. (transl.). Warszawa: PWN.
- Braudel, F. (1999) *Historia i trwanie*. Geremek, B. (transl.). Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Czytelnik.
- Broda-Wysocki, P. (2021) 'Paradygmat analiz ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego', *Przegląd Europejski*, 2, pp. 11–19.
- Brzechczyn, K. (2007) 'Modele zacofania a transformacja w Europie Wschodniej. Recenzja książki: Anna Sosnowska, *Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947–1994)*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2004, ss. 387', *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, 69(1), pp. 255–263.

- Ćwikła, P. (2006) 'Kilka uwag o związku socjologii z literaturą' *Studia Socjologiczne*, 2(181), pp. 127–158.
- Deonandan, R. (2019) 'Defining poverty: a summary of competing models', *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 17–21.
- Domańska, E. (2016) 'Bardzo krótkie wprowadzenie', in Domańska, E. (ed.) *Jerzy Topolski. Teoretyczne problemy wiedzy historycznej. Antologia tekstów*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, pp. 7–35.
- Filipowicz, J. (2002) 'Pojęcie pamięci społecznej w nauce polskiej', *Kultura i Historia*, 2, pp. 23–29.
- Flis, M. (1993) 'O myśleniu diachronicznym, wyjaśnianiu historycznym w socjologii i wyjaśnianiu socjologicznym w historii', *Studia Socjologiczne*, 3–4(130–131), pp. 63–71.
- Golinowska, S. (1997) 'Badania nad ubóstwem. Założenia i metoda', in Golinowska, S. (ed.) *Polska bieda II. Kryteria. Ocena. Przeciwdziałanie*. Warszawa: Instytut Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych, pp. 19–29.
- Golinowska, S. (2012) 'O biedzie i polityce jej zwalczania współcześnie. Podejście porównawcze w świetle Europejskiego Roku Zwalczania Ubóstwa i Wykluczenia Społecznego', in Kubiak, H.E. (ed.) *Polska bieda w świetle Europejskiego Roku Walki z Ubóstwem i Wykluczeniem Społecznym*. Kraków: Krakowska Akademia im. Andrzeja Frycza Modrzewskiego, pp. 94–117.
- Golinowska, S. and Broda-Wysocki, P. (2005) 'Kategorie ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego. Przegląd ujęć', in Golinowska, S., Tarkowska, E. and Topińska, I. (eds) *Ubóstwo i wykluczenie społeczne. Badania. Metody. Wyniki*. Warszawa: IPISS, pp. 17–54.
- Janicki, T. (2017) 'Powstanie czasopisma „Studia Historiae Oeconomicae”', *Zakład Historii Gospodarczej, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza*. http://zhg.amu.edu.pl/historia_sho/. Accessed 10 November 2025.
- Janicki, T. and Graban, M. (2019) 'Studia Historiae Oeconomicae', in Balbuza, K., Dobosz, J., Konieczka-Śliwińska, D., Kościelniak, K. and Matusik, P. (eds) *Historia na Uniwersytecie Poznańskim. Od Seminarium Historycznego do Instytutu Historii (1919–2019)*. Poznań: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Instytut Historii UAM, pp. 304–305.
- Kalinowski, S. (2018) 'Problem ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego w krajach Unii Europejskiej w kontekście zrównoważonego rozwoju', *Więś i Rolnictwo*, 3(180), pp. 93–112.
- Kalinowski, S., Łuczak, A. and Szczygiel, O. (2024) *Ubóstwo ubogich. Obszary deprywacji potrzeb beneficjentów pomocy społecznej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Kanasz, T. (2015) 'Czy osoba doświadczająca biedy może być szczęśliwa? Koncepcje biedy a emocje', in Górniak, K., Kanasz, T., Pasamoniak, B. and Zalewska J. (eds) *Socjologia czasu, kultury i ubóstwa. Księga jubileuszowa dla Profesor Elżbiety Tarkowskiej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, pp. 304–322.
- Kmak, M. (2012) 'Kultura pamięci społeczeństwa polskiego – wybrane aspekty', in Łabędź, K. (ed.) *Elementy świadomości politycznej współczesnego społeczeństwa polskiego*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, pp. 118–129.
- Kolasa-Nowak, A. (2001) 'Socjolog w poszukiwaniu przeszłości: socjologia historyczna Charlesa Tilly'ego', *Studia Socjologiczne*, 4(163), pp. 11–41.
- Kolasa-Nowak, A. (2009) 'Historia i socjologia. Komplementarne metody badań życia społecznego', *Zagadnienia Naukoznawstwa*, 1, pp. 49–58.
- Kolasa-Nowak, A. (2021) 'Perspektywy socjologii historycznej w Polsce. Przeszłość w praktyce badawczej socjologów', *Stan Rzeczy*, 2, pp. 263–286.

- Kończal, K. and Wawrzyniak, J. (2011) 'Polskie badania pamięcioznawcze: tradycje, koncepcje, (nie)ciągłości', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 4, pp. 11–63.
- Kukło, C. (2020) 'Historia społeczna w teorii i praktyce badawczej Jerzego Topolskiego', *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 50, pp. 111–129.
- Kumor, I. (2011) 'Ubóstwo – ujęcie teoretyczne', *Edukacja Humanistyczna*, 1(24), pp. 101–110.
- Ligenza, M. (2018) 'Topolski w pigułce, czyli nowy wybór tekstów i idei', *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 48, pp. 465–467.
- Malczewski, S. (2009) '„Metodologie” Jerzego Topolskiego', *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 39, pp. 89–120.
- Ostoja-Zagórski, J. (1982) 'Problemy modelowego ujęcia gospodarki w pradziejach', *Slavia Antiqua*, 28, pp. 1–18.
- Piasek, W. (2006) 'Granice dyscyplin i „integracja nauk”', in Kowalewski, J., Piasek, W. and Śliwa, M. (eds) *Granice dyscyplin-arne w humanistyce – interdyscyplinarność w historiografii modernistycznej*. Olsztyn: Colloquia Humaniorum, pp. 111–122.
- Piasek, W. (2017) 'Etnografia myśli potocznej w dziedzinie pozaakademickich relacji z przeszłością. Myśl potoczna jako przedmiot badań historii historiografii', *Historia@Teoria*, 2(4), pp. 53–65.
- Pomorski, J. (1985) 'Jak (nie) czytać Topolskiego? (Uwagi nad lekturą „Teorii wiedzy historycznej” Jerzego Topolskiego)', *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 29(3–4), pp. 163–182.
- Pomorski, J. (2017) *Spoglądając w przeszłość. Studia i szkice metahistoryczne*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.
- Pomorski, J. (2019) *Homo metahistoricus. Studium sześciu kultur poznających historię*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Pomorski, J. (2020) 'Teoria narracji historycznej Jerzego Topolskiego. Na tropach ostatniej książki profesora', *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 50, pp. 35–70.
- Sen, A. (2002) *Rozwój i wolność*. Łoziński, J. (transl.), seria *Antropos*, 372: Development as freedom. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo.
- Śłodowa-Helpa, M. (2001) 'Polskie samorządy wobec problemów ubóstwa na wsi', in Warzywoda, W., Kośmicki, E. and Januszek, H. (eds) *Bieda na wsi na tle globalnych przemian społeczno-gospodarczych w Polsce. Socjologiczne, ekonomiczne i polityczne aspekty problemu*. Poznań: Wyd. Akademii Rolniczej im. A. Cieszkowskiego w Poznaniu, pp. 489–508.
- Śłodowa-Helpa, M. (2006) 'Przeszłość w procesie wyjaśniania teraźniejszości i przewidywania przyszłości', in Kościk, E. and Głowiński, T. (eds) *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo w badaniach historycznych – dokonania i perspektywy: w 60. lecie polskich badań statystycznych i gospodarczych na Dolnym Śląsku*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo GAJT, pp. 17–32.
- Śłodowa-Helpa, M. (2013) *Rozwój zintegrowany. Warunki, wymiary, wyzwania*. Warszawa: CeDeWu.
- Śłodowa-Helpa, M. (2020) 'Economic Policy from the Perspective of Contemporary Challenges in Economic History – Hopes, Concerns and Dilemmas', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, 38, pp. 4–36.
- Sosnowska, A. (2004) *Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947–1994)*. Warszawa: Trio.
- Sosnowska, A. (2021) 'Socjologia historyczna – kluczowa na peryferiach', *Stan Rzeczy*, 21, pp. 9–28.
- Spicker, P. (2007) 'Definitions of poverty: twelve clusters of meaning', *Poverty: An international glossary*, 1(84277–84824), pp. 229–243.

- Szalai, J. (1997). 'Power and poverty', *Social Research*, 64(4), pp. 1403–1422.
- Szukielój-Bieńkuńska, A. (2005) 'Miary ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego w praktyce i propozycjach Eurostatu', in Golińska, S., Tarkowska, E. and Topińska, I. (eds) *Ubóstwo i wykluczenie społeczne. Badania. Metody. Wyniki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych, pp. 148–156.
- Szymczak, D. (2016) 'Wprowadzenie do problemu ubóstwa w ujęciu Amartyi Kumara Sena. Wymiar etyczny', *Annales. Etyka w Życiu Gospodarczym (Annales. Ethics in Economic Life)*, 19(3), pp. 85–98.
- Tarkowska, E. (2000) *Zrozumieć biednego. O dawnej i obecnej biedzie w Polsce*. Warszawa: Typografia.
- Topolski, J. (1965) *Narodziny kapitalizmu w Europie XIV–XVII wieku*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Topolski, J. (1968) *Metodologia historii*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Topolski, J. (1972) 'Historycy wobec socjologii', in Kwilecki, A. (ed.) *Teoria i badania socjologiczne a praktyka społeczna. IV Ogólnopolski Zjazd Socjologów*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 293–376.
- Topolski, J. (1978) 'Problemy metodologiczne korzystania ze źródeł literackich w badaniach historycznych', in Stefanowska, Z. and Słowiński, J. (eds) *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, pp. 7–30.
- Topolski, J. (1980) *Nowe idee współczesnej historiografii O roli teorii w badaniach historycznych*. Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Topolski, J. (1983) *Teorii wiedzy historycznej*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Topolski, J. (1992) 'Nędza, ubóstwo, dostatek jako kategorie teoretyczne w badaniu historycznym i ich wartość eksplanacyjna', in Sztetyło, J. (ed.) *Nędza i dostatek na ziemiach polskich od średniowiecza po wiek XX*. Semper: Warszawa, Instytut Historii Kultury Materialnej Polskiej Akademii Nauk, pp. 9–14.
- Topolski, J. (1996) *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej*. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm.
- Topolski, J. (2016) *Teoretyczne problemy wiedzy historycznej. Antologia tekstów*. ed. Domańska, E. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje.
- Topolski, J. (2000) *Przełom gospodarczy w Polsce XVI wieku i jego następstwa*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Topolski, J. (ed.) (1981) *Świadomość historyczna Polaków. Problemy i metody badawcze*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, pp. 512.
- Topolski, J. (ed.) (1994) *Studia nad świadomością historyczną Polaków*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, pp. 284.
- Wrzosek, W. (2010) 'Szkielet do portretu Jerzego Topolskiego', in Wrzosek, W. (ed.) *Topolski, J. Varia historyczne*. Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, pp. 25–26.
- Zamorski, K. (2020) Historia gospodarcza Jerzego Topolskiego. Narracja o wybranych wątkach dziejów gospodarczych Polski, *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 50, pp. 71–87.