

ANTHROPOLOGY– FOLKLORE – HISTORY
PIOTR KOWALSKI (1952–2011) – *IN MEMORIAM*

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It had been five years in December 2016 since Professor Piotr Kowalski – philologist, folklorist, cultural anthropologist and well-known researcher for Polish scholars of humanities – unexpectedly died. When we started to prepare the first volume of *Rocznik Antropologii Historii (Anthropology of History Yearbook)* for editing in 2010, he had been included into the limited circle of friendly advisors to consult on the magazine’s content. Soon, he also agreed to act as a member of the Scientific Council for the newly created periodical.

Among Polish researchers, Piotr Kowalski has been easily recognised. It does not mean, however, that works by that polymath, moving across traditional disciplines in his relentless attempts to describe the complexities of the human world, do not require nowadays some thorough and critical considerations. The numerous subjects that he discussed in his scientific work, which was cruelly interrupted *in statu nascendi*, provided the possibility to view human culture in a wide historical panorama going through the motives and semantic contexts from the present to the modern. That perspective was at the same time characterized by its specific ahistoricity, as in the maze of the different and the changeable in time he eagerly searched for some constant, timeless patterns, cultural codes, meanings and symbols, specific forms of cultural transmission, stable rudiments of world organization, and similarities of the cultural imaginarium. That search for a key to the human imagination, thinking standards that decide on the form and content of the cultural interpretations of the world, the rules of the coding of meaning as well as the rules of constructing the images of reality, which was viewed against the background of textual poetics and sets of accepted formal solutions, makes for only a fragment of Piotr Kowalski’s anthropology project.

In his last works, he knowingly described his study of the mystery of being constant in a change with the notion of cultural history understood in an anthropological way. The motive of historicity of the philological field and anthropological thought should be significantly enhanced here as well as subjected to particular consideration. It is so, as it was one of Piotr Kowalski's main ploys to reconstruct past cultural worlds with the tools and experiences of folklore studies. An accurate application of folkloristic sources, transmissions aimed not only at the elites but also for the public and included in the trash or mass literature, film, etc., was the distinguishing mark of his historical anthropology. A subject that relates to that which is the anthropologization of folklore studies as a field that was once attributed to philology. The issue is particularly interesting as it seems not to be fully exploited intellectually. Out of numerous approaches to the problem, the tempting ones include a metatheoretical perspective of comparative reflexion over the relation between Piotr Kowalski's own project and various anthropologization programmes in the other fields of the humanities. What also seems crucial is to identify the possibilities and limitations of the anthropological folklore studies as practiced by Piotr Kowalski and his scientific followers. Some of questions that poses he about folklore, its limits and the significance for research into cultures past and present.

As it has been aptly noticed by Zbigniew Libera, Piotr Kowalski was most generally interested in the history of understanding the world, human mentality, the ways of conceptualization and expressions of life, which he described as a specific history of signs and texts. Moreover, having studied the folklore in Czesław Hernas's school in Wrocław, Piotr Kowalski learned to reach for sources that were usually marginalized and rejected in research into both the past and present culture. As a researcher of the present times, he took a particular interest in the problem of the cultural imagining of the past in common thinking, in science, in popularizing practices, as well as in the products of so-called popular culture. As a researcher of popular literature in ages past, he often offered important lessons to classic historians focused on the textual contents of narrative sources. By launching philological accessories in his analysis, he made people view a source text exactly as a text itself first. Seeing the rhetoric, the communication game, the topics of a text makes the first step to reconstruct its author's image of the world. Dealing with the sources of mass culture from the 18th to the 20th century - dealing with their specific folkloristic values, motives, subjects, plots, character types, and their changes in time and space – often led Kowalski's expert mind directly to questions about the sources of the present. The modern popular culture, he argued, may be successfully explained by its being rooted in the past cultural phenomena. His sensitivity to a specific historical coefficient of the presently studied cultural phenomena, his interest in their

genesis and place in the timeline, is the trademark of Piotr Kowalski's research. It may be said that it is a movement from the past to the present and back that makes the *modus operandi* for an anthropologist of the present who rejects fundamentalist and dogmatic approaches towards the "here and now". For Piotr Kowalski, it was the depth of a research perspective that allowed for noticing that crucial feature of human culture, which he described – as noticed by Jolanta Ługowska – by using the model of a patchwork (stromata) woven of colourful threads, whose intertexture reveals a great composition with a pattern that is sometimes hard to identify.

However, the polymath trait of Piotr Kowalski's research, which led to the rejection of disciplinary doctrinairism, did not make him indifferent to the crucial aim and the cognitive task of humanistic studies. He strongly criticized and rejected the underwhelming qualities of expanding 'pop-science'. However, many of his interpretations also caused polemics as well as loud voices of objection. Yet, that is the price of his experiments for the researchers, whose inquisitive mind takes over their loyalty to the researched discipline. Piotr Kowalski's scientific idiolect did not often go together with the discourse of the particular disciplines remaining at certain developmental phases of their own language. It is only the distance of time that is to bring a proper evaluation of the arguments by those who stand on the opposite side in those disputes.

Piotr Kowalski died unexpectedly, in Torun which may be a significant coincidence, – since it is the place where *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* (*Anthropology of History Yearbook*) was brought to life. With disbelief, I recommended the framing of his name into a black box in the ready-to-print first issue of the magazine for 2011. It was only in the following issue that his memorial penned by Jerzy Jastrzębski was placed and preceded by a short editorial obituary promising a scientific reflexion on Piotr Kowalski's works, which is the most proper way to commemorate a scientist. In September 2012, Czesław Robotycki discussed with me the idea of organizing a meeting on Piotr Kowalski's work. Yet, by the time those plans were completed, that remarkable scientist had also passed away... Not claiming the right to exploit the subject of relations between folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and history, the following volume makes an attempt to fulfil the arrangements and obligations made years before. It seems that for every scientist it is the common re-thinking of their plentiful, yet often incomplete works that makes their best and most desirable commemorative monument.