

ISSUES IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES
 No. 26, pp. 60-72 (2008)

COMMENTS ON INTERDISCIPLINARITY, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC POLICY

On the 30th Anniversary of the
 Association for Integrative Studies

Keynote Address
 at the 30th Anniversary Conference
 of the Association for Integrative Studies

October 24, 2008

by

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Abstract: After giving recognition to the key contributors to the success of the Association for Integrative Studies over the last 30 years, the speaker applies the three perspectives of his field, international political economy, to the conference themes of interdisciplinarity, higher education, and public policy. The three perspectives are free market, institutionalism, and historical materialism.

Historical Recognitions:

I would like to start by recognizing some people who have been important to the first 30 years of the Association for Integrative Studies (AIS). First, I would like to recognize the three former AIS presidents who have passed away: Barbara Hursh, Forrest Armstrong, and Slo Petrovich. Barbara was president of AIS before I attended my first conference in the spring of 1981. The 1981 conference was hosted by Forrest Armstrong at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. I found out about AIS from him when he was interviewing for the Dean of Undergraduate Studies at my university. The job was given to Mike Lunine, who at the time was Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Miami University of Ohio (the home of AIS). Small world. One of the most memorable moments at an AIS conference for me was when Michael Field, another former AIS President, told the story of how Forrest, in both sadness and fury, recounted the story in Michael's session of how his university administration closed down his interdisciplinary college. We now have many others who could tell a similar tale (Appalachian State, Miami, San Francisco State, St. Cloud, Wayne State, etc.—see Augsburg & Henry, 2009).

Slo Petrovich was an unforgettable character. He was a bear of a man who gave breathtaking bear hugs. So far as I could tell he lived on a daily fare of four hours of sleep and a six-pack of beer. He was a brilliant biopsychologist, who neglected his own health while generously helping others. Slo was the second AIS president to come from the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at the University of Maryland—Baltimore County. The first was Tom Benson, the author of that classic article, "Five Arguments Against Interdisciplinary Studies," that appeared in the first edition of *Issues in Integrative Studies* in 1982.

My next set of AIS recognitions goes to people who are, thank goodness, still alive. The first is the founder and dynamic force of AIS for all of its 30 years, Executive Director Bill Newell. A few years ago when Carolyn Haynes was AIS President, she organized a strategic planning session. My comment at the time was that developing a strategic plan for the future of AIS was simple. All you need to do is find at least 15 terrific people to fill Bill's shoes when he retires. We also may need to find a new host university. My second recognition goes to the person who has put AIS on the intellectual map of the world. Of course, that is Julie Thompson Klein. Over this past year while preparing for some writing projects on interdisciplinarity, I have had the pleasure of catching up on the extensive literature that has ap-

peared in the last 20 years. There is only one scholar who is at the center of all that literature, and that is Julie. Everybody, and I mean everybody, quotes her as *the* authority.

A few years ago the Association recognized Bill and Julie's pre-eminent contributions by awarding both of them the Kenneth E. Boulding Award, the Nobel Prize of interdisciplinarity. The prize is named in honor of Kenneth Boulding, a British-American peace economist who backed AIS from the beginning. He was a poet and painter as well as an academic social scientist. He wrote 30 books and over 1,000 articles. One of the many metaphors that he made famous was "spaceship earth." He used it on many occasions, including the last stanza of his 1972 "Ballad of Ecological Awareness":

Infinity is ended, and mankind is in a box;
The era of expanding man is running out of rocks;
A self-sustaining Spaceship Earth is shortly in the offing
And man must be its crew—or else the box will be his coffin!
(Beilock, 1980, p. 167)

Boulding was one of the founders of two major interdisciplinary fields, peace studies and general systems. In his capacity as chair of the Quakers meeting in Ann Arbor in 1957-58, Boulding was my boss. I directed weekend service experiences for University of Michigan students at the Michigan home for the mentally and physically disabled.

Thinking about Boulding as an economist conjures up the paradoxical observation that some of the best known academic advocates for holistic, humane interdisciplinarity are based in economics, a discipline whose dominant elite seems proud of its proclivity to disconnected theorizing and ideological blinders. The counter-mainstream mavericks, whose academic training was primarily in economics, includes—besides Boulding—Thorstein Veblen, John Maynard Keynes, and John Kenneth Galbraith. Within AIS there is Bill Newell, himself. In addition there is Rick Szostak, who after creating a schema for unifying all of the human sciences, decided to run for the Canadian Parliament. I consider myself a political economist, and I did a little real-world interdisciplinary application of my own by serving 12 years on our local City Council.

Perspectives of Political Economy

As a hybrid interdiscipline, political economy provides several perspectives with which to understand interdisciplinary studies, higher education and pub-

lic policy. Public policy is especially important as we enter the home stretch of the presidential election. There are three primary perspectives in political economy: free market, institutionalism, and historical materialism. The free market perspective is based in neo-classical economics; institutionalism relates well to political science; and historical materialism comes from the trans-discipline of Marxism. Each has its own distinctive world view (Miller, 2008).

The first perspective, the **free market**, takes a very reductionist approach. It presumes that the only real actors in the political-economic system are isolated individuals. Therefore, if we want to find out about a society, one simply adds up the behavior of individuals. In the economic realm value comes from aggregating individual preferences as they are manifested in supply and demand. The resulting price is believed to be an accurate value for either commodities like gasoline, or a secretary's pay, or CEO compensation. In fact, until the recent collapse of the credit bubble, the ruling mantra was the superiority of efficient markets, especially financial markets. The true believers in the free market are a little defensive now, but they still keep the faith. On September 27, 2008, the *Financial Times* dedicated its entire editorial column to its reaffirmation, "In Praise of Free Markets." For the true believers, such as the late Milton Friedman, the markets know best. Any government intervention, such as regulation, interferes with the natural and more efficient outcome promulgated by markets. The theory of free markets presumes rational decision-making on the part of all the participants. When it comes to the realm of politics, the comparable individual behavior is voting. In both economics and politics, rational individuals are assumed to maximize their individual interests.

The social norms of the market, the metaphors of the market, the mechanism of the market, the "natural laws" of the market—all have become embodied in our cultural sub-conscious. They comprise our "pre-analytic formations" (Schumpeter in Heilbroner, 1986, p. 309). They are a part of what cognitive scientist George Lakoff calls our "frames" (2008). Boulding called them our "images" (1956). The adoption of the market mentality has occurred in a relatively short period of time considering that the idea of the market as the dominant social means for decision-making only goes back about 250 years. We can thank, or blame, French intellectuals for coming up with the idea and a Scotsman, Adam Smith, for formulating their idea into the conceptual structure of the self-regulating market, "the invisible hand" (Heilbroner, 1986). The competitive market mechanism can serve some useful public purposes. However, when market thinking becomes all pervasive, some serious distortions of the public interest occur.

As an example of how pervasive the market frame is, think of how we apply the frame of the market to higher education: As teachers, we are facilitators of the “marketplace of ideas.” Students are our “consumers.” Expenditures on higher education are justified by their payoff in higher lifetime earnings. Teachers’ relative performance is rewarded or punished by merit pay. Business professors deserve more pay than humanities professors because the market says they are more valuable. It is all a matter of supply and demand. Other valuation standards are secondary or irrelevant. Paradoxically, the free choice student revolution of the 1960s and ’70s was a free-market approach to the curriculum. The “consumer” knows best. But remember that such an affirmation presumes that the consumers are knowledgeable and rational in their choices. George Lakoff argues that this assumption is based on an 18th century Enlightenment view of the brain in which universal reason prevailed. Others realized that this view of human nature was unrealistic and naïve, but that it could be used ideologically to manipulate people for political and economic advantage (Lakoff, 2008).

In fact, Lakoff argues that the “unconscious frames” embedded in the neural circuitry of our brains accounts for over 90% of our perceptions, reactions and decisions (2008, p. 197). Anything that does not fit our already established frames will generate a strong emotional rejection. According to Lakoff and his fellow cognitive scientists, we are not objective, rational creatures. Whoever or whatever controls our brain frames (our world views) dominates our behavior. Through their socialization processes, disciplines set out to impose their frames on their students and through them the wider culture. Mainstream economics has been very successful in this endeavor. However, the indoctrination process does not always succeed, as dissenters such as Boulding and Galbraith have demonstrated.

The academic organizational analogue to the individual in the market is the individual department with its individual classes. This bureaucratic structure reflects the fragmented and specialized disciplinary and sub-disciplinary structure of knowledge that characterizes the modern university. This structure of multiple, independent units promotes the reductionist production and transmission of knowledge. It is presumed that somehow the bits and pieces to which students are exposed will all add up to something educationally valuable. This is the multidisciplinary approach to education. Some faculty members and administrators have the audacity to consider this disjointed approach quality education. Some might go a further step and bring a few different disciplines together around a temporary general education theme, and lo and behold, they claim to have created quality interdisci-

plinary education. But it’s weak interdisciplinarity, and it serves to actually reinforce the specialized disciplinary structure. The participating faculty members stay firmly encased in their disciplinary cocoons. It is one of the reasons that I am glad that we are the Association *for* Integrative Studies!

In the public policy realm, the free-market orgy of the 1920s produced the Great Depression, which in turn facilitated the creation of fascism and welfare states. After World War II the free-market advocates, especially the financial types, initiated a long-term strategy, in cooperation with social conservatives, to bring back the good old free-market days in the United States by undoing, piece by piece, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Their first real breakthrough was the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, but they made significant gains in the 1970s, starting with President Richard Nixon’s repeal of the international gold/dollar standard in 1971 and President Jimmy Carter’s initiation of the deregulation movement in the late 1970s.

The success of the free-market Wall Street strategy was manifest in the fact that over the period 1950 to 1990 the financial sector increased its market-valued proportion of the U.S. economy from 2% to 50% (Miller, 2008, p. 126). The biggest gains were in the 1980s during the presidencies of Reagan and Bush. The sector continued to expand during the Clinton presidency. The financial sector’s strategy in the last 20 years has included less regulations and extreme credit leveraging. We are now suffering the consequences. The explosion of free-market finance was spearheaded by financial institutions in Washington, New York, and London. The U.S. Congress did its part by repealing some of the New Deal reform legislation, such as Glass-Steagall, in the name of laissez-faire free-market efficiency under both Republican and Democratic presidents. The libertarian wing of the Republican Party, the so-called “market fundamentalists,” was in the forefront of this policy direction. However, nearly all members of Congress accept some version of the free-market frame, varying only in what kind and how much regulation is appropriate.

Institutionalists, who represent the second major perspective in political economy, have been trying to point out the limitations in the free-market approach. But even in the midst of the global collapse of the credit system, the embedded market perspective has prevented many people from seeing beyond the lens of the market. We should not forget that this market perspective is the world view of neo-classical economics. The discipline of economics is the most honored social science, the only social science discipline with a Nobel Prize. Economics is also the only social science discipline with an office down the hallway from the U.S. President via the Council of Economic Advisers.

No surprise then that the disciplinary guardians of the mainstream free market world view do not award Nobels to institutionalist critics, regardless of the quality of their scholarship and the depth of their innovative insights. Consequently, neither Kenneth Boulding nor John Kenneth Galbraith received Nobels while several obscure mathematicians have, including Myron Scholes and Robert Merton, whose claim to Nobel fame was their mathematical equation for valuing derivatives. In 1994, they joined the directorship of a new hedge fund called Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM). LTCM used Scholes and Merton's sophisticated quantitative techniques as well as extreme leveraging. According to some accounts the relation of LTCM's equity assets to obligations acquired with borrowing was over 300 to 1. In 1997, Scholes and Merton received their Nobel Prize. In 1998, LTCM suffered significant losses and was on the brink of collapse, when the New York Federal Reserve Bank brokered a bailout by big banks whose names have been in the news recently, including the recently departed Lehman Brothers (Lowenstein, 2000). One would think that the big banks might have learned something about the dangers of extreme leveraging from this experience.

However, I should note that on occasion the Nobel Committee does pick economists with progressive political views who are not "market fundamentalists." This year's pick of *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman is an outstanding example. He has been reputed to be on Vice President Cheney's list of enemies for his columns critical of the economic policies of the Bush administration. The Nobel Committee focused on Krugman's trade theory in which he combined economics and geography, a combination we would call a crossdisciplinary hybrid. Earlier examples of this type of Nobel recipient would be Joseph Stiglitz (2001) and Amartya Sen (1998). The Committee always claims that politics has absolutely nothing to do with their choices. If you believe that claim, I have a bridge to sell you.

Institutionalists take issue with the realistic relevance of a market model that presumes harmonious equilibrium among independent rational individuals pursuing their material self-interests. The institutionalist model assumes that powerful organizations are the key actors in the political economy. Big corporations, big government, and, in some countries, big labor unions are the central decision-makers. Adherents to the institutionalist world view contend that market beliefs serve as a smokescreen for hiding crass exercises of economic and political power, especially by transnational corporations. While the free-market approach tends to ignore history, institutionalists base their analysis on the lessons of history. They observe that free market excesses by the financial sector have periodically created crises,

the latest one being the sub-prime mortgage derivative credit crisis that has endangered the viability of the entire global economy.

Applying the central analytic concept of institutionalists—power—to the Academy, one does not see a benign, value-free pursuit of knowledge. What one sees is a disciplinarily controlled structure of knowledge and its concomitant departmental system. Following Foucault, Joe Moran argues that disciplines not only establish the acceptable "order of things," they also determine the rules for what is normal and what is deviant (2002, pp. 133-136). Interdisciplinarity is a challenge to that hegemony, especially strong interdisciplinarity that advocates alternative integrative conceptions. Interdisciplinarity provides the only effective countervailing remedy to disciplinary myopia. However, even some participants at AIS conferences seem unaware of these political realities. I was astonished a few years ago at the Portland AIS conference when a participant in my session asked what the departmental structure of the university had to do with the opportunities for interdisciplinary education. My many years of classroom experience at turning ignorant questions into pedagogical opportunities enabled me, I think, to control my exasperation. Nevertheless, I am not sure that the participant accepted my argument that it mattered a lot.

Institutionalists argue that giving any one set of organizations unchecked power will lead to abuse. The relatively unchecked rise of corporate power for the last several decades, especially within the United States, has enabled corporate interests to dominate public policy (Korten, 2001). Corporate elites promote deregulation, arguing that the self-regulating market is always better than government intervention. This argument uses a competitive market metaphor, even though the reality is an economic system controlled mostly by corporate power. The lack of effective regulation has allowed irresponsible corporations to generate serious economic problems. Enron was a major supporter of energy deregulation at the federal and state levels, and we all know how that ended. Lack of regulation in the financial markets has given us the biggest credit crisis since the Great Depression. The next corporate influenced and ostensibly market-based policy that will probably not achieve its stated objectives is the cap-and-trade approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The use of carbon off-sets in pollution permit markets is especially prone to abuse.

The acceptance of major corporate funding undermines the ability of universities to serve as sources of independent analysis. There is some evidence that the reporting on drug and chemical testing carried out by academics has been tainted by corporate sponsorship. Some faculty members at the Berke-

ley campus of the University of California and the Champaign/Urbana campus of the University of Illinois are questioning whether British Petroleum will have inappropriate influence over the research into alternative energy sources that it is funding at these campuses (Abate, 2007).

My own experience in local politics demonstrates that the club of corporate power does not always win. My election to the City Council was intended to give a majority to those who wanted to prevent the developer (Southwest Diversified) of a major housing project from imposing his own profit-oriented scheme without taking into account community concerns. When I voted to approve a Housing Element that included that philosophy, I was immediately hit with a personal lawsuit for \$270 million. The process server was at least considerate enough to wait until a break in my graduate seminar to deliver the legal papers. The litigation was filed in federal court because California law gives Council members immunity from personal lawsuits when they are acting in a legislative capacity. The two legal strategies used by the developer's lawyers were based on federal contract and civil rights statutes. For several years our family was not sure whether or not we would spend the rest of our lives in debt to Southwest Diversified. Finally, the federal judge remanded the case to state courts where the personal intimidation part had no standing. Eventually we reached a mediated settlement, but not before we had also defeated parallel efforts by the developer in the California Legislature to steal our local control. We won this struggle not only because we had a good lawyer but also because the organized voice of all cities in California (League of California Cities) had prevailed upon the legislature to put in place legal protections for cities against predatory behavior by private corporations.

The third political economy perspective is **historical materialism** or classical Marxism. Some people think that after the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Marxism is dead. People who think this way have probably never read anything written by Karl Marx. Virtually everything that Marx wrote was about the workings and failings of capitalism, a phase of history that he considered indispensable to the eventual emergence of a better society. Since the world is becoming one big capitalist system, some of his insights into how it works still remain quite useful. Marx anticipated growing corporate power, periodic economic and financial crises, growing inequality in the distribution of income, and environmental degradation. His key analytical concepts were class and exploitation. One of his most famous followers, Lenin, emphasized one aspect of exploitation: imperialism. Marx expected that capitalism would be eventually overthrown by the

working classes of the world during one of the periodic economic crises, such as the one we are currently experiencing. So far the working classes of the world's nations have not acquired a shared organizational identity. (Joe, the unlicensed plumber, doesn't get it.) Consequently, no working-class-led revolution seems in the offing. In fact, the more likely cause of capitalism's possible demise is the collapse of the ecosystems upon which it depends, but inescapably abuses. Nature does not respond to ideological manipulation nor does it pay any attention to the stock market. Climate change is a function of biophysical processes that humans need to respect if they wish to avoid irreversible consequences.

Besides its explanatory reliance on historical processes, Marxism sees social and biological systems holistically, focusing on relationships among entities rather than individual parts. With this type of world view, Marxism qualifies, along with general systems theory and other overarching thought models, as an integrative transdiscipline (Miller, 1982).

Certainly, both class and imperialism are present within as well as between institutions of higher education. There is a disciplinary hierarchy of power that involves both status and resources. There are class differences between institutions of higher education. Fortunately, in my opinion, the ruling class of higher education has not discovered AIS or considered us worthy of infiltrating and conquering. As a consequence, we have been able to remain both congenial and unconventional. When I was President of AIS, I made an effort to recruit faculty members from these high reputation institutions. In retrospect, I am glad that I did not succeed. They would have tamed, co-opted, and conventionalized our organization. I'm glad that didn't happen.

Disciplines are continuously engaged in imperialistic actions, seeking to co-opt any promising new developments occurring elsewhere. Another type of disciplinary imperialism is the imposition of its own world view on other fields. For example, with the free-market ideology riding high in the last two decades of the 20th century, economics' rational-choice theory traveled all over the academy. In my own field, international relations, foreign policy specialists in the United States were attempting to explain and predict foreign policy decisions via rational choice theory. The results were mixed. Yet another type of imperialism involves disciplines falsely claiming to do what others actually do. For example, when funding agencies decided that proposals having interdisciplinary components would be viewed favorably, then virtually overnight members of disciplines started proclaiming their interdisciplinary qualities. In addition, they set out to eliminate the competition, so the disciplinarians argue that the university

does not need those pesky interdisciplinary units that keep challenging the conventional wisdom and siphoning off resources from the really important units in the structure of knowledge. That was one of the arguments used to discontinue my home program of interdisciplinary studies in social science at San Francisco State University. Of course, the type of interdisciplinary approach the disciplinarians are talking about is either minimal borrowing across disciplinary boundaries or the weakest form of interdisciplinary activity, multidisciplinary.

What provides resiliency to genuine interdisciplinary approaches is the ever changing social landscape in which the public expects innovative responses to emerging public issues. Disciplines tend to resist change, whereas strong and genuine interdisciplinarity welcomes change. The feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and '70s generated the interdisciplinary fields of women's studies and ethnic studies; the spread of global consumerism facilitated the rise of the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies; more recently, the growing awareness of the environmental impacts of human activity has fostered the widespread emergence of sustainability studies. The re-emergence of political economy in the 1980s was associated with the rise of globalization and the global casino.

Different groups of scholars are involved in each of these interdisciplinary fields. Yet they all invariably run into the same problems: how to communicate and work together across disciplinary discourses. What we in AIS have to contribute is the methodological means for harnessing multiple perspectives to an integrative application. In other words, we can help them overcome these predictable communication problems, so that they do not have to reinvent the wheel. However, we always walk the fine line between facilitating interdisciplinary cooperation while also challenging the disciplinary power structure. We do not always succeed, but because it is the right thing to do, we must keep on trying.

Way back in February of 1984, I gave a presentation at the AIS conference at Miami University of Ohio. It was titled, "Future of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Association for Integrative Studies." I made three points: (1) AIS had an identity crisis; (2) we were on the integration merry-go-round; and (3) we had a muddled future agenda. I quoted and proposed an agenda for interdisciplinarians put forth by Margaret Luszki in a book published in 1958 (Miller, 1989). At the time it seemed pretty overwhelming to those in attendance, but I believe that we have made significant progress since then. Thanks primarily to Julie Klein, we have a substantial body of scholarly literature. Thanks primarily to Bill Newell, we have a credible organization

that has promulgated curricular and intellectual standards. Thanks to Allen Repko, we now have a textbook that pulls it all together (2008). Have we suffered setbacks? You bet. We are engaged in a constant power struggle. The institutionalists and the Marxists have got that right. The latest need for our services, sustainability studies, is really about the survival of human civilization. Should we respond? We have no choice!

Biographical Note: Ray Miller retired in 2006 after a 43-year teaching career at San Francisco State University. His interdisciplinary education was at the Universities of Denver, Chicago, and Syracuse. In 1982 he was the founding editor of *Issues in Integrative Studies*. In 2008 his textbook, *International Political Economy: Contrasting World Views*, was published by Routledge, and AIS honored him with the Kenneth E. Boulding Award.

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