

Prof. Andreas Bieler,  
School of Politics and International Relations,  
University of Nottingham,  
UK-Nottingham NG7 2RD,  
E-mail: [Andreas.Bieler@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Andreas.Bieler@nottingham.ac.uk)  
Personal website: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~ldzab>

12 March 2007

**Humanities Research Centre twilight talk: Is interdisciplinarity an imperative in tackling  
global issues?**

At first sight, it would be easy to conclude that globalisation is such a complex set of processes and developments that different disciplines are needed to understand its various aspects. Economics could help us to understand the possible economic gains, business studies could tell us how to organise best in order to reap those economic benefits, politics could help us with ensuring a certain fairness of the distribution of the gains, some would say, or at least assist us in understanding what has to be done in order to avoid resistance by ‘ill-guided anti-globalisation movements’, others would argue. Of course, there need to be some rules in the global economy too and here law could come in and help us understand the necessary legal provisions for a smooth functioning of the global economy. Nevertheless, I will refrain from engaging in such an assessment here, because it rests on the incorrect assumption that globalisation would be some kind of objective reality with its own laws, which we as social scientists have to understand with different disciplines covering different aspects of this reality. I return to this point later.

A second way into this talk could be to respond more directly to the additional questions raised by colleagues:

- What is globalisation (agency, processes)? (Simon Tormey)

- Does globalisation assist development? (Mary Footer)
- What is the role of the state in globalisation? (Mary Footer)
- How is globalisation facilitating a country's political, economic, social and cultural transformation and, in relation to the specific case of China, what does this imply for its role in international affairs? (Yongnian Zheng)

Here, from a political economy point of view, I could start outlining different answers to these questions depending on the approach a political economist adopts. I could provide a liberal definition of globalisation and the related assessment of the changing role of the state as well as opportunities for development, a neo-realist IPE assessment as well as a historical materialist understanding of these issues. Again, I do not really want to pursue this avenue, since this would ultimately be too long and distract too much from the topic of this event: the possible need for interdisciplinarity in understanding and tackling global issues.

Nevertheless, this latter consideration does lead to one core precondition for successful interdisciplinarity, i.e. the awareness of the implications of theoretical approaches for the analysis of empirical events. Depending on their different fundamental assumptions, which can be logically argued for but not proven, each of the three perspectives, the liberal, the neo-realist and the historical materialist political economy approach will come to very different explanations of the very same empirical event. Transferred to the discussion of interdisciplinarity, it can then be concluded that it is not a case of different disciplines investigating different parts of an assumed empirical reality, but rather the need to understand that different disciplines may actually explain the same thing in different ways and come to conclusions, which cannot simply be added up.

Hence, interdisciplinarity requires self-reflexivity about one's own theoretical assumptions and the impact they have on one's research.

But I would argue that we even have to go back one further theoretical step towards the meta-theoretical level. Not only do different theories and disciplines explain the same empirical events in different ways, the very nature and purpose of theories may differ. While positivist social science assumes that there is indeed an objective reality, which allows us to identify causal relationships governing the interaction of human beings, and different approaches compete with each other over which one can explain best this reality, post-positivist approaches would challenge this very notion. Instead, they would point out that the subject of the researcher cannot be separated from the object, the topic of his/her research and that, therefore, every 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox 1981: 128). And it is the latter, which has to be analysed.

Again, going back to the issue of interdisciplinarity the self-reflexivity about one's own theoretical assumptions, one's own purpose is a precondition for successful co-operation. It is this self-reflexivity, which political economists often find wanting when they approach other social science disciplines.

Let me give you an example:

If we had turned to economists in the 1950s in times of economic recession, they would have told us that economic recovery was an issue of sufficient demand. In a Keynesian understanding, they would have advised governments to engage in budget deficit spending in order to create (1) more jobs leading to more people with money to spend and thus higher demand levels; and (2) as a result of (1) generate a more generally positive outlook, which would then also convince private

companies to invest into new production facilities, thus creating more jobs, and consumers to spend more to increase demand yet further.

Turning to economists today, the answer would be very different. It is not a lack of demand, which is the problem, but rigidities in the market and here particularly the labour market, they argue. There is too much government intervention hindering the efficient working of the market which in turn leads to sub-optimal outcomes and an overall negative economic situation. This can only be overcome through a programme of deregulation including the labour market. If it is made easier for companies to hire and fire workers, if the social costs of employment are lowered, then companies are more inclined to employ additional workers, because they know that they can respond flexibly to downturns of the economy, so the argument goes.

Interestingly, during both periods, economists argued in a positivist way that they could explain how economic reality was working and, as a result, what would have to be done to generate economic growth. Yet, the explanations are totally different.

What to do in this situation?

From a self-reflective position, the task as I see it cannot be to investigate who is right and who is wrong. It is not whether a neo-Keynesian programme could explain the situation better nowadays and thus provide us with a better set of recommendations of how to organise the global economy. Instead, what a critical political economist has to do is to ask why is it that one set of economic beliefs was considered correct in the 1950s, while today everybody accepts almost like common sense that another, neo-liberal economic approach represents the truth about the objective functioning of economies? In other words, the question has to be why is it that neo-liberalism is suddenly regarded as the truth and almost exclusively informs government as well as international

economic policy? Who pushes these ideas and what are the underlying power structures, having allowed these ideas to become dominant? Who benefits from the related restructuring and who loses out? In other words, who is the agency behind neo-liberal economics and what is the purpose of this approach permeating economics, business studies but increasingly also political science and law?

Let us return to the question of interdisciplinarity for one final time. As I see it, there are two possible ways forward. First, we could adopt a positivist outlook and argue that different approaches can comprehend different aspects of globalisation and, therefore, need to co-operate in putting together the overall picture. As I have argued this is rather unsatisfactory, since a whole range of historically specific ideas, institutions and power structures of the current order are taken for granted (e.g. neo-liberal economics). Marx referred to this kind of ahistorical analyses as ‘vulgar political economy’.

In many respects, the problems with social sciences started, when different disciplines were separated out from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. We cannot simply undo this. We are now confined within these separate disciplines. But perhaps it is not inter-disciplinarity, which is the way forward, but first a reflection of the very way of how these disciplines emerged and what kind of steps one could then make in order to move into a post-disciplinary situation. A first step into this direction could be to question critically our own as well as each other’s underlying theoretical assumptions and purposes. Perhaps a workshop on disciplinary, interdisciplinary and post-disciplinary perspectives on globalisation would be a fruitful way forward. This would help us to understand better the nature of our claims about empirical reality and allow us to get closer to an understanding of global issues as well as the possible ways of how to tackle them. It would be a first step towards ‘unthinking social science’ as Immanuel Wallerstein (2001) phrased it.

## References

Cox, R.W. (1981) 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10 (2): 126-55.

Wallerstein, Immanuel (2001) *Unthinking social science: the limits of nineteenth-century paradigms (second edition)*. Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 2001.