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## Discovering the Plan behind the Gordian Knot New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences

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**Discovering the Plan behind the Gordian Knot**

**New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences**

**Russell K. Skowronek**

**University of Texas Rio Grande Valley**

At the beginning of December 2015, Dr. Tamer Balci, one of the founding editors for *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences*, asked me to “write an essay or a welcome message indicating the significance of interdisciplinary studies.” It is a rare but rather daunting honor to be asked to write an opening essay for a new journal. How does one who is immersed in such interdisciplinary research share that excitement with others who are similarly engaged; or more provocatively, with those who are not? Perhaps by recognizing that interdisciplinary studies is not “new” *per se* but rather that it is the most dynamic means of understanding phenomena in the social and liberal sciences.

Educated at the undergraduate and graduate level in anthropology, history, and political science, I now embrace the local place-based “STEAM” (with the “A” for arts or humanities) field approach for my teaching and research. Today I serve as the Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts overseeing the School of Interdisciplinary Studies and Community Engagement at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. This position came about after successfully directing an interdisciplinary program devoted to the anthropological, biological, geological, and historical investigation of the lower Rio Grande region in South Texas and forty years of conducting interdisciplinary anthropological and historical research. My teaching and research bridges the spectrum from humanities to science and uses the skill sets of both to illuminate the human condition within the diachronic context of the local social and natural environment. This can only happen when one looks beyond their disciplinary boundaries and understands their roots.

**Academia and Interdisciplinary Research**

“Within one profession truths are often quite clear. But those truths ... are less apparent to those in other disciplines.”

Lennard J. Davis, 2014, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era*

The readers and authors of the research presented in *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences* “get” the above maxim. You are products of a Western system of increasingly specialized higher education. For most of the past thousand years whether one was a student at Oxford, Jagiellonian, Harvard, or the Sorbonne your studies would have been in the Liberal Arts and have included ancient and natural history and geography, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, Greek, Latin, logic, ethics and rhetoric, and music. Careers in the church, law, or government were the norm. Then about 250 years ago in the eighteenth century the so-called “historical sciences” began to take shape as a means of classifying, and so make understandable, cultural and natural phenomena. These “Naturalists,” the forerunners of anthropologists, biologists, and geologists, met the needs of the nascent Industrial Revolution and the scaffolding of evolutionary theory.

In the last third of the nineteenth century the holistic “liberal arts” education of the past was split into such academic disciplines or specialties as anthropology, history, languages, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology each with their own societies and publication venues. This was the era of Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor, Franz Boas, Albion Small, Edward Freeman, and Herbert Adams. Crossing these disciplinary lines was discouraged to those who were untenured.



After World War II academe in the United States and its allies was flooded with veterans of that conflict. In the service they had worked as teams to overcome impediments to their advance. In higher education they questioned the polemics of the founders of their fields. In the years immediately following the war these new ways of approaching questions involved what we would call “Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary, and Transdisciplinary” strategies that cross many disciplinary boundaries to reach conclusions based on new understandings of complex situations. In the jargon of today this is called “Thinking outside the box.”

For example, in anthropology multilineal cultural evolution replaced the “Social Darwinist” unilinear theory of the nineteenth century. Archaeologist Walter Taylor promulgated the “conjunctive approach” for research in his 1948 *A Study of Archeology*. He saw that to understand the past one needed to recognize that societies are integrated systems including settlement patterns, diet, technology, and social organization. At the same time cybernetics entered the lexicon as an approach for exploring regulatory systems in mechanical, physical, biological, cognitive, and social systems.

Less than two decades later Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* gave scholars “permission” to recognize that scholarly fields never rely entirely upon “objectivity” alone as all objective conclusions are ultimately founded upon the subjective conditioning/worldview of its researchers and participants. As a result they undergo periodic “Paradigm shifts” or change in approach.

In an era when STEM fields grab the headlines in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the imagination of educators and the public, STEAM, with its emphasis on placed-based applications of the STEM fields, provides historical and cultural context to phenomena in the social and liberal sciences.

A half a century has passed since Kuhn’s publication. Any scholar working today understands the power of interdisciplinary research but, sadly, many still feel that only publications in flagship journals “count.” *NETSOL, New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences* provides a venue in which these perceptions may be changed.

### **Some say we live in increasing complex times—that is patently false**

#### **John’s Story**

Jan gently nudged his chestnut brown horse “Geraldine” forward with a light tap of his spurs. It was difficult to believe how much his life had changed in the past six years. The twenty one year old hailed from the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria. The region had been annexed from Poland more than a century earlier by Austria. Born a Roman Catholic in 1889 in Wadowice (later to gain fame as the hometown of Pope John Paul II), he had completed his secondary education and was fluent and literate in both German and Polish. In 1907 his parents died of typhoid. A year later he was serving Kaiser Franz Joseph in the Austro-Hungarian cavalry. Jan, with his education and language skills, was the ideal recruit for the multiethnic army. Promotions came quickly such that to the Czech and Polish-speaking men under his command he was known as Sierżant Jan; to his superiors up the German-speaking chain of command he was Zugführer Johan.

After postings in Krakow and Vienna, Jan and the men of the 1st Galicia Lancer Regiment of the Imperial and Royal Austrian Army were sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The region, with its populace of Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs who were adherents of Islam, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity respectively, had been forcibly annexed from the multiethnic Ottoman



Empire in 1909 by the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Now, operating near Sarajevo, Jan and his squad of cavalry, their red breeches and blue tunics covered with dust, were patrolling the region for insurgents who would skillfully camouflage cut telegraph and telephone wires and otherwise harass and undermine Austrian rule.



Corporal Jan Skowronek, circa 1910 in the uniform of the 1st (Uhlán) Lancer Regiment, Imperial and Royal Austrian Army. Photo taken in Krakow. (Courtesy of Russell Skowronek).

Jan left the Balkans and the army in 1913. Lacking immediate family and commitments, he left his homeland by way of the Hamburg-America Line for the United States. There, less than a year before Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo in 1914, he disembarked at Castle Garden in Manhattan and Jan became John, my grandfather.

In the century following his departure this region and the world would witness two world wars, the collapse of empires, the rise and fall of communism and regional political centralization and decentralization, and civil wars pitting Christians and Muslims against each other or among themselves along sectarian lines.

### **Why a new journal in Social and Liberal Sciences?**

In a personalized manner John's story contains aspects of International Relations and Political Science, Human Rights and Religious Studies, Linguistics, History, Economics, Geography, and Ethnic Studies. Was his world inherently "less complex" than today's? I think not. 125 years ago Emile Durkheim described hierarchically integrated societies as exhibiting organic solidarity, which is based on interdependence and cooperation with increased technological specialization. A century ago, in 1913, "hackers" cut telephone and telegraph wires whereas today we find viruses and malware in our computers. Both actions are meant to disrupt or intercept communications. Today we witness rapid technological change predicted in "Moore's Law" but are social relations any more complex? Rather, this anecdote encapsulates the broad reach envisioned by the editors of *NETSOL*, *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences*. Their backgrounds include anthropology, art history, business and economics, history, and philosophy. It should be noted that the majority of the Editorial Board serve at the newly founded University of Texas Rio



Grande Valley. The first institution of higher education founded in the 21st century it stands in a complex cultural and natural environment on the border between the United States and Mexico.

Rightfully they note that “Increasingly, large number of academics conduct interdisciplinary research and analyze their data using both quantitative and qualitative methods, but the number of journals to disseminate interdisciplinary research remains extremely low. *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences (NETSOL)* aims to fill this gap and facilitate the publication of works in interdisciplinary studies. While *NETSOL* prioritizes and highly encourages article submissions in interdisciplinary studies, we welcome submissions in every field of social and liberal sciences.”

I hope that you will encourage your students and colleagues to publish in this journal. We will only change our disciplines and the place of interdisciplinary studies within them by actively participating in the discourse in such public forums.

...ideas need not be true to be powerful for both scholars and ordinary people. In addition, the most influential ideas in both scholarship and everyday life are often those we think about the least. This suggests that it would be very useful for us, as social scientists, to be more introspective about our unstated beliefs and their influence on our conclusions.

Arland Thornton, 2001, “The Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways, and Family Change.”

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## About the Author

**Russell K. Skowronek** (Ph.D. Michigan State University), a Research Associate of the Smithsonian Institution, is Professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley where he serves as Associate Dean, School of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement in the College of Liberal Arts and as the Director of the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools. He is the recipient of the 2015 **Norman Neuerburg Award**, from the California Mission Studies Association and The University of Texas System Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Award (2014). Skowronek specializes in the study of the Spanish colonial world. He is the author or editor of several books including *Pieces of Eight, More Archaeology of Piracy* (2016), *Ceramic Production in Early Hispanic California, Craft, Economy and Trade on the Frontier of New Spain* (2014), *X Marks the Spot, the Archaeology of Piracy* (with Charles Ewen-2006), *HMS Fowey Lost...And Found* (with George Fischer-2009), *Beneath the Ivory Tower, the Archaeology of Academia* (with Kenneth Lewis-2010), all with the University Press of Florida, and *Situating Mission Santa Clara de Asís:1776-1851, Documentary and Material Evidence of Life on the Alta California Frontier* with the Academy of American Franciscan History (2006).



He is currently working on two book manuscripts for Texas A&M Press with colleagues from UTRGV. Their working titles are *Blue and Gray on the Rio Grande*, *The Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail, 1846-1876*, and *War and Peace on the Rio Grande, 1846-1876*.