

My Province

While skiing towards Mt. Kasprowy and slowly climbing a slope I could not resist the impression that this was quite a different mountain than the one I knew a quarter of a century ago. The configuration of the terrain had not altered and the tricks performed by the skiers are not radically different, but the novelty is striking. Not so long ago, a mere twenty or so years ago, Mt. Kasprowy was the domain of a distinctly delineated relation between the metropolis and the province. This small area witnessed the coexistence of all Polish skiers and it was immediately obvious who came from the centre of the country and who from the more distant regions. Obviously, there existed a single common denominator and a skiers' world. Within its range the less numerous members of the elite remained closer to the realisation of a certain evident model (skiing style, fashionable clothes, Western equipment, amount of time spent on the Mountain), while the masses standing in queues could only dream and hope that one day they too would join the "Duchy of Warsaw" (this being the name given to the skiers' metropolis). Despite all the differences and every so often fierce animosity there existed a certain discernible community, and the centre and the peripheries remained an important structural element of its existence. Today, no one speaks of the "Duchy of Warsaw" because it is simply impossible to notice any sort of a "capital" on Mt. Kasprowy. There are also no elements making it possible to situate the skier upon a certain scale. Skis, clothes, shoes mean so little. Their universality and availability have deprived them of some of the symbolic significance; in addition, skiing itself now possesses a radically different dimension. The equipment of a serious skier creates a radical chasm from that of the amateur. The two no longer meet while assessing the style of their performance, nor do they share conversations about the quality of the snow. They simply come from dissimilar worlds and the Mountain too differs and no longer creates a bond. Relations are weak or outright absent. The multiplicity of the proposals defined by the snow and skis is the reason why the opposition: model-like/emulated, strong/weak, metropolitan/provincial is replaced by: mine/not mine.

Choice and personal decision become fundamental since they grant a name. I would like to ski, I declare, and this access, together with its consequences, defines me much more than the sort of skier I shall become. It is not blind chance or an accident, but some sort of powerful and demonic determinants that locate me here and not elsewhere. I select and mould my world whenever I have the opportunity, will and energy, and enter a reality whose basic property becomes *mine-ness*. This is the case in the mountains. Is this an enclave, a special place with individual features or, on the contrary, do distinctive tendencies that in

horizontal and expansive worlds are less visible come to the fore in this small area?

In *Lapidaria*¹ by Ryszard Kapuściński, a spiritual diary of drifting across the world inspired by extraordinary intellectual and physical activity, a voracious need to see, experience, and comprehend the world, we deal with a grand panorama of our times. The author constantly contrasted the poverty of the South with the wealth of the North, the descent of the Third World, which he found emotionally close and which is a concept encompassing more a civilisational quality than a political or geographic one, and the enclosure of the West, which to a considerable measure provoked it. The contrasts entail assorted qualities, but the opposition of interest to us, i.e. between the metropolis and the province, is missing.

The world at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century appears not to have a distinct centre. On the contrary, Kapuściński constantly stressed a tendency towards separation and distinction, a striving towards autonomy, and, in a word, a provincialisation of reality.

Professor Piotr Sztompka about the world congress of sociology in Montreal in 1998. The Congress dealt primarily with the processes of globalisation (...). The other aspect of globalisation is a defensive manifestation of own distinctness (...). Globalism - a feature of the contemporary World - is the fragility of dominant confrontations, orders and unions. "Today" might look totally different than "yesterday" and no one is any longer surprised that suddenly things are different, no one asks about the causes or seeks the roots. (...)

Pessimists claim that the future of our planet will involve further Balkanisation and even tribalisation. They declare that in a certain sense we are returning to the most distant times, to our very beginnings, when Earth was populated by an enormous gathering of innumerable groups, clans and ethnic communities without any clear-cut central structures and hierarchies. This Balkanisation and tribalisation are not only territorial but also mental. A narrow, closed and one-directional mentality is on the rise,

one that rejects everything that is different and that does not confirm its convictions about its exceptionality, superiority and supremacy (...). Provincialism denotes enclosure within one's narrow world in which the local mediocre attain the dimension of powerful heroes and petty incidents achieve the rank of historical events (...). The weakness of provincialism lies in the fact that it often becomes a shelter for the frustrated, the failures, those devoured by ambition and devoid of talent.²

This portrait of contemporaneity outlined by Kapuściński is confirmed also by other prominent interpreters. A close image is depicted by, i.a. Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*.³ In other words, we are dealing not with a subjective vision but with a solidly grounded opinion. In addition, it harmonises with the fact that the Internet – a web, the emblem of our times, universally known and obvious, also emphasizes the changeability, undulation, horizontality, and absence of hierarchy, as well as the fetters, the whole, the impossibility of evasion.

How is it possible in a world thus perceived, devoid of obvious centres whose number is so great that they mutually annul their magnetism and where metropolises perish due to their peripheries, to speak about the province and its spiritual offspring - provincialism? No problem would arise if we were to assume that the phenomenon of the metropolis and the centre is created by quantity. On the other hand, however, it is easy to indicate examples toppling such a thesis. Political or financial power and the force of culture, science, and art are often located beyond the most populous largest cities. Small Geneva is higher ranking in the financial world than gigantic Mexico City, while Washington is politically more important than New York. Moslems regard Mecca as much more significant than Cairo or Karachi. We may speak about the phenomenon of interest to us only when there come into being new models of existence, lifestyles possessing sufficient power and energy to conquer both further and nearer regions. Assorted factors may stimulate the force of radiation. Nonetheless, the latter is evident. The generated model is legible and distinctive; hence the force of its attraction. Kapuściński never indicated any point endowed with such properties on the map of the contemporary world. He also consistently did not speak about the province as a physically existing space but often returned to provincialism, which he conceived as a state of the spirit and a manner of thought, and which he deemed as the worst threat for human existence. He inhabited some sort of a spiritual metropolis that he did not present outright. One thing, however, is clear. It is not located anywhere in the concrete world but remains a transcendent point making it possible to attain a distance – naturally, varied – towards all sorts of reality. This citizen of the world, a martyr of the journey, whose path links New York salons with African

refugee camps, Parisian hotels with collapsing Russian rural dwellings, who talked with the great figures of our times, described the sources of his "worldliness":

The impact of my childhood upon later fascinations:

Pińsk was situated along the peripheries of, once, Poland, and now, Europe. This is probably why I am constantly attracted by the peripheries of the world. The climate of the peripheries, the time that follows such a slow course there, the languid and drowsy atmosphere, those empty streets and immobile faces peering through small windows and raised curtains. I remember silent Bernardyńska Street and the unexpectedly appearing figure of a rabbi. He walks hurriedly and looks around nervously as if he suddenly became aware that he had mixed up worlds and has to quickly return to non-being.⁴ Paradoxically, Kapuściński's openness, curiosity, and attention came into being in a godforsaken locality amidst marshes and bogs, but were able to truly originate, develop, and produce effects only when severed from the roots and after abandoning the place of origin.

In his essay - significantly entitled: *Paradoks prowincji*⁵ - Dariusz Czaja indicated the archetypal dimension of such a situation: Fellini's Rimini, Kantor's Wielopole, Mrozek's Kraków - the worlds of beginnings, small, poor, part of the past, never to return. One either left them or outright escaped from them, and at times the horror of history drove one out. It is impossible, however, to abandon them totally. They are constant, albeit as reminiscence, nostalgia or longing. For the authors - an important source of their works, and for those who use only their life to write a text - a lesson taught by memory, an important stirring of the soul. D. Czaja described this movingly: *According to this interpretation, the inhabitant of the province is simply a different name of the human condition of each one of us regardless of the place of residence. (...) The present-day Everyman is a figure with an underpinning of longing, whose characteristic mark is a part of the DNA cultural chain distinguishing each one of us.*⁶

Lithuania, my fatherland! You are like health/ How much you must be valued, will only discover/ The one who has lost you.

At the onset of the twenty first century, when liquidity, change, and impermanence are a global experience, and in the wake of the previous century, an era of disinheritance, banishment and loss, Mickiewicz's words resound with a dramatic force containing a strikingly true image capturing human plight. A portrayal of the Poles from the Eastern Borderlands, the Germans of Prussia, the Serbs of Kosovo, the Hindi of London, refugees from China and Indochina living in American cities, the inhabitants of refugee camps in Africa and on other continents. Much divides them, but they share only/as much as "lost fate, whose value grows as it becomes more distant in time and space. The harmony and beauty of a reality given without

our choice, and in this sense natural, becomes obvious only from a perspective, and as a finite experience it results in longing and calls for reflection and deliberation. A thus conceived province would be, therefore, the name of a spiritual land enduring *via* literature, the cinema, music, and the visual arts. As a rule, in its capacity as the memory of the poor it would become a vanishing continent implicitly departing together with them.

If we describe the province in this fashion then what will its opposite be like?

Is the *here and now* in which we exist a centre or a metropolis? In what manner is it accessible considering that we lack in it distance necessary for cognition?

After all, we remain inside a reality that is only becoming and starting to take place. It is open and focused on the future, and thus unclaimed. We experience it more than understand it, or rather it is our existence within it that constitutes its comprehension. In this case, our understanding does not consist of examination and interpretation (as in the case of the province) but of selection and activity. It involves writing much more than reading reality. At the end of his journey Kapuściński said something very characteristic in one of the interviews: *I do not understand the world*. Despite this, or rather precisely for this reason, he fervently described his special experiences while creating the world.

In his: *I do not understand* the great reporter evoked a peculiar feature of the centre, the space of life. In extraordinary essays about the reflections of Friedrich Nietzsche, Krzysztof Michalski also presented this quality: *Always, regardless of the extent to which we determine how much we shall know about it, "my" life, "our" life are something more than just I or we. Consequently, it possesses an inalienable, different, dark, and strange side, about which all knowledge fails, a side about which we cannot know. Note that the word "dark" assumes in this context additional meaning. Here, "darkness" does not denote a mere lack of knowledge. It is excess rather than absence, excess that is life, an excess of meaning beyond everything that we know and can know. A darkness of life seen from the point of view of each particular moment, a darkness about which we can say that it is unfathomably deep, mysterious, and too full of meaning. (...) In other words, by describing life as the will of power Nietzsche maintained that life does not adapt itself to the world but shapes it (...). Life understood as power and the will of power is a life that cannot be restricted either to that, which it is or something that it could or should be. In that sense, it is "excess"*.

(...). *Life is creative. It is the power of the will because it always exceeds itself by creating constantly new forms, of which none can become its ultimate form.*⁷

If we, therefore, see the province as a painted image, a completed text, the space of memory, that what

is closed, distant, and recollected and for which one longs, then the centre appears to be life, the will of power so evocatively depicted by Michalski. Note that the most conventional manners of presenting the opposition of interest to us aim in a similar direction. Boring, suffocating, ever the same, ossified, dark, stifling, hopeless – are those not the names given to the province? Even when we describe it as calm, gentle, laid back, a vacation destination, and locate it on the site of death/birth, it remains distant from the force of existence. He who wishes to exist better, to live and not to vegetate, sets off for the symbolic city. It is the latter that bustles, roars, glimmers, and constitutes multiplicity, intensity, and fever. Kapuściński declared that great cities attract thanks to their opportunity, potential, and reinforced life that reveals quantity.

The metropolis and the province are thus more the figures of an existential situation than a description of material reality. This is the reason why there is nothing strange in the fact that the same place will be evaluated differently. We are dealing with a black hole in which everything gets lost, while for others it is a territory full of life. Accounts by Andrzej Stasiuk from the European end of the world show just how radical this reversal can be or even something more: contrary to initial observations we are not tackling a strong opposition.

Here, life is not contrasted with death or existence with non-being. It rather faces that, which is taking place, coming into being, which creates, encloses, grants shape and form and renders comprehensible. This is life harmonized with knowledge, the obvious, and the impossible novelty reducing it. *But we must repeat: KNOWING and BEING - wrote D. H. Lawrence - are opposite, antagonistic states. The more you know, exactly, the less you are. The more you are, in being, the less you know [...]. This is the great cross of man, his dualism. The blood-self, and the nerve-brain self.*⁸ Succumbing to the province is a natural process of the life, which one wants to see and understand.

The price of such a task will be cooling off, slowing down, enclosure, the loss of the principal quality of the metropolis, i.e. power, excess, the dark side. Why pay such a price, what is the purpose of knowledge, the province, memory? Why did the "blonde beast" establish a "dead class"? Tadeusz Kantor, whose reflections about the province Zbigniew Benedyktowicz extracted and recalled in *Powrót do domu*,⁹ said: *Probably only there can we be redeemed*,¹⁰ adding: *We stand in the door helpless, saying farewell to our childhood, upon the threshold of eternity and death, in this poor and gloomy interior; beyond those doors storms and human hell rage and tidal waves rise.*¹¹ Against what does that childishly helpless and poor space protect us, towards what sort of eternity does it lead us – this is the theme presented in Kantor's spectacles through image, sound, mood,

the avoidance of words, declarations, and unambiguity. Figures of the inferno, the flood and the storm indicate that for this immensely dramatic person existence is threatened with annihilation, dissolution, scattering, i.e. the loss of steady points, obvious places of reference.

Osip Mandelstam, yet another great witness of the twentieth century, wrote during an apogee of Stalinist terror: *We are living, but can't feel the land where we stay*, and this phrase conceals the horror of a total lack of enrootment and the absence of all anchors. *We are living* meant at the time: we are driven, exiled, marched, treated as a herd at the disposal of others. All *mineness* is destroyed and denigrated, and sole truth lies in the created project of the future, while the present is considered only if it serves the former. Nothing opposes a thus devised, constructed life created by people and dependent on them more than the province. Childhood and old age, birth and death, the extremities of life remembered and recalled, all possess certain independence. Given without a choice, obvious, and impossible to negate, close to the borderline of all human power, they refer to, or perhaps only indicate or suggest a dimension greater than life and transcendent in relation to it. Reference to it denotes seeing the poverty of each finite existence and comprehending the relativity and, in this sense, the weakness of each project. More, in this perspective there is no other but provincial life. The metropolis is only a movement, a blinding flash, an escape from the memory of prime and ultimate things. Hope, faith or, worst of all, certainty that such a moment will last puts an end to all thinking and dims the imagination. After all, the project of condensing volatility, the enslavement of power is one of the central ideas of the metropolis. The power of its existence is not to transfix the end, which discloses frailty. It would be an expression of pride and narcissism to grant the idea, frequently merging in the metropolis, the name of provincial thinking, but it would also indicate its universality and extensive distribution rather than scattered intensity.

While pondering the opposition of interest to us we continue the laborious task of delineating the obvious border between its members. The metropolis and the province, death and life, the intense and the weak, the dark and the comprehensible, the open and the closed, the existent and the recalled, all those categories introduce order into reality, create order that makes comprehension possible, but also conceal more – they lose an existence that cannot be uttered through them. The continuum, the transition, the encapsulation, the difference of the same, the horror of the metropolis-province – this is the misery of ethnographic thinking adhering to life and experiencing reality. A magnificent weakness.

When after the last steep ascent I finally reach Świńska Pass and look at Goryczkowy Cirque, ever the same and yet totally different due to past ski expeditions, experienced years, and the events I witnessed in this calm place, where, fortunately, I am now all alone, I know that I am in my provincial-metropolitan world. I hear once again the words of Claudio Magris, an Italian from Trieste, said about Ryszard Kapuściński and indirectly, in my opinion, about the issue examined by us: *Kapuściński knows that it is necessary to carefully listen to the voice that is within us without obscuring it with words. I find in him a sense of life that is also fundamental for me: loyalty to wanderings with people whom we love, be they living or dead but ever present. And loyalty to things, places, seasons of the year. This writer, so fascinated with reality and its limits, sometimes succumbs to a desire for whiteness, emptiness, a void, a poor cell – the most discreet signs of all things. Silence - as if there was too much clamour, too many events and objects, too many oppositions. I too always thought that someone who really loves life without artificial comfort and its bathos sometimes becomes really tired of it all.*¹²

Endnotes

- ¹ R. Kapuściński, *Lapidaria I-III*, Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej, Warszawa 2008.
- ² R. Kapuściński, *Lapidaria IV-VI*, Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej, Warszawa 2008.
- ³ Z. Bauman, *Płynna rzeczywistość*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007.
- ⁴ R. Kapuściński, *Lapidaria IV-VI*, op. cit., p. 35, 36, 43.
- ⁵ D. Czaja, *Paradoks prowincji*, "Konteksty" 2/2008, pp. 14-27.
- ⁶ D. Czaja, op. cit., p. 33.
- ⁷ K. Michalski, *Plomień wieczności*, Znak, Kraków 2007, pp. 232, 241.
- ⁸ K. Michalski, op. cit., p. 246.
- ⁹ Z. Benedyktowicz, *Powrót do domu. Tarkowski i Kantor*, "Konteksty" 2/2008, see here english version previous pages.
- ¹⁰ Z. Benedyktowicz, op. cit., p. 24.
- ¹¹ Z. Benedyktowicz, op. cit., p. 25.
- ¹² C. Magris, *Wierność wędrówce*, in: Kapuściński R., *Wierszebrane*, Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej, Warszawa 2008, pp. 133-134

