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Gavin Rae

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Book Review

Artur DOMOSŁAWSKI, *Kapuściński Non-Fiction*. Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010

The publication of Artur Domosławski's biography about his mentor and friend Ryszard Kapuściński has caused a stir both in Poland and abroad. Despite the fact that "Non-Fiction" has yet to be published in English it has already been widely commented upon in the English speaking media, with attention focussed mainly upon the issue of Kapuściński's journalistic style and the disclosures of how he had at times exaggerated the truth or even made up certain facts in his work. Another area of wide media interest has concerned the small part of the book that is devoted to Kapuściński's personal life and the fact that his wife attempted to block its publication. However, "Non-Fiction" has had a much wider and important resonance in Poland and has touched upon the more fundamental issues of its post-war history.

Ryszard Kapuściński is known and famous around the world for his writings on the societies and political events occurring in the countries of the Third World. Kapuściński spent most of his working life abroad and he never wrote one significant piece of work or book about his native Poland. However, Domosławski allows us to understand how his life and thinking were rooted in Poland and at how he was both a product of and a part of a system – the Polish People's Republic (PRL) – which he helped both to build and then finally broke from.

Contemporary Polish political and social life has become dominated by two competing ideologies that are partly related to interpretations of the past. The first regards communism as an illegitimate system that had been imposed upon Poland, but one in which people were required to live and work. It is therefore necessary to draw a line on the past and allow those from different political biographies equal rights in the new Third Republic. In contrast, a competing ideology states that communism was a criminal system and that those who had collaborated with it should be treated as traitors. The failure to bring those to account for the crimes they had committed in communism has hampered the formation of a healthy political system and society and therefore a new campaign of vetting should be carried out within the country's elite.

Domosławski shatters this dichotomy and presents an alternative, and genuine left-wing voice to the public debate. The views and opinions of Kapuściński are not presented as the ashamed utterances of a collaborator, former party bureaucrat or careerist. Rather Kapuściński stood in the tradition of socialism,

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anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. His life was guided both by his ideals and by his political allegiance to a party and government in which he believed. It was only once he deemed that this system had definitively betrayed these principles that he eventually broke from it.

Kapuściński was one of the great observers and analysts of the second half of the twentieth century. However, he was also a product of his time. The generation coming of age at the end of the last century was shaped by the degeneration and collapse of communism, the disintegration of the post-war consensus in Western Europe and the rise of neo-liberal global capitalism. Yet for Kapuściński's generation their formative experiences were wholly different. Emerging out of world war, fascism and the holocaust (with the memories of the great depression ever present) communism came to represent for many the hope that a new and better world could be created. It was in this reality that a young Kapuściński – who had moved to Warsaw from the eastern town of Pińsk during the war – actively threw himself into building socialism in Poland. By 1950, the still teenage Kapuściński had become a leading member of the Union of Polish Youth and joined the editorial board of its newspaper *Sztandar Młodych*.

Domslawski postulates that through the experience of living through this revolutionary transformation, and the difficulties and travails that it entailed, Kapuściński came to understand the paradoxes of revolutions and how these affect people's lives. Even in these early years, as an activist and agitator, Kapuściński was not a loyal mouthpiece of the party but a committed and passionate advocate of socialist ideals. During the height of Poland's relatively short Stalinist period, Kapuściński travelled round the country collecting and recording the opinions and stories of ordinary workers. This concern and instinct for understanding the difficulties of people's lives both gained him a reputation as a skilled journalist within the party; while also raising him as a symbol and authority for those opposing the bureaucratization of socialism in Poland.

This position guided him through the most turbulent times of Poland's post-war history; such as the workers' rebellion in Poznań in 1956, the anti-Semitic repressions of the intelligentsia in 1968 and the famous Solidarność strikes in Gdańsk in 1980/1981. During these latter events Domosławski describes how Kapuściński immersed himself into the life of the strike, recording the views and opinions of workers and how he became fascinated with the charismatic leadership of Lech Wałęsa. Drawing on his experiences of revolutions abroad, he instinctively realized how the strikes were unfolding in a revolutionary direction, as the demands of the strikers evolved from matters of economic interest to ones of honour and dignity. Yet, the book also details how Kapuściński had attended the shipyards as a trusted journalist of the party and at how once the strikes had ended he travelled around the country in order to present a detailed view of society to the Central Committee. Also, once the initial euphoria and optimism of the Gdańsk strikes had subsided, Kapuściński looked to the rise of a grass-roots "horizontal" movement within the party as the best hope for a progressive solution to the country's difficulties. True to course, Kapuściński supported the

democratization and socialization of communism, while hoping that this would encompass and be led by the party.

Kapuściński's relationship with communism in Poland was not just a matter of political ideals and beliefs. Within the post-communist world of historical revision and suspicion attention has regularly focused upon those who had gained notoriety during communism. For Kapuściński to be allowed to travel and write – often working for government news agencies and officially approved publications – he had to maintain connections and be trusted by people at the top. At one point Domosławski refers to the praise that Kapuscinski pays to a book published in Poland that compared life in communism to that during feudalism (Kula). A main thesis of the author was that those lower down the hierarchy needed to maintain contacts with those higher up in order to solve certain problems and advance themselves. The point is not expanded upon by Domosławski and the identities between feudal and communist societies should not be exaggerated. But it does raise an important issue as to how people were able to gain not just influence or positions in communism but also as to how goods and capital were acquired themselves. Money and private capital increasingly played a minor role in social and economic life during communism; while people's lives were shaped by competing for (sometimes scarce) goods and services from the state. This meant that maintaining contacts within the system was an integral part of the social logic of life in the communist world. Of course Kapuściński's connections reached far beyond the average person's social and political network. Kapuściński had the ear of some leading members of the party and state and used these associations to travel and write as a Polish foreign correspondent abroad. However, maintaining social and political ties and using them to help open doors or smooth over problems was nothing exceptional, but woven into the system's social fabric.

The combination of Kapuściński's ideals and his connections to communist Poland both directed and assisted his work abroad. First, he was able to empathize with the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World and sought out the stories of the poor and those struggling against oppression. Also, as Kapuściński was writing about those countries trying to free themselves from the oppressions of colonialism and western imperialism, the fact that he was from "behind the Iron Curtain" allowed him greater access to and less suspicion from the participants of these movements than was afforded to some of his colleagues from the West. Yet, at the same time, Kapuściński found himself caught between the revolutionary anti-colonial and socialist movements in the Third World, with whom he most naturally identified, and the *realpolitik* of the Cold War. Poland's foreign policy, alongside its other communist neighbours, was dictated to by Moscow's strategy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West. The aim was to retain the international *status quo* and its established spheres of influence, not encouraging revolutionary movements that could both upset this balance and be out of Soviet control. Such a policy not only conflicted with many indigenous revolutionary and communist movements in the Third World, but also created schisms with other communist governments (e.g. in Cuba and China).

Kapuściński had to walk this diplomatic tight-rope a number of times during his life, as for example when the local communist movement in Nigeria wanted to move towards a strategy of armed revolt, which was more in line with Beijing's policy of open engagement. For Kapuściński, this incongruity was most acutely revealed through his strong support for the Cuban revolution and his fascination with the iconic figure of Che Guevara. Cuba's backing of Latin American partisans and their support for revolutionary expansion in the continent was unacceptable for a Soviet leadership focussed on stability and compromise. Che was a figure beyond Moscow's control and someone not trusted in the corridors of power in the eastern bloc.

In such circumstances, it might have been expected that Kapuściński would have had either to accept the realism of working for a communist government or sacrifice his career for his ideals. However, once again Kapuściński's idealism and realism combined, as he translated into Polish Che Guevara's *Bolivian Diaries* – the only book he ever translated in his life. He was only able to do this because of his contacts with leading members of the central committee, which furthermore were maintained with those who had risen to the top of party as part of the nationalist campaign in 1968. Kapuściński was operating within a dual reality that expanded beyond the actualities of life and politics in communist Poland to encompass the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World, which in turn contradicted at times with the wishes of his political masters at home. And his political matrix did not end here. Kapuściński has commented that he always wrote with Polish readers in mind. However, on at least one occasion he went a step further by concealing commentary about the political system in Poland inside his writings about life elsewhere. It was common practice in the PRL, particularly in film, to use metaphor and symbol as a way of avoiding the censor and criticising the system. In Kapuściński's work such allegory was most evident in his book *The Emperor* – formally written about Haile Selassie's Ethopia but commonly interpreted in Poland as a metaphor of Edward Gierek's government during the 1970s.

By the time Kapuściński had reached his mid-50s the joint pillars of realism and idealism, that had supported his life, had begun to disintegrate. Kapuściński resigned from the party shortly after Martial Law had been implemented in Poland in December 1981. The Solidarność movement had arisen out of the disenchantment that accompanied the end of the economic boom of the Gierek years, yet once this period of romantic idealism had subsided all that was left was repression, stagnation and degeneration. The party had turned against the workers who were proposing the self-management of their workplaces as a basis for creating a new self-managed republic. As the tanks rolled onto the nation's streets the party had lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the people and power was moving to the military. For Kapuściński, the party and government, with which he had identified and supported throughout his life, had now finally deserted him and broken from the values that he expected them to uphold.

The defeat for Kapuściński was a double one. Not only was his system falling apart but the ideals which he had held throughout his life were now seemingly

becoming redundant and outdated. Reading "Non-Fiction" one relives, through Kapuściński's eyes, the disorientation, despondency and resignation felt by millions of socialists and communists around the globe at this time. In face of the seemingly inexorable force of free-market globalization, Kapuściński aligned himself with the liberal wing of the opposition and welcomed the neo-liberal economic reforms that were ushered in on the ruins of communism. This political road was not a lonely one, with Kapuściński joined by an array of prominent left-wing figures and intellectuals (from both sides of the "barricades") in endorsing this rapid jump to capitalism. In retrospect, it is still bewildering as to how such a range of committed left-wing individuals could adjust their political compasses so dramatically and rapidly. In Poland, this is most spectacularly expressed through the political trajectory of Jacek Kuroń. The former icon of the Solidarność movement and author of the opposition letter to the party in the 1960s – which was on the reading list of any good Trotskyist around the globe – served as the Minister of Labour and Social Policy in the early 1990s, helping to implement the shock-therapy reforms. By the end of his life, Kuroń had admitted that this had been the greatest mistake he had ever made.

Kapuściński never made such a declaration. However, Kapuściński also never engaged actively in politics and certainly played no part in government. Also, he only followed the neo-liberal path for a short period before realising the pitfalls that lay ahead. A recurring phase in "Non-Fiction" is political correctness. Domosławski does not use this in its common form: as a means to undermine the social and liberal gains of the post-war era. Rather it is deployed to explain how Kapuściński questioned the political "common sense" of his time and sought to replace it with some "good sense". It was this talent that drove Kapuściński to turn, for example, a routine task on reporting on the new socialist model town of Nowa Huta in 1955, into an account of the struggles and frustrations of its inhabitants; or how his assignment to record the 65th anniversary of the Russian Revolution became a detailed description of the everyday lives of people in the far-reaches of the Soviet Union. The Fukuyamian façade of the post-Cold War world could not conceal the reality of neo-liberal globalization from Kapuściński for long. By the second half of the 1990s, he had once again begun to write as a left-wing critic of neo-liberal global capitalism. Now writing as a journalist for *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the once opposition newspaper turned media conglomerate) Kapuściński broke decisively from the majority of the Polish intelligentsia (including the newspaper's editor Adam Michnik) over events such as 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Kapuściński had understood how these were the result of expanding economic divisions in an increasingly globalized world and in turn how the West's professed desire to export democracy by force abroad was a new form of colonialism.

Such sentiments were more likely to find support in the countries of Southern Europe or Latin America than in his native country Poland. Unfortunately, here he is generally treated as a "great" or a "maestro", while the actual message of his writing falls on deaf ears. This was no truer than in his final years when his ideals of anti-imperialism and the rights of the oppressed could not even be repackaged

in an acceptable ideological form. Yet, while the liberal intelligentsia closed their ears and smiled in embarrassment the conservative right went on the attack. Kapuściński became increasingly perturbed by the anti-communist conservative right, which rose to power in his final years ("these terrible guys" is how he described them). A few months before his death it was "revealed" in the Polish edition of *Newsweek* how Kapuściński had worked with the communist secret services. However, as in most other such cases, Polish society has proved itself to be more mature and understanding than these "terrible guys". As one commentator has stated – what shame is there in a communist being a member of a communist party? (Żakowski). Still the publication of "Non-Fiction" has allowed his critics to raise their voices once again. One leading conservative commentator has described "Non-Fiction" as justifying conformism and collaboration behind the brave sounding phrases of socialism and anti-imperialism. The same author also fears that the book may have received such wide attention and caused so much controversy due to the fact that it is written from the perspective of the "new left" (Semka). And in this respect he may be correct. Domosławski has managed not just to produce a biography of impressive magnitude and depth but he has also broken through the ruling political correctness of his time and provided a genuine left-wing perspective on Poland's post-war history, through the eyes of one of its great observers and participants. It is hard to imagine a better tribute that could have been paid to the life and work of Ryszard Kapuściński.

Gavin Rae
Warszawa, Poland
Email: gavinrae@kozminski.edu.pl

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