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Travels with Herodotus. On Media Ethnocentrism, Otherness and the Mission of the Journalist Working as a Foreign Correspondent

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The present article discusses the multiple facets of foreign correspondence journalism based on reflections on the matter encapsulated by the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński in his last book *Travels with Herodotus* (2004). Kapuściński, a worldwide renowned reporter of the 20th century, worked for the Polish Press Agency for decades, and his rich experiences as a foreign correspondent in Asia, Africa or South America constitute a fruitful compendium for aspiring journalists. The topics tackled throughout this paper include Kapuściński's criticism of media ethnocentrism, as opposed to his preference for empathy, the measure for quality reporting, and for otherness, a concept understood here as evaluating your own culture and *modus vivendi* only in relation with other cultures and nations. From this point of view, for Kapuściński, more than a process of discovering the other, travelling is a way of growing better knowledge of and understanding yourself. Having Herodotus and his *Histories* as travelling companions, the Polish reporter builds several analogies between "History's first globalist" and his own persona – "cosmopolish writer" and "citizen of the world" (Michnik, 2008: 14).

***Keywords*: foreign correspondent; travelling; media ethnocentrism; otherness; Ryszard Kapuściński.**

> *But how could Herodotus, a Greek, know what the faraway Persians or Phoenicians are saying, or the inhabitants of Egypt or Libya? It was because he travelled to where they were, asked, observed, and collected his information from what he himself saw and what others told him. His first act, therefore, was the journey. But is that not the case for all reporters? Is not our first thought to go on the road? The road is our source, our vault of treasures, our wealth. Only on the road does the reporter feel like himself, at home.*
>
> (Ryszard Kapuściński, *Travels with Herodotus)*

Introduction

When speaking of the cultural orientation of journalism, and especially of news journalism, American researcher James Watson refers to an old adage saying that a fly in the eye is worse than an earthquake in China, pinpointing, with this example, two major criteria used in the selection of events that are subsequently delivered to the public: ethnocentricity and proximity (2008: 143). The author explains that by using an ethnocentric

filter, journalists select those events that are deemed relevant for the community they are addressing: "What happens to 'us' is considered the prime principle of newsworthiness; and if a number of us are killed in that earthquake in faraway China, reports of those deaths will guarantee that the tragedy will be more fully reported" (143). But what sense do journalists working as foreign correspondents make of the realities they are writing about? How do criteria like ethnocentricity and proximity apply to their core activity of extracting stories from the life of the other (other people, other nation, other culture etc.)? With such powerful gatekeeping factors for media coverage, where should we look for a *raison d'être* for on-the-scene reporters whose activity presuppose a certain distancing from one's own nation, own culture, customs, and realities?

To answer these research questions, we have chosen for a case study the last book written by the worldwide famous Polish author Ryszard Kapuściński. *Travels with Herodotus* (original title *Podróże z Herodotem*) is an autobiographic work on the incursions of a young reporter who was instructed by his employer, the Polish Press Agency, to cover the world and who sent back home dispatches on the realities he was to meet with in Asia, Africa or South America. Kapuściński's final book is a travel book only to the extent that it presupposes implies the constant meeting and dialogue with *the other* – a different culture, a different tradition, a different memory, a different experience, a different biography, a different people, and a different religion (Michnik, 2008: 9). The image of Herodotus, as we will see throughout this paper, is used mainly to enhance the reporter's views on travelling and reporting. But before providing the theoretical framework for ethnocentricity and proximity as core journalistic principles, it is important to underline the approach on travelling in this paper by pointing out from the beginning the distinction between travel journalism and foreign correspondence journalism. Although both involve travelling, these journalism varieties differ not only in objectives, but also in field skills: the first aims more at promotion, while the second is more interested in objectively informing an audience. Generally, travel journalism is associated with tourism, being considered a market driven activity and, at best, a soft variety of journalism, entertainment oriented, while foreign correspondence is assigned to hard news journalism, to in-depth reporting (Hanusch and Fürsich, 2014: 2). Also, when discussing foreign correspondence, we have to differentiate between the traditional type of this activity (in this case, reporters are linked to a media organization and reside more or less permanently in the location where they report from, garner local knowledge, learn if possible the local language and develop the ability to identify cultural nuances), and the freelancing type (in this case, the freelance reporters travel on their own expenses and produce their own stories to sell afterwards to news providers) (Petersen, 2011). We focus here on the traditional type of foreign correspondence, highlighting the skills and approaches used by a journalist to chronicle the world.

Ethnocentricity and proximity

Ethnocentrism in media has been approached by many researchers. In his studies on media discourse, Teun A. van Dijk expressed his worries about increasing attitudes towards ethnocentrism and racism in European and American media, concluding that "wild capitalism (…) combines with wild ethnicism and racism in a frightening mixture of policies and social practices" (1995: 27), talking about "how mainstream Western media have partly followed the movement of elite and popular forms of resentment against the Other, and often even exacerbated it" (37). Basically, ethnocentrism is seen as a tendency to partition the human world into in-groups and out-groups (Kinder and Kam, 2009), following an "us *versus* them" logic, depending on the particular context it is used in: white vs. black, European vs. African, men vs. women, modern vs. tradition, straight vs. gay etc. Everything that does not "fit" inside the in-group is portrayed as alien and as carrying a potential risk for the in-group members. Ethnocentrism can be dormant and can be activated in certain circumstances, especially when the others are perceived or shaped (by the media or other agents involved in determining the public agenda) as a threat. Leaving aside the strictly ideological implications of the concept, "the ritual of news is characterized both by its ethnocentric nature (its 'us-centredness') and what might be called its 'powercentredness'.

Both aspects of the ritual demand a considerable degree of selection, of inclusion and exclusion" (Watson, 2008: 144). In other words, in their reports journalists are primarily interested in the events involving the in-group members and, when covering the out-groups, most often the descriptions are derogatory or devoid of empathy. The growth of ethnocentrism into an essential feature of journalism is strongly linked to technological developments. For centuries, until the introduction of electric telegraphy in the first half of the 19th century, the practice of journalism was limited to geographical areas, small communities whose information needs could be easily covered. In journalistic terms, the restrictions related to time and space are known as temporal (chronological) and spatial (geographical) proximity, authors (Watson, 2008; Túñez and Guevara, 2009; Hyland, 2010) suggesting that the audience is more interested in local topics than in news coming from unfamiliar geographical areas.

Although technological progress solved these time and space related problems, the concept of proximity applied to journalistic content evolved in ways that moved it more towards ethnocentricity. For instance, Spanish authors Armentia Vizuete and Caminos Marcet (2008: 134-135) spoke of emotional proximity – "information that directly affects our feelings, as it is, from an emotional perspective, close to us" – and thematic proximity, based on the degree of familiarity that readers will discover in media topics, associated with their previous knowledge of those topics. An even more sophisticated classification introduced, alongside the classic geographical and chronological types, psycho-emotional proximity (interest in issues like safety, income, children, family, free time, health, sexuality etc.) and social proximity (interest in issues like lifestyle, work, religion, politics, sports, culture etc.) (Agnès, 2002), notions in the vicinity of the so-called "self-centredness", which, generally speaking, favors the public debate of in-group problems than those of the out-groups, even in cases of equal or even deeper gravity. In this respect, a recent example is the media backlash on the lack of international reaction concerning the multiple terrorist attacks in Turkey, compared to the similar situation that France had experienced. *The Guardian* tackled the subject, saying that the Turkish capital has suffered three huge terrorist bombings in five months, but received only a fraction of the sympathy and attention given to Paris. In an article entitled "Where is Ankara's 'Je suis' moment?" – alluding to the slogan and logo "Je suis Charlie", largely adopted by supporters of free speech all around the world after the shooting at the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 – the author Liz Cookman wrote: "No BBC reporters broke down in tears. No Facebook app was launched to convert profile pictures into Turkish flags."

The foreign correspondent at work: fighting ethnocentricity with empathy

In his travels, Ryszard Kapuściński replaces ethnocentricity with empathy. The reporter considers that this shift from self-centredness to projecting yourself into the life and customs of others is as enriching an experience as necessary for a foreign correspondent: "Trying to understand their life stories, and doing research, the personal experience is fundamental. 'The others' represent the main source for our journalistic knowledge. They guide us, give us their opinions, interpret for us the world we try to understand and describe" (2002: 37). Consequently, "the right way to do our job is to disappear, to forget about our existence. We exist only as individuals that exist for the others, that share with them their problems and try to solve them, or, at least, describe them (38). Kapuściński finds that the encounter with the other is the main reason for travelling seen as a form of knowledge: the farther you go from your own country, from your own culture, the closer you get to the other and what otherness means is easier perceived. But, as he describes in *Travels with Herodotus*, as soon as he crossed the border of Communist Poland and headed towards India, he understood that *the other* will not reveal itself easily, but has to be discovered, that beyond the geographical borders he was so eager to cross laid other borders, more difficult to transcend. On his first experience abroad, where language proved to be a powerful barrier, he concludes: "I returned from this journey embarrassed by my own ignorance, at how ill-read I

was. I realized then what now seems obvious: a culture would not reveal its mysteries to me at a mere wave of my hand; one has to prepare oneself thoroughly and at length for such an encounter" (2008: 62). The young reporter's shallowness and his impossibility to approach a new culture turned Kapuściński prone to meditation:

> The study of English was at the time as rare a thing as that of Hindi or Bengali. So was this Eurocentrism on my part? Did I believe a European language to be more important than those languages of this country in which I was then a guest? Deeming English superior was an offense to the dignity of Hindus, for whom the relationship to their native languages was a delicate and important matter. They were prepared to give up their lives in the defence of their language, to burn on a pyre. This fervour and resolve stemmed from the fact that identity here is determined by the language one speaks. A Bengali, for example, is someone whose mother tongue is Bengali. Language is one's identity card, one's face and soul, even. Which is why conflicts about something else entirely – about social and religious issues, for instance – can assume the form of language wars. (66-67)

In China, the next stop in his travelling as foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency, the reporter is confronted with the same linguistic problem, although he pretended to have learnt the lesson: "I understood that every distinct geographic universe has its own mystery and that one can decipher it only by learning the local language. Without it, this universe will remain impenetrable and unknowable, even if one were to spend entire years in it" (45).

Nevertheless, these consecutive failures did not prevent the now international journalist from wanting to fight his self-diagnosed eurocentrism: "I wanted to learn the language, I wanted to read the books, I wanted to penetrate every nook and cranny" (93-94). Acknowledging and accepting cultural diversity allowed him to travel more freely in a hostile environment: the Great Wall of China turned into a "Great Metaphor" for "The Great Wall of Language, composed of conversations, newspapers, radio transmissions, written messages on walls and placards, on the products sold in shops, at the entrance in institutions, everywhere" (86). Kapuściński uses the metaphor of the wall to discuss ethnocentricity from the perspective of divided human universes: "The worst aspect of the wall is to turn so many people into its defenders and produce a mental attitude that sees a wall running through everything, imagines the world as being divided into an evil and inferior part, on the outside, and a good and superior part, on the inside" (92).

The openess and mobility that characterize the 20th century introduced Kapuściński to the concept of *otherness*, understood here as evaluating your own culture and *modus vivendi* only in relation with the other, but a different type of other, as Kapuściński explains: "Until now, when we pondered our relation with the Other, the Other was always from the same culture as us. Now, however, the Other belongs to an altogether foreign culture, an individual formed by and espousing its distinct customs and values" (263). But in order to meet the other, one must travel and, for Kapuściński, travelling is the appanage of journalism and he invokes Herodotus to rest the case:

> But how could Herodotus, a Greek, know what the faraway Persians or Phoenicians are saying, or the inhabitants of Egypt or Libya? It was because he travelled to where they were, asked, observed, and collected his information from what he himself saw and what others told him. His first act, therefore, was the journey. But is that not the case for all reporters? Is not our first thought to go on the road? The road is our source, our vault of treasures, our wealth. Only on the road does the reporter feel like himself, at home. (281)

The idea of perceiving Herodotus more as a journalist than as a historian is not new. It appears in the analyses of historian W. Kendrick Pritchett, who refers to Herodotus of Halicarnassus as to "an observer of customs (…), a reporter of what he had seen even if he did not understand it, and of what he had heard, if it seemed for any reason worth reporting, without his necessarily

believing it" (*apud* Saltzman, 2010: 154). But in Kapuściński's book, Herodotus is more than "an observer" or "a reporter": as a matter of labelling, he is both "the father of journalism" and "the father of history". Moreover, the Pole seems to share the view of other historians such as Justin Marozzi, who looks at Herodotus not only as the world's first historian, but also as "its first foreign correspondent, investigative journalist, anthropologist and travel writer. He is an aspiring geographer, a budding moralist, a skillful dramatist, a high-spirited explorer and an inveterate storyteller. He is part learned scholar, part tabloid hack, but always broad-minded, humorous and generous-hearted, which is why he's so much fun. He examines the world around him… with an unerring eye for thrilling material to inform and amuse, to horrify and entertain" (2010: 7).

The way Kapuściński makes use of (the image of) Herodotus and his *Histories* deserves a closer look and a brief analysis. To a certain extent, through the self-image projected in *Travels with Herodotus*, Kapuściński wants the readers to identify him with the first historian. Or, as Bissell puts it, "writing about Herodotus, Kapuściński is actually writing about himself" (2007), and the portrait he makes for Herodotus is actually meant to be a self-portrait:

> He is profoundly intrigued by this subject; indeed he is preoccupied, absorbed, insatiable. We can imagine a man like him possessed by an idea that gives him no peace. Activated, unable to sit still, moving constantly from one place to another. Wherever he appears there is an atmosphere of agitation and anxiety. People who dislike budging from their homes or walking beyond their own backyards – and they are always and everywhere in the majority – treat Herodotus's sort, fundamentally unconnected to anyone or anything, as freaks, fanatics, lunatics even. (2008: 101).

This is the self-image that the Polish author tries to build up with subtlety throughout his *Travels with Herodotus*, but this is also the portrait Kapuściński tries to depict for an accomplished reporter. Since *The Histories* represent, in his view, the "world literature's first great work of reportage" (282) and their author „a valuable teacher", we can extract – from the descriptions Kapuściński makes of the Greek historiographer and his *modus operandi* in the fifth century BC – the main features that the Polish reporter wants to (re)discover in contemporary journalists (either local reporters or foreign correspondents) and in their work:

(a) *on practice*: "He is a consummate reporter: he wanders, looks, talks, listens, in order that he can later note down what he learned and saw, or simply to remember better" (125);

(b) *on purposeful writing*: "Herodotus's journeys are purposeful – they are the means by which he hopes to learn about the world and its inhabitants, to gather the knowledge he will feel compelled, later, to describe. Above all, what he hopes to describe are the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks" (102);

(c) *on reader-oriented writing*: "(…) he respects the laws of the narrative marketplace: to sell well, a story must be interesting, must contain of bit of spice, something sensational, something to send a shiver up one's spine. (...) It was important to him to have the largest auditorium possible, to draw a crowd. It would be to his advantage, therefore, to begin with something that would rivet attention, arouse curiosity something a tad sensational. Story plots meant to move, amaze, astonish pop up throughout his entire opus; without such stimuli, his audience would have dispersed early, bored, leaving him with an empty purse" (105);

(d) *on ante hoc fact checking*: "The goal of Herodotus's journeys? To collect new information about a country, its people, and their customs, or to test the reliability of data already gathered. Herodotus is not content with what someone else has told him he tries to verify each thing, to compare and contrast the various versions he has heard, and then to formulate his own" (126);

(e) *on sources management*: "So much of what we write about derives from our relation to other people – I-he, I-they. That relation's quality and temperature, as it were, have their direct bearing on the final text. We depend on others; reportage is perhaps the form of writing most reliant on the collective" (198). (…) Herodotus understands this, and like every reporter or ethnologist he

tries to be in the most direct contact with his interlocutors, not only listening to what they say, but also watching how they say it, how they act as they speak" (200);

(f) *on predocumentation*: "In the world of Herodotus, the only real repository of memory is the individual. In order to find out that which has been remembered, one must reach this person. If he lives far away, one has to go to him, to set out on a journey. And after finally encountering him, one must sit down and listen to what he has to say – to listen, remember, perhaps write it down. That is how reportage begins; of such circumstances it is born" (99).

We can argue that in Kapuściński's book, *The Histories* and their author are revealed as a plea for quality journalism. It can also be a criticism, a lecture or a reflection on contemporary journalism that generally lacks the in-depthness one could discover by reading Kapuściński's books of reportages like *Shah of Shahs* (1982), *Imperium* (1993), *The Shadow of the Sun* (1998): a long-form journalism, expressed through distinguished stylistics, the ability to build local colour, vivid dialogues, and complex descriptions, and through an emotionally charged writing. "The deeper, tacit message in *Travels with Herodotus* is surely that journalism now, with its celebrity roving correspondents who jet in and out of conflicts, misses the point. This new brand of reporting never connects with the subtleties and with the people on whose land trials and tribulations fall" (Shah, 2007).

Finally, the Polish reporter delivers a message that travels on the axis Herodotus – Kapuściński – contemporary foreign correspondents: "In this profession, the pleasure of traveling and the fascination with what one sees is inevitably subordinate to the imperative of maintaining one's ties with headquarters and of transmitting to them what is current and important. That is why we are sent out into the world – and there are no other self-justifications" (197).

Note: For accuracy reasons, in the excerpts from Travels with Herodotus *quoted in this article, we kept the English translation made by Klara Glowczewska with slight alterations, although the page indications refer to the Romanian edition published in 2008.*

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