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(review): **Robert D. Kaplan**

***The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power***

Translated by M. Głatki, Wydawnictwo Prześwity, Warszawa 2023

Robert D. Kaplan, author of *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power*, was the chief geopolitical analyst for strategic intelligence publishing company Stratfor from 2012 to 2014 and served on the advisory board of the U.S. Department of Defense in 2009. *Foreign Affairs* has twice named Kaplan one of the 100 most influential thinkers in the world. He is currently affiliated with the Foreign Policy Research Institute, where he holds the chair in geopolitics. Beyond his analytical role, Kaplan brings the perspective of a former war journalist to his body of work.

Kaplan's work belongs to the school of realism in international relations. He is the author of 22 books on international relations, geopolitics, global studies, and even travel. Several of Kaplan's books have been published in Poland, but they are not yet widely known among Polish readers.<sup>2</sup>

In Kaplan's perspective on international relations, chaos and war result from the collapse of empires (Kaplan, 2022), an idea reminiscent of Samir Puri's main

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<sup>2</sup> For example: *Monsoon. The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, translated by J. Ruskowski, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne 2012; *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne 2010; *Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History*, translated by J. Ruskowski, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne 2010; *Mediterranean Winter: The Pleasures of History and Landscape of Tunisia, Sicily, Dalmatia and Greece*, translated by M. Grzan-ka, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sprawy Polityczne 2009; *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sprawy Polityczne 2009. See: <https://robertdkaplan.com/>.

arguments in *The Great Imperial Hangover. How Empires Have Shaped the World* (where he also points to the „necessity of imperialism” in world history).

*The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power*, Kaplan’s most recent book on the Polish publishing market is an essay – a reflection in which the author interweaves his own beliefs, views, and experiences with the „golden thoughts” of great writers and thinkers. The entire text is informed by the main idea that hubris inexorably steers states toward to the precipice of tragedy (p. 22). This proposition echoes a parallel contention articulated by Meghnad Desai in *Hubris: Why Economists Failed to Predict the Crisis and How to Avoid the Next One*, wherein the 2007–2009 economic crisis is ascribed to Western hubris.

The convention adopted in Kaplan’s book is associated with building analogies and thinking per analogiam. For Kaplan, the appropriate form of interpretation of history and the nature of international affairs is the work of great writers such as Shakespeare. Most relevant here is the opening paragraph: „[...] an understanding of world events begins with maps, it ends with Shakespeare. Maps provide the context for events and the vast backdrop on which they are acted out. But the sensibility required for understanding those events – the crucial insight into the passions and instincts of political leaders – is Shakespearean” (p. 19).” One can conclude that either the path between realism and fantasy is short (the author being perceived as a realist), or the line between realism and fiction is thin. By adopting such a perspective, the author has, perhaps quite unintentionally, fallen into the ranks of the constructivists, although he accepts the philosophical assumption that humanity is and remains imperfect.

Following the thought of the Greeks, as expressed in their theater, Kaplan subscribes to the claim that „there is something irremediably wrong with the world” (p. 24), an irremovable, immanently inscribed, mysterious evil force in the nature of international relations and geopolitics. Unfortunately, it is also an intellectual capitulation – a demonstration that, even in terms of a linear conception of history, humanity has not advanced one step in this regard.

Kaplan’s view stems from his thinking per analogiam that is adopted throughout the book. In practical terms, it can unfortunately lead to the abandonment of efforts to eliminate and counter all armed conflicts and wars. Furthermore, to invoke the realist Hans Morgenthau, who wanted to fix the world by following the worst human instincts, this is simply wrong. We have historical examples, repeated in history and literature, of genocides resulting from the worst traits of human nature. Have they improved our world in any way?

The author's understanding of geopolitics as if it were „a struggle for territory and power played out in a specific geographic area” is a premise for describing the author as a neoclassical geopolitician who sees nothing in geopolitics but the struggle of powers from the perspective of geographic determinism (p. 29). Moreover, he devotes a lot of space to the „tragic sensibility” of some fiction writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, or Shakespeare. Tragedy, according to Kaplan, is closely related to chaos. Thus, in addition to tragedy, humanity should also accept a certain amount of chaos, another phenomenon that is supposedly inherent to humanity.

Kaplan also makes multiple references to Dionysus and the Bacchantes (pp. 45–48), which place his book in the midst of the works of Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War*) and Clausewitz (*On War*), who understood politics as tragedy or, in other words, offered an understanding of politics through tragedy. The question remains, however, whether the tragedy of politics is tantamount to fatalism. Considering Kaplan's interpretation of tragedy, it should be seen as a surrender to determinism not only in geographical but also in historical terms, which has serious implications both for the forecasting of international relations and in historiosophical terms. Fatalism seems to be the thread of Kaplan's tragedy, which implies the impossibility of eliminating it through acts of free will, such as those of democratic societies and states.

Kaplan introduces an understanding of tragedy as an indelible element that must be taken into account when calculating any possible scenario of events in the international arena. This is an important point, albeit not new. Nassim Taleb, in his book on the black swan phenomenon, has already written about unexpected, de facto tragic phenomena that have serious and often irreversible consequences for humanity. Kaplan's tragedy is not Taleb's entirely unpredictable black swan, but in a similar fashion it cannot be removed from our future, resulting from his conviction in the determinism of history.

One cannot but agree with Kaplan in his assessment of our times, which, as he himself writes, are times of decadence and glitter, of crumbling hierarchies and weakening institutions (p. 59). Critical reflection on the state of modernity has extensive literature and has been produced in various ideological currents (e.g. in Poland, Wojciech Roszkowski's *Roztrzaskane lustro*, or Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West*). Or in the fact that the foundations of democracy, though ancient, are still very fragile (p. 63). Kaplan argues against the idealization of violence (p. 111), but probably mainly because he himself feels indirectly guilty for the tragedy in the Balkans and Iraq that unfolded as a result of US military

interventions. For the analysis of current events, the most relevant is the chapter entitled „Imperial wars are decided by fate”, where the author, not unreasonably, states: „suddenly Americans learned that their power to change the world was circumscribed” (p. 131). He adds that Americans have already lost their agency in international affairs.

Kaplan’s book is an intellectual journey that can encourage one to revisit classic works of literature in search of unchanging truths about human life and humanity. However, one has to bear in mind that they were all created in a specific time and socio-cultural environment, and so remain only relative truths. Neither the poems of Shakespeare nor the works of Dostoyevsky should be used as points of reference or as a theoretical basis for drawing conclusions about international affairs. Still, they can and should continue to be a foundation for broader reflections outside the usual academic patterns.

## References

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