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The Brazilian Exile of Vilém Flusser and Stefan Zweig

Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) landed in Brazil at the end of 1940, fleeing Nazi Europe, and was told on arriving that his father had died; the rest of his family would die in the concentration camps. He survived, even flourished, and again picked up to travel, eventually moving back to Europe in the 1971. Flusser produced the beginnings of a unique philosophy of immigration that focused consistently on the freedom and creativity made possible by exile. Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) also fled Nazi Europe, and after visiting Brazil as a celebrated author in 1936 and 1940, eventually decided to remain there in 1941. In February of 1942 he committed suicide with his wife. There are many interesting parallels to be found between Flusser and Zweig which deserve attention, their writings on Brazilian history and culture, and Judaism for example. In this paper, however, I will offer a preliminary comparison of Flusser's philosophy of immigration and Zweig's last work of fiction, *Schachnovelle*. These works will be contextualized in the history of Jewish exile to Brazil and the Brazilian government's policies towards Jews around the time of their arrival. Flusser and Zweig share a dialectical form of thinking which constantly emphasizes the search for a synthesis, and yet Zweig expresses the failure of finding that synthesis due to exile and the loss of European culture, while Flusser finds the synthesis in the experience of immigration itself.

At the moment Flusser and Zweig were exiled to Brazil, the Brazilian government's relationship to Jews was bizarrely ambivalent, courting middle and upper class Jews for their wealth and skills, yet in general outlawing the issuance of visas for Jews.¹ Jeffrey Lesser (1995), on whose work much of this brief history draws, describes the situation in his aptly titled *Welcoming the Undesirables*: "Many in the Brazilian intelligentsia and political elite considered Jews culturally undesirable even while believing that they had a special, inherited relationship to financial power and could thus help Brazil to develop industrially" (Lesser 1995: 2). Jews were acceptable in regard to color, given that, according to the government, they were "white", as distinct from the Africans and Asians who were unwanted in the post-slavery climate of "whitening" Brazil. But, as Lesser explains "Jews, on the

¹A similar dynamic can be seen in the Dominican Republic. See Marion Kaplan's *Dominican Haven* (2008). This kind of ambivalent anti-Semitism/philo-Semitism has deep roots in Europe and increased with the rapid industrialization of the 18th Century. This is expressed in Christian Dohm's "Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden" (1781) which supported the inclusion of Jews specifically for their productivity.

other hand, caused a problem since they were judged a separate race that could not easily be distinguished physically” (Lesser 1995: 8). The result of these contradictory attitudes of the government towards Jews was a widely fluctuating immigration policy that closely controlled what Jews to admit.

The ambivalence of the government’s relationship to Jews was partially a result of the changing political and economic goals of the Vargas regime. From 1920 to 1930 about 30,000 Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe immigrated to Brazil, many beginning work as peddlers (Lesser 1995: 20). After the Revolution of 1930, Vargas turned the country’s resources toward industrialization and demanded that immigrants should become capitalists, managers, and producers (Lesser 1995: 9). Vargas wanted skilled guest workers who were exiles primarily for social-political, not economic reasons. From 1933 to 1941, 9,427 German-Jewish immigrants entered Brazil, and even though anti-Semitism was on the rise in this increasingly fascist state that was strengthening ties to Germany, the Jewish population prospered in Brazil (Lesser 1995: 79).

Working against the trend to bring in Jewish refugees was the rise in Brazilian nationalism which resulted in an energetic immigration debate and ultimately, stricter immigration policies. Lesser writes: “After 1930 the government and its supporters increasingly used the discussion of immigration to express nationalist and nativist positions” (Lesser 1995: 47). And so, at the time that German Jews were beginning to flee Europe, the government was closing its doors. Putting greater restrictions on immigration was top of the list of the changes promised by the Vargas regime: just forty-five days after the coup, the government made it extremely difficult for those arriving as third class passengers to enter. It would be international politics that would push Brazilian immigration policy in the other direction.

Because of the threat of international sanction, especially from the United States, the Brazilian government issued many of its strict immigration laws in the form of Secret Circulars: “On June 7, 1937, five months before the coup d’état that established the Estado Novo, Secret Circular 1,127 was issued by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and authorized personally by Getúlio Vargas” (Lesser 1995: 92). The Circular “prohibited the concession of visas to persons of ‘Semitic origin’ thereby causing a 75 percent drop in Jewish immigration over the next year” so that by 1938, five hundred Jews entered Brazil (Lesser 1995: 92, 120). However, because of increasing pressure from the United States, Secret Circular 1,249 was released in September, 1938 outlining exceptions to the rule, specifically for capitalists, technical experts, scientists, artists and intellectuals of international renown (Lesser 1995: 115). By 1939, 4,601 Jews were allowed to enter. And yet, the actual receipt of a visa

was always precarious, since many consuls continued to use the guidance of the previous Secret Circular. When Brazil entered the war on the side of the Allies, the U.S. took pressure off the Vargas administration, and the numbers dropped again—during the period of the Holocaust, the numbers fell, with only six Jews entering in 1944 (Lesser 1995: 183).

These dramatic swings in immigration policy created a situation in which the receipt of a visa was not only related to the applicant's background and skills, but also a matter of luck. As intellectuals with some resources, applying for visas from Britain, Flusser and Zweig had a better chance than most. Flusser says in interview: "...the Brazilian consul was corrupt, and he accepted relatively small bribes, and so he gave us a Brazilian visa" (Flusser 2003: 92). Zweig had the added advantage of being a scholar of international renown, and was an official guest of the Brazilian government (Karson 1983: 263).² In the end, confusion on the part of consuls with varying levels of sympathy towards those in danger, made the issuance of visas so random that it can hardly be asserted that a policy existed at all—other than to keep most Jews out.

The Jews that did arrive entered a community in the midst of a debate about assimilation concerning language and culture. Part of the pressure of this debate originated in the Brazilian nationalization project which limited the use of languages other than Portuguese, restricted the activities of political groups, and made it easy to deport those who "compromise national security, the structure of institutions, or political tranquility" (Lesser 1995: 105-109). The question of assimilation then became not only a social concern Jews had to deal with, but a political concern which made any decision a life or death one. And yet, as Roney Cytrynowicz (2008) points out, the official policies were not always enforced and the Jewish community had much more leeway than other immigrant groups such as the Japanese. Hebrew was still taught in schools and often Zionist groups simply changed the names of their organizations in order to give the appearance of nationalizing. Many in the German Jewish community did support some kind of assimilation, for example by offering Portuguese language classes in their refugee community centers. There were others pushing for greater separation, particularly those Zionists who had already been holding out for a new homeland. These conflicting perspectives were the cause for conflict in the Jewish community (roughly divided along Eastern European versus Western European lines) so much so that relief for refugees was at times compromised. The debate on how to relate to Brazilian society

² And yet not every wealthy, educated Jew was able to get a visa; Lesser wonders "why Stefan Zweig received a visa and Claude Lévi-Strauss did not" (Lesser 1995: 122). In 1941 Lévi-Strauss sought a visa from Luis de Souza-Dantas, consul in Vichy France, yet just as de Souza-Dantas was about to stamp his passport, a staff member reminded him of the new regulations which forbade visa renewals (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 24).

was a complex mix which included elements from governmental immigration policies and internal community politics brought from Europe. Flusser's philosophy of immigration offers a unique answer that synthesizes the two tendencies of assimilation and separation.

Some of Flusser's (2000) key ideas on exile and immigration can be found in a collection of essays *Von der Freiheit des Migranten: Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus*, edited and published posthumously by Stefan Bollmann; Anke Finger (2003) edited the English translation *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*.³ In these essays, Flusser both tries to understand what the structures of exile and immigration are from a phenomenological perspective in addition to taking an existential stance about how to deal with the experience. While these two general approaches are inseparable and depend on one another, I will take them separately for the purpose of this article.

Flusser notes that a philosophy of immigration should begin this way: "Eine ihrer Aufgaben wäre es, Emigration so deutlich wie möglich von Flucht zu unterscheiden" (Flusser 2000: 34). Already we see that this initial distinction has an ethical element, given that we may have different ethical responsibilities to those who are fleeing in danger. It is this ethical responsibility that places this distinction at the head of Flusser's philosophy of immigration. Taking a step back, what the two categories have in common is their pre-exilic life. Flusser begins his reflection on exile with the idea of being immersed in a *Heimat*. He describes habits in the homeland this way: "Gewohnheit ist eine Decke, welche den Sachverhalt zudeckt" (Flusser 2000: 103). In this pre-exilic life, the settled people are accustomed to traditional structures to the point that they fade into the background, smoothed out by the blanket. In the *Heimat*, the customary is equated with beauty and comfort, and in this world, only new events receive attention, awkwardly sticking out from the blanket.

Flusser equates the blanket being pulled off with the unveiling of truth which is monstrous and revolutionary. For emigrants (those who leave their *Heimat*), who are not used to their new environment and are in the unprotected space of exile, everything is *ungenöhnlich* (Flusser 2000: 103). I should note that with this last idea of exile we see that Flusser's own experience was instrumental in forming this view of exile; he was exiled from Central Europe to South America, and he would have experienced everything as new and unusual. In other words, I think that we should see the blanket metaphor working on a relative scale; some blankets are thicker or thinner than others depending on one's connection to the *Heimat*, and sometimes the blanket is not fully taken off depending on the level of newness.

³ The essays in this collection cover many topics concerning immigration—this paper covers only some of the most central concepts.

According to Flusser's terminology, the "refugee" is stuck with the blanket on and the "emigrant" has the blanket pulled off. Flusser describes the first step of emigration, in which the blanket is pulled off, as irony. Irony for Flusser is a rising above contingency, or getting a view of the things that normally steer our movement. He writes: "Von dieser Stelle aus kann er seine Umgebung überblicken" and "Die Bewegung in die Ironie hinein ist eine Empörung" (Flusser 2000: 31). The emigrant can look down upon the world that was formerly covered and see its topography. Once the emigrant confronts the new world, she becomes involved in a new contingency: "Die Bewegung aus der Ironie heraus ist eine Engagment" (Flusser 2000: 31). In this new world, the immigrant (one who enters a new *Heimat*) experiences a chaos of information, and so must act: "Man muss, um dort wohnen zu können, die umherschwirrenden Information zu sinnvollen Botschaften erst verarbeiten, man muss diese Daten 'prozessieren'" (Flusser 2000: 103).

What has been described by Flusser is a basic description of exile, however, Flusser values a certain way of reacting to this situation. Flusser's existential stance is that once the immigrant is involved in the new *Heimat*, she should remain foreign and "other." In this way, "Denn der Vertriebene bedroht die 'Eigenart' des Ureinwohners, er stellt sie durch seine Fremdheit in Frage" (Flusser 2000: 109). Flusser values freedom from habits and prejudice, and so the immigrant in trying to make sense of the new world, should not completely assimilate—the immigrant thereby could make the settled people, less settled. This idea that immigrants have a responsibility to teach the settled people about the possibility of letting go of their habits and prejudices, and not vice versa as is usually thought, is an important part of Flusser's positive valuation of immigration. Flusser goes further and advocates another step which is to actually change the new contingency. The processing of data is not done in a vacuum but is based on past experiences: "dass das Erzeugen neuer Informationen (das Schaffen) auf Synthese vorangegangener Informationen beruhe" (Flusser 2000: 108).

Once this synthesis happens, the immigrant will be able to understand the present circumstance, not merely from the perspective of what was formerly known, but in a completely new way. Immigration is therefore the potential incubator of creativity, which for Flusser is freedom. Flusser sees that this freedom comes about through awareness: "Wird er sich jedoch seiner Wurzellosigkeit als seiner Würde bewusst, dann entsteht in ihm ein 'innerer' Dialog, nämlich in Austausch zwischen seinen mitgebrachten Informationen und dem Ozean der Informationswellen, die ihn im Exil umspülen" (Flusser 2000: 109). Once the world "resonates" with this inner dialogue then the world and everyone in it is changed. The newness, the synthesis that happens inside the immigrant can also

happen in the world. The world will be lifted from its past and become something new: as Flusser writes: “Vertriebene sind entwurzelte, die alles um sich herum zu entwurzeln versuchen, um Wurzeln schlagen zu können” (Flusser 2000: 107). Flusser realizes the danger here: “Diese dialogische Stimmung, die das Exil kennzeichnet, ist nicht notwendigerweise ein gegenseitiges Anerkennen, sondern sie ist meist polemisch (um nicht zu sagen mörderisch)” (Flusser 2000: 109). Flusser’s valuation of immigration seems to be intertwined with this danger. His philosophy is noteworthy because of the emphasis on freedom, creativity, and risk taking, and the potential for change that immigrants give to the settled people. Immigrants to Europe and the United States are often portrayed in ways that negate their revolutionary potential: as either poor and in need of help, as dangers to society, as cheap labor, or exotic visitors. These portrayals expose the common perception that immigrants have little to teach the settled people, that they are not here to change the host country but to assimilate to it or to remain completely foreign.

Flusser’s philosophy of immigration is not clearly applicable to those who are not in a situation similar to Flusser. In his philosophy of immigration, Flusser places awareness, disengagement, and transcendence at a key position. This decision is sensible if what has been left behind is corrupted or even destroyed, with the result that it would be useful to get above the contingency of the past. It also makes sense for philosophers who naturally would think their way through exile. But is it a good focus for all immigrants and refugees? Flusser seems to claim that his existential stance holds for those who immigrate for whatever reason, and yet, it seems strange to make that which is often impossible, psychologically or practically speaking for the refugee, a central component of a philosophy of immigration. In addition, it does not seem to be clearly applicable to transnational or borderland immigrants who cannot as a matter of choice disengage from their old contingency. Do all immigrants need to go through a phase of irony, awareness, and disengagement to become creative and free? Certainly other values exist that could be placed in that center point, for example, rebellion, commitment, authenticity; and many other possibilities deserve investigation. Flusser’s philosophy of immigration arises from his particular circumstances and we should be hesitant to claim of its universality. Nietzsche describes this connection between the personal and the philosophical in *Beyond Good and Evil* in which he writes: “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir” (Nietzsche 2000: 203).

Stefan Zweig was one of those in a similar situation as Flusser, and his last work *Schachnovelle*, which he wrote in Brazil from August 1941 to February 1942, deals with the issue of exile. In his

suicide note he explains his reason for committing suicide is that his “geistige heimat Europa” had destroyed itself, and while being grateful to Brazil for hosting him, he just could not make a new beginning (Zweig 1947: 329). The novella opens in a New York harbor, as the narrator and a friend recall the life of the world chess champion Mirko Czentovic who they see board the narrator’s steamer which is bound for South America. As someone interested in “monomaniacs”, the narrator wants to lure Czentovic to him and so sets up a chess board in the smoking room with his wife. He is first approached by a Scottish-American chess enthusiast named McConner who wants to join. After seeing that Czentovic is on board, McConner pays him to play, and during their second game, Dr. B, another passenger, leans in and helps McConner play a draw against the champion. After this stunning result, the narrator follows Dr. B to the deck where Dr. B reveals to him that he had been imprisoned by the Nazis and subsequently exiled from Vienna. The narrator learns that during his time in captivity, Dr. B played chess with himself by dividing his consciousness into “White Me” and “Black Me”, eventually suffering a mental breakdown. The following day, the two masters, Dr. B and Czentovic, finally play a couple of games that show the superiority of Dr. B’s playing; and yet, the game provokes a return to his former mental state and he just nearly avoids another breakdown.

Like many of Zweig’s novellas, the framework of *Schachnovelle* is constructed of a number of opposites and their possible reconciliations. In first instance are the two chess masters who are explicitly opposite. Czentovic, raised by a poor bargeman in Eastern Europe, is dull and has no interests other than chess. And yet, even though he is a “monomaniac” he is unable to play “blind”, that is, only in the mind. Importantly, he is not in exile but is working his way across the world getting paid for playing chess games. Dr. B on the other hand was from a prominent family of lawyers in Vienna that had worked for the Kaiser and the Church. He has a powerful imagination—the problem is that he was *too* capable at playing “blind,” and his voyage was not chosen voluntarily. The extreme dichotomy between the two is also found in the structure of chess itself with its white and black pieces, Dr. B’s division of consciousness into “White Me” and “Black Me,” and the opposing social groups of the Nazis and the Viennese.⁴ According to Zweig’s framework, these opposites are enemies and yet the novel suggests each set of opposites is at least potentially capable of being harmonized.

The narrator is most closely connected to the idea of harmonizing opposites since he brings the two opposite masters together. His interest and level of chess playing is also a kind of middle ground, that is, he has an interest in chess, but he is not obsessed as the masters are. And yet, he

⁴ The conflict between Germans and Jews can also be read into the book, but just as in Kafka’s work, Jewish issues in Zweig’s work is normally encoded.

cannot bring the two men together by himself, as it is McConner's money and brashness that brings Czentovic to the table. The narrator's limited powers of harmonization are further seen in the outcome: Czentovic beats Dr. B who then sadly states that he will never play chess again, sacrificing his incredible potential for creativity. There is the intention, there is the capability, but the narrator cannot succeed in forming a synthesis.

Chess itself as described by the narrator is intertwined with this idea of harmony; he describes it as "eine einmalige Bindung aller Gegensatzpaare: uralte und doch ewig neu, mechanisch in der Anlage und doch nur wirksam durch Phantasie" (Zweig 1945: 24-25). Furthermore, it is "das einzige Spiel, das allen Völkern und allen Zeiten zugehört" (Zweig 1945: 25). And yet, he realizes that the game is just a game, finding it strange that someone would spend "die ein ganzes Leben lang ausschliesslich um einen Raum von vierundsechzig schwarzen und weissen Feldern rotiert" (Zweig 1945: 24). This awareness of the frivolous nature of chess, will be confirmed, as chess initially brings the two masters together and in theory should keep them together, but in the end it is the reason for their permanent separation. Chess, the great harmonizer, develops into conflict in the mind of Dr. B, and it fails. Chess, in the narrator's understanding, is similar to the structure of the mind. A good chess player must be able to use the various aspects of the mind, both artistic and mechanical, that are generally seen as opposite ways of thinking. In the end, this division is too difficult on Dr. B and the narrator must help him out of the conflict. The problem is that Dr. B has not developed an inner harmonizer, in Freudian terms, he could not exert a strong enough ego that could mediate between the id and the super-ego.

Europe is also seen by the narrator as a great harmonizer among the various social groups, between east and west, rich and poor, Jew and Christian. However, the extreme opposites, the Viennese and the Nazis, are in conflict and are represented by the narrator as being completely different. For example, the German soldier is learning chess from a scientific manual, written in algebraic chess notation B1, B2, etc. while Dr. B had wanted a spiritually rich book (one by Goethe) in his confinement by the Nazis. The conflict of these opposites is not harmonized and the various cultures in conflict cannot be reconciled by the "good European" ideals of creating a shared European culture. These ideals are shown to be illusory as the Nazis take power and some of those Europeans become exiles.

The various ways of harmonizing all fail. In fact, the novella suggests that the failure is permanent, as Dr. B promises to turn away from chess forever and there is no suggestion that a solution will appear. In regard to Flusser's basic division of emigrant and refugee, Dr. B is a refugee

because he is stuck in his European *Heimat*. We can see his final chess game as a failed attempt at gaining that ironic distance that Flusser advocates because he is fully engaged with the conflict, internal and external. The narrator too is engaged with his European *Heimat*, with the hope that it can continue to be a harmonizing force. However, the narrator, even while valuing the potential for harmony that Europe exemplifies for him, also values one side of the dichotomy: Dr. B, the imagination, and the West. It is this side that loses, and as Dr. B loses his last game, so does the narrator lose his hope for a synthesis. Zweig's narrative tells of the expulsion and the journey of exile, and yet by the end of the story, the ship has not arrived. There is no immigration and no South American characters enter the scene, only Europeans, and so all we have is an expression of the failure of the great harmonizers.⁵

Flusser and Zweig looked for ways of synthesizing their experiences, and yet Zweig remained stuck in Europe while Flusser tried to include the new land. Ultimately, while Zweig saw that harmony was not possible given the situation, Flusser saw that a harmony was not only possible but he was able to investigate the creativity that is possible in immigration. Flusser's philosophy gives some understanding of the failure of Dr. B in *Schachnovelle*. However, Flusser's philosophy does not seem to be able to handle the kind of failure that Dr. B undergoes. It is in those cases of failure that new values other than disengagement and irony need to be explored. As Flusser acknowledges: "Zugegeben, eine Philosophie der Emigration ist erst zu schreiben" (Flusser 2000: 34).

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⁵ The definitiveness of this failure should be compared to the limited success of art as a synthesis in Zweig's *Buchmendel* as it also relates to the affects of war.