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The Political Crisis
of the Anti-Zionist Jewish Intellectual

Introduction

This short excerpt¹ from the concluding chapter of "*Nazi Fantasy*". *Vilém Flusser and History as Site of experiment* (New York: Routledge, 2025: 120-124) discusses the political crisis of the anti-Zionist Jewish intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century. With no Prague to which he could return, not fully at home in Brazil, and a life-long opponent of Zionism and of nationalism more generally, Vilém Flusser developed a philosophy of groundlessness (*Bodenlosigkeit*), which aligned with his philosophy of technology, where individuals are isolated and destined to die in solitude. Flusser resolved his personal dilemma of place and belonging by embracing groundlessness, which resided, ultimately, in the sphere of aesthetics. Flusser's rejection of a grounded politics sharply contrasted with both Zionism, which asserted *Boden* was necessary for political life, and Heidegger's thought, which linked the "right way" to *Boden* but was ultimately rendered an impossible alternative for Flusser because he saw Nazism as a biological-technological program. Flusser's philosophy, devoid of concepts like political life, citizenship, or state, exposed a deep political crisis in the post-Holocaust condition. His anti-nationalism and anti-Zionism stemmed from a general rejection of nationalism as a false striving for security and a specific belief that Zionism contradicted his ideal of Judaism. Flusser's views, though structurally echoing pre-1918 anti-Zionism, diverged from the post-1948 Jewish intellectual mainstream, offering a unique perspective from the margins on the evolving history of Jewish opposition to Zionism.

¹ We thank the publisher for the permission to publish the text.

The Political Crisis of the Anti-Zionist Jewish Intellectual

As a case study, Flusser bears witness to the deep crisis in the political situation of the non-Zionist or anti-Zionist European Jewish intellectual following the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Flusser fled Prague for Brazil, but after the Holocaust, there was no longer a “Prague” to which he could return. It no longer existed. But neither did Flusser ever feel fully at home in Brazil. He did not move to the United States, the solution that was chosen by many others who found themselves in situations similar to his. And nor did he want to move to the newly established state of Israel. So he developed a philosophy of *Bodenlosigkeit*, of being without foundation or grounding, in other words of groundlessness. Groundlessness also fits well with the philosophy of technology that Flusser developed, in which everyone in the world is ultimately alone and, as he repeated several times, dies in solitude. Indeed, in a certain way, and without saying so directly, Flusser suggested that Jews are the political avant-garde of the technological world of groundlessness.²

Both the idea of groundlessness and his notion of technology led Flusser to aesthetics. Because the artist works alone, the notion of politics that Flusser developed was internal to an aesthetic outlook. The true artist, according to Flusser, subverts the technological apparatus, works against the apparatus from within it, and, through acts of resistance, contributes to our liberation from the shackles of the apparatus. Flusser’s notions of groundlessness and technology, then, offered him a solution to his own individual dilemma of place. Flusser did not need a place because he wanted to live without grounding. The resulting question, which has run through this book, has to do with politics. The crisis that characterizes Flusser’s situation as a post-Holocaust and post-Israel intellectual pertains to the question of whether there can be political life without *Boden*, without a grounding or foundation.

On this question, Flusser, with no Prague to return to and lacking any Marxist or socialist sympathies, must be read against the two options that remained for him. First, there was Israel, where the Zionists answered this question unequivocally: *Boden* is a necessary condition for political life. To see Israel was, for Flusser, to acknowledge at least the possibility of politics based on a ground. And second, there was Heidegger. Flusser continued Heidegger’s deep criticism of the turn toward technology and toward the instrumental outlook on the world that had already been taken by the Greeks. Heidegger claimed that there was a right way, and that this right way was closely related to *Boden* (in his case, for instance, through walks in the Black Forest). But Heidegger, for all that he was apolitical,

² In this sense, Flusser is quite close to Hannah Arendt’s position in her famous article “We Refugees,” *Menorah Journal*, 31, no. 1 (1943): 69-77.

found a place as a university rector in Nazi Germany, believing that he was partaking in the unfolding of a revolution against the destiny of technology. Flusser, in the post-Holocaust world, recognized that Nazism, far from being a turn against technological destiny, was itself a biological-technological program pushed to its very extreme end. Identifying with a revolution that might change the destiny of technology could never be an alternative for Flusser. This way, therefore, was blocked for him as well.

Having rejected the answers of both the Zionists and Heidegger, then, and with no Prague to which he could return, all Flusser could do was develop a notion of groundlessness and of technology, but as we saw in the preceding, it would be devoid of politics. Flusser's philosophy had no notion of political life, citizenship, society or state, political organization, or inter-group relations. Groundlessness and resistance to the apparatus cannot, by definition, establish any positive, stable entity, and certainly not a group, collective, or political entity. Engaged with the notions of "chance," "possibility," and "necessity," now that it came into being, Israel was a "possibility." When we integrate Flusser into the Jewish history of the second half of the twentieth century, his notions of groundlessness and technology expose the deep political crisis in the post-Holocaust condition.

What makes Flusser a particularly interesting case is the fact that his rejection of nationalism and Zionism did not come from the left-hand side of the intellectual map. The third thread that has crisscrossed various parts of this book, and whose intersections with the bigger picture I now wish to draw out, is Flusser's rejection of nationalism and Zionism. I have shown that Flusser's rejection of Zionism had a dual source. On the one hand, he rejected Zionism because he rejected nationalism, a rejection that went back to his earliest publications, written in the 1960s in Brazil, where nationalism was the example par excellence of shallow, inauthentic, hypocritical, erroneous, and cowardly human striving for security in the world. At the same time, in his autobiographical publications and in his writings on Judaism, on Israel, and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Flusser addressed Zionism specifically. He rejected Zionism more particularly because he saw it as standing in contradiction to the ideal of Judaism to which he felt committed. His double rejection of Zionism (both as nationalism and as specifically Jewish nationalism) and thereby also of Israel had the effect of making his criticism of Zionism and Israel more violent than his criticism of Czech, Brazilian, German, or Arab nationalism, which he somehow accepted, in practice, as a given in the world. The rejection of Zionism and/or of Israel based on a specific notion of Judaism, Jewish history, or religious Jewish ethics situates Flusser in a specifically intellectual Jewish context that reaches from Hermann Cohen to Shlomo Sand.

When we compare Flusser the singularly unique intellectual with Flusser as a "case" or "type" of the Jewish intellectual, a deep transformation in Jewish history in the second half of the twentieth

century comes into view. While it is not possible to definitively identify the source of Flusser's rejection of Zionism, the route I have suggested here begins in the intellectual and political Prague of his youth, where, in complex ways, a world and particularly a Jewish world underwent cataclysmic change within a short decade, between 1940 and 1950. As a result of the Holocaust (and the exodus of the survivors), the Jewish people ceased to exist as an entity on European soil. In 1948, a state for the Jewish people was established in Palestine, with the recognition of the international community. But a dramatic structural change had already occurred at the end of the First World War with the collapse of the imperial order and the emergence of Central and Eastern European nation-states. The opposition to nationalism and Zionism that Flusser expressed in the second half of the twentieth century echoed an even more distant Jewish situation, found at the end of the nineteenth century or first decade of the twentieth century. I will now attempt to map Flusser's views onto the evolving history of Zionism and the Jewish opposition that it evoked in the first half of the century.

When the Zionist movement was established in 1897, it was rejected by the majority of German-speaking Jews in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In both Germany and Austria-Hungary, Jews had received full civic equality before the law by then. Not only was Zionism viewed as completely politically unrealistic, but the very idea of Zionism, of a Jewish nation striving for self-determination, with its suggestion that they were strangers in the European nations where they lived, was a threat to the quest of the Jews in Germany and in Austria-Hungary to be accepted, integrated, and/or assimilated as full members into their respective societies.

This situation began to change during the First World War, when, especially for the Eastern European Jewish masses, the Zionist organizations offered the most effective framework for political representation in the chaos in which they found themselves. Important changes occurred with the new nation-state order, when states such as Poland, Hungary, Austria, and Romania replaced the old Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian imperial order. Without having moved geographically, Jews had now become a newly defined minority within these new states that were defined by the national group that comprised the majority, thus profoundly changing the nature of the majority-minority relationship.

Flusser's family had lived in Prague for two hundred years, but Flusser was born two years after the establishment of Czechoslovakia, out of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The process that led to the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic was the same process that brought the Zionist movement its first major international recognition, in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and that led to the British Mandate over Palestine in 1920, for the purpose of creating a home for the

Jewish people in Palestine. The Czechoslovak Republic, itself comprised of three nations and additional recognized national minorities, stood out for its inclusiveness compared with the other newly established nation states with which it shared a border, largely thanks to the towering figure of its founding president, Tomas Garik Masaryk. Although the social realities in Prague were complex, and included anti-Jewish riots in 1918 and the presence of antisemitism in the Czech nationalist movement, Czechoslovakia was also fairly unique in how it treated the Jews: its Jewish citizens were granted full citizenship, Jews enjoyed the status of a protected minority, and Masaryk acknowledged the Zionist movement, all three of these positions being seen as naturally compatible with each other and with the Czechoslovak Republic. We can see some of this in the political experiences of Flusser's father, who was active for a while in the circle surrounding Masaryk, as recounted by Flusser in some of his notes and discussed by his biographers.³

Czechoslovakia, then, was not anti-nationalist, in fact quite the contrary, but its version of nationalism, especially when compared with that of its neighbors, was inclusive, relatively relaxed, and non-chauvinistic. Jews enthusiastically accepted Masaryk's invitation and were proud members of the Czechoslovak nation. At the same time, Czechoslovak Jews were also quite naturally Zionists, in a very vague and general way, including the establishment of Jewish sports clubs and youth organizations and a renaissance of Jewish culture and the Hebrew language (as in Kafka and the Prague Circle). Zionist socialist settlements (kibbutzim and moshavim) named after Masaryk were also established in Palestine. Zionism and socialism, as we can see in Flusser's own account as well, were woven into Jewish community life and education in 1930s Czechoslovakia. The important thing for understanding Flusser's opposition to nationalism and Zionism is that in the Czechoslovakia of the 1920s and 1930s, one could either mildly support or oppose the idea of nationalism, but there was no need to develop an anti-Zionist agenda in order to justify one's inclusion in the life of the nation, let alone a need to develop a fully fledged philosophy of groundlessness.

Flusser's anti-nationalism and anti-Zionism, then, are not a continuation of his Jewish and Czechoslovak upbringing, but rather go back to his father's generation and forward to the post-Holocaust world. But Flusser's situation in fact features a structural contradiction in this regard: he was both a victim of one nationalism (German) and saved by a different one (Brazilian). Flusser is apparently incapable of addressing this contradiction. His philosophy of groundlessness and his view of nationalism as a synthetic expression of false, erroneous security in the world are a response to the violent destruction of the world of his youth. Yet his ideas also strangely echo the anti-Zionism of the earliest

³ Guldin and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser (1920–1991)*.

Zionist movement, still in the pre-1918 imperial age. It is based on this echo that I speculate that Flusser's anti-Zionism is drawn from his father.

I have paid special attention to Flusser's first visit to Israel and to what I sensed was a sharp contradiction between his opposition to Israel, which was ideological and philosophical, and his actual social and intellectual experience, which did not match up with the image he had of what he was opposing. Flusser was electrified, it seems, by encountering people of a similar background to his on kibbutzim where the material conditions were at a much lower level than in European standards of living but where the people worked hard, lived an intense intellectual life, and were content with their existence. In the encounters with them there was no hint of the ideology that Flusser opposed, as if the Zionism that he opposed and the Israeli realities that he met with somehow belonged to two unrelated levels of reality or maybe two incompatible perspectives on Zionism/Israel. This is reflected in the letter exchange with his cousin, the renowned scholar of the Jewish roots of early Christianity, David Flusser. In what appears as a direct answer to a question posed by Vilém, David writes towards the end of the letter: "Whether I am a Zionist I don't know, I am sitting here among my people." (David Flusser to Vilém Flusser, letter from 12 of May 1958). According to the first part of the sentence, Zionism seems to be an ideology with which he agrees or disagrees. According to the second part of the sentence, Zionism/Israel means "sitting here among my people."

For Vilém, though not for David, the two seemed incompatible. The encounters he had in Israel showed him a Zionism much closer to the kind of Zionism he had come across in the Prague of his youth: socialist if not Marxist, humanist, curious, tolerant, and open. The Zionism that Flusser opposed, meanwhile, was Zionism as an ideology, the Zionism that the great majority of German-speaking Jews had also rejected when the Zionist idea first appeared: one that they identified as a Jewish national/nationalist idea, necessarily chauvinistic and exclusionary.

Flusser was not the only Jewish intellectual who opposed Zionism in the second half of the twentieth century. The source of his rejection appears to have been dual. One source was his general rejection of nationalism, less connected to anything specifically Jewish than it was for George Steiner, Tony Judt, Daniel Boyarin, or Judith Butler, to mention several prominent names. In other words, the problem that Flusser had with Zionism was not a matter of any specific "Jewish problem," but more part of his general and consistent outlook with regard to nationalism; his opposition was not related to the conflict with or occupation of the Palestinians, nor the supposed belatedness of Zionism; nor ideas of Jewish diasporism; nor even the idea of groundlessness as anything specifically Jewish. The other source of his opposition to Zionism and Israel was based on his vision of Judaism. This is not

the place (and I am not the person) to write the history of Jewish opposition to Zionism and Israel, but in mapping Flusser's intellectual opposition to Zionism and situating it within the bigger picture of the Jewish history of the second half of the twentieth century, it is important to note that his opposition is out of sync with the major trends of Jewish history in two senses. The Jewish world changed empirically over the first half of the twentieth century: from a widely dispersed existence at the beginning of the century to a concentration in two centers, Israel and the United States, after 1948. Although there were vocal exceptions from prominent Jewish intellectuals, the great majority of Jews outside of Israel, including those from circles that were committed to an ideological opposition to Zionism, accepted and acknowledged the existence of Israel in practical terms, both politically and intellectually. Flusser's views, from outside of Israel, the United States, or any other major Jewish intellectual center, throw light on Jewish history from the margins, adding an additional configuration to the rich theoretical and practical picture of Jewish intellectual opposition to Zionism and Israel in the second half of the twentieth century.