

Stefan Zweig's *Brazil, Land of the Future*: A Topic of Debate

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Introduction

Stefan Zweig, a famous Austrian writer and defender of pacifist humanism, lived in Vienna among a privileged circle of intellectuals that included Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Herman Hesse, Max Brod, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Walter Rathenau and others. He studied in Paris and Berlin, and in 1934 left from Salzburg to escape Nazism and to live in London. In 1932 he had already begun corresponding with his Brazilian editor and in 1936 came to Brazil for the first time; during this trip he declared to a newspaperman that "he would like to write a book about Brazil" (Dines 40). In 1940 he moved to Brazil for good, where he continued with the research he had already started, which resulted in the book *Brasil, País do Futuro* (*Brazil, Land of the Future*), published in 1941.

Stefan Zweig's book was, undoubtedly, a book written by a self-exiled European under the influence of the American tropical experience and the failure of the liberal experience in Europe. Regarded by Afrânio Peixoto as one of the most well-known "portraits of Brazil," his poetic narration shortened the distances between the European and the American worlds, and the book revealed to Brazilians and foreigners alike the love this Austrian had for Brazil. His account expresses the pleasure of encountering nature in America, which he incessantly praised. He speaks with wonder of the social milieu, comparing the German and Brazilian experiences, and deciding upon Brazil as a new humanistic paradigm in view of the failure of the European political experiences. For the author of *Brasil, País do Futuro*, the positive features of Brazilian social life and the size of its territory predestined the

country to become one of the most important in the future. Its level of humanity evidenced in the harmony among races comprised a patrimony that could be a corrective model for the authoritarian national projects that dominated the years 1930-1940 in Europe.¹

In terms of daily life, the experience of the democratic dimension of Brazilian social life was contrary to Zweig's experience in Europe. In the book's introduction, we already observe the search for a new paradigm: "How will it be possible for human beings to live in the world peacefully together, regardless of all differences in race, class, skin pigmentation, religion and opinions?" (Zweig 14-15). The author believed that Brazil had solved this "complex" situation, and continued: "With the utmost awe we see all races (existing in Brazil) living in perfect harmony" (15). Zweig, certainly influenced by the Nazi brutality, could not see the limits of tolerance and the degree of social-political conflict occurring in Brazil among races, classes and nationalities. The magnitude of the violence of the German political process had made profound impressions on his personality and, as with other European humanists, Zweig had left Europe for political reasons. As opposed to Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Berthold Brecht, and Thomas Mann, all of whom went to North America, Zweig chose to live in Brazil, as well as to commit suicide there in 1942. An ardent follower of Viennese culture, Zweig could not bear the abrupt interruption of democratic ideas in Europe and died, surely of "political pain," observing the Nazi ascendancy in his continent of origin. In respect to his death, other hypotheses have been formulated, but without the surety of the aforementioned one.

European Conjunction

Although Austria's history had been marked by peculiarities in the cultural and political fields, Hitler used it to justify anti-Semitic actions.² Karl Lueger and Georg von Schonerer became, according to Carl Schorske, the Führer's inspiration and their ascension in the Austrian political scene marked the beginning of an era of obscurantism.

Stefan Zweig was a humanistic writer who lived in a post-Versailles Treaty Europe caught in the contrast between technical modernity and socio-political archaism, between the cultivated socio-cultural debate and the aggravation of themes such as national identity and xenophobia. Beyond these contrasts, he witnessed in Europe an unimaginable economic crisis with

drastic social consequences for the continent and made possible by the great international crisis. The peace treaty of Versailles, known for its brutality towards Germany, provided the moderate and extreme right wings an opportunity to strengthen their perverse romantic ideas of people and nation. As expressed by the German spirit, both ideas held mystical connotations that demanded from their followers a fanatic loyalty such as that required by the national-socialists. (In Italy a similar regime had been installed in 1922, anchored in the remote history of Rome.) This ideology, marked by the defense of radical confrontations, foresaw the extinction of either a class, generation or race. The new German society would emerge from the ruins in the redemptive fight of an Aryan race threatened since 1918 by a presumed socialist, foreign and above all Jewish conspiracy. As opposed to the concept of *biophilia* defended by Erich Fromm, at the time the stakes were on *necrophilia*, regardless of the results that German and other European democrats had managed to achieve during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The atmosphere that had sustained democracy assumed that, in a short period of time, all men would enter into total citizenship. Fiction or not, that idea, perhaps a limit-concept, fed the democratic project of modernity and moved legions of men who, through liberal and Marxist-Enlightenment programs, fought for the institutionalization of human rights. Themes such as social equality, tolerance, fighting despotism and moral and social improvement were commonly discussed by the society. In practice, the adepts of such ideas were in a hurry to exorcise the demons of despotism, racism and obscurantism.

However, after the 1920s, this utopic project began to show signs of fragility in view not only of nationalist-driven movements but also of ideologies of racial conflict. Nationality as opposed to universality, war as opposed to peace, fanaticism as opposed to human reason became dominant values.

With the ascent of Nazism, intransigence took over and from then on a radical and systematic policy of exclusion prevailed, one that considered the inclusive project of modernity a sign of decadence and the annihilation of authentic brotherhood. Justifying the defense of this brotherhood, Hitler stated, in *Mein Kampf* as well as in political speeches and in private conversations,³ that it was necessary to reconnect the German people to their historical blood/soil, eliminating whenever necessary the enemies of this identity concept. For him, the reason for the "German society's lack of

authority”⁴ was its tolerance for democratic ideals as an enemy of the genuine German spirit. In practice, the culmination of this policy was directed against the Jews who were prevented from living as German citizens for political, ethnic, and simply individual reasons. The result is well known: almost six million Jews were exterminated in an unprecedented historical experience.

Similar to such figures as Mann, Brecht, Pollock, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, who perceived the failure of the democratic project in Austria and Germany, Zweig left Europe and tried to recreate a new human paradigm in exile. The urgency to construct the “thousand-year Reich” confirmed the conservative modernity of the Nazis whose objective was to establish a model of order that was irreconcilable with the victories that derived from political enlightenment. The concept of the future contained in Zweig’s hopeful narration of Brazil included miscegenation that could not even be imagined in Nazi Germany. It clearly represents Zweig’s reaction against Nazism.

The Place of the Capital City in the New Paradigm

In the book *Brasil, País do Futuro*, the proposed dialectic of complementarity and its emphasis on the socio-political universe is based on the essential convergence expressed in the relation between nature and culture. In the case of the city of Rio de Janeiro, the concepts of East and West are associated, allowing for the possibility of a city whose organization overcomes the models discussed by the European vanguard. For a European in the first half of the twentieth century, the modernity of a country was measured by the modern qualities of its capital and by the rationality and planning of its territory. In the case of Berlin, Hitler decided to make it even more cosmopolitan and monumental than Paris and Vienna; he considered it inadequate as only the capital of a Reich when it should be a model for the world. In conversations recorded by Albert Speer, Hitler said that “Berlin is no more than an irregular heap of buildings” (Speer 76). Therefore, it was necessary to make it above all symmetric.

For Stefan Zweig the city of Rio de Janeiro expressed the new civilizational paradigm through the range of supplementary contrasts accommodated by it. Besides emphasizing that Rio de Janeiro’s social life tolerated all contrasts, he praised the city as not being prey to

... a geometric delirium of straight avenues,... to the horrendous idea of excessive regularity of the modern large cities, which sacrifice to the symmetry of line and

to the monotony of forms, exactly that which is always incomparable in all cities: its surprises, its whims and angularity and above all its contrasts—those contrasts between old and new, city and nature, rich and poor, . . . contrasts found here in their incomparable harmony. (232)

His account of Rio de Janeiro refers to something new, built from an unheard-of dimension of history, and without the violence resulting from a purging dictated from above, such as that undertaken by the *Führer*. For Zweig, in the city of Rio de Janeiro the miscegenation brought together the new and the old, the ancient and the traditional. Perhaps being tired of the modern megaprojects, he found in the city of Rio de Janeiro the beauty of the necessary and ideal proximity between nature and culture, East and West so distant from the discussions of the European vanguard. “Everywhere nature is exuberant . . . and it is within this nature that we find the same city. And a forest of stone with its skyscrapers and small palaces, with its avenues and squares and *oriental-looking small streets*, with its Negro shacks, and gigantic ministries, with its bathing beaches and its casinos” (190, emphasis added).

In this account, Rio de Janeiro appears as the city that is inseparably enmeshed with nature, as a beautiful work of art attached to it. In reality, he saw it as a monument embedded in Guanabara Bay and in the forests surrounding it on all sides. Like the majority of Germans, he was influenced by the idea of union with nature, which he found realized in the tropics, either in the forest and environs, or in its intersections with the American civilized world. In Brazil, there was the possibility of a new, democratic society based on social-ethnic plurality, the starting point for the renewal of the concepts of culture and civilization understood until then as instrumental reason. As Zweig says: “We are no longer willing simply to make them conform to the idea of organization and comfort” (19), suggesting that only the degree of superiority of the human spirit would be able to neutralize hate between ethnic groups, classes, generations and nationalities.

Redeeming his initial prejudice described in the introduction of the book, Zweig thoroughly confesses: “I had the same pretentious idea of Brazil which the Europeans and North Americans have and now I find it difficult to go back to it” (2). Nevertheless, this “pretentious” Austrian was able to write a book that is still useful for the study of Brazil’s future. In fact, Stefan Zweig already loved Brazil even before coming to know it. Back in Europe from his

first trip to Brazil in 1936, he wrote "Short Trip to Brazil," which was published in several international newspapers. According to Alberto Dines, his major biographer in Brazil, Zweig stated at the time: "He who knows Brazil today, has gazed into the future" (Dines 78).

I leave as homage to Stefan Zweig the sentence he dedicated to Brazil and to the city of Rio de Janeiro in the last page of his book:

Farewell.

He who visits Brazil is loath to leave it. From wherever he is, he longs to return. Beauty is a rare thing and perfect beauty is almost a dream. Rio, this superb city, makes it real at even the saddest moments. There is no city more charming in the world. (302)

Notes

¹ Between Stefan Zweig's first, second, and final visits to Brazil, Vargas' dictatorship was implanted, a period called the *Estado Novo* ("New State"). During this period, some democratic guarantees were withheld, although most of the newspapers did not emphasize what the torture chambers were already recording.

² The Nationalist movements in Austria neutralized, from the middle of the twentieth century, the progress of Austrian liberal multinational ideas. Both Karl Lueger and Georg von Schonerer were important figures in the nationalist movements. Lueger, an anti-Semitic Christian, became mayor of Vienna at the beginning of the century. Schonerer, an industrialist, organized the radical nationalists in 1882 and implemented a drastic anti-Semitic policy.

³ This information was taken from the book *Secret Conversations*, whose content defines, by the use of intimate documents, Adolf Hitler's conservative and radical ideas.

⁴ In the second chapter of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler records his hostility towards social democracy and to socialism: "What kept me away from social democracy was its contrary position in relation to the movement for the preservation of the German spirit" (44). Later in the text, he identifies the French and Jews as responsible for the degradation of German souls.

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