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# Between the Universal and the Particular: Europe and the Ethical Commitment of Stefan Zweig (1881-1942)

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## Abstract

The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig is thought to be one of the intellectual forefathers of the European Union. Now, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a revived interest in his figure and works and, especially, in his (idea of) Europe. It is no secret to anyone familiar with Zweig—"the great European", as Jules Romains used to call him—that the idea of Europe played a very important role in the development of his career as writer and intellectual. Whereas before IWW Zweig carried out a key role as mediator (translator, editor, etc.) between European cultures, believing in their ultimate spiritual union, after the conflict he will pledge his own writing to become an "agent" of the European cause, especially as the threat of fascism and radical nationalism turns into a dangerous reality in the thirties. Thus, he will create and defend—mostly in his non-fiction works and, above all, in his memoirs *Die Welt von Gestern*— a postnational narrative that is defined, to some extent, by its idealism and apoliticism. Thus, if Zweig's ideas remained in the sphere of the intellect, how can they help us solve our current practical—political and social—problems? This paper will argue that, in order to make the most out of Zweig's commitment, we have to change the way we approach his legacy. That is to say, instead of trying to convert his ideas into a political discourse, we should approach them from the perspective of their ethical value. Therefore, behind Zweig's 'Europe', we will find a set of notions and principles—individualism, freedom, difference/diversity, pacifism, humanism, empathy, cosmopolitanism...—that go beyond Europe itself to form a Weltanschauung that may help us figure out both our lives in common and as individuals.

**Keywords:** Europe, Nationalism, Postnationalism, Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), Ethics and Literature.

This paper addresses the core of my research as Ph.D. candidate —the Austrian writer and intellectual Stefan Zweig— and, more specifically, what I think it's the most revealing and thought-provoking paradox in Zweig's (idea of) Europe, in his European project, that is to say, the place of the nation, and the national, in his otherwise transnational imagined community, in his project for a frontierless and cosmopolitan Europe. Taking these premises into account, first, I will discuss the meaning and importance of Europe in Zweig's project. Then, once the main features of his transnational community have been explored, I will focus on the role of the nation or the national element in zweigian ethics. However, before starting with the analysis of Zweig's *Weltanschauung*, we must consider that Zweig's postnational narrative is defined to a great extent by its idealism and apoliticism, by utopia and nostalgia. Thus, if Zweig's ideas remained in the sphere of the intellect and were "naive", how can they help us solve our current practical—political and social— problems?

This paper will argue that, in order to make the most out of Zweig's commitment, we have to change the way we approach his legacy. Instead of trying to convert his ideas into a political discourse, we should approach them from the perspective of their ethical or moral value. For, thus, behind Zweig's Europe we will find a set of notions and principles, that go beyond Europe itself to form a *Weltanschauung* that can help us figure out both our lives in common and as individuals. I argue that by looking back on and analysing Zweig's legacy as an "ethical project", we will add a relevant voice to the current debates on Europe's identity and its future as 'imagined community' both in terms of its diversity and unity, striking a balance between its potential universalism(s) and diverse particularism(s).

## The meaning and importance of Europe in the Works of Stefan Zweig

The first thing that must be said is that Europe, in Zweig's *oeuvre*, is not only a geopolitical, historical, economic or cultural reality, but also, and more importantly, the signifier through and around which Zweig articulates his commitment as writer; his commitment or promise with both an ethics and an idea of the world, or *Weltanschauung*, based on and informed by notions such as freedom, humanism, cosmopolitanism, pacifism, tolerance, common understanding, empathy, and/or what we could call the experience of the postnational.

And the truth is that I'm not saying anything new so far. Since his recent revival, after having been one of the most read and translated authors of the world in the 20<sup>s</sup>, and since his re-entering the literary scene in the 90<sup>s</sup>, with new editions and translations of his works flooding the bookshops of countries such as Spain, Italy, Brazil or France; and specially after having caught the attention of the Anglo-Saxon publishing and film industries in first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Stefan Zweig has been closely associated with the idea of Europe, as its defender, promoter, and, together with figures such as Ortega y Gasset or Victor Hugo, as one of its intellectual forefathers, one of those "visionaries" who defended the Union of Europe in the interwar period well before the actual process of unification and integration began to take place.

It must be said as well that this close link between Zweig and Europe was also promoted by Zweig himself both in his works and in his public appearances. Not surprisingly for anyone who knew him at the time, the French writer Jules Romains, a close friend of Zweig, called him, in an essay published on the occasion of Zweig's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 1941, "the great European". According to Romains, and I quote:

"Stefan Zweig belongs to a species that is not —at least I hope so— on the verge of extinction, but which is nonetheless in great danger, threatened by our actual circumstances, and which will only survive by going through all kinds of difficulties: this species is that of the Great Europeans" (Romains 1941).

Moreover, the subtitle chosen by Zweig for his memoirs *The Word of Yesterday (Die Welt von Gestern)*, which were published shortly after his suicide in 1942, is "memories of a European". In said text, as in many other instances, Zweig will defend the idea of a "European unity", the need for an intellectual, spiritual (meaning cultural) and moral union. Right at the beginning of the First World War, he tells us in his memoirs that he

"was inoculated [...] against the infection of patriotic enthusiasm and, being thus prepared against this fever of the first hours, I remained fully determined not to allow this war of brothers [...] affect my conviction of the necessity of European unity" (Zweig 2009b).

Accordingly, I contend that Europe was for Zweig a sort of religion, not only a pacifist solution, but a teleology, the inevitable shared destiny of Europe's nations if they were to get back on the path of progress, justice and reason. Thus, says Zweig in a lecture in Florence in 1932, although

"this united Europe will not happen tomorrow [...], a genuine conviction does not need to be confirmed by reality to know it is just and true. And today no one should be denied the right to [...] call himself a citizen of Europe and, in spite of borders, consider the world a fraternal community".

And he ends his speech by asserting that:

He who can himself look away, hold his breath against the vile hatred which lays across our world today like a cloud of poison gas, [...] then will he better understand humanity on this earth and [...] perceive the destiny of all peoples as his own” (Zweig 2016).

And so, determined to bring about this European manifest destiny, Zweig puts his pen at the service of the idea of Europe and the brotherhood of the nations. Following the same line of discussion, in a short autobiographical sketch published in New York in 1936, he will define himself as a writer committed to a very specific purpose:

“Since the war [meaning IWW] I have felt it to be my moral duty to create in one direction only, that one which would help our time to progress [...], because I believe that effort alone can be considered valid which furthers the unification of humanity and increases the mutual understanding of peoples and nations”. (Zweig in Schreiber 1936)

## The Arch-Plague of Nationalism

So now we know what Zweig was fighting for. But what was he fighting, or reacting, against? According to Zweig, the enemy responsible for the hatred between Europe’s nations, the enemy responsible for that cloud of poison gas that has morally intoxicated Europe, is nationalism, which is seen by Zweig as the most dangerous illness of his time. And I’m going to quote again from the *World of Yesterday*:

“I have seen the great mass ideologies grow and spread before my eyes —Fascism in Italy, National Socialism in Germany, Bolshevism in Russia, and above all else that arch-plague nationalism which has poisoned the flower of our European culture. I was forced to be a defenceless, helpless witness of the most inconceivable decline of humanity into a barbarism which we had believed long since forgotten, with its deliberate and programmatic dogma of anti-humanitarianism” (Zweig 2009b).

And in this sense, and in order to take action against the “national evil”, in his lecture “The historiography of tomorrow” of 1939, Zweig will pledge for a change in the way History is taught, blaming the education he and his contemporaries received at school as the reason for the triumph of nationalism:

“We were forced to don different-coloured spectacles, according to the country, to prevent us during our entry into the world from seeing with free and humane eyes, ensuring we viewed everything through the narrow aperture of national interest” (Zweig 2016).

So what Zweig is basically saying is that History must be taught in a different way, emphasising the common victories of humanity in terms of science, technology and culture, instead of instilling in the youth the hate and violence which permeate the nationalistic discourse.

## Europe’s Paradox: An Identity Between Universalism and Particularism

So far so good, but where is the paradox in all this? We have a clear goal (Europe) and a clear opponent (nationalism), and we know where Zweig stands. In fact, after reading the first chapters of Zweig’s memoirs, one is tempted to see Zweig as quite a one-sided and essentialist figure. However, as we get towards the end of the book, especially the part that describes his state of mind and his feelings during exile, we cannot help but observe how deeply Zweig misses his homeland, his *Heimat*. And I’m not talking about Europe in general, but Austria and the German language in particular. And we, the readers, wonder: How can this cosmopolitan being, who claims to fly effortlessly across borders, feel all of a sudden completely uprooted, homeless, etc.? As Donald Prater notices in his biography of Zweig (*The European of Yesterday*), “the man who considered himself above all a European, a citizen of the world, found that his homeland, after all, meant more to him than he thought, now that it was lost.” (1972). It seems that in exile Zweig realizes that without freedom —another keyword of his *Weltanschauung*— one cannot become a cosmopolitan individual. That without the ability to enjoy one’s diverse affiliations, his postnational ideal cannot be realized.

And this —his yearning for home at a time of personal defeat, pessimism and depression— is not the only clue that warns us against reading Zweig’s idea of Europe from a uniformizing universalist perspective. In this sense, in other instances of the autobiography, Zweig makes a continual praise for difference, diversity and plurality. That is, in his imagined community, the path towards common understanding does not stand on the ground of a single supnation or culture (on, for instance, the expansion of Mitteleuropa), but on the sum of the manifold personalities that inhabit and give shape to the European landscape. Therefore, in Zweig’s ideal community, one should be able to, as he says in his memoirs, “enjoy the strangeness as something familiar” (2009b). In fact, in 1925, he wrote a whole essay dedicated to what he called the “monotonization” of the World, positioning himself against a tendency he thought could end with Europe’s most valued treasure: its diversity (1981). And we must not forget that this diversity, in the eyes of Zweig, materializes in the plurality of the nations.

In this sense, so deeply imbedded are diversity and difference in Zweig's idea of Europe that he did not hesitate to use them to define, for instance, the "European" character of one of the leading figures of pacifism and a true friend and mentor for Zweig: the French writer and Nobel Prize Winner Romain Rolland, whose multicultural upbringing, based on the French Classics, German and Austrian Music, Shakespeare, a research stay in Italy, etc. would have contributed, according to Zweig, to the formation of his cosmopolitan and pacifist and European character: "The other saint of his childhood's days [says Zweig in his biography of Rolland], Shakespeare, likewise belonged to a foreign land. With his first loves, unaware, the lad had already overstridden the confines of nationality" (2009a). Therefore, whereas Rolland becomes the symbol of both peace and diversity, Zweig's biography of the Frenchman becomes, as those of Erasmus, Castelleo, or Montaigne, a key element to reconstruct and articulate Zweig's commitment and his idea of Europe.

We could claim, to start paving our way towards a conclusion, that in Zweig's project, in his postnational ethics based on the idea of Europe, both Europe and the nation have a role to play. In other words, the goal of fighting against nationalism is not to destroy the nation as community, but to change the way the nation relates to its neighbours. In an essay first published in 1937, *Die Moralische Eingiftung Europas* ("The moral decontamination of Europe"), Zweig (1981) argued that it was necessary to create a regulatory supranational organization to control the propaganda disseminated by the press in order to instigate hate and drive a wedge between the nations. And on saying this, he insists that freedom of expression must be kept at all costs, that the problem, as he saw it, was not with difference of opinion, debate and singularity, expressing his firm belief that national politics are indeed possible within Europe, but only without insults, offenses and the constant slandering of the other. Also, at the end of the text, he claims that Europe should be like a second *Heimat* ('homeland'), to the European citizen, one that could coexist with his own; something that reminds me, if you allow me this huge leap forward, of Marta Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism (1999), influenced by the stoics and their idea that one should not renounce to one's local affiliations or identifications, but to expand one's system of affect to incorporate and establish a dialogue with the other. Or also of Appiah's concept of "patriotic cosmopolitanism", understood as an identity that claims to be

"cosmopolitan - celebrating the variety of human cultures; rooted - loyal to one local society (or a few) that you count as home; liberal - convinced of the value of the individual; and patriotic- celebrating the institutions of the state (or states) within which you live" (1998).

Summing up, Zweig invite us to think of Europe taking in all its complexity, that is, both in terms of a common ground, of a shared history and culture, and also in terms of its diversity, which is so deeply rooted in its identity that it cannot be overlooked. So, against the temptation of reading and building Europe from the idealism of the uniformizing Universal, we must confront its diverse nature. But how? How can we build a common ground and preserve difference, when precisely this difference has led historically to annihilation and self-destruction? As George Steiner puts it:

"how is one to balance the contradictory claims of political-economic unification against those of creative particularity? How can we dissociate a saving wealth of difference from the long chronicle of mutual detestations? I do not know the answer. Only that those wiser than myself must find it, and that the hour is late" (2015).

As for Zweig's answer to this paradoxical reality, we could say that in Zweig's *Weltanschauung*, in his idea of the World, in his ethical program, Europe is and must be, mainly, a space to negotiate difference. In this sense, Zweig argues, as we have seen, that "Europe" and the "Nation" are not two mutually exclusive realities, as it seems to be the case in the current rhetoric of populism, nationalism and Euroscepticism. Europe cannot simply become a supernational, seems to be Zweig's message, Europe cannot become a unique and uniformizing collective discourse/identity, but must retain its adaptability, its flexibility, continually redefining itself in order to adapt to a rapidly changing world. This obviously can also be seen as idealistic and it cannot be denied that Zweig's thoughts are in many occasions full of idealism and naiveté. However, I firmly believe that his message, because of its topicality, can and must be incorporated in the current debate about the identity of Europe and, specially, about the ethical values that must be represented, that must be embodied, in this/our European imagined community. As the Swiss philosopher Gabriel Fragnière wrote on Zweig and his idea of Europe: "We believe indeed that this ideal could give a new soul to the institutions set up so successfully for more than forty years. Rediscovering Stefan Zweig is indeed an enterprise that can inspire a new reflection on the Europe of the future." (1993).

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## **Bio-note**

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