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Flusser, Vilem. *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*. Edited and Introduction by Anke K. Finger. Transl. Kenneth Kronenberg (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 106 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-02817-5)

*“The settled person has a clear and distinct
concept of historical time, but one that
falsifies the concrete experience of time. Only
after we have broken out of our walls, which
tag us with three coordinates and the
coordinate of date, will we be able to
experience time again.”*
(Vilem Flusser)

Vilem Flusser is just beginning to be discovered in the English-speaking world thanks to a spate of recent translations. *The Freedom of the Migrant* is a collection of his essays and articles from the 1970s through the early 1990’s. A German-Jewish philosopher from Prague, Flusser fled the Nazis via London to Brazil where he wrote a daily newspaper column, took up a professorship in the “philosophy of communications” at the University of Sao Paulo, and returned to live in France in 1972. He died in a car crash outside of Prague in 1991. He wrote in several languages; the selections in this volume have all been translated into English from German. His work is best known in the German-speaking world.

Like all of Flusser’s works (with which this reviewer is familiar), *The Freedom of the Migrant* is a challenging, sometimes bewildering, but ultimately engaging and deeply rewarding experience.¹ His philosophy is angled, it has a kind of chiaroscuro effect; it’s quirky, non-systematic, and oddly addictive – like being mesmerized by the stage design of a German Expressionist film. He is a kind of German Roland Barthes or Germanic Marshall McLuhan. And like Barthes and McLuhan, he is at home in a variety of disciplines: communications and information theory, philosophy, philosophy of science, religion, the sociology of culture.

As one might guess from the title, *The Freedom of the Migrant*, this book is not really about the predicament and dire straits of migrants and

refugees fleeing civil war, collapsed states, political persecution, drought, famine and disease. Flusser is for the most part discussing, in highly original terms, what presages so much contemporary work on globalization and communication studies – even “post-human studies” – i.e. hybrid communities, media extensions of the self, and fluid, “nomadic” identities, what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls “the dimensions of global cultural flows” and catalogues as *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes* (33-43).² But this apparent evasion of the “real migrant” is only partly true; in fact, his thesis appears to be even more radical:

People are generally expelled from someplace to nowhere in particular. If they don't perish in the process, they become immigrants somewhere. Even though expulsions have occurred ever since human beings became settled, they remain horrific. All three phases of the process are unsettling: being expelled, wandering in the void, and finally, being beached somewhere. The first phase unsettles us out of the ground that supports our reality; the second exposes us to unreality; the third transports us into an unacceptable second-degree reality. This desettling and unsettling are usually viewed negatively.... I will try to tease the positive aspects from them. (25)

If we only consider some of his more striking conclusions in the light of – how can we not?! – the current brutality and hopelessness of the refugee situations in Europe and throughout the world, this “positive” approach to migrants and refugees is, frankly, a maddeningly, “arch” perspective. (It reminds one of the precautionary tale concerning the fate of the first known philosopher in the western world – Thales – who died falling down a well while gazing at the heavens.) Flusser writes:

What I mean is that we may easily recognize ourselves in the expellee and his unsettledness. They are just like us, except more so. We also experience three phases: the loss of ground under our feet, the unreality around us and within us, and the unacceptable second-degree reality. We merely experience these in less obvious ways. And so we may perhaps say the following: the expellees whom we occasionally see on television show us that to which we would do well to aspire. (27)

This reasoning all started in the little chapter, “To Be Unsettled, One First Has To Be Settled”: “Truly rooted and settled people (to the extent they

exist in reality and not just ideology) are experientially impoverished shrubs. To be a human in the true sense of the word, one has to be unsettled” (25). And, because Aristotle said, “the starting point of philosophy has always been unsettledness” (qtd. in Flusser 25). (But suppose we continued with Martin Heidegger’s ontological “thrownness” of Being (*Geworfenheit*), or Novalis’ “philosophy is really homesickness”?! Profound perhaps, but weak tea for hard times for those migrants who are not philosophers.) So unless we are in the realm of Flusser’s “telematic society” (67), “taking residence in homelessness” (1), i.e. the migrant’s life, might not be all that liberating. But isn’t this “philosophy of the migrant” from the empyrean heights hard to square with Flusser’s own life in which he himself was at one time or another (“concretely,” as the philosophers say) a persecuted minority, a refugee, migrant, emigrant and immigrant?

So how do we square this circle? One way is simply conclude that Flusser would not really understand that 16 year-old Syrian boys in a refugee camp are asking a very different question about “unsettledness” when they approach an aid worker with, “Where am I?”³ than are those watching the refugee flow on television. One might conclude that Flusser’s habitat is in a postmodern “telematic society”, a “neuro-sphere” and a “cyber-democracy” (all his terms) of his own making. One could conclude he is a nomad in theory only, “peering outside without becoming wet” – what the Greeks called *theoria*: knowledge without danger or direct experience (56). On the other hand, one might work with his theories, not just to try to understand the contradiction between his biography and some of his seemingly oblivious pronouncements about the freedom of unsettledness, but actually to – in a philosophically pragmatic way – make them work in the contemporary – not timeless – circumstances of the refugee and the migrant.

Flusser is addressing the transformations of communities and nations on a global scale which are unsettling our ideas about political sovereignty and personal and group identities. So while he often operates at a high level of generalization, those observing the situation of migrants and refugees today will notice that after the food and blankets are distributed in the philanthropic societies’ tents, 12-year-old refugees pull out and giggle over their smart phones just like their contemporaries at dining room tables all over the world.⁴ One can easily imagine research on

the use of social media “on the run.” Flusser even devotes an entire chapter to the phenomenological meaning of tents,

... we are in the process of losing the roofs over our heads.... Given [our conventional] definitions of wall and roof, we can actually count on higher levels of homelessness, for we are everywhere tearing down walls, either because they impede traffic or because they get in the way of the free flow of people, goods or information. Roofs supported by solid walls don't have much of a future. However, such a limited meaning of roof is itself a consequence of the limiting quality of walls. Once solid walls have fallen, we will more likely think “canvas” when we speak of roof and wall. Within this expanded sense of the word, there is no room for homelessness. This expanded sense, however, will require that architects transform their ways of thinking. They will have to think more in terms of tents than houses. (59)

Flusser continues – again, almost like the semiology of a Roland Barthes – discussing tents and related phenomena like umbrellas, parasols, parachutes, Genghis Khan's yurts, (biblical) Jacob's tents, circus tents, tents as a wall for moving pictures: “...thanks to the processing that takes place in its membrane ... the tent wall billowing in the wind, gathers experiences, processes them, and then passes them on. It is because of its wall that the tent is such a nest of creativity” (59-64).

Now Wendy Brown, in her book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, would have much to say in this discussion, especially the current phenomenon of walling and fencing as a response to the eroded sense of nation-state sovereignty unleashed by the forces of globalization.⁵ Flusser, for his part, undoubtedly would continue to act as visionary or prophet of post-history, post-humanism and “superseding the Neolithic” (53-54). The titles to the chapters in *The Freedom of the Migrant* are deceptively journalistic, when in fact they are anything but so straightforward and “readerly,” and decidedly more like philosophical journeys: “The Challenge of the Migrant,” “On the Alien,” “We Need a Philosophy of Emigration,” “Nomads,” “Building Houses,” “Does the French Nation Exist?” and so on.

There is much to be learned from Flusser's book. It is a challenge, to say the least, to find much freedom as we conventionally understand the concept, in the experience of the migrant or refugee. But Flusser

apparently did. And he makes an intriguing case for it. In the end, he would say, “The settled possess; the wanderer experiences” (41).

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Notes:

¹ For example, see Flusser and Louis Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique De Recherche Paranaturaliste* (part of the Post-Humanities Series, Cary Wolfe, ed. Transl. Valentine A. Pakis. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), which is (only) part spoof of the phenomenology of the (really existing) “vampire squid from hell.” Also, Flusser, *Gestures* (Transl. Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Flusser, *Writings* (Ed. Andreas Stohl. Transl. Erik Eisel. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2002), especially, for present purposes, the essays, “Taking Up Residence in Homelessness” and “Exile and Creativity.”

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

³ Personal experience, Dobova refugee camp, Slovenia, November 26, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).