The Liquidation of Exile
Advance Reviews

“No one among our contemporaries has thought more deeply about exile than David Kettler. His new book illuminates its historical modes, its cultural impact and its personal cost. Humane without being mawkish, analytical without being cold, *The Liquidation of Exile* instructs and inspires the reader in equal measure. Those of us fortunate enough to have lived peaceful lives in quieter times can only gasp in amazement at what these refugee intellectuals endured – and achieved.”

—Professor Peter Baehr, Lingnan University

“Having successfully ‘liquidated’ his own exile, David Kettler (né Manfred Ketzlach), a ‘second-wave’ émigré (b. 1930, Leipzig) from Germany to the U.S., and a long-time contributor to the sociology of intellectuals, has written a critical review of the uses of ‘exile’ in contemporary scholarship. He shows how a coterie of German émigrés, most of Jewish origins, negotiated their relationship to their former Heimat in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Some returned to Germany, most did not: Ernst Fraenkel, Oskar Maria Graf, Erich Kahler, Hermann Kesten, Siegfried Kracauer, Hans Mayer, Franz Neumann, Nina Rubinstein and Carl Zuckmayer. A must-read is the collection of first postwar letters, which émigrés sent to German colleagues, renewing contact, beginning a tortuous rapprochement. The letters provide vivid evidence that, for most émigrés, the liquidation of exile was long and arduous.”

—Professor Malachi Hacohen, Duke University

“David Kettler has written a fascinating and thoughtfully accessible account of one of the most devastating and intriguing periods of modern intellectual history.”

—Professor Gerhard Lauer, University of Göttingen

“David Kettler has thought deeply about the meaning and impact of exile. His scholarship is beyond reproach. Thus, this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of an important topic.”

—Professor Jack Jacobs, City University of New York

“In this meticulously researched, interdisciplinary study David Kettler expands on the conventional understanding of political exile by including the question of return. Building on new theories of exile, Kettler offers a carefully developed paradigm of ‘political exile’ that focuses on different modes of acculturation as well as the difficult negotiations for a return or at least a reconnection with the country of origin. Insightful case studies of individual exiles like Nina Rubinstein, Franz Neumann, Hans Mayer or Erich Kahler, which illustrate different variants within this paradigm, clearly demonstrate the viability of Kettler’s illuminating approach.”

—Professor Helga Schreckenberger, University of Vermont
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CHAPTER ONE

The Study of Intellectual Exile: A Paradigm

This is a book about exile. It is also a book about some figures within a cohort of individuals in a particular time and place to whom the term exile has been variously applied—persons active in one or another sphere of public space who were displaced by Nazi rule in Germany between 1933 and 1945—and whose historical experiences and achievements have been found sufficiently important to serve as a point of departure for an interdisciplinary field of studies. While there can be no prohibition against simply postulating a plausible definition of exile as a preliminary to biographical, historical, or critical studies of the individuals or groups subsequently classed under that dramatic label, as is often done in exile studies, such a proceeding entails costs. Exile has a rich and contested history as a concept in political, literary, and religious reflection—a history that enters as well into the recognition of self and others among those involved in the instances under study. The aim of the present study is to take some chapters in the historical inquiry into the 1930s exile as the locus for an investigation of the phenomena and issues at stake in the contested uses of exile in social inquiry.

The Concept of Exile

What work does the term exile do in the contemporary language of cultural and political self-reflection, so that interpreters find it worthwhile to quarrel about its scope and application? Well, exiles in that context are always special. They are suspended between two places. In one place, they are denied, either by threat of violence or by some other insupportable condition; in the other place, they are only conditionally accepted: they find asylum, not a home. They are at a distance from both places. Moreover, in almost all uses of the term, even exiles who are literally banished retain the special status only so long as they continue to identify themselves—or to be identified—with this suspension between the two places, the refusal wholly to abandon the one or wholly to accept the other. The focus of their attention is on their unfinished business between them and the first place, not their limited business with the
second. Exiles accordingly appear unlike ordinary people whose ordinary needs and ambitions regulate their lives. Exiles are not rarely a reproach to those who stay behind, even though exiles may also reproach themselves for their departures, whether willing or coerced. To be an exile is to have a project, to be a thoroughly untrivial person, however absurd your beliefs and conduct may appear to outsiders. To be an exile is to be interesting, in the way that a refugee or victim or traveler or immigrant cannot be supposed to be. Exile is a status that gives a right to a special kind of hospitality, a right to asylum, and that exempts the beneficiary from the ordinary rules of reciprocity. It is not a surprise, consequently, that the meaning of exile is a bone of contention among both social scientists and cultural commentators. It implies a lot about the person(s) to whom it is applied. The status makes claims and excuses, while it also implies separation from and uncertain loyalty to the place of residence and the company of others who are there. Exile, it might be said, is politics in extremis. It tests the capacities of political life when such life is deprived of most of its institutional supports.

Like many similar terms, exile is used both to refer to a condition and to persons or groups who are identified with that condition by contemporary observers, commentators, or themselves. There is controversy about both aspects. In the case of the condition, there are disputes not only about its distinction from states characterized by terms like cosmopolitan, wanderer, stranger, emigrant or refugee but also about its relationship to the language of political life, where the concept poses especially hard questions. In the case of the exemplars, the questions are about the applicability of the term over time: when and how does one become an exile, how does one sustain the condition, and when does one stop being an exile in any important sense?

Dictionary definitions are either too narrow—as when exiles are equated with those banished from their native lands—or they are too broad—as when all sorts of displacements from any state deemed native are included. Outright banishment is not altogether irrelevant to exiles in the era of the modern state, but it comprehends only a fraction of the cases where individuals see no acceptable alternative to departure from the scene on which they have been active. In a time in which identities are inwardly and outwardly contested, the concept of native land is also too restrictive to capture the bounded domains in which individuals operate and which they may be constrained to leave. When it comes to the question of return, moreover, no concept suffices that is not open to basic transformations in the place of departure. The many figurative and metaphorical conceptions of exile, on the other hand, are constantly at risk of rendering everyone an exile in some sense, and thus forfeiting the opportunity of specifying the complex that constitutes the condition of exile in the sense that has posed difficult questions in social, political, and ethical analysis.
The condition of exile takes multiple forms and requires in any case a study that attends to its susceptibility to conflict and change. In recent years, in fact, the trope of exile has stood high. To judge by some recent writings in literary criticism and cultural studies, exile appears as a transcendent status, beyond the ambiguous supports of historical circumstance, and beyond even the painful sense of its loss. Exile appears as an enabler of the most profound thought, art, and literature—an empowerment. And yet if we look in the newspapers for exiles, we find stories of pain, criminality, maneuver, burden, and racking contradictions. Exile here looks like something historically overdetermined, constricting, distorting, closely bound to the threat, suffering, and infliction of violence. A preliminary approach to the wider scope of the concept is provided by a survey of the current use of the term in the *New York Times*, considered here as I collected them for a month in the recent past.

There are eight items that involve exile. Two refer to leading figures in active external opposition to the clerical regime of Iran, with a noteworthy emphasis on the contrast between them and the opposition mobilized in the country against the outcome of the recent elections there. In the first instance, in an interview with the son of the last Shah, “the exile,” as he is called in the title of the selection, he in effect disparages the internal opposition insofar as it really thinks that the choice of one candidate rather than the other could matter; likening them to people who preferred one successor to another in the last days of the Soviet Union. Only the introduction of secular democracy can make a difference. In response, the interviewer probes skeptically whether the exile is not really an instrument of the American CIA, which he angrily denies. She pushes also whether the repressive practices of the present regime were not in fact modeled on those of his father, whereupon he says in his father’s defense only that he accepted exile rather than inflicting more bloodshed, a context in which the concept of exile stands for justly imposed punitive exclusion rather than principled opposition. Or perhaps, to stretch the point, we are implicitly asked to consider the possibility of the former kind of exile turning into the latter, if only in the second generation.

The second article relating to Iran, which is also an opinion piece, does not sound quite as many changes on exile, but similarly signals ambivalence about the role of external exile groups in relation to internal protest in that it suggests that the latter may be damaged by the self-identification of any external exile groups with their principal symbols, especially in the light of some past political maneuvers by the exiles. What comes across, leaving aside the complication introduced by the concept of exile as (merited) punishment, is the contested status of exiles in relation to the internal politics of dissent and opposition, a contest that echoes in the very connotations of the term. From the standpoint of an internal resistance
to an oppressive regime, exiles may appear as absconders and outsiders, while exiles may in turn distrust the scope of opposition represented by those who remain within the bounds.

This ambiguity is less present in the third article, comprising a series of comments on the twentieth anniversary of the violent repression of the Tiananmen Square protests, where exile is initially used merely to mark the difference in location between present-day oppositionists within China and those without. As the article proceeds, however, it becomes clear that exile is thought of as a special kind of collective social entity with an inner life—"the" exile, as it were, so that it makes sense to speak of exile publications and exile culture, and to consider the potential value of its productions as well as its harmful disposition to internal conflict. Interesting in this context is also the notice of an "exile series" of publications in connection with one of the exile journals, where the work of Havel is translated, although he was never in fact an exile from the Czech Communist regime, so that exile in this sense appears to refer quite generally to a distinctive style of trans-national oppositional political thinking.

In the fourth and fifth articles to be considered, exile figures in its quality as a punitive sanction, as in the references to the Shah in the first piece considered. "Political justice," after all, is not always wrong. One of the articles is quite straightforward. It refers simply to the "exile" of Philippine president, Ferdinand Marcos, which was imposed by his successors after a successful popular rising against a manipulated electoral result, as part of a process of political pacification. Both the Iranian and Philippine examples may be considered as a function of political justice, although both instances resulted as well from ad hoc political interventions by more powerful third parties, but the quasi-juridical character of the penalty is more marked in the case treated at length in the next article to be considered. It deals with the relations between an American journalist and a Palestinian militant charged with impermissible violence. In this case, exile is a restrictive regime formally established and enforced by agreement among members of the European Union in an attempt to break into the cycle of violence between Palestinians and Israelis by preempting the power to punish someone marked for death by the Israelis. A striking feature of this case is that the Israelis—and then the Americans, after evidence is uncovered of the man's complicity in the killing of an American—refuse to concede the status of exile, so that the exile regime must not only constrain the Palestinian to prevent his return to the opposition at home but also protect him against assassination by Mossad and abduction by the CIA. This illustrates the contested character of the exile status, even when it is in some measure formalized by a recognized process of political justice, and its deep political core.
The remaining three uses of the term involve extensions of exile beyond the realm of politics. One is an almost trivial metaphor for the isolation that the film director Werner Herzog seeks from his collaborators in film making, as he fully immerses himself in the location of the film. What makes it worth noting is that it focuses on the separation from associates that is not thematized in the political uses examined earlier, although the conditions so designated would more generally include this element. A similar shift in emphasis occurs in the use of exile as an attribute of an author who is the protagonist of a novel, where the case would appear to be one where the term in its most common minimal political sense would apply but the point of the concept in this case is to prepare for a characterization of the author as “misfit,” who comes to resemble Joseph Conrad by virtue of his outsider’s exquisite mastery of the alien English language. In both of these cases then, exile is associated with an opening to cultural achievements not available to those who remain inside of the context from which they are excluded—or exclude themselves. This association between exile and transfiguration is epitomized, then, in the final use of exile to be considered. A Greek journalist speaks rhapsodically of the supposed universalization of the highest values that is a concomitant of the “exile” of the Elgin marbles from their localized settings in Athens, the opening that the condition provides to cosmopolitan humanism.

Symbolic Exile and Political Understanding

As we move from this preliminary survey of the rich complexity of contemporary uses of exile, we begin with this final class of unpolitical meanings because of its current vogue outside of the concrete settings of journalistic discourse. Two seminal texts exemplify the prime disjuncture in the contemporary cultural meaning of exile. The author of one has been a principal advocate of one of the most poignant and bitter exiles of our time and the author of the other is best known for his brilliant exposé of the captivity from which he fled. They speak with authority. Edward Said’s brief article, “Reflections on Exile,” immediately became a classic.\(^1\) A comparable essay “On Exile” is drawn from Czeslaw Milosz’s Nobel Prize address.\(^2\) What makes these two pieces especially interesting is, first, that both authors write with an acute sense of the “terrible” pain of exile, the deep and not rarely irreparable harms inflicted by defeat, dislocation, and disorientation. Second, their concepts are grounded in concrete experiences of people leaving their homelands because they must, making it clear that the borderline between exiles and refugees is fluid. These grave features of their thinking quite rightly put the burden of proof on those who have transformed it “so easily,” as Said says, “into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture.”
The commonplace figurative identification of the modernist artist (or post-modernist or post-colonial intellectual) with “exile,” by virtue of their distance from—their elevation above—the ensnared multitude, risks the reduction of the claim to exile status to a self-dramatizing gesture, not unlike the Romantic poses familiar to the nineteenth century, as mere dramatizations of the heroic unseasonableness (Unzeitgemässheit) claimed for the poet by Schiller no less than by Nietzsche. Said and Milosz both recognize that risk but both nevertheless seek to explain—and conditionally to justify—an extended, symbolic sense of exile; in Said’s words, an understanding of the condition as an “alternative to the mass institutions that dominate social life,” an alternative that both Said and Milosz articulate in the language of Christianity.

Said opens with a firm rejection of the idea that exile somehow serves humanism, as some sort of school for virtue—along the lines, perhaps, of the consolatory philosophizing conventionalized in the Roman literature of exile in the Imperial Age: “Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irretrievably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography?” Said passes by with scant respect what he calls “the modest refuge provided by subjectivity” to the literary “exiles” of Paris and New York, and assimilates exile rather to the condition of the hopeless refugee in Cairo, Beirut, or Mexico City. A distinctive double bind of exile in the most recent era is nationalism, which is both bred by exile and conducive to generating new exiles. After developing numerous brilliant insights into the tortured condition of exile, however, Said returns to his initial question: “How is it that the literature of exile has taken its place as a topos of human experience alongside the literature of adventure, education, or discovery?” His answer, citing Simone Weil and Theodor W. Adorno on the atrocious costs of alternatives to exile, circles back to the exile as symbolic embodiment of subjectivity. Exile, it seems, is good for us after all, just as the humanists thought, because “exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.”

At the crux of the essay is the vision of a twelfth-century associate of the monk, Abelard, who projects a mystic sequence, which culminates in the perfect state where all love of place is extinguished and the entire world is seen as a foreign land, quite in the spirit of Augustine’s City of God. Said backs off from this outcome and proposes instead a “contrapuntal” play of home against strangeness, a “life led outside habitual order.” “It is nomadic,” he concludes, “decentered, contrapuntal,” and constantly subject to new disruptions. Somewhere in all this invocation of phrases that sound sweet to modernist poetics the hopeless refugees have gotten lost again, as has the
exile with the kind of political project that occupied Said himself in his other persona. It is the paradoxical depoliticization of exile that is troubling about this attractive and influential reflection, which ends up devaluing the sufferings of the defeated and excluded, whose pitiful state is initially mobilized against humanistic glorification of the exile.

Milosz, for his part, having poignantly depicted the loss of orientation that follows the loss of the rhythms of life at home, moves towards a characterization of exile by recalling a Polish hymn, “Exiles of Eve, we beseech Thy help,” and its implication that we are all ultimately homeless. He next recalls the sense in which we are all in any case “exiled” from our childhood and earlier years, and appears to be moving towards a vision where all are exiles. Yet he abruptly brings the discussion back to the realities of the “condition of exile in the geographical sense,” as he has himself suffered it, and then fluctuates between a sober, questioning recital of some consolations that exiles offer themselves and an invocation of Nietzsche’s exaltation of “the freedom of height, of loneliness, of the desert.” The latter is introduced by an artistic possibility that Milosz illustrates by references to Mark Chagall, Isaac Bashevis Singer, James Joyce, and Igor Stravinsky but expounds by reference to Christian hermits in the desert, with “the only remedy against the loss of orientation” being “to create anew one’s own North, East, West and South and posit in that new space a Witebsk or a Dublin elevated to the second power. What has been lost is recuperated on a higher level of vividness and presence.” Yet this flight is followed immediately by a somber review of the many names by which “the exodus of people from their countries” has been familiarly known in our century, calling the roster from Russian émigrés to Vietnamese “Boat People.” The rest is anticlimax: “One thing is certain: people leave their homelands because life there is difficult to bear.” The next, concluding paragraph is full of awkward manifestations of pain. He asks whether we can hope for a world without exile, and admits that this goes against all the signs. Then he cautions people that there may be nothing better than the life that is “difficult to bear,” but admits that people will always hope. He ends with a lame joke about the refugee who asks the travel agent for an alternative to the lands on the globe. It is precisely the ever more weary scanning of possibilities that makes Milosz’s essay such an invaluable document of and about exile, a literary enactment of its dismaying portrayal of exile.

I emphasize the Christian rather than anti-Christian allusions in both Said and Milosz because in this matter Nietzsche is at one with the Fathers. The exile that matters is a condition of diaspora where any sense of return other than the ultimate, unimaginable, transcendent one is a betrayal. The condition of exile in this sense is itself as close to transcendence as it is possible to come. The paradigm case is the early Christian universalizing of the theme that