

REITH LECTURES 1993: Representations of an Intellectual

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Lecture 3: Intellectual Exiles

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Exile is one of the saddest fates. In pre-modern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment, since it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about present and future.

There has often been an association between the idea of exile and the terrors of being a leper, a social and moral untouchable. During the 20th century exile has been transformed from the exquisite, and sometimes exclusive punishment of special individuals, like the great Latin poet Ovid, who was banished from Rome to a remote town on the Black Sea, into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, many of them the inadvertent result of impersonal forces such as war, famine and disease. In this category are the Armenians, a gifted but frequently displaced people who lived in large numbers throughout the Eastern Mediterranean - Anatolia especially - but who, after genocidal attacks on them by the Turks, flooded nearby Beirut, Aleppo, Jerusalem and Cairo with their numbers, only to be dislocated again during the revolutionary upheavals of the post-World War Two period.

I have long been deeply drawn to those large expatriate or exiled communities who peopled the landscape of my youth in Palestine and Egypt. There were many Armenians, of course, but also Jews, Italians and Greeks who, once settled in the Levant, had grown productive roots there. These communities after all produced prominent writers like Edmond Jabes, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Constantin Kavafis that were to be brutally torn up after the establishment of Israel in 1948 and after the Suez War of 1956.

There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin. Would that surgically clean separation were true, because then at least you could have the consolation of knowing that what you have left behind is, in a sense, unthinkable and completely irrecoverable.

The fact is that for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather - given today's world - living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalising and unfulfilled touch with the old place.

The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old; beset with half-involvements and half-detachments; nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret

outcast on another. Being skilled at survival becomes the main imperative, with the dangers of getting too comfortable and secure constituting a threat that is constantly to be guarded against.

Salim, the main character of V S Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*, is an affecting instance of the modern intellectual in exile: an East African Muslim of Indian origin, he has left the coast and journeyed towards the African interior, where he survives precariously in a new state modelled on Mobutu's Zaire. Naipaul's extraordinary antennae as a novelist enable him to portray Salim's life at a "bend in the river" as a sort of no man's land, to which come the European intellectual advisers (who succeed the idealistic missionaries of colonial times), as well as the mercenaries, profiteers, and other Third World flotsam and jetsam in whose ambience Salim is forced to live, gradually losing his property and his integrity in the mounting confusion. By the end of the novel - and this, of course, is Naipaul's debatable ideological point - even the natives have become exiles in their own country, so preposterous and erratic are the whims of the ruler, Big Man, who is intended by Naipaul to be a symbol of all post-colonial regimes.

The widespread territorial rearrangements of the post-World War Two period produced huge demographic movements - for example, the Indian Muslims who moved to Pakistan after the 1947 partition, or the Palestinians who were largely dispersed during Israel's establishment to accommodate incoming European and Asian Jews - and these transformations in turn gave rise to hybrid political forms. In Israel's political life there has been not just a politics of the Jewish diaspora, but also an intertwining and competing politics of the Palestinian people in exile. In the newly founded countries of Pakistan and Israel, the recent immigrants were seen as part of an exchange of populations, but politically they were also regarded as formerly oppressed minorities enabled to live in their new states as members of the majority. Yet far from settling sectarian issues, partition and the separatist ideology of new statehood have rekindled and often enflamed them.

My concern here is more with the largely unaccommodated exiles, like Palestinians or the new Muslim immigrants in continental Europe, or the West Indian and African blacks in England, whose presence complicates the presumed homogeneity of the new societies in which they live. The intellectual who considers him or herself to be a part of a more general condition affecting the displaced national community is, therefore, likely to be a source not of acculturation and adjustment, but rather of volatility and instability.

This is by no means to say that exile does not also produce marvels of adjustment. The United States today is in the unusual position of having two extremely high former officers in recent presidential administrations - Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski - who were, or still are depending on the observer's outlook, intellectuals in exile; Kissinger from Nazi Germany, Brzezinski from communist Poland. In addition Kissinger is Jewish, which puts him in the extraordinarily odd position of also qualifying for potential immigration to Israel according to its basic law of return. Yet both Kissinger and Brzezinski seem, on the surface at least, to have contributed their talents entirely to their adopted country, with the results in eminence, material rewards, national not to say worldwide influence that are light years away from the marginal obscurity in which Third World exile intellectuals live in Europe or the US.

Today, having served in government for several decades, the two prominent intellectuals are now consultants to corporations in other governments.

Brzezinski and Kissinger are not perhaps as socially exceptional as one would assume if it is recalled that the European theatre of World War Two was considered by other exiles - like Thomas Mann - as a battle for Western destiny, the Western soul. In this “good war”, the US played the role of saviour, also providing refuge for a whole generation of scholars, artists and scientists who had fled Western fascism for the metropolis of the new Western empire. In scholarly fields like the humanities and social sciences, a large group of emigre scholars - some of them such as Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach, extremely distinguished - enriched American universities with their talents and old-world experience. Others, among them scientists like Edward Teller and Werner von Braun, entered the Cold War lists as new Americans dedicated to winning the arms and space race over the Soviet Union.

So all engrossing was this concern after the war that it has recently been revealed how well-placed American intellectuals in the social sciences managed to recruit former Nazis, known for their anti-communist credentials, to work in the United States as part of the great crusade, along with the rather shady art of political trimming - a technique of not taking a clear position but surviving handsomely nonetheless. How an intellectual works out an accommodation with a new or emergingly dominant power is a topic I shall deal with in my next two lectures. Here I want to focus on its opposite - the intellectual who, because of exile, cannot or, more to the point, will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, unco-opted, resistant.

There are, however, some preliminary points that need to be made immediately. One is that while it is an actual condition, exile is also for my purposes a metaphorical one. By that, I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration with which I began this lecture, but is not limited to it. Even intellectuals who are life-long members of a society can, in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders, those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called yea-sayers; and on the other hand the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honours are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider, which is the role I believe is the right one for today's intellectual, is best exemplified by the condition of exile - the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others.

You can't go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation. Secondly - and I find myself somewhat surprised by this observation even as I make it - the intellectual as exile tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness, so that dissatisfaction bordering on dyspepsia, a kind of curmudgeonly disagreeableness, can become not only a style of thought, but also a new, if temporary, habitation. The intellectual as ranting Thersites perhaps. A great historical prototype for what I have

in mind is a powerful 18th century figure, Jonathan Swift, who never got over his fall from influence and prestige in England after the Tories left office in 1714, and spent the rest of his life as an exile in Ireland, an almost legendary figure of bitterness and anger - saeve indignatio he said of himself in his own epitaph - furious at Ireland, and yet its defender against British tyranny, a man whose towering Irish works, Gulliver's Travels and The Drapier's Letters, show a mind flourishing, not to say benefiting, from such productive anguish.

To some degree, the early V S Naipaul - the essayist and travel writer, resident off and on in England, yet always on the move, revisiting his Caribbean and Indian roots, sifting through the debris of colonialism and post-colonialism, remorselessly judging the illusions and cruelties of independent states and the new true believers - this was a figure of modern intellectual exile.

Even more rigorous, more determinedly the exile than Naipaul, and for me the dominating intellectual conscience of the middle 20th century, is Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, a forbidding but endlessly fascinating man whose entire career skirted and fought the dangers of fascism, Communism and Western mass consumerism. Unlike Naipaul, who has wandered in and out of former homes in the Third World, Adorno was completely European, a man entirely made up of the highest of high cultures that included astonishing professional competence in philosophy, music (he was a student and admirer of Berg and Schoenberg), sociology, literature, history, and cultural analysis. Of partially Jewish background, he left his native Germany in the mid-1930s shortly after the Nazi seizure of power. He went first to do philosophy at Oxford, which is where he wrote an extremely difficult book on Husserl. He seems to have been miserable there, surrounded as he was by ordinary language and positivist philosophers, he with his Spenglerian gloom and metaphysical dialectics in the best Hegelian manner. He returned to Germany for a while but, as a member of the University of Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, reluctantly decamped for the safety of the United States, where he lived for a time first in New York, and then after 1941 in southern California.

Although Adorno returned to Frankfurt in 1949 to take up his old professorship there, his years in America stamped him with the marks of exile for ever. He detested jazz and everything about popular culture; he had no affection for the landscape at all; he seems to have remained studiously mandarin in his ways, and, therefore, because he was brought up in a Marxist-Hegelian philosophical tradition, everything about the worldwide influence of American films, industry, habits of daily life, fact-based learning and pragmatism, raised his hackles. Naturally Adorno was very predisposed to being a metaphysical exile before he came to the United States: he was already extremely critical of what passed for bourgeois taste in Europe, and his standards of what, for instance, music ought to have been were set by the extraordinarily difficult works of Schoenberg, works which Adorno averred were honorably destined to remain unheard and impossible to listen to. Paradoxical, ironic, mercilessly critical, Adorno was the quintessential intellectual, hating all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste. For him life was at its most false in the aggregate - the whole is always the untrue, he once said - and this, he continued, placed an even greater premium on subjectivity, on the individual's consciousness, on what could not be regimented in the totally administered society.

But it was his American exile that produced Adorno's great masterpiece, the *Minima Moralia*, a set of 153 fragments published in 1953, and subtitled *Reflections from Damaged Life*. In the episodic and mystifyingly eccentric form of this book, which is neither sequential autobiography nor thematic musing nor even a systematic expose of its author's world-view, we are reminded once again of the peculiarities of Bazarov's life as represented in Turgenev's novel of Russian life in the mid-1860s, *Fathers and Sons*. The prototype of the modern nihilistic intellectual, Bazarov is the only character in the novel not given a narrative to place him; thus, although Turgenev spends a lot of time situating the other characters, their parents, early years, university exploits, marriages, etc, Bazarov is a solitary figure who erupts on to the landscape, muddles everyone with his challenges and impetuosity, and then very abruptly dies. We deduce from this that by virtue of living a life according to different norms, the intellectual does not have a story, but only a sort of destabilising effect; he sets off seismic shocks, he jolts people, but he can neither be explained away by his background nor by his friends.

Turgenev himself actually says nothing of this at all: he lets it happen before our eyes, as if to say that the intellectual is not only a being set apart from parents and children, but that his modes of life, his procedures of engaging with it are necessarily allusive, and can only be represented realistically as a series of discontinuous performances. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* seems to follow the same logic, although after Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the onset of the Cold War and the triumph of America, representing the intellectual honestly is a much more tortuous thing than doing what Turgenev had done for Bazarov 100 years earlier.

The core of Adorno's representation of the intellectual as a permanent exile, dodging both the old and the new with equal dexterity, is a writing style that is mannered and worked over in the extreme. It is fragmentary first of all, jerky, discontinuous; there is no plot or predetermined order to follow. It represents the intellectual's consciousness as unable to be at rest anywhere, constantly on guard against the blandishments of success, which, for the perversely inclined Adorno, means trying consciously not to be understood easily and immediately. Nor is it possible to retreat into complete privacy, since, as Adorno says much later in his career, the hope of the intellectual is not that he will have an effect on the world, but that some day, somewhere, someone will read what he wrote exactly as he wrote it.

One fragment, number 18 in *Minima Moralia*, captures the significance of exile quite perfectly. "Dwelling, in the proper sense," says Adorno, "is now impossible. The traditional residences we have grown up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests." So much for the pre-war life of people who grew up before Nazism. Socialism and American consumerism are no better: there, Adorno says, "people live if not in slums, in bungalows that by tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps, or the open air". Thus, Adorno states, "the house is past that is over . . . The best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one . . . It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home."

Yet no sooner has he reached an apparent conclusion than Adorno reverses it: "But the thesis of this paradox," he says, "leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people, too; and the antithesis, no sooner

uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”

In other words, there is no real escape, even for the exile who tries to remain suspended, since that state of in-betweenness can itself become a rigid ideological position, a sort of dwelling whose falseness is covered over in time, and to which one can all too easily become accustomed. Yet Adorno presses on. “Suspicious probing is always salutary,” especially where the intellectual’s writing is concerned. “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live,” he says. Yet even so - and this is Adorno’s final touch - there can be no slackening of rigour in self-analysis: “The demand that one harden oneself against self-pity implies the technical necessity to counter any slackening of intellectual tension with the utmost alertness, and to eliminate anything that has begun to encrust the work or writing or to drift along idly, which may at any earlier stage have served, as gossip, to generate the warm atmosphere conducive to growth, but is now left behind, flat and stale. In the end, the writer is not allowed to live in his writing”.

This is typically gloomy and unyielding - Adorno, the intellectual in exile, heaping sarcasm on the idea that one’s own work can provide some satisfaction, an alternative type of living that might be a slight respite from the anxiety and marginality of no “dwelling” at all. What Adorno doesn’t speak about are indeed the pleasures of exile, those different arrangements of living and eccentric angles of vision that they can sometimes afford. So while you are neither winning prizes nor being welcomed into all those self-congratulating honour societies that routinely exclude embarrassing troublemakers who do not toe the party line, you are at the same time deriving some positive things from exile and marginality.

One, of course, is the pleasure of being surprised, of never taking anything for granted, of learning to make do in circumstances of shaky instability that would confound or terrify most other people. An intellectual is fundamentally about knowledge and freedom. Yet these acquire meaning not as abstractions - as in the rather banal statement “You must get a good education so that you can enjoy a good life” - but as experiences actually lived through. An intellectual is like a shipwrecked person who learns how to live in a certain sense with the land, not on it; not like Robinson Crusoe whose goal is to colonise his little island, but more like Marco Polo, whose sense of the marvellous never fails him, and who is always a traveller, a provisional guest, not a freeloader, conqueror or raider.

Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation. Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually, this means that an idea of experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light. From that juxtaposition one gets a better, perhaps even more universal, idea of how to think, say, about a human rights issue in one situation by comparison with another.

I have felt that most of the alarmist and deeply flawed discussions of Islamic fundamentalism in the West have been intellectually invidious precisely because they have not been compared with Jewish or Christian fundamentalism, both equally

prevalent and reprehensible in my own experience of the Middle East. What is usually thought of as a simple issue of judgement against an approved enemy, in double or exile perspective, impels a Western intellectual to see a much wider picture, with the requirement now of taking a position as a secularist, or not, on all theocratic tendencies, not just against the conventionally designated ones.

A second advantage to what in effect is the exile standpoint for an intellectual is that you tend to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way. Look at situations as contingent, not as inevitable; look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.

The great prototype for this sort of intellectual position is provided by the 18th century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, who has long been a hero of mine. Vico's great discovery, which derived in part from his loneliness as an obscure Neapolitan professor, scarcely able to survive, at odds with the Church and his immediate surroundings, is that the proper way to understand social reality is to understand it as a process generated from its point of origin, which one can always locate in extremely humble circumstances. This, he said in his great work *The New Science*, meant seeing things as having evolved from definite beginnings, as the adult human being derives from the babbling child.

Vico argues that this is the only point of view to take about the secular world, which he repeats over and over again is historical, with its own laws and processes, not divinely ordained. This entails respect, but not reverence, for human society. You look at the grandest of powers in terms of where it came from, and where it might be headed; you are not awed by the august personality, or the magnificent institution, which to a native, someone who has always seen (and therefore venerated) the grandeur but not the perforce humbler human origins from which it derived, often compels silence and stunned subservience. The intellectual in exile is necessarily ironic, sceptical, even playful - not cynical.

Finally, as any real exile will confirm, once you leave your home, wherever you end up you cannot simply take up life and become just another citizen of the new place. Or if you do, there is a good deal of awkwardness to the effort, which scarcely seems worth it. You can spend a lot of time regretting what you lost, envying those around you who have always been at home, near their loved ones, living in the place where they were born and grew up without ever having to experience not only the loss of what was once theirs but, above all, the torturing memory of that which they cannot go back to ever again. On the other hand, as Rilke once said, "you can become a beginner in your circumstances, and this allows you an unconventional style of life and, above all, a different, often very eccentric career".

For the intellectual, an exilic displacement means being liberated from the usual career, in which "doing well" and following in time-honoured footsteps are the main milestones. Exile means that you are always going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path. If you can experience that fate not as a deprivation and as something to be bewailed, but as a sort of freedom, a process of discovery and doing things according to your

own pattern as various interests seize your attention and as the particular goal you set yourself dictates, that is a unique pleasure. You see it in the odyssey of C L R James, the Trinidadian essayist and historian, who came to England as a cricket player between the two world wars and whose intellectual autobiography, *Beyond a Boundary*, was an account of his life in cricket, and of cricket in colonialism; he also wrote *The Black Jacobins*, a stirring history of the late 18th century Haitian black slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture; then as an orator and political organiser in America, he wrote a study of Herman Melville, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*; then various works on pan-Africanism and dozens of essays on popular culture and literature. An eccentric, unsettled course, so unlike anything we would today call a solid professional career. And yet what exuberance and unending self-discovery it contains.

Most of us may not be able to duplicate the destiny of exiles like Adorno or C L R James, but their significance for the contemporary intellectual is nevertheless very pertinent. Exile is a model for the intellectual who is tempted, and even beset and overwhelmed, by the rewards of accommodation, yea-saying, settling in. Even if one is not an actual immigrant or expatriate, it is still possible to think as one, to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralising authorities towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never travelled beyond the conventional and the comfortable.

For another, a condition of marginality which may seem irresponsible and unserious at least frees you from having always to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the applecart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the same corporation. No-one is ever free of attachments and sentiments, of course. Nor do I have in mind here the so-called free floating intellectual whose technical competence is on loan and for sale to anyone. I am saying, however, that to be as marginal and as undomesticated as someone who is in real exile is for an intellectual to be unusually responsive not to the potentate but to the traveller; not the captive of habit and what is comfortably given, but attracted to the provisional and sporty; not committed to maintaining things by an authority we have always known, but to innovating by force of risk, experiment, innovation; not the logic of the conventional, but the audacity of daring, and moving, moving, moving representing change, not standing still.