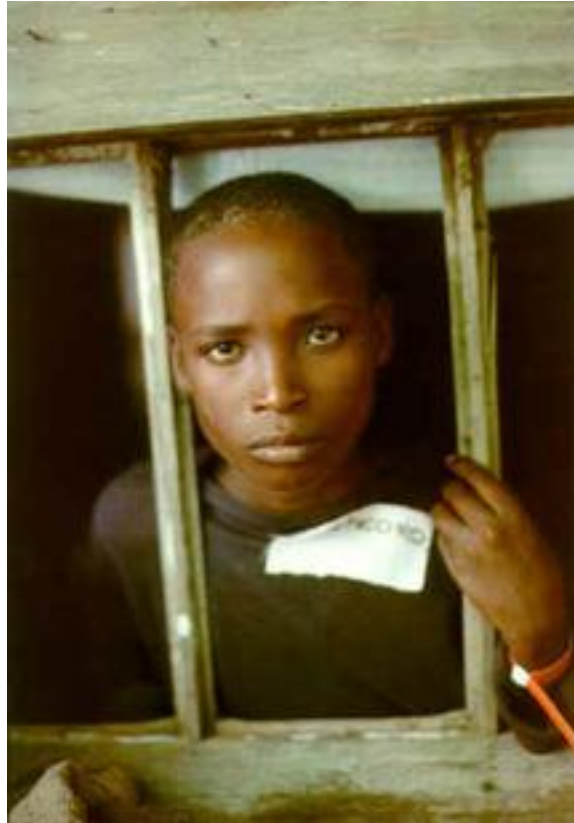# The Politics of Exile: Class, Power, and the "Exilic"

Martha E. Gimenez

Rwandan Boy
Photo by Howard Davies

Introduction

The collapse of the socialist bloc, followed by the end of nationalist development strategies and the adoption of export led economic policies by most impoverished nation states, was followed by an accelerated worldwide circulation of capital and labor. As capital speeds around the globe taking advantage of rapidly changing profit making opportunities, the economic devastation it leaves behind compels millions of workers to uproot themselves and join local, regional and international migration flows. Ethnic strife and localized armed conflicts are also contributing to the displacement and mobility of people within and across national borders. These phenomena are not new; historically, wars, economic, political and religious struggles have caused vast migration streams and population displacements. However, the socio-economic, political and ideological conditions which late 20th century immigrants and other displaced populations encounter in their homelands and their final destinations, have changed a great deal.

Migrants leave behind nation states where, at least for the foreseeable future, there are no emancipatory or even economistic politics of any substance left and shed their universalistic cloaks, brazenly further the interests of local and transnational capital, doing whatever international lending institutions demand to keep the dollars flowing primarily into debt payments, and the pockets of the privileged few. Once they reach their destination in their "host societies" in the West, migrants today find conditions far different from those 19th and early 20th century immigrants found in their search for a better life or for political refuge.

Changed opportunities result in different social trajectories, patterns of social and economic integration or exclusion and forms of political mobilization which are, in turn, reflected in changing categories of representation. In the 19th century U.S. context, for example, millions of European immigrants were quickly absorbed in the expanding economy and their descendants became eventually integrated in the mainstream of American society. These were the conditions of possibility for the emergence of assimilation and integration theories. However, the combined effects of racism and profound changes in the U.S. economy resulted in patterns of economic superexploitation, discrimination and exclusion which showed the limited scope of such theories and their inability to account for the substantial exclusion of African Americans and other non-white populations. Hence the eruption of racial unrest and emergence of the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s which, combined with the effects of the anti-war movement eventually resulted in the political mobilization of other sectors of the population (e.g., women, homosexuals, the elderly, migrant workers) also affected by economic and social discrimination.

The rise of identity politics followed, mirrored in an explosion of related academic programs and literatures. The new literature was, to some respect, a blend of the old and the new, for the concern with legal and undocumented immigrants and immigration, its causes, its social and economic effects, its political significance, etc., was combined with a growing interest in issues of identity, self-identification, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth. Theorists engaged in what Ellen Wood called "the retreat from class." Class, reduced to an identity, was relegated to the last element of the ubiquitous trilogy, race, gender and class, which became the height of academic fashion in the last ten years. Fashions, however, are short lived; as nation states seemed to dissolve under the corrosive effects of free markets and neoliberal economic policies, academic thought about identities also changed: identities are no longer moored in a social location, be it, for example, race, gender or ethnicity, but appear to be as mobile and fluid as the intellectuals that write about them in their attempt to capture some important aspects of the present historical and political conjuncture. To talk about race, gender and, I dare say it, class, seems almost embarrassingly old fashioned these days, in light of current discourses on borders, border crossings, hybridity, fluidity, diasporas, flexible citizenships, migration, and exile.

Exile is the topic of this paper, but to arrive to it I had first to attempt to link, no matter how tenuously, the changing forms of representation of exclusion and displacement to their changing political and economic conditions of possibility. As a

sociologist, I inhabit a rather quiet, boring theoretical space where very little happens regardless of the upheavals of globalization. One has to look elsewhere, to Marxism, to the humanities, to cultural studies and European intellectuals for theoretical excitement. The seminar from which this paper developed, "The Persistence of Exile," brought me in contact with many, to me, new concepts of identity; this detour into the changing historical conditions affecting individual and aggregate social and spacial mobility was necessary to help me to understand their meaning, and the extent to which they illuminate or mystify the phenomena they seek to bring to our attention.

About Exile

The dictionary defines exile as "the forced removal from one's native country; as banishment or expulsion from home." To exile is to banish, expel or drive away someone from their country or home. An exile is a person expelled by the authorities. Exile, however, can be also voluntary: exile denotes "voluntary absence from one's country; or "one who separates himself from his home." Exile has very specific political connotations, for it presupposes the actions of the authorities towards those they banish, and the actions of those who, given the nature or the outcome of political struggles in their country, either choose or are forced to leave.

In this narrow, political sense, exile is the effect of conscious decisions, by those who expel their enemies, those who are expelled, or those who leave even if the authorities let them be. Whether imposed or voluntarily chosen, exile in this sense is a condition, a real location in the political, social and geographical space. It is not an identity arbitrarily imposed by census officials, or by well meaning social scientists and literary theorists. Those who find themselves thus situated know and embrace exile as their status and their role, as their place in history, because it is their fate, who they are, and they know it.

But just as we seem to have grasped the nature of exile as a political phenomenon, the concrete outcome of political struggles, its complex nature undermines this conclusion, for political exile whether the result of coercion or choice, is just one of the manifold usages of the concept. Both in its political sense and a metaphor, exile has a life as long as recorded human history; it is not just about the social relations that separate people from home and homeland, but a way to capture the suffering that ensues from all forms of estrangement. This is why, perhaps, my electronic search for a very specific subject, the sociology of exile, yielded nothing except a few studies of the most visible and politically powerful exiled population in the U.S.: the Miami Cubans. The search for a sociological theory of exile yielded nothing because, as I will argue later on, the social relations of exile and the forms of consciousness they give rise resist capture by empirical generalizations and lead into more subtle theoretical and philosophical terrains.

Reading about the Cuban exile experience, in a short article by Nelson Valdez, was very informative. Valdez sharply differentiates between exiles and immigrants. The latter are indifferent to the political system they leave behind; they depart voluntarily in search of economic opportunities and upward mobility. Exiles take a critical stand towards their country's politics, economic organization, culture, etc. and, given that they can't change

them, leave. Or, they leave because they have lost their position of power and authority. Although Valdez does not say it, I would add that exiles often leave to save their lives or because they have been expelled.

There were several waves of Cuban exiles in response to different stages in the revolutionary process. The first wave (1959) included the military and political elites, identified with the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, who were defeated by the revolution. The second wave (Fall, 1960), was caused by the nationalization of a large proportion of corporations, industries, business and real estate. The exiles were now the top personnel of these business concerns and administrative and professional workers immediately below them. They were white, skilled, well educated. After the Bay of Pigs failed invasion, the revolution became more radical and caused the exile of the middle classes: dentists, teachers, middle management, skilled and clerical workers. They were mostly white and relatively well off. Through the years, thousands left, in legal freedom flights, escaping by boat, or traveling to the U.S. from Europe. Eventually, as life in Cuba became harder, people who approved of the Revolution also wanted to leave. In 1980 the Cuban government allowed people to pick up relatives by boat and the last big wave of Cubans (almost 125 thousand) arrived in Florida in 1980. This final wave was radically different, Valdez points out: their motivations to leave Cuba was economic rather than political; they were mostly blue collar workers, 40 percent black; almost 20 percent had been in prison and a small number were serious criminals or were mentally ill. These were not exiles; they were migrants. The U.S. welcomed the earlier waves of anti-Castro Cubans as exiles deserving social and economic support. Numerous programs (e.g., scholarships, low interest loans, training to allow professionals to use their skills in the U.S., etc.) eased their adaptation to U.S. society. The last wave, however, did not receive support; in the eyes of the government and the general public, they were simply immigrants.

Is this distinction between exile and immigrant so clear cut? The first wave of Batista supporters, the members of the political and military elites do fit the political concept of exile. The exile status of the second and third waves would seem somewhat ambiguous, for their rejection of the system, while outwardly political, had to do primarily with their loss of economic privilege and deteriorating living standards. In the absence of nationalizations and a declining quality of life, would they have left Cuba? If their motivation was mainly economic, just like the archetypal immigrant's and the last wave of Cuban arrivals, why should they be considered exiles? It could be argued that their political opposition to the government outweighed their economic self interest in leaving their homeland, so they can rightfully claim exile as their status and identity in this country. But if, as Valdez argues, exiles are those who leave not just because of politics but because of disagreement with other aspects of their country of origin, then not only the second and third waves of Cubans but the fourth, can also claim exile as their lot in life.

This brief outline of the differences between the four main waves of Cuban arrivals to the U.S. highlights the complexities and ambiguities of the concept of exile as well as its political and ideological significance. Exile is defined by social relationships and because

those relationships are so varied, it is impossible to come up with a definition capable to differentiate exile from other patterns of individual and aggregate social and spacial mobility. Individuals and collectivities can self-identify as exiles but whether their identity and status as exiles will be acknowledged or not in their "host societies" depends on the nature of the political relations between their country of origin and their country of destination. For example, Soviet artists who defected to the West seeking the economic rewards the Soviet system denied them were always received with open arms, as exiles who deserved everything their talents could get for them. Their economic reasons were acknowledged but overshadowed by the political significance authorities attributed to their act. No such reception was ever given to Haitians who risked their lives seeking a better life in the U.S. by traveling in flimsy vessels. As economic refugees, their claims found no official sympathetic audience.

Exile is, therefore, always and regardless of individuals' and collectivities' self-understanding, a political construction and, as such, an expression of political power. To be precise, I have arrived at the following definition: exile is a social relation between people and institutions, mediated by the political relationship between their countries of origin and destination; what is political or "exilic," and what it is not, therefore, depends on the nature of those relations. Class, power, and politics appear to determine whether the bewilderment, pain, nostalgia, fears, loss, displacement and longing individuals experience when they leave their homes and homelands belong to the realm of the "exilic," and are thus worthy of being heard, or to the realm of economic need or self-advancement. Valdez tells us that "the true exile is immersed in politics." But he also tells us that, as time goes by, exiles inexorably become migrants, for ". . . memories disappear, new values and traditions are adopted. Children are born. The language is lost." Under those conditions, I argue, exile can increasingly become a political role, a bargaining chip, a marketable identity. So we arrive, then, at another paradox of exile: not only the boundaries between the political and the non-political dimensions of exile are permeable, but also its ontological status changes, from a relational phenomenon grounded in the broader political relations among nation states, to an individual attribute, a consciously chosen role or identity, a mode of self-understanding unmoored in the harsh realities of international politics.

But what is the significance of these considerations? Why should the subaltern, meaning the dispossessed, poor, migrant collectivities circling the world in their way to the wealthy West, or the displaced populations roaming their devastated lands, aspire to the traditionally elitist "exilic" condition? Aren't there other, presumably, more accurate forms of representing their new spacial locations? Aren't terms like diasporic, refugee or, more traditionally, immigrant, more accurate representations?

A relational, sociological definition of exile resting in a narrow conception of the political that overlooks its necessary connections with the economy and vice versa, has the political implication of denying the legitimacy of the feelings and experiences of those who, for a variety of reasons beyond their control such as racial and ethnic conflicts, wars, famines, the downsizings and privatizations mandated by neoliberal economic policies, droughts, guerrilla warfare, the drug wars, and the list could go on,

have been forced to leave their homes and homelands perhaps for ever, to seek survival in far away places. Exile highlights the significance of place in the formation of everyone's identities regardless of social class, not just of the privileged, those who disagreed with the dominant politics of their countries or were banished by their governments because of their political resistance. Exile is both a particular phenomenon, referring to the effects upon individuals and collectivities of political struggles, and a universal phenomenon that captures, in a powerful metaphor, the psychological and emotional effects of loss of that which anchors individuals in space, both literally and figuratively. Exile is also about the loss of roots, the loss of place, the loss of one's bearings in the world. Edward Said writes that it is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted." Exile, in this sense, is irreducible to a sociological concept based on a narrow concept of the political, which often reserves the condition of exile only to the "deserving" uprooted person. On the other hand, to detach the notion of exile from its basis on political relations reduces it to a feeling, to an aspect of the human condition which, in the last instance, we should eventually outgrow; after all, isn't life about separation from the instant of our birth?

We seem to face a dilemma: a narrowly political view of exile denies its relevance fully to understand the experiences of millions of displaced and uprooted workers, peasants, impoverished people in the world, the ethnically or racially persecuted, the victims of crossfires and so forth. But a purely humanistic, universalizing concept hides, as Said points out, its historically specific features, for exile is "irremediably secular and unbearably historical . . . it is produced by human beings for other human beings . . . like death but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography."

I am arguing, therefore, for the "democratization" of exile, as an experience common to millions of displaced people who are not necessarily political actors in a narrow sense, but owe their uprooted conditions to the interplay of economic and political forces beyond their control. Labor market dynamics are not politically innocent while political processes are never wholly disengaged from economic interests and constraints. What would be the benefits and the problems inherent in adopting exile, rather than other possible forms of representation of the experiences of being uprooted, displaced, driven away from home and homeland? To some extent, I believe that this expansion of the understanding of political relations, to include social, economic and cultural relations of exploitation and oppression, which would ground this broader sociological conception of exile, would force the recognition of the humanity of immigrants and displaced persons, rather than their reduction to abstract economic agency or to victimhood. Such expanded notion of exile, which mirrors the United Nations' expanded notion of human rights which adds social and economic rights to the traditionally recognized political and civil rights, would expand awareness of the historical nature of the causes of such massive population displacements that it is possible to talk of our age, as Said observes, as "the age of exile." Paradoxically, this broadening of the concept of exile would inherently restrict it, for if exile is, in the last instance, what "people do to other people," it is not, whatever individuals might come to believe about themselves, a more exotic or fashionable identity, a claim to notoriety, a marketable political, academic or literary

asset, a claim to uniqueness or distinction. To say I am an exile is indeed more romantic than to claim refugee, displaced, immigrant, itinerant, hybrid, diasporic or foreign-born identity. But to be an exile is to be in relationship with powers that both overwhelm and incite resistance; as Valdez argued, exile is thoroughly political and to reduce it to a subjective feeling, an identity claim, or a part of the human condition is to depoliticize it and make it the credible attribute of the affluent, the powerful, the intellectual, the famous writer, those who have never been immigrants but emigres for, as Buruma states, "the choice to live in a metaphorical exile is, in fact, already a form of privilege, something only people who face no real danger can afford."

Conclusion

Lest this presentation be misunderstood, I should say that I am aware of the ancient and profound religious and humanistic meaning of exile and of its power as a metaphor about so many kinds of separations and losses inherent in our short but eventful lives. I am aware that wonderful literature, poetry and philosophy have been and will continue to be written by those who actually experienced exile as individuals or claimed it as the best way to describe their ways of being in the world. Nevertheless, I am aware, as a person who could make a good case for claiming exile as my fate, that to do so would involve bad faith for my life is privileged beyond measure in comparison to the lives of those who, I have argued, should have the right to claim that status but cannot. Exile is about banishment, it is about what people do to other people, it is a thoroughly political phenomenon that has responsible agents behind it, not uncontrollable forces of nature, functional prerequisites, system requirements or the effects of our uncontrollable aggressive and territorial genes. To pretend otherwise is to contribute to their loss.