
REVIEWS

Anthony Heilbut. *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present*. 2nd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 524p.

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As a general introduction to the topic, or even as a broad overview of intellectual and artistic life in this country during and after the war, this book by Anthony Heilbut, first published in 1983, is very useful. Heilbut claims a lot for the men and women he writes about, but not unjustifiably. Few would disagree that this group of refugees had an influence on American culture quite out of proportion to their actual numbers.

Since they came to this country as adults, with “European sensibilities” and a political perspective determined by recent European history, it is not surprising that Heilbut shows us in more detail what they brought with them and “gave” to America than what America gave to them. As refugees they had one thing in common: they all had fled the country of their birth because of fascist persecution. For this reason alone it would not be surprising if they — Jews and non-Jews alike — had all been leftists, politically speaking. And in fact many, if not most, were, and continued to be after they became American citizens. (Actually, Heilbut’s book presents very little evidence that America was “paradise” for any of them.) But the surprise is that there was great diversity in their political outlooks, ranging from Henry Kissinger on the right to Hannah Arendt on the left.

In the case of German refugees from the left, it would seem that what America “gave” them, as far as their further intellectual and artistic development was concerned, was minimal. Leftist refugees associated with academic institutions in this country, for example, continued their work from perspectives they had already gained in Europe. Heilbut writes at some length about individual refugees connected with the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (for example: the art historian Erwin Panofsky, the archæologist Ernst Herzfeld, Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, and Albert Einstein), the New School for Social Research in New York (where many if not most of the refugee associates were former non-Marxist German Social Democrats), and the Institute of Social Research, the former Frankfurt School, whose collaborators were Marxists of a special stripe: Max

Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, the legal scholar Otto Kirchheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, and Erich Fromm.

German refugee historians, social critics, and political and economic analysts of a more or less conservative bent — and here the main figures talked about are the historian Hans Kohn, the political philosopher Leo Strauss, business analyst Peter Drucker, the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, and the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim — found less to criticize in American culture than their counterparts on the left. Heilbut leaves the impression that America's influence on this group manifested itself mainly in a rejection of ideological thinking in general. [Heilbut gives the radicals on the left the last word, however: is there such a thing as non-ideological thinking? For a social scientist to adopt American methods, for example, meant adopting a “willful blindness to the forces of social control” and calling it “common sense” (203; 211-212)]. The question just what, precisely, America “gave” the German refugees intellectually and artistically during the 1930s is one that needs further study.

How America was a *challenge* to the refugees on a more practical level, however, especially to those on the political left, hardly needs any further explanation. One big challenge they had to react to from the beginning, of course, were the closer ties they found here between almost everything and commerce (or, to them: capitalism). In the case of scientists like Einstein, the problem was the close tie between education and research, on the one hand, and the military on the other (80). But the greater commercial interest posed a problem in every sphere of intellectual and artistic activity, and perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the profession of filmmaking. All the émigré film directors in Hollywood had to compromise between their art and what the market dictated, even those who admired American culture, got a kick out of American movies, and didn't object in any fundamental way to giving the American audience — that vast crowd of unsophisticated “mass consumers” — the kind of uncritical entertainment it seemed to want. (Heilbut writes about Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk, Fritz Lang, and Max Ophuls). They too had to become subversive, if they wanted to produce a film that was critical-minded, and sneak their message in, so to speak, without the audience being fully aware of what was being done. Nevertheless it was in the area of filmmaking, Heilbut speculates, that the German refugee artists were able to wield the most influence on Americans, and his chapter “A Club for Discontented Europeans” cites interesting examples of how these directors and filmmakers shaped much of the discourse that has followed.

Politically, the signing of the nonaggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939 was a challenge that caused some of the leftist

refugee artists and intellectuals, in the name of ideological consistency, perhaps, to compromise their own political principles. After the war, the political challenge came from here at home: the terror practiced by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and Senator McCarthy, working hand in hand with the mass media. This was a period, Heilbut observes, when it surely seemed to many of the refugees that the totalitarianism they had fled from in Europe was now establishing itself in this country. The U.S. government seemed all too ready to embrace former Nazis with a zeal equal only to that with which it was ready to punish those who had opposed Fascism.

In some detail Heilbut describes the committee's investigation of Hanns Eisler (372), Bertolt Brecht, who "managed to answer questions truthfully but not completely" (376), and the Austrian scholar Karl August Wittfogel (379). The three refugees Heilbut most admires for their courageous behavior during this period are Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann.

Chapters of a more general nature alternate with chapters devoted to the lives and works of individuals. Especially good, I find, is the one devoted to Hannah Arendt (Chapter 18: "I somehow don't fit"). Heilbut shows a great deal of sympathy and admiration for this interesting and provocative woman, yet — taking his cue from Arendt herself, perhaps — never idealizes her. Heilbut describes Arendt as a combination of intellectual rigor — full of "Prussian vehemence" in her willingness to face unpleasant facts (400) — and absurd generalizations: only Americans and Marxists, Arendt once wrote, are "immune" to the infection of mob violence (411). Heilbut repeats Arendt's criticism of the role some Jews played during the Holocaust, serving as accomplices to the Nazis and delivering many of their own number to their deaths. But he defends her against the criticism that she blamed the victims for their own slaughter.

A postscript, new to this reissue of the book, assures us that the big questions asked in the first edition of the book are still topical. The question of guilt, for example, debated during the war by people like Brecht and the theologian Paul Tillich, Einstein, Hans Morgenthau, and Thomas Mann, continues today; most recently there is the question of Jewish wealth in Swiss banks and French complicity in Nazi racial policy. As the influence of the political left has declined in this country, the views of the conservative German émigré Leo Strauss (a man who "identified" with heroes, the Great Men of the West) have found new life through the prominence of his "disciples" today, who, according to Heilbut, include Irving and William Kristol, Robert Bork, and Justice Antonin Scalia. True, the influence of Herbert Marcuse on students today has subsided (in comparison with the "revolutionary" students and hippie culture of the 1960s), just as the "boom"

during the 1980s of the Frankfurt School in American universities has also begun to fade. Hannah Arendt's influence on scholars is no longer so obvious, and Thomas Mann's stature has been diminished by the publication of his diaries and by recent biographies. But on the other hand, the music of Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler is still performed, John Heartfield's montage technique is still imitated by illustrators, the "social purpose" of the Bauhaus style continues to inspire some contemporary architects, and Arnold Schoenberg remains "the century's most influential composer" (493). Another contribution that the German refugee artists and intellectuals made to American culture, one that has only become evident since 1983, is in the area of gay consciousness; the author cites not only the "gender-bending" image of performers like Marlene Dietrich, but, more importantly, the Marxist-Freudian writings of Herbert Marcuse and the diaries of Thomas Mann. ✨