

Article

# Exilic Ecologies

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**Abstract:** A term of relatively recent mintage, coined by German scientist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, ecology draws on ancient Greek to establish and consolidate its meaning. Although scholars all too often overlook it, the anachronistic rise of ecology in its semantic and conceptual determinations is noteworthy. Formed by analogy with economy, the word may be translated as “the articulation of a dwelling”, the *logos* of *oikos*. Here, I argue not only that a vast majority of ecosystems on the planet are subject to environmental upheavals and ecological crises, but also that ecology as the crossroads of dwelling and articulation is in crisis, having come into its own and made explicit what was silently present in its historical enunciation. As a result, ecology needs to be deromanticized, decoupled from the bucolic and the picturesque, and dissociated from nativism and autochthony. Every organism, ecosystem, or place is affected by the forces of unsettlement and displacement; all dwellings and their articulations are shaken to the core and set in motion, rendering ecologies exilic. Ecologies today share the exilic condition, which also threatens to level the differences among them, without the chance of returning to a stable origin, itself nothing other than a theoretical fiction. In what follows, I propose to chalk out the outlines of exilic ecologies.

**Keywords:** ecology; exile; elements; Judaism; climate; displacement

## 1. Preliminaries

A term of relatively recent mintage, coined by German scientist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 [1], *ecology* draws on ancient Greek to establish and consolidate its meaning. Although scholars all too often overlook it, the anachronistic rise of *ecology* in its semantic and conceptual determinations is noteworthy <sup>1</sup>. Formed by analogy with *economy*, the word may be translated as “the articulation of a dwelling”, the *logos* of *oikos*. To be sure, the figure of dwelling is also present in *economy*, but there it is devoid of any sentimental undertones. At best, it refers to the pragmatics of household management and division of labor; at worst, it dictates the laws relevant to property ownership that pertain to owning human and nonhuman chattel.

The discursive construction of ecology, then, begins in the 19th century, at the time when dwelling or abiding is no longer possible for large numbers of people due to their massive displacement from the countryside and concentration in rapidly growing urban centers by the forces of industrial capital. And, the discourse of ecology peaks now in the 21st century, when whatever remains of the planetary dwelling is further threatened by the lingering and accumulating material legacies of industrial capitalism, chief among them catastrophic climate change, spawning enormous populations of climate refugees, whether human or not. It is this existential threat that brings the issue of ecological dwelling out of obscurity—the obscurity associated with the intimacy, familiarity, and habituality of a lived relation to places—and into the limelight. So much so that ecology *becomes* an issue, if not *the* issue, once everything it connotes is eroded, flooded, set on fire, and otherwise devastated.

Despite (or, more precisely, because of) the historical circumstances of its emergence and ascendance, “ecology” bristles with nostalgic and romantic connotations. Eco-products,



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in other languages also called bio-products, are sought after due to the purity they are supposed to embody, being relatively free from pesticides, transgenic interferences, and the like. The same logic governs desperate searches for communities and ways of life largely unaffected by the current environmental crisis, which is rapidly morphing into an ecological crisis, which is to say, the crisis of disarticulation and non-dwelling—in a word, a meta-crisis. The values of autochthony and nativism, ingrained into the political ecologies of the 20th century, were consistent with and mobilized by Fascist regimes, such as Benito Mussolini's Italy [2]. The conceptual backdrop for these and similar political actions colors ecology with conservative hues and overshadows conservationist efforts.

In my 2020 book *Dump Philosophy: A Phenomenology of Devastation* [3], however, the logic or the illogic of the global dump, which militates against the possibilities of dwelling and articulations alike, appears as a sweeping and profound force, leaving nothing in its path intact. To contend with the mutually reinforcing and omnipresent effects of toxins (including the so-called “forever chemicals”), greenhouse gas emissions, light and sound pollution, non-decomposable materials, and the microplastification of the world, among others, it is necessary, in the first place, to acknowledge the depth and the breadth of the problem. It follows not only that a vast majority of ecosystems on the planet are subject to environmental upheavals and ecological crises, but also that ecology, as the crossroads of dwelling and articulation, is in crisis, having come into its own and made explicit what was silently present in its historical enunciation.

## 2. Two Tasks

Two vast, occasionally mutually incompatible tasks present themselves, replete with multiple secondary assignments, engagements, and exercises.

- *On the one hand*, ecologies (in the plural) ought to be seen as more than the generalization of the same rules of the game to interactions among different species and to distinct ecosystems. The modes of dwelling, of articulating the possibilities of dwelling and projecting them into the future, need to be indexed to and approached from the standpoint of the dwellers themselves, be they plants or non-sessile animals, fungi or bacteria, and, often enough, symbiotic assemblages of the above. For example, the sense of dwelling is not the same for an oak tree and a squirrel running up and down its trunk. This sense varies even in sessile organisms (say, a rose bush and a limpet mollusk) due to their respective body plans, growth and reproduction strategies, and relations to their habitats.
- *On the other hand*, ecology needs to be deromanticized, decoupled from the bucolic and the picturesque, and dissociated from nativism and autochthony. A handy instrument in such a dissociation, which at the same time takes stock of the current state of the living and livable planet, is a thoroughgoing consideration of the devastating repercussions of the global dump and the climate emergency. Every organism, ecosystem, or place is affected; all dwellings and their articulations are shaken to the core and set in motion, rendering ecologies *exilic*. Ecologies today share the exilic condition, which also threatens to level down the differences among them, without the chance of returning to a stable origin, itself nothing other than a theoretical fiction. In what follows, I propose to chalk out the outlines of exilic ecologies.

From the outset, it bears cautioning that exilic ecologies should not be conflated with nomadic trajectories, which have recently given rise to theories of nomadic subjectivity and its corresponding approach to the world [4]. Whereas nomads reject the lifestyle associated with sedentary settlements, nomadism is not an ecological but an economic phenomenon: in terms of its relation to territories and their resources (indeed, in terms of its construction of territory as such), it represents the underside of *nomos*, of human law or custom organizing behavior, as well as of the (admittedly dynamic) division and distribution of lots or allotments. The pervasive nomadism of late capitalism [4] <sup>2</sup> is beholden to this other unsettling and unsettled *nomos*, lending depth to economy.

### 3. Climate Change as the Exile and Displacement of Places

Uneven as far as its global effects are concerned, climate change implies something more and something other than long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Undeniably, climate has atmospheric significance, but, at a deeper level, it is anchored in the notion of place and in the terrestrial fold. So, the Greek *klima* (“slope” or “inclination”, from the verb *klinein*, to slope) “referred to the supposed sloping of the earth from the equator to the poles” [5]. According to ancient Greeks, weather conditions varied depending on the degree of the slope, which, in each case, circumscribed the different regions or zones of the earth and the corresponding angles of sunlight upon its surface. The zoning of the planet was the main connotation of the Late Latin *clima*, which survived in the Middle French and Middle English *climat*, until the introduction of *climate* in 17th-century English to denote predominant atmospheric patterns in a region.

Climate, then, is indicative of an ensemble of emplaced conditions and is connected to the placeness of a place, i.e., to everything that lends a place its unique texture and character. And, as I have noted elsewhere, “assuming that climate is interchangeable with place, climate change is the change of places, meaning both the displacement of human as well as non-human populations from locales that will have become uninhabitable and the displacement of the very placeness of place” [6]. In the age of climate change, even if one stays put, even if one seems to stay in place, the place does not stay in place but is on the move. Exilic ecologies elaborate on dwelling in exile—of place, of dwelling, of climate, of life.

### 4. Extractivism as Elemental Exile

Just as climate change is irreducible to the mathematical or computerized modeling of greenhouse gas dynamics and average temperature fluctuations, so extractivism is not limited to large-scale mining and removal of natural resources. For one, extractivism names the predominant paradigm of energy, value, and being itself, according to which the appropriation of everything that is desirable depends on wresting the potentiality hidden within bodies (not least, within the planetary body), often at the cost of destroying the outer layers of the actual (“mere appearances”) and discarding it as though it were a superfluous shell [7]. For another, particularly in the field of energy production, extractivism triggers nothing short of an elemental dislocation, bringing the lower strata of the earth to the surface and sending them further up into the atmosphere with the CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions, among other byproducts of the combustion process. As particles of burnt coal and oil fill the air, the earth is flung *en masse* into another element. As plastics and microplastics, which are derivatives of the petroleum and natural gas industry, inundate the oceans and every single ecosystem, the earth infiltrates the element of water as well.

Since Antiquity, elemental domains prescribed a certain code of conduct to things that were *of* them, that were made predominantly of that particular element. So, in the absence of the theory of gravity, a stone was thought to fall down to earth in order to reunite with its proper element. In Medieval thought, everything that deviated and went against the natural (physical) order of things altogether was taken to be a sign of the existence of the soul, of the principle of animation that moved *contra natura*. Hence, Avicenna interprets the plant’s upward growth defying the downward pull of the earth, as well as a bird’s flight, as evidence of vegetal and animal ensoulment [8].

The soul, in this view, is exilic; it expels a living being from the realm of mere physicality, or from the elemental milieu that claims inanimate objects to itself. Today, it is the element (above or below all, the element of the earth) and the physical order associated with it that is exiled from itself. To be sure, the stability and self-containment of the earth has always been something of an illusion. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, landslides and underground aquifers testify to the provisional nature of the earth’s supportive capacity and to how it hosts other elements (water, fire) within itself. Parochial attachment to the earth in the more conservative strands of ecological theory and practice is troubled by the earth’s nonattachment to itself.

As for the extraction of masses of fossils from the planetary body and their cross-contamination with the other elements, in a perverse tendency of ensoulment, industrial capitalism assumes the role of the *contra natura* animation of the world. Aside from fire, to which extractive energy generation commits liquified, gasified, or solidified organic matter derived from long-dead plants and animals, the principle of animation is palpable in the violation of (the admittedly porous) boundaries between elemental regions. But such animation, or reanimation, is utterly unsustainable. The elemental exiles resulting from and exacerbated by extractivism ultimately lead to total confusion, intermingling, and blending of the sky and the earth no longer propitious to life.

Water, too, is exiled from itself. From the standpoint of physics, whether solid as ice, liquid, or gaseous as vapors, water is the same substance; the number of its particles, too, remains the same. Nonetheless, from the ecological and biological points of view, it matters that ice in the Arctic and in the Antarctic is melting at an alarming rate, leading to rises in sea levels, changes in ocean currents, and various positive feedback loops accelerating global heating. Gas, liquid, and solid are, rather than the states, the *ecstases* of water. The water cycle, with its transitions from one state to another, may be a nearly mechanical process in physics, but, on the ecosystem and planet scales, it underwrites or undermines livability as such. Although ice ages and interglacial periods also alternate with relative regularity, in each phase (of glaciation or warming), the element of water is exiled from itself, from the relative homeostasis propitious to the thriving of any given species, if approached from the perspective of that species.

### 5. Embodied Existence as Environmental Exile

The thesis regarding the exilic condition of the soul wandering in the world here–below has a long history in philosophy. It goes back at least to Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, where the soul finds itself exiled *in* the body, fallen into the world of matter. In the Gnostic “Exegesis on the Soul”, for example, it is said that, of feminine nature, the soul was pure spirit, but “she fell down into a body and came to this life, [and] then she fell into the hands of many robbers” [9]. In the Zoroastrian fragments that are a part of the Gnostic Nag Hammadi library, embodied existence is called “Exile”, while truth is internal to the soul at the greatest remove possible from the world of matter: “concerning the man in Exile, when he discovers the truth in himself, he is far from the deeds of the others who exist [wrongly] and stumble” [9].

Philo of Alexandria discerns in the exile of Cain from the face of God the mark passed on to all of his descendants, who forge a harmful union of the soul with the body into which it is exiled: “but union may be of two kinds, the soul being either made the body’s yokefellow, or being brought into fellowship with virtue. The soul, then, that submits to bodily couplings” is doomed to the exilic condition [10]. For Plotinus, the emergence of the One out of its perfect simplicity, unity, and fulness (pleroma) in itself denotes the inexplicable tragedy of existence, ramified and situated at a greater or lesser remove from its root (namely, the One). Referring to later Roman philosophers Seneca and Plutarch, Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback concludes that “exile. . .has been conceived existentially as the proper of the human existence qua movement and has been considered what most properly marks the *human* condition” [11].

This is where things are genuinely interesting. The overcoming of the mind–body split implies a simultaneous bridging of the organism–environment divide, since the embodied mind does not exist in a vacuum but in the world—indeed, in the lifeworld. The soul’s exile in the body parallels, in terms of its structure and dynamics, the organism’s exile in the world, regardless of the more or less auspicious environmental niche it occupies and regardless of the type of organismic existence. Once the parallel is grasped, it turns out that the romanticized, nativist, autochthony-valuing ecologies are covertly gnostic: they bemoan the fall, exile, and divagations of the embodied organism in the polluted environment, dreaming of pristine nature and of a return to the prelapsarian ecological condition. Just as the Gnostics (as well as others, including Origen or Plotinus) welcomed

the soul's homecoming to the realm of pure spirit after the death of the body, so crypto-gnostic ecologists idealize the environmental home (*oikos*) untouched by the forces of modernity, Western colonialism, technology, and capitalism and reject *in toto* the fallen ecology of a contaminated world. The uncompromising denunciation of the world as it is puts such ecological positions on par with Gnosticism.

## 6. Exilic Ecologies and Existential Exile

The exilic character of existence is an inflection point for ecological thought. On the one hand, the purist and conservative strands of ecology strive to overcome, in addition to the disturbing consequences of massive pollution and climate change, the multipronged course of evolution and time itself that passes in, as, and with organisms, species, and ecosystems. Nostalgia for the premodern past, war on invasive species, and neo-Luddite and parochial attitudes are the symptoms of an ecological allergy to time and to the self-reinvention (as opposed to the ongoing self-reproduction) of life. On the other hand, while the movement of no-return coursing through existence is exilic, this movement is undeniably accelerated and exacerbated by the anthropogenic side effects of extractivism, gargantuan emissions of toxins and pollutants into the environment, and catastrophic climate change. Differently put, there is a partial overlap between (a) *life as exile* from the static limits of self-identity and (b) the looming prospects of *an exile from life*, the extinction of numerous species, and the overall undermining of the conditions of livability on the planet.

When it came to the nexus of ecology and existence, Heidegger betrayed the key insights of his own thinking. In the 1955 "Memorial Address" dedicated to the 175th birthday of composer Conradin Kreutzer, Heidegger asks: "Does not the flourishing of any genuine work depend upon its roots in a native soil?" And he continues: "For a truly joyous and salutary human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into the ether. Ether here means the free air of the high heavens, the open realm of the spirit" [12]. Something like an ecology of spirit is, for Heidegger, based on the experience of being at home in one's native place, rooted in the soil of nature and culture alike. Conversely, the exilic existence of Jewish people is responsible, in his view, for a comparable "uprooting of all beings from being": "The question of the role of *world Jewry* [Weltjudentum] is not a racial [*keine rassische*] question, but the metaphysical question about the kind of humanity that, *without any restraints* [*die schlechthin ungebunden*], can take over the uprooting [*Entwurzelung*] of all beings from being as its world-historical task" [13].

The discrepancy between Heidegger's existential thinking of existence and his forays into ecology comes to a head in the contrast between German rootedness and Jewish uprootedness. The temporal and, hence, ecstatic meaning of Dasein, which he elaborated in *Being and Time*, should have informed Heidegger's ecological philosophy, rendering ecology equally ecstatic, time-bound, exilic. Dwelling and its articulations are steeped not in a stable native element, but in the uncanny, in what is on the move, in what comes out of itself (the *ex-* of *exile*) and lives thanks to this finite yet endless egression. Existence ensconced in existence, dwelling is being in what is outside or beside itself—in wandering, straying, exiting a self-enclosed identity, existing. Just as Heidegger realizes that the essence of technology is nothing technological [14], so, taking his philosophy to its logical conclusion, we might say that the essence of dwelling is nothing abiding. His question "Is there still a life-giving homeland in whose ground man may stand rooted, that is, be autochthonic?" [12] should thus be amended as follows: Is there a life-giving and death-bearing experience of non-belonging and wandering, in which exilic ecologies may be rooted?

## 7. Jewish Experience and Exilic Ecologies

Since the first exile of the Jews to Babylon around the year 600 BCE, Jewish life and thought have been profoundly marked by exilic experience. Though the exilic condition has been often lamented and though the traditional aspiration has been to overcome it for good, the same condition (above all, taken in terms of its intensity and historical duration)

has exerted a formative influence on the Jewish modes of being and thinking. Franz Rosenzweig gives what is perhaps the clearest expression to this insight when he writes that the Jewish people is “the people that becomes the people, as in the dawn of its earliest times so later again in the bright light of history, in an exile. [. . .] The land is in the deepest sense its own only as land of longing, as—holy land” [15]. Judaism, we might say, is the religion of originary exile.

In our age of universal displacement, of diasporic communities that proliferate around the globe, the singular Jewish experience has become universal. It is, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, the universal exception [16]. Shortly after the Second World War, in the 1954 “Note on Marc Chagall”, Erich Neumann fleshes out the Jewish universal exception, which inverts the idea of “the holy nation”, *goy qadoš* [17], set apart from other nations to be in a covenant with God: “The fate of the Jewish people is also the fate of Europe, the fall of Vitebsk at the same time that of Paris, and the wandering Jew is the migration of countless millions of uprooted people, Jews and Christians, Nazis and communists, Europeans and Chinese, orphans and murderers. A mass migration of individuals, a flight into the abyss, which reaches from the outermost borders of Asia via Europe and to America, an endless stream of change, the depth of which seems unfathomable and the goal and direction unforeseeable” [18,19].

We should go further than either Rosenzweig or Neumann, however. In the 21st century, the shared condition of exile has extended beyond the confines of a particular human group, and even beyond the human species, to the earth and the atmosphere, to plants and places, to animals, microorganisms, bacteria, and fungi. Following Rosenzweig’s lead, the most diverse species, the elements, and ecosystems become *themselves* in their shaping by exilic non-identity. The parameters of Neumann’s observation that “the wandering Jew is the migration of countless millions of uprooted people” also require broadening in order to include the migration of countless billions of uprooted living beings and places, their “flight into the abyss” equivalent to mass extinction and generalized placelessness, into which places are sucked as into a black hole. The point is that, instead of craving pre-exilic harmony and natural balance—themselves little more than idealized projections into the past—, it behooves us to learn how to dwell in exile, that is to say, both in essentially exilic existence and in its exacerbation by the unsettling forces of capitalism, modernity, and technology.

Elsewhere [20], I have explored the concept of exile in mystical Judaism’s take on original sin. There, the act of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is grasped in terms of a separation of knowledge from life and the subsequent banishment of the living from vitality due to the deficient, objectifying knowledge they imbibe. If the fall is exile not from pure spirit but from life and, especially, from the fleshy knowledge and wisdom that are of a piece with vitality, then it corresponds to the exacerbation of the exilic nature of existence by technoscientific rationality and its toxic offshoots.

In the history of Judaism, however, the most radical event of exile affects God himself (or herself): as the Jewish people are driven into exile, the female presence of God closest to the earth, *šekīnah*, joins them in their vagaries. As the Medieval book of *Zohar* puts it: “Whenever Israel went in exile, *šekīnah* was exiled with them” [21] (2:3a; v. 4, p. 5). Or, again: “When the blessed Holy One sought to destroy his house [the Temple, MM] below and to exile Israel among the nations, he removed *šekīnah* from his presence and it remained at a distance [*ve-itraḥaqa*]” [22] (1:219a; v. 3, p. 324). With this removal, God is revealed not as an indivisibly whole, stable, and immutable foundation for all existence, but as the driftwood of a shipwrecked world.

Crucially, the literal translation of *šekīnah* is *dwelling*, the Hebrew and Aramaic equivalent of the Greek *oikos*. Derived from the root *š.k.n.*, *šekīnah* is related to such words as *šekunah* (neighborhood) and *šoken* (neighbor). Radical as the gesture of divine self-exile may seem, it is no match for this sense of *šekīnah*: not only does a certain human group go into exile, and not only does a part of God accompany them in their wanderings, but also, and most significantly, the very possibility of dwelling is exiled. More than dwelling in

exile, it is the exile of dwelling in the incipient moment of the Jewish tradition that offers a preview of contemporary exilic ecologies.

## 8. Conclusions

We are exiled from our planetary dwelling. Yet, we must dwell in this exile, finitely *and* indefinitely. Who are *we*? Plants and water, animals and the earth, air and humans, bacteria and the fire of a boiling world. The planetary dwelling, too, is far from stationary: the planets are cosmic wanderers, who, as the Ancients realized, did not stay in their fixed positions in the night sky, in contrast to the stars. There is nothing but the *mise-en-abîme* of an exile within an exile within an exile. . .

What does it mean to share, at the bare minimum, as one says in English, the condition of exile and, moreover, to create a dwelling in this condition? It means, conceptually, that, rather than a common origin, it is an immemorial expulsion from the origin that lends being to all that is. Practically, it means that the ties of solidarity with all exiled existence promote caring for the living and the dead, for the elements and errant worlds, right where we are, at the intersection of myriads of finite–indefinite peregrinations. In contrast to parochial ecological programs, exilic care is rooted in the experience of a shared non-belonging, of being out of place, hopelessly mis- or displaced, not at home anywhere, or, better, at home only in strangeness and in the absence of a fixed home. It circulates on the obverse of Novalis’s definition of philosophy (“Philosophy is really homesickness—the desire to be everywhere at home” [23]), unless philosophy is secretly a party to universal exile, desiring what it does not have and can never have, namely a universal at-homeness.

In concrete terms, the ecologies of non-belonging will not valorize autochthonous over “invasive” species, nor will they romanticize and, in the last instance, exoticize the native, the indigenous, or the local. Exilic ecologies will acknowledge, instead, their partial overlaps with climate change and other effects of extractivism, as well as their divergences from these aspects of the anthropogenic global dump, massifying, leveling down, homogenizing, and deadening existence. They will reinvent the sense of place in the state of generalized displacement. And, by dint of emphasizing the self-reinvention over the self-reproduction of life, they will update the values of sustainability with an eye to the unrepeatable singularity of existence, its materiality and anarchic temporalities, insubordinate to the power and demands of economy or metaphysics.

The millennia-old intergenerational Jewish experience of exile has been conscious of its own negativity, of the “bitter bread” (Ezek. 4:13) this experience offered, both as sustenance and poison. The positive, creative dimension of exilic negativity in Jewish intellectual and cultural history, combined with the universalization of the exilic condition, opens up new vistas for ecological thought. To make home out of exile is to dwell in vulnerability and exposure, in expulsion and fragility, shared with all human and other-than-human beings. Exilic ecologies take this finite–indefinite experience as their starting point.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Something similar happens with the coinage ‘entropy’, which is strikingly recent, yet mimics the ancient word-formation of ‘energy’.

<sup>2</sup> This is what Braidotti celebrates, mixing together all subjects displaced by capitalism: “Being homeless, a migrant, an exile, a refugee, a tourist, a rape-in-war victim, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, an expatriate, a mail-order bride, a

foreign caretaker of the young or the elderly of the economically developed world, a high-flying professional, a global venture financial expert, a humanitarian relief worker in the UN global system, a citizen of a country that no longer exists (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union): These are no metaphors. . . These are highly specific geopolitical and historic locations—It's history and belonging tattooed on your body". Braidotti, R. *Nomadic Subjects*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA; pp. 10–11. [4]

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