Pity the exiled: Turkish academics in exile, the problem of compassion in politics, and the promise of dis-exile

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# Abstract

Grounded in the moral responsibility to help those who seek assistance and refuge, humanitarian aid organizations occupy a central place in our contemporary social life. The question arises as to whether the humanitarian response can provide solutions for those exiled by political persecution. In interdisciplinary work in political philosophy and ethnography, I examine the experiences of politically exiled scholars from Turkey who have received temporary postdoctoral fellowships in European institutions of higher learning through ‘academics at risk’ organizations fashioned on humanitarian principles. Welcomed in their European hostlands as ‘victims’ of and ‘refugees’ from autocratic countries, these academics have become marginalized by an anonymising victim-saviour discourse perfused with the moral sentiments of pity and compassion. Rejecting the emptying out of their political agency and critical academic acumen by such humanitarian gestures, they have turned to strategies of ‘dis-exile’ that seek to reintroduce singularity, collective action, and solidarity into the political realm.

# Introduction: Academics in exile, humanitarian aid, and the emptying out of politics

Humanitarian aid plays a central role in contemporary social life in that it is meant as a means of carrying out our collective moral responsibility to help those who are disadvantaged or destitute, even when they become so by dint of politics. The problems inherent in such a moralization of the political sphere wherein moral emotions capture a range of political discourses is currently under critical debate (Fassin 2012; Sznaider 2001; Ticktin 2016). In this moral atmosphere, compassion becomes the basis for our political motivations. But the appropriateness of such a compassionate temperament in the political sphere may appear more uncertain when we examine close up current campaigns designed to help persons displaced by political persecution. Can the moral sentiments of pity and compassion solve social and political problems? Like politically persecuted journalists and writers, academic exiles placed ‘at risk’ and pushed into exile are particularly interesting cases in that they are persecuted precisely because of the political nature of their work.

To examine the significance of a politics based in compassionate humanitarianism, I focus here on its impact on politically exiled scholars from Turkey who have recently sought refuge in European countries through the provision of temporary postdoc fellowships and grants. As a direct result of the consolidation of the autocratic regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has witnessed one of the largest waves of exile in its history. Since the failed coup attempt of July 2016, a state of emergency has been used to ‘target criticism, not terrorism’ (OHCHR 2017) and to facilitate the arrest of journalists, writers, and academics (UNHCR 2017). As of May 2018, more than 150,000 public servants have been dismissed without due process under emergency decrees, among them 5,800 academics (HRW 2018). The upshot is that thousands of Turkish academics have been internally displaced and hundreds have gone into exile in European countries.

Publicly welcomed in their European hostlands as ‘academics at risk’– ‘victims’ of and ‘refugees’ from autocratic countries – Turkish exiled academics experience a form of anonymization and marginalization which demands that they acquiesce to their normatively assigned roles as victims to be saved. Unintentional as they may be, the effects of such welcoming policies and programmes based on humanitarian compassion are of great social and public relevance. The experiences and responses of those subjected to them deserve to be narrated not insofar as they may feed the public or institutional need for further stories of suffering, but because they hint at ways such policies can be improved and reinvigorated via politics. Indeed, studies on exile produced over the intervening years since World War II are rich in such relevance of ethnographic and historical detail to theory, practice, and policy (Adorno 2005; Arendt 1943, 1965, 1973; Doukhan 2012; Gray 2017; Kettler 2002; Kettler and Lauer 2005; Krohn 1993; Lévinas 1934, 1961, 1997; Lyman 1994; Malet and Grenville 2001; Said 1993, 2002; Tabori 1972; Timms and Hughes 2003; Wallace 2015). As yet, the current European hostland welcoming policies and the reactions of exiled ‘academics at risk’ to them has been an understudied area (Telli *et all*. 2018).

Combining the theoretical insights of political philosophy and the empirical localization of ethnography, this interdisciplinary research analyse how those in exile interact with and respond to a politics of humanitarian othering which delineates the terms of their knowledge production, the public arena in which they are able to practice, and the limits of their political subjectivity. Below, I first outline the imbrication of the study’s philosophical, ethnographic, and political aims. I then index the ways in which the emotions of compassion and pity have come to constitute a primary philosophical and moral question in our modern political life, particularly within democratic countries, and the problems this poses for society and politics as identified by political philosophers and social scientists. I then concentrate on the conditions of European hostland welcoming policies and reactions to them by politically exiled scholars from Turkey, concluding with suggestions culled from my interlocutors about how to move away from the anonymizing and victimizing humanitarian model of compassionate helping towards acts of solidarity with politically exiled academics.

# A note on the mutually constitutive relations of philosophic aims, empirical methodology, and political exile

As a political philosopher, I am concerned in this interdisciplinary study with how the domination of politics by the sentiment of humanitarian pity impacts Turkish academics currently in exile in Europe. Drawing on Herzog and Zacka’s rubric (2017) for interdisciplinary work in political philosophy and ethnography, I ask a number of interrelated questions. What is the moral terrain that determines the normative demands placed upon both Turkish academic exiles in European exile and upon their host institutions and societies? What are the negative impacts of a politics of humanitarian compassion when applied to political problems and to the people compelled into exile by them? How do exiled academics experience and interpret the demands placed on them by a politics of compassion? What can such experiences teach us about the social and political ramifications of current normative demands? As a Turkish academic now in exile in Europe, I have both personal knowledge of the often unspoken ‘shared interpretive sensibility’ (Herzog and Zacka 2017: 10) of these academics in exile (albeit not always a shared opinions) and the philosophical insight with which to bring these interpretations to bear on an inquiry of the normative humanitarian practices of compassion in politics.

My aim as a political philosopher is therefore not to evaluate whether the compassionate temperament within what Didier Fassin (2012) has called the ‘humanitarian world order’ is helpful or not, a task well beyond the scope of this study. My goal here is more circumscribed: to analyse the current impact of this moral approach to the political problem of exile on exiled academics from Turkey; to index the ways in which these scholars have been incorporated into practices of charity via a discourse of victimhood; to draw new insight from their agentive riposte to that victimhood. This is not to devalue the social importance of emotions such as pity and compassion and their power to assist our capacity to empathize with others; the reader will not find here a purely rational argument that rejects a place for emotion in politics. The importance of our feelings in the political realm is undeniable; without translating into emotions, new ideas have insufficient force to appear and gain traction. Rather, I argue that the emotions of pity and compassion cannot provide a political panacea for those exiled via political processes. It is therefore incumbent upon us to consult, study, and draw conclusions from the individuals impacted by political exile so as to better understand the impact of these moral emotions on the everyday lives of those living in exile and on possible solutions to the political problems that produce such exile in the first place.

To unearth these scholars’ unique circumstances and their perspective on their exile in light of their exposure to the current compassionate welcoming in Western countries, over the course of one year I conducted fifteen in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with exiled Turkish academics currently living in the UK, Germany, and France, who had sought refuge in Western countries between 2016 and 2018. All interviewees were either in the midst of a university job or fellowship search or had already begun work as visiting fellows under the auspices of various ‘academics at risk’ aid programmes. I chose scholars with an equal mixture of life conditions – those with temporary fellowships of several months or several years, and those whose life conditions are precarious and who are dependent on their families. Given the sensitive nature of the research focus, the fact that these scholars are still under political pressure and criminal investigation in Turkey, and the ethics of social research practice, I have opted to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants through pseudonymization and the altering of details which might identify them.

Each study participant’s exile to Europe was triggered by a government-led political pressure campaign brought to bear following the public announcement in January 2016 of the Academics for Peace Petition wherein 2,212 Turkish academics demanded a halt to the military killing of civilians in Turkey’s Kurdish regions and a restart of the stalled peace negotiations. Denounced immediately as terrorists by the state, academics quickly became the target of a virulent government political campaign aimed at suppressing academic freedom and political dissent. With the failed coup attempt of 15 July, state-of-emergency decrees were used to facilitate the country-wide arrest and purge of political groups, politicians, public servants, journalists, writers, media workers, and academics. Thousands of academics across the country were dismissed from their university posts, banned from public service, and suspended pending disciplinary or criminal investigation. Some were accused by the public persecutor of ‘making propaganda for a terrorist organization’ under article 7/2 of the Turkish anti-terror act. Blacklisted and turned into ‘others’, ‘outcasts’, and ‘academics *non grata*’ in their homeland, some academics chose voluntary exile in Western countries. In the UK, France, and especially Germany, a number of university, NGO, and private initiatives were funded to provide temporary fellowships for a few months up to two years. Having entered their host countries with legal work and residence permits, most have been reluctant to apply for asylum or refugee status and do not seek to settle in their host country. Rather, they remain in exile due to political processes that reflect global trends.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit information the individual academic’s pathos and experience of exile. The objective was to mine the details of their exilic trajectory from anonymous exclusion from political, civic, and economic subjectivity and homeland to agentive response to their new state of exile in their host countries. Because such in-depth interviews give direct access to informants they are designed not as representative samples, but as a means of understanding how individual exiled scholars from Turkey experience the problem of their exile and their welcome. As such, in these pages, I enumerate examples from limited empirical case studies culled from a larger research data set so as to gain an understanding of the impact of the current ‘humanitarian word order’ on the contingencies of individual and collective exile. My hope is that a deep mining of the contingent experience of this exile may prompt its reappraisal. Informed by empirical research of the locally contingent and concrete, the study is nevertheless interpretative, the intention being for the theory and the empirical data to illumine and challenge one another.

# The domination of politics by compassion

The ambiguous relationship between politics and emotions and the concomitant impact of emotions on politics is one of the most central subjects in moral and political philosophy and sociology. From Aristotle to Augustine, from Rousseau to Tocqueville, from Adam Smith to Hannah Arendt, philosophers and political thinkers have deliberated on this issue from varying perspectives (Aristotle 1984; Augustine 2003; Rousseau 1755/2011, 1992; Tocqueville 1835/1986; Smith 1759/2010; Arendt 1943, 1965, 1973). In the premodern era, compassion did not play a major role in moral considerations. The decisive emotion of this era was pity, expressed as religious charity. In his book *The Compassionate Temperament* (2001), Natan Sznaider notes that in the Middle Ages the sentiment of pity took as its aim the struggle against cruelty and called humans to help others in the name of God. This charitable pity was based on the Christian principle of *agape*, a transcendental and universal love of neighbour, ‘spontaneous, unconditional, and unmotivated’ (12). Agape did not, Sznaider argues, give birth to institutions of organized helping or humanitarian movements such we have in the modern era. According to Sznaider, as the ‘cultural value system of modernity’, compassion serves as the normative base of modern Western humanitarianism (8, 17).

Jean Jacques Rousseau’s conception of the importance of compassion (*pitié*) to modern culture has had and enduring influence on modern theory and politics. In *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inegalité parmi les hommes* (1992), Rousseau explains compassion as a second principle of the savage man’s soul in his primitive condition, the first principle being that of the drive to self-preservation (*amour de soi*)—and thereby to self-interest, or love of self (*amour propre*). According to Rousseau, were people to act solely from self-interest, they would become monsters, but because they have the emotional capacity for compassion, they are able to maintain the human race. He says that compassion is ‘a virtue all the more universal and all the more useful to man in that it precedes in him any kind of reflection, and so natural that even animals sometimes show noticeable signs of it’ (1992: 36). Compassion is ‘an innate repugnance to see his fellow suffer’ (1992: 36). According to Rousseau, we are naturally jealous of happy people and have compassion for ‘people who are suffering’ (Rousseau 1762/1976: 262; Revault d’Allonnes 2008: 29). This sentimental operation is made by our capacity for social imagination, which allows us to identify our ‘self’ with those who suffer.

Rousseau’s analysis of compassion as a natural human drive becomes more ambiguous when applied to political questions. Although Rousseau uses the terms *pity* and *compassion* interchangeably in his writings, today we prefer the term *compassion*. One reason for this semantic choice is that the word ‘pity’ evokes a religious instrumentalist sentiment about one’s obligation to God – specifically, one’s obligation *through the wretched and destitute* to God. Another reason is that ‘pity’ requires people who are weak and in need; it is nourished by human suffering (Revault d’Allonnes 2008: 53). Because pity is constructed on the assumption of ‘suffering people’, it produces an asymmetry between the sufferer and the helper. Yet for all its difference from the older term, our current semantic preference for ‘compassion’ cannot fully eradicate pity’s asymmetry: the way that compassion is organized within contemporary social and political life closes off the possibility of an individual appeal to ‘co-suffering’.

In her book *On Revolution* (1965), Hannah Arendt clearly demonstrates the negative impact of these kinds of emotions on the modern political realm through an analysis of the French Revolution. She notes that during the French Revolution, revolutionaries took as their aim the emancipation of the people not as future citizens but as ‘*malheureux*’ (160) – wretches, unfortunates. Thus, she argues, they reduced politics to the social, conflating the two (48). Pity does not result in reciprocity because it turns suffering individuals into an indistinguishable and homogenous mass, thereby dissolving the plurality of individuals into anonymity. Pity is insensible to the incommensurable singularity of human life. It is for this reason that Arendt criticizes the moralization of politics and the current mode of moral reasoning which seeks to displace political human action with an anonymising and homogenising compassion. Serena Parekh (2008) summarizes Arendt’s critique of pity thusly: ‘Pity's cruelty can be easily rationalized; it’s like the helpful surgeon who cuts off a gangrenous limb in order to save the body of the sick man’ (118). At any moment, pity may be converted into cruelty in order to save humanity in spite of itself. The surgeon’s knife reveals itself as a doubled-edged tool – cruel at the same time as it is charitable. Once compassion settles into the realm of the political, it may engender cruelty (Arendt 1965; Sznaider 2001: 4).

This critique of compassion has ever more relevance in the contemporary moment in that the compassionate temperament serves as the basis for acts of solidarity. In this way, sentiments of compassion may wholly occupy the political realm (Revault d’Allonnes 2002, 2008, 2012; Fassin 2012; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). In the spirit of the time, compassionate worry takes hold of our perceptions of social and political life, increasing the importance of charity organizations and moving us to action via international urgent aid appeals to help those affected by earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, and wars. By arguing within the political discourse of ‘humanitarian intervention’, governments make use of this worry to rationalize the use of force and overseas military operations (Fassin 2012) or to wage ‘just wars’ (Walzer 2015). Spun as calls to action, these arguments summon our moral and compassionate sentiments into being. In our daily social life, we rely upon charitable organizations and initiatives to resolve ‘world misery’ and we respond to media campaigns in which vast sums of money are raised for the provision of food, water, shelter, and medical care to those in need. Indeed, some of these charities are able to provide these things faster than the organs of government can because they don’t need to wait for official funds to be released.

Didier Fassin (2012) divides charitable organizations into two categories based upon their relation to their subject of compassion: those whose aim is to deliver aid to people living in areas where war and natural disasters occur engage in a ‘politics of distance tragedies’; those whose aim is to help people in need within the community such as the poor or immigrants engage in a ‘politics of nearby suffering’ (11). Fassin dubs this political and social organization based on compassionate worry ‘the humanitarian world order’ (2012: 10).

The central problem in this humanitarian world order comes sharply into view when we rely upon these kinds of moral initiatives to resolve the world’s political problems. In these cases, individual or collective apathy, a failure to act in the political sphere, and the release of governments from political responsibility forecloses the possibility of political solutions to political problems. As Arendt noted, once these emotions seize and occupy the political realm, individuals in need begin to be treated *en masse* and their singular agency is suppressed. It is at this point that an anonymising operation takes place. As Alexis de Tocqueville stresses, the compassionate person should provide help to those in need, but should not act together with them on the grounds of a moral emotion (Tocqueville 1836/1986: 23). Today, in order to obtain help, the suffering other must prove that they are worthy of our help and that they can sort out the problem by themselves. Our humanitarian responsibility to them does not include the political solidarity that would address their life conditions. The prerequisite to help is the personal competence of the persecuted, the ‘excluded’, or ‘outcast’. The rising number of people who have been disqualified from the public realm altogether – those considered as ‘superfluous’ (Arendt 1973), ‘useless’ (Castel 1999), or as ‘rubbish/waste’ (Ogilvie 2012) –sufferers deemed incompetent, intractable, ineffectual – requires an reassessment of humanitarian organizations and their base sentiment of compassion.

The questions we must ask of this humanitarian world order and the remedies it offers are manifold. How can we come into contact with and offer help to ‘suffering others’ in a way that preserves their singular dignity and the politics of their life condition? How can we respond in solidarity to their need such that our compassion does not reduce them via another repression? How can we prevent the possibility that our actions do not become an anonymising cruelty and our public policy does not turn into a politics of inequality?

# Re-exiling the exiled with the victim-saviour narrative

Because academics have been compelled or forced into exile by the logic of politics, a study of the current exilic conditions of Turkish academics in Europe cannot be separated from the human rights violations that drove them into exile in the first place. Indeed, international aid organization reports on today’s ‘academics at risk’ worldwide document their predicament in terms of the violation of their academic rights, their human rights, and their rights to freedom of speech – in other words, in terms of the political causes of their persecution (GCPEA 2018; OHCHR 2017; SAR 2017b; UNHCR 2017;HRW 2016, 2018). So, too, the analyses of Academics for Peace focused on how these scholars have been criminalized and their human, academic, and freedom of speech rights violated in Turkey (Altıparmak and Akdeniz 2017; Başer‏, Akgönül and Öztürk 2017; Özkırımlı 2017; Tekdemir, Tivanen and Başer 2018). But the logic of exile also ties the exit from homeland to the entrance in hostland. Exile creates a translocal, transnational connection between homeland and hostland that cannot therefore be uncoupled. The compassionate reaction to which academics in exile are exposed in their host countries is therefore of relevance to larger transnational issues.

Host governments, NGOs, and institutions of higher learning have done their utmost to increase their helping capacity. The increase in academics leaving Turkey that began in 2016, coinciding as it did with a similar influx of academics from Syria, has given rise to new European programmes and initiatives: doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships for ‘academics at risk’ in countries across Europe offer hundreds of temporary fellowships of one month to two years in duration; Le Programme National d’Aide à l’Accueil en Urgence des Scientifiques en Exil (PAUSE) established by the French government in January 2017 aims to provide temporary support to one hundred ‘at-risk’ scholars per year; since June 2016, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative established by the German government and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and with the support of numerous foundations has provided over one hundred fellowships to ‘academics at risk’ (Özdemir, Mutluer and Özyürek 2019). Many NGOs, including the Institute of International Education-Scholars Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) and Scholars at Risk (SAR), have increased budget allocations or have found new funds in order to support scholars in exile. According to Scholars at Risk’s *Summary Report on Activities 2016-2017*, because of the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria and ‘extraordinary pressures on scholars and universities in Turkey’, applications of academic seeking assistance have increased around 400% over the prior years (SAR 2017a: 4). But a report on supporting networks funded by SAR underlines that according their database ‘includes 59,4% all number of recipients and 71% are recipients from Turkey out of 69 support items.’ (Telli *et all*.: 18). Thus, academics from Turkey constitutes one of the most relevant welcomed academic community at risk.

Although the welcoming of these academics within Europe reflects the overarching dominance of the compassionate temperament in democratic countries, it nevertheless brings with it an attendant confusion between morals and politics, humanitarian acts and political acts, as these play out in a globalized world. For while exiled academics find temporary refuge in the West, they also find themselves once again vulnerable to a discourse that transforms them into ‘others’ and ‘outcasts’ within their host institutions. This moral approach to the political problem of exile results in exiled scholars being incorporated into practices of charity via a discourse of victimhood that centres around their function as exiles from an autocratic form of government – as refugees or political asylum seekers rather than as academics.

In her *openDemocracy* article, Nil Mutluer (2017) critiques the dramatization in the Wall Street Journal of her personal story of travel from Turkey through Greece as a Western desire to see academics in exile as victims.

Syrian refugees also sought to reach Europe via Greece, but though politically persecuted in Turkey, I was and am not a refugee. (…) The western gaze needs new victims, but am I that victim? Well, I am a ‘scholar at risk’, that much is true enough. (…) Europe needs me as a victim to assure itself that it is indeed ‘the saviour’ that it has imagined itself to be.

# Translocal exclusion from the academic public realm

Fellowships and grants furnished through European institutions of higher education, government programmes, and NGOs do provide academics in exile with the temporary security necessary to proceed with their research for a time. These opportunities are especially significant for those scholars working on politically salient research topics that are now blacklisted in Turkish universities by the current government: the Kurdish and Armenian questions, state and military violence, human rights violations. But the interviews also reveal that the (temporary) provision of a safe research space and public services does not ensure access to public academic space in which the exiled may freely appear. The opportunities afforded to them through the fellowships do not necessarily protect them from marginalization with their host institutions.

Academics in exile are in fact subjected to a ‘bureaucratic machinery designed to establish the validity of claims’ (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 256), requiring them to prove themselves ‘worthy’ (Ticktin 2016). After completing her PhD at a prestigious university in the US, Bilge returned to Turkey and began work at a public university. When she signed the Academics for Peace Petition in January 2016, she was in the midst of preparing a move to France where she had just received a highly competitive postdoctoral fellowship. Stressing the fact that she had been invited to give a lecture at her host institution only two years after her arrival, Bilge said that she felt ignored and disregarded as a result of her having been turned into a victim. ‘I have been disappeared as an academic’, she insisted. In our talk at a local café in France, she explained the negative impact of the new political pressure brought to bear on her academic life in France.

Although I came to France with a prestigious postdoc, not a fellowship for ‘academics at risk’, my academic qualifications have simply disappeared and I have suddenly became a ‘victim’ in the eyes of other academics. I see that there is an clear hierarchy between these ‘victims’: there are acceptable, presentable victims and there are unacceptable victims. Just as there are good Muslims and bad Muslims, good migrants and bad migrants. This hierarchy hinges on the distinction between ‘marketable academics’ in exile, deemed so because their case and their suffering can be presented to the public, versus ‘unmarketable’ academics. I suddenly found myself in the middle of this hierarchy. Marketable academics are more presentable: they accept without argument the role of victim; they have ideally either finished their PhD in Turkey or were dismissed from an institute of higher learning in Turkey; and above all they never discuss the Kurdish issue. Whenever we would like to talk about the true context of our petition, we are silenced. Here, people only want to listen to and support the ‘victims’ of an antidemocratic society. But when we begin to explain the problems that lie behind the political pressure, or talk about how Europe has supported Turkey in exchange for keeping Syrian refugees outside its borders, or that European countries export arms to Turkey, we are considered unmarketable victims. With this kind of pressure, I have been silenced.

Bilge’s words bring clearly into focus the ways in which European helping organizations and institutions of higher learning may turn on those academics in exile who overstep the boundaries that have been pre-determined by the humanitarian moral order and instead speak critically about the political conditions of their exile. Claiming the right to appear in the public realm as critical academics and to express their political opinion comes into conflict with the victim-saviour narrative that is at the heart of the humanitarian world order, leading to exclusion, experienced as a kind of second exile.

As evidenced in the interviews, because of their unique positioning which allows for a critical appraisal of the problem of the moralization of politics and the valorization of compassion and pity over political solidarity, academics in exile from Turkey are often censored for drawing attention to their marginalization within the humanitarian victim-saviour discourse. In this way, those academics at risk who seek visibility in the public realm during their exile are again marginalized and transformed into ‘superfluous others’ within their host society, re-excluded from critical participation in the public realm.

The irony here is that what might actually help these academics in exile is the very public visibility as critical academics that is precluded by the helping moral economy. Recognition of the valuable critical perspectives these academics in exile might have on their home and host countries and treatment as equal fellows and colleagues could go a long way toward returning them from their exile as academic ‘outcasts’ and ‘refugees’. This in turn begs the question of the need to re-examine the practices of compassion within aid organizations designed to support ‘academics at risk’.

# Temporary fixes and the undefined state of exilic limbo

Academics in exile from Turkey today fit more unambiguously within the legally undefined ontological category of *the politically exiled*, rather than within the internationally defined legal categories of migrants, refugees, displaced or stateless persons, or asylum seekers. Unlike migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers who may initially have no legal right to work or benefit from public education and health services, the majority of academic exiles live in their host country with short-term authorized entry and work visas arranged through fellowships or scholarships granted by universities and NGOs and therefore have access to livelihood and public services. And unlike many migrants and displaced persons, the emphasis is not on the hope of building a new life in the hostland, but on return to the homeland. Many of my interviewees who had arrived recently in a European country plan to return to Turkey as soon as political conditions allow. Their ontological exile is thus deeply related to this unpredictable aspect of their current life condition – their return to Turkey that guarantees their belonging. Sensing keenly their exclusion as full academics in their host countries, unwilling to settle in Europe permanently, and unable to return to Turkey, exiled academics spoke often in our conversations of having lost all sense of belonging in their undefined state of limbo.

Indeed, it is for this reason that the Turkish academics in exile I spoke with are highly averse to the idea of applying for political asylum or refugee status. Having entered Europe with work visas as academics on fellowships or grants, they find that their status is nevertheless temporary and insecure. The rise in anti-immigrant populism and the attendant ‘hostile environment’ policies, different in each country, interact in complex ways with the practises of aid organizations that support scholars exiled in Europe. But because such supporting NGOs are designed as humanitarian aid organizations which take the ‘victim-saviour’ narrative as their basis, their flexibility in the face of unexpected circumstances whereby academics on temporary fellowships may eventually become vulnerable is severely hindered. New solutions designed to address underlying political problems beyond the immediate emergency seem not to be incubated in such NGOs organized around humanitarian aid.

After signing the Academics for Peace Petition, Ayşe was dismissed by her rector from her position at a Turkish university. Finding herself under unbearable political pressure, she applied for a European fellowship for ‘academics at risk’ and an NGO accepted her application. Within days of arriving in her host country, she was dismissed from her job, public service and educational employment in Turkey by a government decree, making her return extremely difficult. When she went to the Turkish consulate to clarify her position, she learnt that her passport was seized. She is now stuck in her host country. When her visa expires, she will be unable to apply for an extension without her passport. In a final catch-22, should she apply for asylum as a refugee, a notoriously difficult and drawn-out process, the NGO currently supporting her will terminate her postdoctoral fellowship and she will again lose her job, even though scholarships for asylum seekers are allowed in her country of residence.

My current situation is really bizarre. My visa will soon expire and I cannot apply for an extension because I don’t have a valid passport. But I also cannot apply for asylum because the organization that gave me the fellowship would put an end to it. I am in a bind and don’t know what to do.

When I asked her what the NGO proposed to do on their end, she explained that they were unwilling to change their internal scholarship policy, even in light of her unexpected passport status.

A lawyer I talked to said that all depends on the [ministry responsible for immigration] and that this case is unprecedented. With such a novel case, the NGO doesn’t know how to respond. They don’t want to change their policy. I think my current personal situation is a violation of human rights. I expect them to find a reasonable solution. In the short term, I am planning to claim asylum just before my fellowship ends. In this case, I would have to give up on extending my fellowship. But if I apply for a visa extension without a valid passport, my application will be refused and I will be late in claiming asylum. I am also unclear about what this status of asylum seeker means. So, I am really in a bind.

Because of the enormous pressures brought to bear on her and the lack of flexible responding by the organizations designed to support her, Ayşe’s sense of unbelonging is plain: ‘I feel like I don’t belong anywhere’.

This sense of unbelonging was a common among my interviewees no matter which European country they had found refuge in. Unable to resume their productive academic lives in Turkey and lacking a sense of belonging in their new temporary positions in Europe, many described their lives as being ‘in limbo’. Rather than being rooted in homesickness or nostalgia – exiled scholars generally feel comfortable in their host country’s language, academic culture, and social lifeways – this sense of unbelonging is that of being dismissed *as an academic*. One interviewee currently living in the UK echoed the sentiments of many: ‘I don’t feel at home here. In fact, I lost all sense of belonging the moment I was dismissed [from my position in Turkey]. Because of this loss, I have many doubts about my future in academia’.

# Anonymous exile versus singularity

As examples of anonymously persecuted persons, scholars from Turkey now exiled in Europe seek – together, individually, in the company of their European colleagues – to imaginatively reconstruct their academic subjectivities and singularities. Because the current Turkish government does not single out a few ‘exceptional’ individuals for censure but instead targets the entire spectrum of intellectual workers in an anonymous purging process of mass exclusion and othering, this exile is unique from those classic examples exemplified by the long-term advocacy for individual writers by organizations such a PEN International or IFEX. In those instances, public figures are targeted *as individuals*. In contrast, today’s Turkish academics in exile are targeted *as academics*. While this ‘anonymous exile’ spots individuals not by name but *en masse*, it nonetheless destroys individual academic and private lives, sending its targets into exile either abroad or internally. Having been blacklisted and banned from public service in the thousands by a sweeping government decree and unable to continue their research, find alternative work, or access financial assistance, Turkish academics find that they have been reduced to the level of anonymous biological life (Fassin 2012).

Yet within the humanitarian order where pity has invaded the political realm, the exiled – designated variously as refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, or ‘academics at risk’ – are also responded to in their host countries *as a mass* and therefore *as an anonymous group*. This move which reduces the individual academic to an ‘academic at risk’ ends by suppressing the academic’s singularity. In this one compassionate operation, the political is reduced to the moral and the singular to the anonymous. Politics and ethical singularity are emptied out. The central problem with this emotional approach to the exiled is that it underestimates the capacities and skills of the *exile-as-victim*. Because the emotional politics that views exiled scholars from Turkey as ‘academics at risk’ precludes their full inclusion in European knowledge production as uniquely capable peers with valuable insights, they remain visible in the academy primarily as elite, potentially marketable, anonymous victims of an equally anonymous rising authoritarianism. Politics is both emptied out and anonymized.

Despite the anonymizing processes to which they have been exposed, exiled academics continue to act and speak in the translocal public realm in the spirit of Gezi Park’s ‘pluralist insurrection of dignity’ (Özdemir 2015; Özbank 2013). Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the twofold nature of human plurality as *equality taken together with distinction* is useful for understanding the academic in exile’s demand for singularity and equality as a precondition to being able to speak and act agentively while in exile:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough’ (Arendt 1958: 175–176).

Rather than take on unquestioningly the role of suffering victim wounded by loss and homesickness, these academics seek to refill the public sphere with their pluralistic political singularities and their critical academic faculties. Rather than ask to be saved, they beckon others to join them in action.

To challenge the negative anonymising and victimising effects of exile and to invite their European colleagues into joint programmes of solidarity that nurture dis-exile, in 2017 exiled Turkish scholars initiated the creation of two new academic organizations in Germany. With support from the Institute of Turkish Studies, the University of Duisburg-Essen, the Forum Transregionale Studien, the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen, and Volkswagen Stiftung, they have established an Academia in Exile for scholars from or in Turkey (Özdemir, Mutluer and Özyürek forthcoming). In collaboration with their colleagues who have remained in Turkey and with funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and the University of Potsdam, they have recently launched Off University, an online academy without borders for exiled and purged academics worldwide.

# Conclusion: Political solidarity and the possibility of dis-exile

While exile and return from it are most often identified with traumatic loss and nostalgic ache, exile in fact contains within it potentialities, possibilities, and beginnings. These recent initiatives demonstrate that while the current conditions of academic exile carry negative effects, these are accompanied by the potential for what I call ‘dis-exile’ – the dignified struggle to appear as singular academics in the public arena of knowledge production. In the 1970s, the Uruguayan author Mario Benedetti (1973) coined the term *desexilio*, variously translated as ‘dis-exile’ or ‘un-exile’, to denote the postexilic aftermath of return to one’s homeland. Here, my interlocutors have outlined the possibility of and obstacles to another kind of dis-exile, one that may begin long before repatriation. This kind of *dis-exile in exile* marks the capacity of the exiled to disrupt the negative victimising, anonymising, and objectifying features of humanitarian exile at the same that it opens up the possibility of solidarity among academic, critical, and political equals.

The ethical response to their political exile that Turkish academics seek demands recognition of them not as academic refugees to be met with compassion but as political subjectivities with whom critiques may be mounted. In reconsidering exile by way of dis-exile the anonymous operation that turns ‘academics in exile’ into ‘academics at risk’ and subjects of action into objects of compassion is disrupted. Such a dual logic also necessarily ties the exit from homeland to the entrance in hostland, establishing a translocal, transnational space in which the conditions that give rise to exile and the conditions under which the exiled are welcomed inform one another.

As the number of academics living in exile rises (SAR 2017; GCPEA 2018), a critical appraisal of the humanitarian helping strategies employed by academic institutions and supporting NGOs is crucial. Humanitarian policies based on the compassionate approach must be superseded by acts of solidarity grounded in the sense of belonging to a common world. Only then can the political problems that give rise to such exile be confronted. As we know from human history, the kindness with which host societies welcome such exiles may be suddenly replaced by hatred and cruelty.

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