Off Center, Vol. 3, No. 2: Ostracism

Among the objects currently on display in the Onassis Cultural Center New York’s exhibition, *A World of Emotions: Ancient Greece 700 BC – 200 AD*, are a handful of ostraka—small pieces of pottery on which 5th-century B.C. Athenians would inscribe the name of a citizen they wished to banish from the *polis*. With too many votes, the unlucky winner would then be forced out of the city and exiled for ten years.

It is from this practice that we derive the word ostracism, which the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “exclusion by general consent from common privileges or social acceptance.” In this edition of Off Center, we examine different examples of ostracism, in both the ancient and contemporary sense of the word.

**READ**

In this excerpt from his *Parallel Lives*, the Greek biographer Plutarch disapprovingly describes the ostracism of Aristides.

*They assembled at Athens from all the towns in Attica and banished Aristides by the ostracism, disguising their envy of his character under the specious pretense of guarding against*
tyranny. For the ostracism was not a punishment for crimes and misdemeanors but was very
decently called a humbling and lessening of some excessive influence and power. In reality it
was a mild gratification of envy, for by this means whoever was offended at the growing
greatness of another discharged his spleen, not in anything cruel or inhuman, but only in voting
a ten-years’ banishment.

http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/celebrity/voted-island

In his 1838 address to the Harvard Divinity School, Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed a
transcendentalist vision of Christianity—one at odds with what he called "historical
Christianity." It led to his ostracism from both Harvard and the Unitarian Church.

To aim to convert a man by miracles, is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, a true
Christ, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments.

http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm
The history of leprosy is to a large extent a history of ostracism. But this trend is starting to change, as Rebecca Solnit explains in this essay for *Harper’s Magazine*.

*Leprosy is really two diseases: the physical effects and the social response to them. In Hawaii, where leprosy was endemic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was called the “separating sickness.”* Once diagnosed, Hawaiian sufferers were hunted down like outlaws and offered a choice of exile or death. And Hawaii wasn’t alone. For centuries, from India to Iceland, people with leprosy were ostracized. Only in the past sixty years have even a minority of leprosy patients received truly humane care.

[http://harpers.org/archive/2013/06/the-separating-sickness/?single=1](http://harpers.org/archive/2013/06/the-separating-sickness/?single=1)
Vincent van Gogh was famously ostracized by his neighbors, who lobbied to have him committed to an insane asylum. But for the French dramatist Antonin Artaud—who suffered a not dissimilar fate—van Gogh’s exclusion is not proof of his insanity, but rather of society’s sickness.

And what is an authentic lunatic? He is a man who has preferred to become what is socially understood as mad rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honor. In its asylums, society has managed to strangle all those it has wished to rid itself of or to defend itself from, because they refused to make themselves accomplices to various flagrant dishonesties. For a lunatic is also a man whom society has not wished to listen to, and whom it is determined to prevent from uttering unbearable truths.

https://monoskop.org/images/9/9b/Artaud_Antonin_Van_Gogh_the_Suicide_Provoked_by_Society.pdf
John Carlos and Tommie Smith are today celebrated for raising their fists on the podium of the 1968 Olympics. As Carlos recalls in this NPR interview, their act of defiance led to ostracism from the world of mainstream American athletics.

*I'm no more or no better than anybody out there. I just had an opportunity in life to prepare myself for that particular day, and when I got there, I'm just thanking God that I had the courage, the insight, and the wisdom to say it's not for my life on the stand, but it's for the life of my kids and my grandkids and those that come after.*

Few characters have been as thoroughly ostracized as Hester Prynne, who in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is humiliated for baring a child out of wedlock. In this episode of Studio 360, various speakers revisit this cornerstone of American fiction.

*The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.*

http://www.wnyc.org/story/american-icons-scarlet-letter/
In this lecture from Yale University’s open courses, historian and classicist Donald Kagan describes the emergence of Greek democracy after the Persian Wars. He ends his remarks with a discussion of ostracism—how it worked, who tended to be ostracized, and what purpose it served in Greek democracy.

Most years there was no ostracism, only once in a while, and every single person that we hear ostracized was a leading political figure. Ostracism, in short, was meant to be a constitutional device to work in the political realm as a way of deterring a coup d'état, treason, or other forms of unrest.

http://oyc.yale.edu/classics/clcv-205/lecture-12#ch4
Scratch the surface of any countercultural movement and you are likely to find a group of people who have been ostracized from their home communities. This was certainly true for members of New York's ballroom drag scene in the late 1980s—a world chronicled in Jennie Livingston’s landmark documentary Paris is Burning.

We as a people for the past 400 years is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned to survive. That is why in the ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing, or speaking, you is a marvel.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hedJer7I1vI

Liao Yiwu was imprisoned by the Chinese government for his poem “Massacre,” which he wrote in the wake of student protests at Tiananmen Square. Once released, he was ostracized by his family and left to scrape together a living on the streets. There, he gravitated toward other marginalized members of society—a professional mourner, a human trafficker, and a public toilet manager, among others. He later told some of their stories in a book of interviews, The Corpse Walker.

In prison I was terribly mistreated. That's why I tried to commit suicide twice. I met all sorts of horrible people—murderers, thieves—and I got to listen to them. I heard all these stories they told me in jail, and then I wrote about them.
For Patti Smith, the poet and artist William Blake serves as a guiding light—a shining example of how to persevere in the face of denigration and ostracism. In this clip from Democracy Now, she discusses her interest in Blake and performs her song “My Blakean Year.”

I was thinking of William Blake, who was such a great artist, poet, printer, philosopher, activist, who died in poverty, was ridiculed in his time, who was almost forgotten. But in his lifetime he never let go of his visionary powers.

https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/8/patti_smith_on_19th_century_poet

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