



Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

Citizenship after Orientalism

Professor Engin Isin:

Hello my name is Engin Isin. I am a professor of politics at the Open University. I am also the director of the project 'citizenship after orientalism'.

There is a strong sense today that the world we have come to inhabit is on the cusp of profound transformations. The sources of this sense are many. The ongoing struggle over the meaning of 'climate change' and its consequences are part of this sense. But so is the talk of the rise of China, India and other societies and economies on the scene. We can sense that ongoing struggles in Israel and Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, not to mention in Afghanistan and Iraq, are also part of these transformations. There is a sense that there is a new 'scramble for Africa' – a phrase from the height of colonization of that continent in the late nineteenth century. There is a sense that the crisis of Europe and European states is deeper than the economic and financial crisis that concerns us at the moment.

We don't as yet, and we may never have, a credible narrative about these transformations. However we interpret them, our narratives will reflect the grounds from which we speak — meaning, we speak from both a geographic location but also a social, cultural, and economic position. To put it another way, there is no singular or comprehensive perspective from which we can see these transformations. The world looks very different from Guangzhou or Caracas. Yet, there are also trends, or broad patterns if you like, within these transformations that have acquired certain traction or visibility that spans across various perspectives.

One such trend concerns the place of Europe in the world. For centuries, Europe has been at the centre of the world – again both geographically (as represented by cartography) and socially, culturally and economically. Arguably, this has been the case since that period which is called the 'renaissance' or rebirth, or at least since the modern emergence of colonization and slavery, which were certainly a part of renaissance, or perhaps its dark side. Europe, and later its expanded image 'the West', has come to dominate how the world is seen if not made. Despite all the resistance or protest against it Europe placed itself in the centre of the world in more ways than one. And now there is a strong sense that it can no longer do so — or be able to do so — at least without stronger and more persistent resistance against such placement. Europe and the West are no longer the centre of the world. The consequences of this displacement or decentring are profound. It may take a long while before we understand them.

One such consequence is the question of political thought – that human, all too human, activity — focused on grasping (and shaping) norms, laws, and practices through which power is exercised. Europe not only stamped its authority on how and by whom political thought was produced since the renaissance but also made political thought broadly understood one of the ways in which Europe, or the West, was centred, that is, placed at the geographic, social, cultural, and economic centre of the world and sustained its centrality. The great contribution of Edward Said's 1978 masterpiece *Orientalism* was to have highlighted one of the strategies by which political thought — again broadly understood since Said's primary focus was art — centred Europe by distinguishing itself from other 'cultures' through a series of presences and absences. Europe was the space of presence of such things as capitalism, law, science, medicine, and labour and of broader concepts or supposed processes such as rationality, state, secularism, and bureaucracy.

One such presence and absence that came to be associated exclusively with Europe was a type of political subjectivity known as citizenship. By political subjectivity we mean the ways in which people take up political positions, that is, claim a right, if not the right, to have rights. The audios in this series all explore the ways in which people act as political subjects. These audios are from the project *Citizenship After Orientalism* (Oecumene) funded by the European Research Council (ERC). Since January 2010, six postdoctoral researchers, two visiting postdoctoral fellows and three PhD students have conducted research on the vexed relationship between citizenship and orientalism and explored ways of rearticulating or reimagining this relationship. Drawing upon this research, these audios present statements on citizenship as an exclusive property of Europe. These audios report on research that provides a glimpse of how we might (and must) begin to think about citizenship as political subjectivity differently.

Critique of citizenship in European democracies over the last two decades has demonstrated that the abstract and ostensibly universal and secular figure of the citizen was in fact a projection of a male, propertied, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian and Western figure. This critique also demonstrated that the challenge was not one of progressively including the subaltern figures such as women, blacks, queers, Muslims, and eventually non-Westerners into that figure through sexual citizenship, multicultural citizenship, or indigenous citizenship. Such assimilation meant that marginalized figures could appear only through the qualities of the dominant figure of the citizen. It also meant that the logic of citizenship as a dividing practice remained intact – there would always be new social groups defined by their supposed ineligibility to be considered citizens in the societies in which they lived. 'Oecumene: Citizenship after Orientalism', our project, explored the possibilities of uncovering subaltern citizens and their acts and practices not with reference to the dominant figure of the citizen and its orientalizing perspective, but as a challenge to them.

The project's name, 'Oecumene', plays on the etymology of the word, which originally meant the inhabited world, separating it from 'another' world in ancient Greece. It then acquired a meaning that included other 'worlds', finally standing for the 'whole' world.

The audios explore the Arabic origins of the right to question authority through subversive storytelling; how Adivasis (indigenous people of India) have made claims to rights and how their claims spur acts of writing as acts of citizenship; and how Gurus cultivate post-secular citizenship in India. They also explore how settler colonialism itself has been responsible for transforming the image of Europe into an image of 'the West' as the dominant political force in the world; how the universalization of Western sexual values, and the contestation of the way in which sexuality has come to define new forms of imperialism, and; how women's struggles are shaping citizenship in postcolonial India. The research that is not represented in these audios included how orientalism plays a strategic role in curbing migrant activism in Europe; how debt is reorganizing the geopolitics of Europe's orientalism; how genealogies of multiculturalism illustrate a long history of the politics of difference in the UK; how Israel's Haredi settlers are unsettling modern Israeli citizenship; and, how a hybrid Muslim family law is being forged in the UK legal system.

The thread that binds these diverse research projects is precisely the question of political thought in a world without Europe at its centre. But it is not a world without Europe as such. As I said earlier, it is impossible to speak from nowhere (that is without a perspective) and we, the members of this project, are 'located' in Europe. But we are speaking from Europe through a political thought without frontiers, if you like: that is, without creating boundaries as a series of presences and absences of political subjectivity between Europe and its others. Instead, we are investigating citizenship as political subjectivity, the ways in which people make themselves as political subjects.

We hope that you will enjoy listening to them as much as we enjoyed conducting research on these challenging topics.