
cahier#1

ON ACTS OF
CITIZENSHIP



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NOTES ON CITIZENSHIP
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FROM POST-/DE-
NATIONAL TO POST-
WESTPHALIAN
CITIZENSHIP (AND
CONTEMPORARY ART'S
PROMISE TO DELIVER)
Victoria Ivanova



← Bram
Demunter,
(2017), 'Beside
the enclosed
garden'
(detail)

NOTES ON CITIZENSHIP

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Vandevelde

iLIANA FOKIANAKI I would like to start with the fact that through the institution's decision to focus more on the city, we have begun to look at the city as our main focal subject. I began wondering whether cities actually exist anymore, or whether the State designates the confines and policies of a city and imagines it through its bureaucratic "gaze", covering vast areas of land and creating offices, roads, traffic lights, cul-de-sacs etc. that it then calls "cities". I was trying to grasp what a "city" might mean or be in 2017, and whether in fact what we know as cities today are just vessels for other structures. I tried to look into the notion of the city now becoming obsolete, since we live secluded in our own microcosms, our own small neighbourhoods, and interact with our "clans", or our online worlds of people that act alike, think alike or "Like" alike online – without actually ever knowing or grasping the greater limits of the cities that we inhabit. This line of thinking immediately took me back to the dystopian/utopian novels and films of my childhood, where architectural descriptions of structures in fact gave outlines to the city in my imagination, but the only way I could grasp the notion of the city as something tangible was through the personal stories of the characters in my childhood books, who were its citizens. It reminded me of a volume by Verso that was recently published, where Thomas Moore's 'Utopia' is revisited in essays by writ-

ers Ursula Le Guin and China Mieville. Le Guin states that *“every utopia since Utopia has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author’s or in the reader’s judgment, both a good place and a bad one. Every utopia contains a dystopia”*¹. And it reinforces my realization of the impossibility of the single city, as opposed to the co-existence of myriads of cities within a city in accordance with our perceptions and understanding. People make and define cities; cities are constructed through our lives. And somehow, my initial reaction to the programming of this institution and subsequently to its first exhibition was to primarily direct myself in between the grander scale and the smaller scale, the interchange of the imagining of the state of what the city is and the citizen’s imagining of what it is.

ANTONIA ALAMPI I think that our interests really met in wanting to look at the social fabric of the city, at the people who inhabit them. For example, I was particularly fascinated by the diverse population that characterizes the city of Antwerp, which is paradigmatic of many others in continental (former) colonial Europe, including Berlin, where I live. Also because I am Italian and come from Calabria, a region with a high density of emigrants, and am an immigrant myself in Germany, it was interesting to look at the waves of migration to Belgium. As Dirk Geldof² writes, Italians, in addition to Poles and Czechs, were among the first to come here as from the 1930s as guest workers in the coal mines, followed by Greeks, Spanish and Portuguese and then Moroccans and Turks during the rich years between 1945 and the first oil crises of 1973. However, since the nineties (for obvious reasons: the fall of the Berlin Wall, globalization

¹ Thomas Moore, (2016), ‘Utopia’, with introduction by China Mieville and essays by Ursula K. Le Guin, Verso, p.233

² See Dirk Geldof, (2016), ‘Super Diversity in the Heart of Europe’, Acco, Leuven.

and the growing economic disparity that came with it, the Gulf War and the war in Yugoslavia, and the European Union's free movement of labour) Belgian urban settings have reached an unprecedented diversity. In a city like Antwerp, almost half of the population (49%) has a migration background, from all over the globe (the highest percentage of migrants come from other European countries). In a recent interview on *The Other Journal*³, Judith Butler pointed out the importance of asking "*on what conditions do we live together, and what kinds of obligations bind us to one another and to the polities in which we live?*". And this is one of the questions I find relevant to pose.

But also to respond to what you said about the city being its citizens, I think it is important to mention that what I am particularly interested in addressing is also what parameters we use to define who is entitled to be a citizen, and on which premises (from legality, via economy, to morals and ethics) those parameters are still in place. I think that if we really want to understand or grasp the city, we also need to look into its non-registered and non-legal hidden corners. And this is a subject that a work like Ahmet Ögüt's 'Center for Urban Citizens', which we commissioned and which will reside here for the next three years, directly engages with; questioning and stretching what the definition of a citizen might be, particularly from the vantage point of progressive movements that started in cities, microcosms that might be easier to manage, organize, read, but also to act upon.

MICHIEL VANDEVELDE I am interested in the language, the notions, definitions and the dominant ideology that defines cities and citizenship in the

³ Judith Butler & Stephanie Berbec, (26th of June 2017), *The Other Journal*, 'WE ARE WORLDLESS WITHOUT ONE ANOTHER', <https://the-otherjournal.com/2017/06/26/worldless-without-one-another-interview-judith-butler/>

west. You rightly describe the enormous cultural diversity of today's Europe, and the smaller scale: Antwerp, as a result of different migration processes. Now, what interests me is how to contest the dominant cultural understanding of the organization of cities, or more specifically: of citizenship, after, one might say, "super-diversification".

I think the struggle – and this is where a space like Extra City has a role to play – is to contest the ontology of liberal democracy, of citizenship defined through a liberal understanding of the term. Liberalism implies "openness", yet there is very little openness to be found towards what is "different", towards what is "other". Liberal values have concrete borders, the borders of administrative offices, of Europe, and so on. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are both subtle and obviously visible, but we like to feign ignorance of these mechanisms. It is more comfortable to act as if we don't know. I hope that the least we can do, that art can do, is to lay these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion bare, not only through the artists we invite, and through the artworks they create, but also through a critical attitude towards ourselves: because we can't solely address critically other public institutions or structures without critically examining and laying bare the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the relations of power, that we ourselves install. I hope that the fact that we work as a kind of loose collective will allow for internal criticality towards each other, but also the creation of a citizens council, existing of around 30 people, living in Antwerp, with different backgrounds, might create the possibility of critical awareness around how Extra City is being run and who is (unconsciously) "allowed" to enter and who is not.

IF To pick up on that, the problem with liberalism is not its frontiers, but rather the hundreds of borders within its frontiers, that still marginalize and separate citizens among themselves. Since the 1980s, the so-called democracies of the Western world advocated a state that demands a lot from its citizens and offers less every time, and this has actually fortified the internal borders we are discussing, creating divisions. Little has changed since Hannah Arendt's writings, in which she names the stateless as the ones deprived of the right to have rights, and little has changed since Spivak's reading of Arendt, which leads us to today's globalization: the deficient form of the nation state in the modern period allowed for the neoliberal state in the late twentieth century. One that we see currently implementing its powers, with even more force; thus these internal borders are now magnified. Where does art stand in all this? How much actual effect can art have in a globalized capitalist era? The recent article by JJ Charlesworth, 'The end of the Biennial'⁴, is a good example of naming the big conundrums of our practices. Art institutions remain institutions of power. However, they also function as a mirror of society that supposedly reflects today's issues through a cultural language. And subsequently, it is important to look into the utterances of this language: how power structures are defined and communicated in an institution, but also to acknowledge *by whom* they are defined. What could be more efficient than to focus on the local context in order to see in real time how these power structures are set and how these languages uttered. Therefore, the fact we have chosen to focus on citizenship through the viewpoint of Antwerp with all its idiosyncrasies and the super-diversity that you both mention, might present interesting questions for cultural practices. We are trying

⁴ JJ Charlesworth, (July 17th 2017), Art review online, https://artreview.com/opinion/opinion_online_jj_charlesworth_the_end_of_the_biennial/

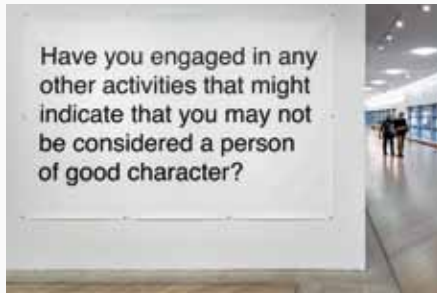
to change the rigid structure of an institution, working all together, a curatorial team, director and staff diverse in culture and gender: our polyphony will hopefully generate aspects of cultural practice that many institutions lack. And we do this with the direct and constant input of an Extra City council that is composed of people for the most part not with a background in the arts, but who are, rather, related to our research, ranging from diversity consultants, activists in social movements, to urban planners working on democratizing public space. I think that it is a good start to actually turn the institution inside out, so that the citizen-visitor sees its “insides”: its mechanisms, functions and thinking processes, and therefore be able to address its practice directly. It is an experiment in power structure systems. I also see this through the works in the exhibition: Antonis Pittas brings the neighbourhood into the institution quite literally, by presenting parts of the homes of Antwerp’s citizens as artworks in Extra City.

AA In the spirit of self-criticism that Michiel called for, I don’t think we are that diverse as a team, given that we are all white middle-class Europeans and all of the people (except for one) on a salary at Extra City as an institution, are Flemish. On the other hand, for the first time in the institution’s history, its director is a woman, and women are actually part of the artistic team, which is certainly an achievement we should acknowledge.

On the note about the frontiers within frontiers, I want to quote Stephan Lessenich, who said: *“strictly speaking, citizenship is what economists call a “club good”. Club goods are defined by reflecting artificial scarcity: in principle, the access to these goods could be open to all, but it is arbitrarily circumscribed to and*

monopolized by a particular group of people."⁵ This relates again to the fictional openness of liberalism and our European democracies, which are fundamentally based, as Lessenich argues, on externalizing exploitation (of land, of labour, etc.). In essence, our privileges as European citizens are also based on the violent exploitation of the resources of others elsewhere. Who, in turn, are not allowed to access "our" nations and with whom we don't want to share our rights.

⁵ Stephan Lessenich, (2016), 'The Open Society and Its Contradictions: Towards a Critical Sociology of Global Inequalities', lecture.



I think the series of works included in our opening exhibition, by Meriç Algün, a Turkish artist with Swedish citizenship, and entitled 'Becoming European', speaks incisively of what type of man-made barriers have been erected, or how unequal a notion such as mobility is. In works that emerge from her own experience, she highlights what one has to do and how one has to think in order to be given the entrance ticket to this thing called European citizenship.

While in the same show, but at the other end of the spectrum, James Bridle presents 'Citizen Ex' – an artwork consisting mainly of a downloadable plug-in that produces an algorithmic citizenship spanning multiple jurisdictions and national borders that is based on our movements on the internet, showing us where we go on the web, and what that means. The work shows

↑ Meriç Algün, 'Billboards', (2012), series of billboards, print on PVC with grommets, 3x2m each Exhibition view: 'Becoming European', Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2014
Photo: Åsa Lundén
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Nordenhake & Moderna Museet, Stockholm

what terrains new technologies and the internet open. Would a global citizenship such as an algorithmic one actually be possible? What commitments would it entail? And what responsibilities? Engin Isin and Bryan Turner⁶ trace the difference between liberal and cultural theories of citizenship. In essence they write about how in the first the role of the state is rather utilitarian, facilitating the construction of an individual that can be placed on the market and whose “happiness” is measured in relation to individual wealth. The second is based on what is defined as “virtue”, meaning in the construction of an autonomous and thinking individual, an active agent within a community, that engages in, and has the intellectual and practical tools to engage in, political participation. From there, they bring the reader into thinking how in order to even think of something such as a cosmopolitan or global citizenship, we would need to fundamentally re-evaluate precisely this notion of virtue that is being increasingly eroded by neoliberal governance. Lina Attalah also looks into this through her text in this reader. Amongst personal experiences between Egypt, Palestine and Iran Lina Attalah speaks of possible forms, or the need thereof, of active citizenship. One of these is Mada Masr, a platform for independent and progressive journalism she co-founded in Egypt, which keeps existing and speaking out loud in two languages (Arabic and English) against state repression and censorship.

⁶ Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), (2002), ‘Handbook of Citizenship Studies’, Sage.

MV The two different approaches to citizenship you mention are interesting to me. The liberal “individual” versus the cultural “active agent within a community”. I haven’t read the book you refer to, so I might go in a different direction here. I have to think about a few things.



First of all about the individualization of political struggles and of activism. Political disobedience is for me an important part of taking up your role as citizen. In our liberal Western democracies a lot of groups, a lot of individuals, have gained more and more rights. Which is a very good thing. Yet, at the same time it has dispersed political action in many different directions, and to smaller subgroups. It seems difficult today to unite. To come together.

I have to think about what Adam Curtis says in an interview: *“I thought the one image that really summed it up for me was the photograph of the protest outside Trump Tower. I think it was two days after the election, and there was a girl holding up a poster that said, “I just feel so sad.” And I thought, “Well, that’s not enough”. I’m so sorry, because, you know, we have gotten to this point that is brilliant – where we are all allowed to express ourselves. Fifty years ago, we weren’t allowed to do that, so it’s great. That’s about feminism, that’s about gay rights, that’s about all the good things we’ve done. But at the same time we’ve gotten locked off into the individualism that is at the heart of that. What we’ve got to recapture, somehow, is the idea – and this is the real key thing for politics in the future – of allowing people to feel that they are individuals, with rights, and that*

↑ James Bridle, (2015), ‘Algorithmic citizenships based on browsing behaviour’, from ‘Citizen Ex’

they desire to do what they want to do, but also feel that they can give themselves up to something bigger. Squaring that circle is going to be the future of politics on the left. Someone's got to find a way of doing it."

So, I think it is about contesting structures of power *together*, no matter who has the power, right or left, because these divisions don't really count anymore today. It is about realizing that being an "active agent within a community" is about a community without any identity. And that's where it becomes difficult but interesting. To learn to think outside of identity, and finally leave identity politics behind us.

In that sense, I think Anton Jäger's piece in the *cahier* is very interesting. Because he re-introduces the term "class". A lot of people tend to avoid that term nowadays, for various reasons: it is a too "leftist" term, or "there are no classes anymore", etc. Maybe the classes have changed, but class has not gone, different social statuses still exist. The struggle here is about power. And it doesn't unite people based on their cultural identity, but based on social inequality. I think it is very necessary today to dare to use this notion of class.

IF To answer Antonia and Michiel together. In terms of how diverse we are I actually disagree and think we are quite diverse in many of our identities. (class, national, gender identity etc.) More specifically, the term "white" and "European" can be very different for a citizen of Portugal or Greece and for a Belgian or French citizen. In financial terms, we are talking about "a Europe of two gears" referring

to growth numbers that are very different, when comparing the rich north and the poor south. And we need to mention that the colour of one's skin, albeit the pale colour of one's skin, does not always guarantee superiority or advantage, although in most cases it does. And here comes class identity, national identity and the financial condition of the nationState that reconfigures the terms "white" and "European". And I think that Victoria Ivanova's text in this cahier, is addressing directly the greater picture of identity in terms of class identification systems, that are in turn defined by national identity -and the economic wealth of individuals belonging to countries and geographies. Therefore citizenship can be an asset. To go back to Antonia's comments, of course in terms of the art world these geographies and class identities are also existent. The art world in general is thought to consist of middle-class individuals and this in itself poses questions in regards to the ability we have to actually "influence" societal changes and shifts. I think Sven Lütticken put it quite succinctly by saying that *"any artistic or intellectual critique must be self-critique. The structural cultural revolution has created a mobile international quasi-class whose complicity with what it actually claims to oppose ... is blatantly obvious. We too are part of the problem"*.⁷

So, very crucial points have been made here in terms of national identity and class identity. I tackle them in my research and I really do struggle with these terms, especially after the extreme surge of identity politics in the 90s. But I think it can be very dangerous to abandon identity politics completely, since this is exactly what many EU parties used as an argument and

⁷ Sven Lütticken, (2017), 'Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy', Berlin, Sternberg Press, p. 181.

they in turn allowed (unconsciously?) the identitarian extreme right to emerge, of course with the help of the financial crisis. We only need to look at the neighbours of Belgium, the Netherlands and France with the examples of politicians such as Wilders and Le Pen, respectively. Identity politics use this idea of “us versus them” and this has proven to be extremely problematic and polarizing when used by the wrong ideologies.

The failure of the left has been either the complete abandonment of class politics in some cases, or the questions they raise on class politics, questions which are wrong in my opinion, or to phrase it better they are not wrong, but they lack a contemporary approach and relevance. But as you say, Michiel, we might have had new formations of class today, but this has not abolished class by any means. Indeed, the second stage of capitalism has allowed for citizens to move from one class to another: look at the baby boomers of the nineties, “from rags to riches” examples of tycoons from the 80s onwards, the CEOs of Wall Street etc. and then look at Guy Standing’s recent analysis of the dangerous new class, The Precariat⁸, which is a sort of an inverse mirror image: citizens suddenly in a precarious financial state, one that unites them into one new classification which he names “the precariat”. Now what is important here, to link back to Antonia’s initial reference to Judith Butler, is to see what it is that actually unites us and under what premises this unification and common struggle – or resistance as Michiel writes – occurs. It’s what Tariq Ramadan proposes as “*the sharing of the common rather than the integration of differences*”,⁹ and the core of it is to create alliances that have a true base, that steer clear of identity-based ideolo-

⁸ Guy Standing, (2011), ‘The Precariat: the new dangerous class’, Bloomsbury Academic.

⁹ Tariq Ramadan, (2011), ‘On Super-diversity’, Witte de With with Sternberg Press.

gies, but that give birth to what I have proposed in recent texts as a “neo-identitarian” world that is yet to come.¹⁰ One that speaks a new language – to return to language whose importance we discussed previously – one that abandons the established lexicon of power dichotomies, one that forms new constructions of power. And art has the agency to actually propose scenarios for these new citizens to think and act themselves into existence.

¹⁰ I am using here this term of “neo-identitarianism” as a concept in progress, I urge our readers to treat it as such since it is part of a current research, and I hope through the work at Extra City to be able to develop it more concretely via our programming the next years.

FROM POST-/DE-NATIONAL TO POST-WESTPHALIAN CITIZENSHIP (VIA CONTEMPORARY ART'S PERFECTLY COMPROMISED CONDITION)

Victoria Ivanova

I. Citizenship: Some Remarks on Legacy and Pressing Challenges

In an essay published in 2002 as part of the 'Handbook on Citizenship Studies', sociologist Saskia Sassen – most known for her work on the rise of the global city in the final decades of the 20th century – argues for the need to rethink the contingent, yet largely naturalized, premises upon which citizenship as a model for structuring the relations between the “individual and polity” is based.¹ Historically, the nation state crystallized as a core unit of Europe's geopolitical architecture with the Treaty of Westphalia 1648, and was consequently universalized and consolidated through colonial expansion, the institution of international law and industrialization. As a result, “nationality” became the key juridico-political determinant of citizenship globally, and the state apparatus its organizational machinery. To this extent, from early modernity onwards, the nation-state has functioned as the sole polity endowed with the right

¹ Saskia Sassen, (2002), 'Towards Post-National and Denationalized Citizenship'. In: Engin Isin & Bryan Turner (eds.), 'Handbook of Citizenship Studies', pp. 277-291.

to set citizenship's parameters and circumscribe its constitutive requirements, holding a *de facto* and *de jura* monopoly over citizenship as a juridico-political relationship between the sovereign and citizen. Meanwhile, the extension of citizenship to population subgroups (e.g. women, children, minorities), modulations in the nature of rights held by citizens (e.g. the ability to make claims against state institutions) and changes in the criteria for holding citizenship (e.g. permission to hold multiple citizenships) marched hand in hand with larger social, technological and geopolitical transformations (e.g. successful emancipatory movements, increasing reliance on technology rather than people as a means of warfare, new bilateral and multilateral agreements between states).

The present juridico-political categories of belonging that are linked to the nation-state continue to carry profound – even if seemingly out-of-date and politically conservative – cultural resonances that have embedded within the construct of citizenship such notions as “blood” relations (i.e. citizenship by *ius sanguinis*), “being of the soil” (i.e. *ius soli* – citizenship through one's connection to specific land), or “naturalized foreigner” (i.e. acquiring citizenship by naturalization, whereby a “foreigner” “accepts” and internalizes the order of the nation state, with the latter in turn accepting and internalizing the foreigner). However, as Sassen's larger *oeuvre* clearly demonstrates, the era of globally mobile capital created new actors such as transnational corporations and supranational institutions, which have *de facto* undermined the nation state's previously held monopoly over governance.² In the 2002 essay cited above – written in the twilight period that followed the full onset of

² Saskia Sassen, (1991), 'The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo', Oxford/Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Saskia Sassen, (2005) 'Denationalization: Territory, Authority and Rights in a Global Digital Age', Oxford/Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

globalization in the 1990s but preceding the financial crisis of 2008 – Sassen reflects on the sociological and critical deconstructive re-conceptualizations of citizenship that have emerged as a result of this shifting landscape. Sassen identifies two critical strands that have increasingly gained traction: those emphasizing post-national determinations of citizenship, which offer qualifications to citizenship other than nationality – for example, community affiliation (e.g. belonging to a specific immigrant community), or through everyday practices that bind individuals (e.g. stay-at-home mums), and those that emphasize transnational organizational forms that compete with the nation state as the politico-administrative epicentre of the institution of citizenship. While the former – the post-national conception of citizenship³ – emerges as a product of the democratization and liberalization of the subject-sovereign relations that was characteristic of the post-Second World War era and that extended/liberalized citizenship either by including previously unrecognized groups within its ambit or by showing that other forms of belonging were as valid as that of nationality, it still ultimately falls back on the juridico-political infrastructure of the nation state. By contrast, the denationalizing conception of citizenship accentuates the weakening of that infrastructure by showing how other configurations are replacing some of its key functions, as evident with the formation of regional configurations like the European Union. Yet, despite the cracks that have increasingly fragmented the presumed natural order of the Westphalian system registered by the post-national and denationalizing paradigms, the largely naturalized images of nation-state belonging (i.e. “blood,” “soil,” “incorporated foreigner”) continue

³ The regime of human rights – legally instituted in the second half of the 20th century – may also be characterized as a post-national development insofar as it positions the national citizen first and foremost as a member of the global community of humans endowed with human-specific rights, however, the enforcement of that regime falls back on the state infrastructure.

to haunt the commonplace associations with citizenship as much as continuing to serve as its legal foundation. At the same time, the two counter-narratives presented by Sassen reveal a blind-spot that the author is acutely aware of given her work on global cities as financial centres that have transformed the “national”:

“From where I look at these issues, there is a third possibility, beyond these two. It is that citizenship, even if situated in institutional settings that are “national”, is a possibly changed institution if the meaning of the national itself has changed. In so far as globalization has changed certain features of the territorial and institutional organization of the state, the institution of citizenship – its formal rights, its practices, its psychological dimension – has also been transformed even when it remains centred in the national state.”⁴

The interest of this essay lies precisely in this third possibility, which may be summarized as one emerging from the increasing financialization of the global economic order, which in the case of citizenship has made itself evident in the surface symptom of citizenship granted by direct financial investment – a category most often excluded from the Westphalian narrative, but also under-explored in the sphere of cultural critique and the deconstructive approaches presented by Sassen. By focusing on the implications of citizenship’s financialization for revising the basic premises upon which citizenship is considered as a structural category, this essay puts forward some speculative propositions as to what is at stake when

⁴ Saskia Sassen, (2002), ‘Towards Post-National and Denationalized Citizenship’, p. 286.



we ask the following question: how can contemporary culture – and particularly the sphere of contemporary art – partake in establishing post-Westphalian and progressive citizenship modalities?

↑ Femke Herregraven, (2015), 'Liquid Citizenship', <http://femkeherregraven.net/liquidcitizenship/>

II. The Rise of the Financial Order and Its Implications for Citizenship

In a series of lectures formulated at Goldsmiths College between 2013 and 2015, Michel Feher develops a framework for considering the transformed roles of the subject, corporate entities and the state with the advent of financialization.⁵ Having re-coded the function of production by subjugating it to the logics of financial circulation, financialization has debunked production from its formerly central role in the industrial economy and, in turn, removed industrial production from its formerly leading role

⁵ Michel Feher, (2013-2015), 'The Age of Appreciation: Lectures on the Neoliberal Condition'. Available at: < <http://www.gold.ac.uk/architecture/projects/michel-feher/> >. Accessed: 18 July 2017.

in structuring “modern” societal organization.⁶ As Feher argues, the financial turn has meant a reorientation from profit maximization (by increasing productive output) to raising the capital value of the firm – i.e. the shareholder value of stock – by inspiring “investor confidence”. To this extent, financialization has explicitly placed the power into the hands of the investor as it is they who select what *can be* produced by either opening or blocking access to the realm of circulation, and implicitly into the hands of those who have the capacity and scalability to shape and normalize the criteria of accreditation for investment-worthy ventures, such as rating agencies (but also governments).

⁶ Gerald Epstein, (2005), ‘Introduction: Financialization and the world economy’. In: G. Epstein (ed.) ‘Financialization and the World Economy’. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 3-16; D.M. Kotz, (2010), ‘Financialization and neoliberalism’. In: G. Teeple and S. McBride (eds.) ‘Relations of Global Power: Neoliberal Order and Disorder’. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 1-18.



The shift is historically pinned to the change in the US-led economic policy in the early 1970s from post-Second World War demand-side economics that boosted American domestic consumption by subsidizing key industries (in part through military action abroad), and thus lowering domestic unemployment, to supply-side/monetary economics that favoured regulation of inflation by adjusting interest rates (which in turn affected borrowing). The monetarist policy came as a response to stagflation – an unprecedented coupling of sluggish growth and inflation – that hit the US in the early 1970s and was a product of high expenditure on foreign military and geopolitical projects (e.g. the Vietnam War and the Marshall Plan) that unbalanced America’s budget deficit and devalued the dollar. The collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 was in effect a relatively successful attempt at salvaging American global domination – albeit by transitioning it into a new form. The bond market responded to the free-floating exchange rate by placing greater emphasis on the credit-worthiness of sovereign debt, with governments entering the playing field that was previously primarily the domain of corporations, meaning that ensuring their states’ investment-worthiness (and their ability to borrow) becomes one of states’ key priorities. Credit-worthiness thus also becomes a cornerstone of the financial economy insofar as it is that which allows actors to participate in and reap benefits from circulation by being deemed worthy of investment – in this way unifying the previously distinct actors embodied by such categories as “the state”, “the company” and “the subject”.

Feher’s description of the financial transformation dovetails with the emergence of a new juridico-po-



↑ <https://www.nationalityindex.com/>

⁷ Citizenship by investment is granted on the fulfilment of set investment criteria and sometimes residential criteria.

⁸ For example, Russia in the 1990s and China until the present day – both states are infamous for having a large number of their citizens acquire second citizenship by investment in order to shield themselves from future risks. For a more

political category of citizenship – citizenship by investment⁷ – that sporadically emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in states that were reliant on offering competitive terms to foreign capital as a means of survival, as was for example the case for small states like St. Kitts and Nevis. For the investor, citizenship in such instances functions as a hedge or a diversification strategy, with the risks being imposed by tax-wielding governments, but equally by unstable or authoritarian state formations.⁸ The more rapid expansion of this category across jurisdictions has taken place since the late noughties and is today offered by most states in the Caribbean and a number of European states that have found themselves outcompeted in many other areas of attracting investment (i.e. other markets) but have gained important leverage by being part of the European Union (e.g. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta). A similar trend is observable in the context of other European states (with Singapore being a notable exception) that grant permanent residency status on the back of investment – France, USA, Switzerland, Latvia, Greece, UK – to name just a few.

Permanent residency status and citizenship have somewhat different prescriptions as far as civil, political and economic rights are concerned. Typically, citizenship affords greater civil and political rights (e.g. voting) while residency status is generally the basis for fiscal determinations (tax, access to social welfare provisions, etc.). In this sense, acquiring citizenship in one of the Caribbean states offers a different package of possibilities for the investor than acquiring permanent residence status in France. However, what binds these diversely constituted strategic approaches to citizenship is their codification of the relationship between the individual and the polity through the financial prism of investment-worthiness and capital value. As Feher points out, with financialization, the state competes for investment in a number of ways: deregulation, taxation, etc. Offering citizenship/residency services then also becomes one of the ways in which the state raises its “capital value”.

However, as already noted in the example of Caribbean citizenship versus French permanent residence, the precise details of what citizenship has to offer have also been subjected to an unprecedented rationalization as demanded by financialization. Here, it’s interesting to look at an actor like the Nationality Quality Index (QNI)⁹ that puts itself forward as a rating agency for citizenships, assessing their “quality” on the basis of the following criteria: *“internally, the QNI looks at how successful the country is in terms of human development, economic prosperity and stability and peace,”* and externally, at travel and freedom of settlement. On the matter of “external criteria,” it is worth quoting directly from the page where QNI methodology is explained:

elaborate discussion on the offshore as a site that can’t be fully grasped from the perspective of tax-evasion, which also needs to be understood as a space that allows for other legal and non-fiscal forms of protection, see Bill Maurer’s work on offshore (<http://faculty.sites.uci.edu/wmmaurer/publications/>). In a similar vein, in their research on the links between offshore and contemporary art, the offshoreart.co collective has found that artists in South East Asia often choose to become fiscal residents of offshores due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure in their home jurisdictions or as a means of political protection.

⁹ See <https://nationalityindex.com>

“To reflect the added value of both in the best possible way, QNI looks at two criteria. The first is the sheer number of other jurisdictions where one can travel to or settle in while holding a particular nationality – Liechtenstein is better than Canada and Germany is better than Turkmenistan, because the diversity of the places you can visit or live in with your nationality is important. The second is exactly what kind of countries one can travel to or settle in with a particular nationality, taking the human development and economic strength of every possible destination into account. Under this spotlight, being able to travel to France visa-free is of greater added value than being able to visit Syria visa-free. The same with settlement: the unconditional right to work and live in Germany which is associated with an Icelandic nationality, for instance, places Icelanders above Chinese nationals, for instance, since Chinese nationality does not even allow settlement and work in the totality of the territory of the issuing state itself.”

Effectively, according to QNI, citizenship today is a matter of purchasing power – however, exactly what type of package one might need will depend on personal circumstances (Are you running a start-up? Do you want your children to receive good state education? Do you foresee running into problems with state authorities? Do you just need a nice beach home and a tax-efficient fiscal residence solution?). Needless to say, QNI as a rating agency – delivering “a comprehensive ranking of the quality of nationalities worldwide” – is created by a legal consultancy, Henley &

Partners, that specializes in “[providing] assistance [to financially independent individuals] in selecting the most valuable second nationality for themselves and their families.”

While Henley & Partner’s rating agency mobilizes national citizenship as a portfolio of affordances – engendering an explicit financial logic,¹⁰ a platform like Estonian e-residency marries the possibilities of technological advancements – most significantly Estonia’s lead in the digital authentication of identity – with the needs of an entrepreneurial/start-up class that has been actively nurtured in the European Union for over a decade.¹¹ The platform offers an efficient business management interface with “*low start-up and maintenance costs, incentivized growth with 0% corporate tax on reinvested profits, minimal bureaucracy, a clear tax framework and minimal corruption in a transparent business environment.*”

The cloud-based residency is an extension of Estonia’s state, but in a remarkably post-Westphalian way. It is a platform that is not attached to Estonia’s territory in the traditional Westphalian sense as described in the first part of this essay, even if the terrestrial aspect should not be entirely discounted, given that the digital infrastructure requires essential physical components (e.g. think massive data farms). Similarly, the state is not entirely excluded from the mechanics of Estonia’s e-residency – the state offers a mediating service to qualified businesses in return for investment that is in this instance qualified through subscription fees and taxes. At the same time, the state as an e-residency provider does not grant any traditionally “civil” and “political” rights to its “citizens” beyond what is specified contractually.

¹⁰ The concept of portfolio as a collection of assets allowing for risk diversification is key to modern finance. The aim is to compose a portfolio in such a way that regardless of market movements, a return is secured. The logic of portfolio risk-diversification can be extended to many other societal practices beyond the immediate field of finance.

¹¹ See <https://e-resident.gov.ee>

Benjamin Bratton, author of the seminal ‘The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty’, takes the Estonian e-residency example further by showing that in the age of globalization and rapid technological evolution, the state has effectively devolved many of its traditional information-processing and service-providing functions to corporate entities that today have the capacity to function as cloud-based proto-sovereign platforms, thereby acting as *de facto* polities.¹² Thus, the phenomenon that Feher describes from the perspective of financialization – the retreat of the welfare state as a strategy for making itself credit-worthy and attractive to investors – has lubricated the emergence of entities that put the Westphalian conception of citizenship and its *de facto* operationality under strain. Yet, legally-speaking, post-Westphalian conceptions of political, civil and social dimensions of citizenship are conspicuously missing in this landscape. While financially mobile individuals have the capacity to integrate traditional nation-state citizenship into their globally-oriented life strategies or to make use of novel post-Westphalian platforms, for illiquid subjects, citizenship is a lottery and even an insurmountable curse – a straight out liability.

This returns us to the intimate relationship between credit-worthiness, capital value, investment-power and influence as the dominant forms in which political agency is exerted within a financialized condition. In other words, as Feher highlights, power is wielded by those with the capacity to offer credit and by those who can show their attractiveness as recipients, but also by a third actor – the rating agencies that set the criteria of accreditation and thereby delimit the manoeuvrability of the credit-seeking venture. Conversely, illiquid subjects/entities that don’t

¹² This precise point was made as part of the fourth conversation in a series edited by Armen Avanessian and Markus Miessen (2017 forthcoming) ‘Perhaps it is high time for xeno-architecture to match...’ Berlin: Sternberg Press.

hold capital are least capable of achieving influence due to their relatively marginal power as investors. Feher suggests that today's most urgent collective project is to produce agencies (in both meanings of the term) that can determine what credit-worthiness means – that is, set criteria of accreditation – and to actively compete with existing players such as Henley and Partners. Since the only leverage that illiquid entities hold is their status as stakeholders, meaning that they are somehow implicated or affected by the activities of the firm and investors, the very fact that not only are they a liability to themselves in the current climate but also to investors and ventures is – perversely, but equally pragmatically – to their advantage. In a financial economy, a liability can be restructured as an asset, which is what investors try to do with stakeholders through Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. Feher proposes that stakeholders use their ambivalent status as leverage in building agencies that develop socially progressive criteria for judging the value of a venture. Feher urges stakeholders to enter the “mental gambling space of investors” at this precise juncture, where they (stakeholders) are both a risky asset and a condition for maintaining and hopefully increasing the stock's capital value. By emphasizing the contradictions of this position, what Feher is asking of the new activist stakeholders is to steer the speculation on themselves as an asset, and thus become a force that can “alter the conditions of how investors value stock.”

III. Contemporary Art as Platform for Post-Westphalian Citizenship Rating Agency

It's now time to tie this back to what this essay claims is the key question in the relationship between contemporary art and the challenges posed by the state of citizenship today: how can contemporary culture – and particularly, the sphere of contemporary art – partake in establishing post-Westphalian and progressive citizenship modalities? It has been argued that financialization has recoded what citizenship is as a structuring relationship between an individual and the nation-state, in part by transforming the state, which has also given rise to novel proto-sovereign polities that are currently at the forefront of developing post-Westphalian citizenship modalities with all of their implicit and troubling limitations. For the most part, the sphere of contemporary art has been engaged in the question of citizenship – or alternative citizenship formats to the dominant juridico-political categories described in the first section – by performing and embodying what Sassen has called the post-national reconceptualisation of citizenship. In other words, contemporary art and its institutions are known to emphasize and perform a critical deconstruction of the national criterion of accreditation by opposing its historical confluence with patriarchal, colonial (if not straight out genocidal) and heteronormative logics of governance, and (in some instances) establishing alternative communitarian paradigms of belonging.¹³ Yet, just as Sassen points out, while the post-national has the capacity to sketch out non nation-state paradigms of belonging, it does not construct an alternative infrastructure

¹³ For example, institutions that actively position themselves as socially embedded actors that can offer “citizenship” through participation, but equally, the post-national dimension may be gleaned through networks of practitioners and institutional settings that support queer and alternative identify formations.

for their administration, which means that despite the carved out parallel microcosms of agency created through contemporary culture, the sobering reality of Henley & Partner's mapping is an inescapable background condition.

There are other practitioners such as Tania Bruguera, Femke Herregraven, James Bridle, Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Jonas Staal, who have deployed different strategies for contemporary art's engagement with the issues of citizenship: by using art's ambivalent exceptionalism as a way of offering under-provided services to illiquid groups (Bruguera's 'Immigrant Movement International' 2010-2015), by capitalizing on the creation of a transnationally mobile contemporary art class to produce new forms of real estate ownership (Thomas' 'New Eelam (ongoing)'), by creating an engaging and interactive mapping interface that poignantly communicates the problem of citizenship's financialization (Herregraven's 'Liquid Citizenship') or the implications of digital financialization (Bridle's 'Citizen Ex'), and by using the transnational contemporary art sphere as a platform for developing counter-hegemonic political visions (Staal's 'New World Summit'). These affordances – ambivalent exceptionalism, critical mediation of complex systems and the transnational socio-institutional complex with its own class and infrastructure – are what makes the contemporary art sphere a fertile ground for developing an agency that sets criteria of accreditation for post-Westphalian citizenship. By positioning itself as a key link between post-Westphalianism and its stakeholders via its institutions, such an agency could work towards reintroducing a social and (post) human rights agenda into the emerging landscape

of proto-sovereign services. The exact mechanics of such a venture are subject to further speculation, but it seems undeniable that the sphere of contemporary art – with its (often denied) integration of financial power-holders, fiscally disenfranchised populations and a “creative” class fully versed in the practices of the financial regime (portfolio logic, valorization, capitalization, diversification, leveraging, etc.), is a perfectly compromised¹⁴ ground for citizenship activism suited to the realities of the financial era – even if the wagers to be made on such a route are anything but straightforward.

¹⁴ For more details on contemporary art's perfectly compromised condition, see S. Malik, (2011), 'Art's Ethos and Capitalization'. In: M. Lind and O. Velthuis, (eds.) 'Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: a Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios'; V. Ivanova, (2016), 'Contemporary art and financialization: Two approaches'. In: 'Finance and Society', (2016), 2(2): pp. 127-37.

‘THE SECRET PEOPLE’: POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY IN A POST-SOVEREIGN AGE

Anton Jäger

In 1907, seven years before the advent of the First World War, the British poet Gilbert Keith Chesterton published a poem named ‘The Secret People’ in his personal magazine. The piece was no exercise in aestheticism. A long-winded reflection on the social state of England, Chesterton’s creation was above all a political vision, wherein the coming British revolution of the “rich” against “the poor” was predicted in unashamedly apocalyptic fashion. Two years previously, revolution had struck the streets of St Petersburg; ten years later, the Old Order would come crumbling down in all its majesty in the deluge of the Great War. “*It may be*” Chesterton spoke in the middle of his poem,

*“We hear men speaking for us of new laws
strong and sweet,
Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in
the street.
It may be we shall rise the last as Frenchmen
rose the first,
Our wrath come after Russia’s wrath and our
wrath be the worst.
It may be we are meant to mark with our riot
and our rest
God’s scorn for all men governing. It may be
beer is best.”*

Later, Chesterton's stanzas become ever more evocative, taking on an activist tone – the poet is no longer afraid to make political enunciations, taking a fiercely populist tone:

“Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget; For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet”

It should come as no surprise, then, that Chesterton's creation has recently been hailed as presaging our contemporary populist explosion'. *“Is this the poem that predicted Brexit?”* asked 'The Catholic Herald' in a long issue discussing Chesterton's contemporary relevance. To The Telegraph, Chesterton is the writer *“who has the most to teach us about the anti-elitist revolt currently stirring the European mainland.”*

Some biographical background might be helpful here. A devout Catholic with a deeply anti-modernist temperament, Chesterton is often presented as the quintessential “Tory Anarchist”, in line with great English writers such as George Orwell, William Cobbett, and J.B. Priestley. As a politician, Chesterton was no less than a walking paradox: a conservative against capitalism, a zealot against religious heterodoxy, a defender of the “producer” against the financial “parasites”. Above all, Chesterton was a firm believer in democracy – *“democracy is the greatest human system”*, he wrote in his 1904 book 'Orthodoxy', *“the democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves – the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state. This is democracy; and in this I have always believed.”* Obviously, the conditions of his native country England at the time were rather

unconducive to such a system. Exploited and excluded from regular political life, Chesterton's "secret people" lived in a world most unkind to their aspirations. "*Caught in the trap of a terrible industrial machinery*" he wrote in a personal memoir of the London poor,

"harried by a shameful economic cruelty, surrounded with an ugliness and desolation never endured before among men, stunted by a stupid and provincial religion, or by a more stupid and more provincial irreligion, the poor are still by far the sanest, jolliest, and most reliable part of the community."

The most interesting aspect of Chesterton's poem, rather than its contemporary significance, lies in the very title of his tract: what does it mean for a people to be "secret"? What does this "secrecy" consist of?

From the outset, Chesterton makes it clear that this secrecy is, above all, the result of a repression. The people exist, as an "essence", yet they are hidden in "appearance" – a thwarted force. It is therefore not that the people have been pushed into hiding on their own terms. Rather, they have been forced to *emigrate* from the sphere of political action altogether. Their secrecy is a result of an institutional banishment, rather than a chosen exodus. Furthermore, the title of Chesterton's poem may serve to illuminate one of the most vexing questions in contemporary political philosophy: what is a "people" in the first place? If we are to take seriously the call that "the people should be represented in parliament" – the ultimate promise of the concept known as "popular sovereignty" – what *kind* of people should be represented

in this parliament? If the people are indeed “secret”, and we today do not know how they look, how they act, what kind of wishes they possess, how are we ever to paint an accurate image of it on a parliamentary level? Is it even possible to claim that “there is a people”, a unitary coherent bloc, which should make itself available for a political mandate? Can we ever fully define an entity such as “the people”? Some political philosophers have of course emphatically denied such a claim. As the French political philosopher Jacques Rancière postulated in a recent article, “*“the people” does not exist... What do exist are different – sometimes antagonistic – figures of the people, constructed figures that privilege certain ways of assembly, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities.*” Rancière continues with a possible enumeration of these “different peoples”:

“an ethnic people defined by the community of blood or land; the people-flock watched over by good shepherds; the democratic people that sets in motion the competency of those who have no particular competency; the ignorant people that the oligarchs keep at bay; etc.”

Inevitably, such discussion tends to conjure up the same old notion. If Chesterton’s insistence that there is a “true people” hidden away, waiting for the advent of their truthful representation, who is to be classified as a bad kind of “people”, how, in Rancière’s thinking, are we to understand a “good”, “pluralistic” “people”? The philosopher here offers a radically “constructivist” answer. “The people”, as he sees it, is not an organic entity, which can be read from a certain set of social relations. It is rather an ongoing “process” – as

an entity, “the people” is in a state of constant flux, always changing and mutating. Rancière concurs with many a great name in political theory on this point. *Contra* Chesterton, contemporary thinkers have always stipulated the innate “multiplicity” hidden within the “people” itself – the people are “polyphonus” (Rosanvallon), the people is “empty” (Lefort), the people can “only speak in the plural” (Habermas,) the people is “constructed through a chain of equivalences” (Laclau). Of course, Rancière continues in a similar vein:

“The notion of populism itself constructs a people characterised by the fearsome alliance of a capacity – the brute power of the majority – and an incapacity – the ignorance attributed to this same majority.”

There are, as Rancière points out, a variety of “peoples” hidden by the contemporary regime of representation. In contrast to Chesterton, however, none of these seem to possess any lasting identity in Rancière’s view. The question of who “the people” are is always *sous question*. However, a “people” can be “excluded” from a given representative regime, forfeiting the possibility of a more truthful image of it on a parliamentary level.

It is of course tempting to turn to vitalist imagery here. The game of popular politics is consistently illustrated with emotional metaphors (“anger”, “cancer”, “blight”); the metonyms used to describe such trends are undeniably Freudian (“ressentiment”, “status-anxiety”, “frustration”). When popular anger “erupts” – another volcanic metaphor – few can “contain” it; it inevitably “spurts out”, “as a

frenetic reaction”. In his commentary on the Greek referendum, the head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker spoke of the event “as an *emotional farce*”, meant to “*stir up the wildest passions*”. Strangely enough, opponents on the opposite side of the spectrum have insisted on the same vision. According to political theorist Chantal Mouffe, contemporary liberal democracy is at pains to express the “affective” and “libidinal” dimensions of popular politics, replacing them with an arid consensualism, in which groups of elites compete for positions of power. The dichotomies are striking: rationalism versus irrationalism; populism versus technocracy; the abstract versus the concrete.

How ought one to understand and theorise the notion of a “people” today, despite these dangerous appropriative claims? “*It is the Unity of the Representer, and not that of the Represented, which Shapes a Political Covenant*” wrote Thomas Hobbes in 1651, uttering perhaps the most famous sentence in the history of political theory. Even today, it seems there are “representatives” aplenty. Contemporary demagogues are always ready to distil an organic, ready-made people from a demographic bric-a-brac. The mere statistical reality of a people is a mathematical abstraction; only in the concrete can democracy be lived. Chesterton’s hidden people flare up at completely aleatory intervals, to the disgust of the liberal intelligentsia. Obviously, the question of the identity of the “people” cannot be settled with tenuous representative claims. A simple pluralist solution – “the people are always everywhere”, “they are many things at once” – seems equally problematic. A people who have no food to eat, as Chesterton once pointed out, are not a people at all.

One might claim this is “essentialism” – assuming a certain human morphology with a basic set of biological needs. Yet it stands beyond disputation that it is above all the *material* conditions of popular sovereignty which are so often eroded by capitalist crises. Since people need to spend more time working, offering their bodies to the “Great Juggernaut of Capital” (Marx), less time is left to engage in political participation: there is a direct causal link between economic deprivation and the capacity to participate in politics.

Strangely enough, liberals *and* radical democrats seem bent on denying this material fact. Contemporary democracy always operates within the confines set by capitalist social relations. They condition the very form of our democratic politics, and write out its results *a priori*. As the French theorist Leon de Mattis put it, “*to defend direct democracy... against the false political democracy of the State, is to believe that our true nature will at least be revealed if we were to finally be freed from the constraints which the system imposes on us.*” Yet such a conjecture is an illusion: democratic politics always operates within a pre-designed space moulded and conditioned by Capital, not the other way around. As Mattis writes, “*to free oneself of such constraints supposes a transformation at the end of which we would no longer be ourselves, at the very least we would no longer be what we are under the civilization of Capital.*” He does not hesitate to classify such thinkers in the camp of “*the village idiots*”.

“In a world where the alienated morays of capitalist civilization reign, it is selfishness, bitterness and socio-pathology that express themselves when everyone is allowed to voice

their opinion... An indescribable chaos of divergent opinions and thoughts where nothing would come out of it, except that at a certain point it would be necessary to choose the few leaders who would eventually take the necessary decisions.”

Mattis’ argument throws up difficult questions. How might this an anti-materialist bias be remedied? How can we conceive of the “people” in a non-essentialist vein, without succumbing to the illusion that contemporary life can be conducted without the necessary amount of material provisions? (*“At a certain point, people just get hungry and want to go home”*, Hannah Arendt spoke of revolutions).

A return to “class” – often ridiculed as archaic and greyish, at worst as “brocialism” – is, of course, a possible answer. To think of the “people” as hovering between a “class-in-itself” and a “class-for-itself”, hungry for power but unable to claim it, eager for sovereignty but incapable of ever expressing it, might do justice to the complexity of our task. In a recent text, the English philosopher Benjamin Noys asked theorists to return to “class” without previous misinterpretations. As he writes:

“In terms of subject, the left has the answer of the proletariat. The class with nothing to lose but their chains, the class which is the source of labour that capitalism exploits, and so forms the universal class opposed to capitalism. Certainly we can say, which has always been the case, the proletariat appears as a problem. The collapse or decline of “tra-

ditional” institutional and political forms of worker resistance (states, unions, parties) seems to leave a vacuum into which not only accelerationism steps. Currently, left analysis seems to oscillate between the identification of a vanguard group of workers closest to the (Kantian) idea of the proletariat (cognitariat, surplus population, etc.) and a dispersion of the concept to include, nearly, everyone (99%, multitude). I think the purification of the proletariat as subject out of the empirical working class is part of the problem. We are lacking, or forgetting, the need for class analysis that can grasp the overlapping and displacement of these strategies (think of the category of “the retired” for example). While I am suggesting this is a task, I still think this is a central task to displace a politics of will that engages in a forcing not attentive to these realities.”

Maybe Chesterton prefigured such a danger. Although he did believe in the existence of a “people” before the advent of representation – thereby denying the pluralist argument – he equally understood the strong constraints imposed by the capitalist order on such a people. Democracy is impossible within capitalism. That might be essentialism. But it does solve one question: “the” people need to eat before they vote. “*One cannot eat flags*”, as another poet – Heinrich Heine – once put it rather aptly.

A TALE OF THREE DISAPPEARANCES

Lina Attalah

On the shelves of one grocery store in Souq Feras in Gaza city centre, there are a few Egyptian food products, mostly close to their expiry date. The rest are Israeli. A few of my companions from the city spoke about the inevitability of buying Israeli goods, because commodities available from Egypt through the smuggling tunnels running underneath the borders have mostly expired. That leaves Gazans with few food options, as Israel has restricted the passage of goods since the militant Hamas group took over in 2007. The Palestinian historian Sherene Seikaly points to Israel's policy of measuring food procurements to Gaza in such a way that the bare minimum is supplied, without risking the development of malnutrition.¹ It is the calories that are used as the basis for the measurement of these procurements, which Seikaly describes as a tool of political containment through bodily control.²

The tunnels through which the movement of goods is possible, as well as people and arms, became an entire system of resistance to the blockade. By 2013, around the time of my visit, these tunnels had seen the most concerted circumvention attempts by the Egyptian authorities, which have deployed a variety of mechanisms to halt the once-thriving underground economy, as part of its contribution to Israel's besiegement of the Gaza Strip. From spraying toxic gas inside some of the tunnels, to strengthening deploy-

¹ Sherene Seikaly, (Nov. 12, 2012) 'Counting Calories and Making Lemonade in Gaza', Jadaliyya. <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8339/counting-calories-and-making-lemonade-in-gaza->>

² Ibid.

ment, which has a deterrence function, Egypt has stepped up its game in recent years by completely destroying houses and villages on the border, because tunnels are embedded in them.³

The disappearing tunnels once served many people's registers of triumph. First, there are the people of Gaza living under occupation, who would have otherwise been subjected to food quality and portions in accordance with the calculations of their enemy. Second, there is the Hamas administration, now dispossessed of an underground economy once rendered formal, through layers of legality such as the taxation of tunnels. Then, there are also the people of Egypt, particularly of north Sinai and one of its main towns, Rafah, who always reminisced about the days when the borders were open and traders could come and go, moving goods along, before a line was drawn and barbed wire set up, plunging the Egyptian side into a lingering state of economic inaction. Across these three categories, and their broader markers of triumph, there is one simple possible question: What to eat for dinner? The question is now mostly determined by an Israeli bureaucrat assigning what is to be loaded onto food trucks heading for Gaza, a contemporary embodiment of bio-politics.

In an essay, political theorist Miguel Vatter tries to satisfy a curiosity he has about Hannah Arendt's references to natality and its relation to bio-politics. He starts out from references to natality that Arendt makes, where the meaningfulness of a creature is derived from its exterior, and where men, in the plural, as opposed to Man, in the singular, with an up-percase as the signifier of a mass of identical bodies,

³ The news section of Cairo-based news website Mada Masr (co-founded by the author) has details of the ongoing attacks on the tunnels. < <https://www.madamasr.com/en/topic/gaza-tunnels/>>

is the product.⁴ In her thinking, natality is a root of human freedom. Vatter then ties this notion to Michel Foucault's bio-politics, *i.e.* control over life, and Giorgio Agamben's "bare life", *i.e.* one's exclusion from the precincts of human life. In doing so, he proposes Arendt's natality as a bio-political instrument of resistance in the face of forces that also reduce human life through bio-political control.⁵ In other words, the freedom embedded in the act of birth makes this bio-political phenomenon the ultimate resistance to bodily control, which uses the very elements of this act.

Something in Arendt's natality hinges on the essentialization of resistance to all that which challenges the condition of birth as something that is ultimately a condition of freedom. In Gaza, if it is not the tunnels that form an edifice for resistance against states, borders and occupiers' tampering with the essential human condition of freedom, it can be other things, less tangible, less militant and perhaps less effective.

After the market, we congregated around a television in a busy street café overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. That evening, the whole city was cheering for Mohammad Assaf, the golden boy of Gaza, running in the Arab Idol singing contest. He became the besieged strip's new link to the world, an embodiment of the strip, sealed in such accessible features as music and handsomeness. He also made some nationalist gestures possible, with the masses cheering for their compatriot in a regional contest. On the tables, there were only some old-fashioned bottles of coke, and lemonade, most probably made out of Israel's bitter lemons.⁶

⁴ Miguel Vatter, (2006), 'Natality and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt', *Revista Di Cienca Politica*'.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Seikaly.

In mid-2000, the Iranian artist Mahmoud Bakhshi displayed eight dirty Iranian flags in the city hall. The bureaucrats were alarmed, but didn't do much: after all, where in a polluted city would a flag not be stained? And where is a flag proudly put on display anything but propaganda? I met Mahmoud in his studio to see his new work, a few days before the 2013 Iranian elections that saw the victory of Hassan Rouhani for a first presidential term. Mahmoud was planning to vote.

That summer I also met Fatemeh Sadeghi, professor of political science who was fired from her university position in Tehran for an article she wrote about the veil. In a conversation in her apartment, she put the 1979 revolution, today's Iran's Islamic Republic and the people, as the makers and receivers of such politics, into a single diagram.

“It's like this. Young people make revolutions and Islamists take control. The revolution is good, but we should worry about what happens next. I defend the 1979 revolution when everyone slams it, because at the beginning it was a moment of politics. Today, there is this re-appropriation of Islam by the state. People became disenchanted with the way the state is controlling Islam. When there is a vacuum in hegemonic power, we should start organizing. You should be preparing yourself for that phase, politically. You have to overcome that depression and set up an ambush. But you have to be patient. This is politics. Politics

*means patience. We are all traumatized. There are collective issues, and they are political, not personal or merely psychological.”*⁷

Fatemeh was also planning to vote.

In Laleh Park, one of Tehran’s expansive public gardens, Arash made his first declaration of love to Gelareh.⁸ They had met on an MBA course and then, captivated by her, he took a trip organized by her family, which runs a tourism business. The trip involved a hike, and Gelareh says that Arash, with some difficulty, climbed the mountain for her. Arash was following on a request from his father to accompany me on a trip down Inqilab Street, near Tehran University, and to reminisce over the 2009 protests that saw the re-emergence of the Iranian political street protests against the rigging of the elections. Arash brought Gelareh along, because she also took part in the protests. *“I thank the goddamn Islamic Republic of Iran. Because of it, we are here now,”* Arash says. Somehow, he thought that this was the most convenient moment to declare his love to Gelareh, a moment featuring a stranger looking for affinities across different revolutions. The garden in the backdrop, the state pledge of entertainment for its citizenry, was perfect in making this encounter feel cinematic. Both were also planning to vote.

What is the post-revolution condition that has rendered Iran such a space of citizenship, in the civic-republican sense of political agency and not merely rights in a certain group context?⁹ What state tradition made this sentiment possible, despite rampant authoritarianism that showed a violent resurgence in

⁷ Fatemeh Sadeghy, (June 2013), interview with the author.

⁸ Names have been changed.

⁹ A discussion of citizenship distinctions and important critiques to them can be found in Stanford University’s ‘Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry on citizenship’, revised in July 2017. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/citizenship/>>

2009 in fear of any remote semblance of the 1979 revolution? What makes that vote a right, an entitlement in an absolutist non-consequential sense? I am puzzled. I am told that this may be the product of the brief and partial reformist ruptures in the post-1979 age, ruptures that are embodied in figures like Mohammad Khatami, Akbar Hasemi Rafsanjani and Hossein Mousavi. Like these ruptures, the elections seem to be a brief reappearance of politics that everyone is conscious to grab, albeit not without cynicism. Once the rallies, the ballot boxes and the media attention are over, we fall back into a state of desertion, of the disappearance of politics.

There might be something else, broader and bigger than reformist politics, that makes it possible to turn on the political theatre buttons, alongside those of citizenship. If natality can be a prototype for finding that which analyses a condition from outside of it, it is possible that power, and particularly state power, can be understood in this vein. The anthropologist Michael Taussig wrote about spirit possession rituals on a mountain in Latin America, where pilgrims are possessed by the spirits of the dead Indians who chased the Spaniards out in the 16th century. Taussig traces how this possession transcends the mountain ritual, and is embodied, through the work of the state, in monuments in the squares, inscriptions on the currencies and advertisements in public transportation. For the state, death is power and through it, it is possible to possess the subjects, now turned citizens through this very act of possession.¹⁰

The image of “the Liberator” is found everywhere in Taussig’s imaginary Latin American state, the subject

¹⁰ In Iran, the deaths of 1979 (and of the Gulf War) are what make the victory possible, according to prevalent state propaganda.

of his book. It is on school books, public monuments, walls, stamps, money, etc. He describes this image, *“there can be no better form of expression of the culture of the official than the blank nothingness of the eyes looking out at the populace in a conspiracy of silence.”*¹¹ This process of transmission/possession is enacted on the bodies of children, *“that perennially different crowd of starlings and protoplasmic creaturely potential in whose evocation so much state policy is justified.”*¹² Here we go: natality as a battlefield and site of contestation, between primordial liberation and state control.

Can citizenship, historically and conceptually associated with notions of freedoms, laws, rights and active engagement, be nothing but a form of state control? I find solace in my Iranian interlocutors’ scepticism. At least they voted on the margins of their art, their intellectual solitude and their declarations of love.

* * *

I often write intimately to myself about “soor magra al-oyoun” because it is not the kind of thought that is able to write itself in words. This is a gate whose name translates loosely into “the gate of the wells’ riverbed”. It is a structure once built by Sultan Salah Eddin al-Ayoubi, who ruled Egypt in the 12th century, to mark off the city and to also channel river water to agricultural land just outside it. So it was the life of the land and the gate of the city. It’s like politics feeding nature. Today, it’s only a wall behind which tons of rubbish dumps sit, a landmark that fences off an invisible world. Every time I drive by the austere, empty and silent structure in the midst of bustling

¹¹ Michael Taussig, (1997), ‘The Magic of the State’, Routledge, p. 112.

¹² Ibid, p. 114.

Cairo, as it guards part of my road from my family house to my office, I sense a vampire that swallows everything that passes through, in a reverse image where nature governs the politics of the vivid, boisterous city. What if the wells' riverbed fence swallowed the city one day?

One evening in the summer of 2013, the whole of Cairo resembled the austere, empty and silent wall, as though the apocalypse was coming and we'd all disappear in it. The only sign of life on the road was to be found in the contours of the Ministry of Defence, also on the way to my family house. There, a group of fired-up protesters insisted on gluing a poster to my car saying, "*come down to the street and don't be a coward,*" which I washed off frantically in the middle of the night, until it completely disappeared. In the days that followed, people had emerged into the streets en masse, demanding the end of the regime. I wasn't able to be present, although my body was present. I could only think of the fence and the apocalypse. Three years before, I was happy to disappear in the multitudes of the January revolution. And before that, I was happy to disappear in the multitudes of cheering football fans. But in 2013, I was actively seeking another kind of disappearance, one that is more deliberate, and less consequential.

Around exactly the same period, I had started a news website with a group of journalists in and from Cairo, which, albeit born with the claim of desiring to bear witness at a time of pandemic erasures, it might have fulfilled a prophecy of disappearance. Without knowing it, the project hinged on Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on disappearance.

*“Behind every image, something has disappeared.”*¹³

The testament to this prophecy was in a square, similar to those where people had emerged to demand the end of the regime. In that square, a concentration of otherness, the supporters of the regime that the earlier group of people wanted to depose had been camping for days to protest against their imminent annihilation. On the day of their ultimate obliteration, the massacre, we interviewed people, observed the event, wrote down the details, took photographs and ran for our lives like everyone in the camp. We wrote about witnessing death, but made no one see it with us really. It is as though in the very act of witnessing, we had made the event disappear. Perhaps it is the ultimate essence of media, where the virtual trumps the real, where the aesthetics of an event produce some sort of an *“amnesic trance, a realm of virtual responsibility where we consume experiences, absorb pain, and allow the TV screen to envelop us in a closed circuit. In this hyper-reality, we stop experiencing with our bodies and essentially become symbol processors for these media machines.”*¹⁴

*“Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?”*¹⁵ This is what Walter Benjamin asks in an exquisite treatise on storytelling, perhaps in a consolation sent through a time machine to a people failing to recount a massacre in 2013.

But what avenues are available in the face of eroding communicable experience?

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, (2016), ‘Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared?’, Seagull Books.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard and Truls Lie, (April, 2017), ‘The Art of Disappearing’, Le Monde Diplomatique. <<http://www.eurozine.com/the-art-of-disappearing/>>

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, (1999), ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’, ‘Illuminations’, Pimlico, p. 84.

In his attempt to find traces of communal violence and war in seminal pieces of art, the Lebanese author Fawwaz Traboulsi references the “aggression on reality” in the work of Heiner Muller, the German dramatist and theatre-maker, who lived in Eastern Germany and built up faith in its socialism, alongside scepticism towards crimes committed in its name.¹⁶ Traboulsi, whose book centres on the Lebanese civil war, makes another proposition, especially when violence sits at the crossroads of remembrance and forgetfulness. Rather than thinking of remembering as an opposition to forgetting, he suggests thinking of forgetfulness as an element of memory and to question what forces and interests make it possible. And rather than focusing on remembering the face of violence alone, he proposes remembering the causes that mobilized it.¹⁷

The website has survived, without trying hard to follow Traboulsi and Muller’s manuals. It survived despite its inability to recount the story of the massacre, which in my mind is a juncture between a past and a present. Yet it has fulfilled Baudrillard’s prophecy: one day we woke up to find that it had disappeared from the Internet. The website was blocked in the imaginary territorial bandwidth of Egypt.

Like the fantasy of the fence, a house of disappearance, or the reality of the apocalyptic day that saw the birth of this website, and perhaps one of the reasons for its existence, I look upon its vanishing from the Internet and see a twisted opportunity: can we inhabit the condition of impossibility of telling that we were born with? Can we ultimately internalize a certain ease with the imminent loss of the institu-

¹⁶ Fawwaz Traboulsi, (2017), ‘Dam al-Akawayn (Brethren Blood)’, Riad al-Rayes Books, p. 132.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp.124-127.

tions we built with a labour of love to become the likes of our children?

A delayed sense of futility became more legitimate, but not repulsive. It simply put the act of telling in its right framework. Baudrillard says it again when he speaks of vanishing before dying: *“Disappearing should be an art form, a seductive way of leaving the world. I believe that part of disappearing is to disappear before you die, to disappear before you have run dry, while you still have something to say...”*¹⁸

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard and Truls Lie.

cahier 1:
ON ACTS OF CITIZENSHIP

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Younes Baba-Ali, Zbynek
Baladran, James Bridle, Bram
Demunter, Iman Issa, Cao Fei,
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Antonis Pittas, Martha Rosler,
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Meerkerk, Evgeny Morozov,
Stavros Stavrides, Sarah Vanhee
and Myriam Van Imschoot,
among others.

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‘THE SECRET PEOPLE’:
POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY
IN A POST-SOVEREIGN
AGE

Anton Jaeger

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A TALE OF THREE
DISAPPEARANCES

Lina Attalah
