

Citizens Without Frontiers

An inaugural lecture given at the Open University on 7 February 2012 by Engin F. Isin, Politics and International Studies (POLIS), Faculty of Social Sciences.

Over the last forty years there has been an enormous focus on people who move between countries for work, travel, and I should add, escape. Whether treated as legal or illegal, these mobilities for business, education, tourism, refuge, or migration involve the relocation and sometimes permanent resettlement of people. The proliferation of regimes and apparatuses to control and regulate such mobilities has been widely discussed. Less well documented is another development that has required little or no relocation. The growth of humanitarian politics, international volunteerism and transnational activism have changed politics on a global scale. These have enabled or mobilized people to act across frontiers without necessarily making claims to mobility or resettlement. Of these, one that came to be known as ‘without frontiers’ signifying the provision of professional expertise and services without remuneration has been remarkable. Although the most prominent of these has been *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), there have been others such as Reporters Without Borders and Lawyers Without Borders. Moreover, although it has not been identified as such, we could add ‘celebrities without frontiers’, as we have seen the emergence of high-profile entertainment figures involved in cross-border politics, such as Madonna, Bob Geldof, Bono, Angelina Jolie and many others. Despite significant differences, their shared premise is professional status and fame. It is very difficult to sift through these complex terrains of politics that enable people to act across frontiers and articulate what ‘citizens without frontiers’ might mean. There are many activities that don’t fall under the existing categories of activism and yet possibly indicate something just as significant about our present age. To begin with, ‘citizens without frontiers’ is a paradox. By definition, citizens are members of nation-states and they don’t have the capacity to act under that name outside the nation-state of which they are members. Citizenship, in other words, does not cross frontiers. Yet, for all the reasons I already mentioned, citizens of nation-states are either implicated or deliberately involved in all those things that cross nation-state frontiers. But if citizens are to act across frontiers they always have to leave their citizenship at home and act under the disguise of professional expertise, privilege and accreditation. To put it another way, for those who have accumulated cultural and symbolic capital associated with their professional fields, moving across frontiers is much less of an issue and is broadly accepted if not encouraged. What happens if citizens act without disguise? What if citizens act across frontiers simply and purely as citizens? This happens a lot more than we realize but we have yet to recognize and name it. Having failed to recognize and name it, we criminalize and punish it. I aim to identify such acts, develop a vocabulary appropriate to recognizing and investigating them, and, hopefully, contribute to our understanding of this emerging politics without disguise; or the politics of those who don’t necessarily move but whose acts traverse frontiers. That, in a nutshell, is the argument today.

But by what right do I make an argument? When I was writing this lecture, I was compelled to investigate what it means to deliver an inaugural lecture because I am not familiar with this ritual. Of course, as Pierre Bourdieu said when he gave his inaugural lecture at Collège de France in April 1982, ‘One ought to be able to deliver a lecture, even an inaugural lecture, without wondering what right one has to do so: the institution is there to protect one from that question and the anguish inseparable from the arbitrariness of all new beginnings.’ Still, that protection did not save me from asking the question, and I quickly learned one lesson: it is

very difficult to investigate the origins of the inaugural lecture. This is because every search you perform using ‘inaugural lecture’ turns up, well, thousands of actual inaugural lectures. But how does one filter out all the inaugural lectures and find material on the origins and meaning of the inaugural lecture? I was rather overwhelmed and doubt began creeping in, as it always does with beginnings. Anyway, in this case at least, I was lucky. Accidentally, I found another inaugural lecture given by Wilfred Carr at the University of Sheffield in December 1995 that was similarly compelled to reflect on its own origins. From there I expanded to classic studies by Hastings Rashdall in the 1940s and Gordon Leff in the 1960s. I won’t dwell too much on this except to say that, unsurprisingly, as with all things to do with universities, the inaugural lecture goes back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially to the universities of Paris, Bologna and Oxford and to the faculties of arts, theology, and law. I was intrigued to discover, for example, that the ritual of the inaugural lecture was closely related to the conferment of master status on apprentices in craft guilds. As a doctoral student, I had studied the city as a legal corporation so I am familiar with the history of guilds. The inaugural lecture was the culmination of an elaborate process, sometimes taking years, that confirmed the inception of an apprentice (bachelor) into master status, which licensed the inceptor to act as a lecturer or tutor. The occasion was apparently momentous. Borrowing from guilds, monasteries and churches, the inauguration ceremony developed highly ritualistic aspects. Of these, the most solemn was the delivery of the lecture of inception and the confirmation by the testimony of other select masters of the inceptor’s character and capacity. (I should mention though it was always followed by a lavish banquet.) In the inaugural lecture, the inceptors demonstrated their qualifications by taking on a disputation such as whether the act of willing presupposes the act of understanding.

Arguably, the inaugural lecture had two meanings. It was about admitting a new member into a guild or a profession. But it was also the inauguration of a new person with a capacity to act. As Hannah Arendt might have put it, by making promises with an oath, a new person was being disclosed in the presence of and in relation to others. In fact, the text that comes to us from the University of Paris read by the Vice-Chancellor upon conferment says as much: ‘By the authority invested in me by the apostles Peter and Paul, I hereby grant you the licence for lecturing, reading, disputing and determining and for exercising other scholastic and magisterial acts in the Faculty of Arts at Paris and elsewhere.’ So the inauguration was about licensing a person with the capacity to act under certain descriptions (lecturing, reading, disputing) and it disclosed this person to those who were present and beyond. Or, as Bourdieu says, ‘as a rite of incorporation and investiture, the inaugural lecture, *inceptio*, is a symbolic enactment of the process of delegation whereby the new master is finally authorized to speak with authority, and which establishes his words as a legitimate discourse, delivered by somebody with the right to speak.’

I am ostensibly talking about the inaugural lecture. But I am actually beginning to raise some crucial issues that I want to address today. Given that cities were also constituted as legal corporations and that they were effectively a confederation of craft and merchant guilds, there was a close relationship between being endowed with the capacity to act in a guild and having the capacity to act as a citizen of the city. This raises two questions. What did it mean to act in the capacity of a citizen rather than, or perhaps in addition to being, a lecturer, shoemaker, ironmonger, saddler, jeweller or tanner? Did people exercise their capacity to act, or inaugurate themselves, without being granted the licence to do so? You will be relieved to know that my aim is not to ask these questions for cities in the thirteenth and fourteenth

centuries, though it is important to have in mind the guild origins of professions. But I will now fast forward to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

All those movements with the name ‘without frontiers’ that we have witnessed since the 1970s raise these two questions that I have just mentioned. Or, at least, that’s where I will start. Of these movements *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) is perhaps the most recognizable. What does that name signify? It is translated from French as ‘doctors without borders.’ But the French word ‘frontières’ does not mean only borders or at least, if it does, only marginally so. Rather, it also indicates front-lines, extremities or edges of something. Used figuratively, it implies limits (e.g., frontiers of science) and, by extension, it is used to indicate the unknown (e.g., the final frontier). Used literally, it indicates the outer borders of a settlement or, more importantly, defending or protecting them. So translating ‘frontières’ as ‘borders’ loses its nuance and translating ‘sans frontières’ as ‘without borders’ loses its performative force. As regards MSF what limits are we talking about then? Is it simply that its practitioners – in this case doctors – declare their loyalty beyond the frontiers of the jurisdiction that accredited and licensed them? MSF was founded in 1971 in Paris as an international aid group and evolved into a humanitarian organization whose mission ranged ‘from emergency medical assistance and healthcare training to humanitarian assistance.’ It is run by medical professionals but can also be joined by professionals in other fields. That sounds very much like a standard international non-profit organization. So why is the name ‘without frontiers’ used then? At first glance, the limits that these professionals declare themselves ‘without’ appear to be those laws and norms that govern their profession. Today, every profession, unlike the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century-guilds, is governed by rules that are typically made or enforced by the authority of the state. The modern medical profession recognizes that authority. Does it mean that doctors are against the state and want to operate regardless of or beyond its authority? Does it mean that doctors want to belong to another authority that is beyond the state? Although there may be practitioners who harbour such ideals, MSF, to my knowledge, never rejected the authority of the state as such – at least not at the outset. Moreover, the limits that MSF declares itself ‘without’ are more than an aspiration to practice medicine without rules especially those made by the state. Clearly, we need to look deeper into the logics of the movement to make sense of that name ‘without frontiers.’ These logics become apparent in its practices and ethos of not only serving patients, the ill, the victims, and the wounded, but also in creating autonomy and authority to function beyond the limits of the state. How does MSF define those limits? It turns out that those are both the political and practical limits of the state as such. What I would like to call MSF, above all, is a movement ‘traversing frontiers’. I will certainly elaborate on this phrase but it indicates that rather than merely interrogating the rules that govern the medical profession it actually extends its reach beyond limits that are imposed on its practitioners by the state.

This traversing is significant. Perhaps implicit in it is the fact that national, corporate and religious powers are not only the causes of wars, deprivation, oppression, violence, and other forms of domination but they also actively block assistance to those who are adversely affected by such violence. The declaration ‘without’ acknowledges that doctors must act against frontiers, reaching beyond the limits imposed on them by states, corporations and religious authorities.

Also implicit in its traversing is the recognition and revelation that there are vast inequalities in the world that divide those who have access to proper care and those who do not. Thus, for

those who have the privileges and accreditation, traversal becomes an obligation as the foundation of their autonomy.

To avoid misunderstanding, the suggestion here is not to overlook how, over the last forty years, MSF has changed and grown more complex, especially with its development in several other countries. I will come back to this. But I want to isolate the logics of this movement in order to understand the broader appeal of the name ‘without frontiers.’ As I mentioned, over the last forty years we have seen academics, accountants, architects, engineers, lawyers, reporters, teachers and other professionals organizing or identifying themselves with that name. That’s why we have perhaps become accustomed to the name ‘without frontiers’. Taken together, the name ‘without frontiers’ signifies a number of crucial issues. These movements are radically different from business, professional and diplomatic travellers. First, travelling businesspeople, professionals and diplomats are protected in the practice of their profession. Especially over the last twenty years under the banner ‘globalization’, the movements of such people have become much easier, smoother, and more straightforward. For them, travel and work are increasingly asserted, claimed, and obtained as of right. Second, corporations, organizations, and governments remunerate professional services and they engage in exchange and transactions. By contrast, movements without frontiers are neither commercial nor protected. In fact, state, corporate and religious authorities often do not endorse or support their movements and attempt to inhibit their activities. It is in this sense that I think the founding aspect of these movements is traversing frontiers.

It is about time I explain that phrase ‘traversing frontiers.’ There are four distinct but related senses of the word ‘traverse’. It first refers to the act of ‘traverse’ in a physical sense. The actions involve passing through a gate, or crossing a river, bridge, or other place forming a boundary. The actions of ‘traverse’ also involve passing over, or going through (a region, etc.) as well as passage or crossing from side to side and from end to end, or in any course. In this first sense its usage closely resembles that of ‘across’. However, its second meaning involves non-physical actions such as opposition or thwarting: something that crosses, thwarts, or obstructs; or something that can form opposition, an obstacle, or an impediment; things that constitute a trouble, vexation, a mishap, misfortune, or adversity can all be called traverses. In fact, in law it can mean denying an alleged misdeed by the other side. These two meanings (physical and non-physical) coming together and indicating not simply a crossing but with obstruction (or obstructed) or thwarting (or thwarted) is one reason why I want to use traversing frontiers rather than crossing to capture these frictions. Moreover, in its third sense ‘traverse’ denotes the way across, path, track, or course. So traverse is not only action but also that which it produces: a path, track, or trace. In this sense it denotes the remains and traces of acts of traversing frontiers as courses and paths that we can recognize, and follow. Finally, and in a concrete sense, ‘traverse’ denotes something that is placed or extending across, a kind of bridge or connection. With these two added senses ‘traverse’ not only denotes acts of crossing against but also leaving remains or traces and building bridges. Clearly, taken together, these four senses signify ‘without frontiers’ much more strongly than merely crossing, across or even without or beyond frontiers.

To understand all these movements ‘without frontiers’ is a difficult task. At the outset, as I already indicated, it would be wrong to give only a positive image of academics, accountants, architects, engineers, lawyers, reporters, and teachers claiming to act without frontiers. These movements raise various troubling questions about the dominant human-rights based or humanitarian politics. To mark its 40th anniversary, for example, MSF itself recently

discussed the difficult compromises that it makes to negotiate its activities. Marie Noelle Rodrigue, operations director of MSF in Paris, accepted ‘... the price it is necessary for an organization to pay so that you are helping the victims’ and recognized that ‘often that means making a compromise to a degree where you are helping the authorities.’ Clearly, although such movements, or at least some of them, have been increasingly subsumed under human rights politics, it is important to recognize that movements ‘without frontiers’ cannot be seen only as human rights politics or as transnational (or global) activism that is mobilized through human rights. Admittedly, they are implicated in human rights regimes and their compromises, but they also operate with quite distinct principles, and we ought not to see these movements as identical or equivalent to what has come to be known as ‘global activism’ or ‘international volunteerism.’ To be sure, movements without frontiers share a non-commercial and non-profit ethos with activism and volunteerism. They can even be considered as a species of global activism and perhaps share some elements with international volunteerism. Yet, these movements indicate a new kind of politics for which we do not yet have a name; or perhaps we have not yet taken seriously the name they have given themselves.

Let us now go back to MSF, its ethos, concerns and limits or, more precisely, let us interrogate them. The claim that the movement does not differentiate creed, religion, politics or race when providing medical assistance, and that it exercises ‘universal medical ethics’, and that it maintains independence from established political, economic or religious authorities indicates an aspect of traversing frontiers. MSF clearly distinguishes between those norms that it accepts as given and those that it establishes without limits. In fact, our professional lives may well consist in managing the tension or even conflict between direct, intentional, regulated and recognizable duties and indirect, unintentional, open, indeterminate and yet affective obligations that implicate our lives in the lives of others. MSF’s ethos illustrates this tension or conflict. When MSF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, James Orbinski, its director then, stated this in his acceptance speech quite well. He named this tension or conflict as the most important thing that mobilized the movement. He said ‘... we push the political to assume its inescapable responsibility.’ He added ‘humanitarianism is not a tool to end war or to create peace. It is a citizen’s response to political failure. It is an immediate, short term act that cannot erase the long term necessity of political responsibility.’ The use of ‘citizen’ is ambiguous here. Why is it used when a professional ethos is being discussed? What is implicit in this push for the political to assume its responsibility is that rules and regulations that order our professional lives do not necessarily exhaust our responsibilities toward ourselves and others. We are answerable beyond the direct responsibilities that govern our lives so that we can modify them. It establishes a capacity to act with certain autonomy. We, of course, learn, endorse and uphold laws and norms under which we live and responsibilities that we must fulfill. We also engage ourselves with others and question our relationships and the effects of our actions or inactions on others. This engagement often implicates us in tension or conflict with laws and norms that we uphold. That much is clear. What is ambiguous is whether citizens have the same capacity as professionals to make these claims.

It is this tension (and conflict) that perhaps explains the proliferation of movements called ‘without frontiers’ since the 1970s. Acting as responsible professionals within the confines of the state that define those responsibilities can no longer answer our obligations to others elsewhere; nor can it answer the consequences of the actions or inactions of our governments in our name. These movements, despite their differences, operate with similar logics of

answerability: that its obligations are principled, that such obligations extend beyond or across frontiers, and that these obligations are not expressly authorized by established national, corporate or religious authorities.

What we have learned from (or been reminded by) these movements with the name ‘without frontiers’ over the last few decades is that each profession is (or ought to be) governed by obligations that are beyond the regulations of a jurisdiction under whose authority it is licensed. The fact that we began with an example from the medical profession is not an accident. It is not insignificant that the Hippocratic Oath is considered a fundamental aspect of the profession of medicine. Regardless of closed concerns, it obliges its practitioners to open principles that are held to be common. The idea here is to recognize that doctors are not only responsible to enclosing regulations, norms, and laws that govern their profession, they are also answerable to their principles. This may sound like what is often considered as a ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’ associated with professions. But calling or vocation indicates inward-directed orientations developed against outward-directed pressures whereas these movements question this distinction.

Now, let me consider the question you have been perhaps impatiently anticipating. Why have we not witnessed a mobilization called ‘citizens without frontiers’? What exactly would such a movement involve? And here we encounter a problem. As I said earlier, the very term ‘citizens without frontiers’ is a paradox. Citizenship is a bounded concept. It is bound up with the state if not the nation that signifies its authority and limits. Unlike academics, accountants, architects, engineers, lawyers, reporters, and teachers the ‘membership’ of citizens is strictly considered within the frontiers of the state. In fact, the very frontiers of the state become possible by defining some people as ‘its’ citizens. That it is acquired by birth, residence or blood and these bound it to the authority and territory of the nation-state constitutes citizenship. Without binding people into a body and bounding them with an authority, the state would be inconceivable. In a way, boundedness is the very condition of citizenship. By using ‘citizens without frontiers’ are we not then creating an empty concept?

Yet, as many scholars observe, it is this boundedness of citizenship to the nation-state that has become problematic in the age of migration and globalization. Many scholars of migration and security studies, for example, have noted that with the increasing movements of people across boundaries there have been transnational, cosmopolitan, global forms of citizenship where dual and multiple nationalities are being negotiated. Some have attempted to develop concepts of cosmopolitan or global citizenship. Others have called for open borders. Yet, all these presuppose, I submit, a moving subject rather than an acting subject.

Can we understand the specificity of those who don’t move but traverse frontiers without professional accreditation or privilege? Is it possible to shift our focus from the moving subject to the acting subject traversing frontiers? These acts do not necessarily involve work, travel or escape and the issues we have come to associate with them such as dual and multiple nationalities or regulation of movements. What makes these acts of citizens without frontiers revealing is their traversal qualities: with specific interventions each creates concrete series of resonances, solidarities (or enmities), alliances, and intensities across space and time and effectively resists universalizing narratives and unifying interpretations. The qualities of acts traversing frontiers such as those of WikiLeaks, Anonymous, Gaza Flotilla, The Pirate Party, Climate Camp, No One Is Illegal, Waging Peace, Open Rights, If the World Could Vote, and Banksy on the Wall are too heterogeneous to be confined within our known

categories. These are only the most known and recognized instances. There are literally thousands if not millions more acts such as these.

Let me then return to the movements ‘without frontiers’ again. These can only be traced back to the 1970s. There were doubtless many originary moments for these movements without frontiers and the founding of MSF was certainly an important one. I want to briefly focus on a speech Michel Foucault gave at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva in 1981 on ‘confronting government’. It signals something different. Foucault said ‘There exists an international citizenship that has its rights and its duties, and that obliges one to speak out against every abuse of power, whoever its author, whoever its victims.’ Then he added as if it was self-evident: ‘After all, we are all members of the community of the governed, and thereby obliged to show mutual solidarity.’ Calling this ‘international citizenship’ Foucault defines its duty ‘... to always bring the testimony of people’s suffering to the eyes and ears of governments, sufferings for which it’s untrue that they are not responsible. The suffering of men must never be a silent residue of policy.’ Foucault claims that the suffering of other men, or rather witnessing thereof, ‘grounds an absolute right to stand up and speak to those who hold power.’ Insisting that we must refuse a division of labour between those who act (governments) and those who talk (citizens), Foucault emphasizes that ‘Amnesty International, *Terre des Hommes*, and *Médecins du monde* are initiatives that have created this new right—that of private individuals to effectively intervene in the sphere of international policy and strategy.’ What does Foucault mean by ‘private individuals’? Obviously, he cannot use ‘citizens’ because that would mean ‘nationals’. The kind of right that he is claiming as new cannot be confined to citizens as nationals. Yet, ‘private individuals’ is a problematic phrase for a statement of solidarity that traverses frontiers. The themes in this short and succinct statement are nonetheless quite significant. The declaration that although we might reside under different jurisdictions we share the same condition of being governed and claim that we have a right to responsibility were ambitious declarations.

Those were the 1980s. It appears that Foucault was basically concerned with ‘international citizenship as witnessing’: the suffering of the other and the responsibility to act against it. Or perhaps he was expressing the answerability of citizenship as grounds for an absolute right. Both are plausible interpretations. But I want to contrast this with an episode in 1979 when Foucault briefly worked as a ‘reporter without frontiers’ in Iran. A couple of years before his speech that I just quoted, in a dialogue with an Iranian writer, Baqir Parham, Foucault was discussing why he was visiting Iran. He insisted that he was not visiting as a ‘universal intellectual’ but as a ‘specific intellectual’ to use his skills in solidarity with those who were revolting against an oppressive regime. He did not make this claim lightly as he had thought about it seriously. Arguing that ‘engineers, lawyers, doctors, healthcare workers and social workers, researchers in the humanities, all form a social layer in our society whose numbers, as well as whose economic and political significance, are constantly increasing,’ he concluded that ‘the role of the intellectual is perhaps not so much, or maybe not only, to stand for the universal values of humanity. Rather, his or her responsibility is to work on specific objective fields, the very fields in which knowledge and sciences are involved, and to analyze and critique the role of knowledge and technique in these areas in our present-day society.’ Let me note that here his focus is not ‘private individuals’ but ‘specific intellectuals’ acting with professional capacities. Yet, there is a paradox here. Two years later Foucault would use ‘private individual’ as the subject of this kind of politics traversing frontiers instead of ‘intellectual’ or, more accurately, ‘professional.’ In my view, this is not a contradiction or

confusion in Foucault, but simply points to the absence of a vocabulary with which to think about the new kind of politics that ‘without frontiers’ movements signify.

Since the 1970s and the 1980s, discussions and debates have subsumed ‘citizens without frontiers’ under various disguises such as global activism, humanitarianism, and even global or cosmopolitan citizenship. Much of what can be described as acts traversing frontiers has been interpreted from the perspective of human rights or civil society discourses. The struggles against the apartheid regime in South Africa, the struggles against oppression in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, secessionist movements, the environmental movement, the solidarity movements with refugees, aliens and other irregular migrants have all triggered a complex mixture of interventionist, human-rights based and humanitarian forms of politics. The most recent of these were the so-called Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Middle Eastern states. There are already massive literatures about each and every one of these political struggles and broad interpretations under various rubrics such as ‘global social movements’, ‘global civil society’, ‘multitude’, and ‘global democracy’.

The problem with these interpretations is that the manifold events that are shaping the worlds which we come to inhabit are multiple, complex and heterogeneous. Grand narratives that attempt to capture them are powerless in the face of these complexities. But, more importantly, interpreting acts traversing frontiers as participating in the formation of a singular or unified global or cosmopolitan society runs the risk of bounding citizenship again. It is almost as if just before we understand the promises and possibilities of acts traversing frontiers, we want to limit them to what we already know. To my knowledge, nobody suggested that there should be a global or supranational body regulating academics, architects, doctors, or engineers. You all know how difficult it is to regulate financiers or investors. As professions go about their business of constructing transnational fields in which they acquire the capacity and authority to act without frontiers, why should we call for cosmopolitan or global citizenship? The significance of traversing frontiers as a field in which we can act in our capacity as citizens cannot be underestimated. Nor can we underestimate the damage inflicted by politics under disguise, which occurs sometimes through so-called civil-society groups engaging in clandestine activities and sometimes spying operations.

The task ahead is to interpret these heterogeneous acts in contemporary politics whose subjects constitute themselves as citizens beyond both the figurative and literal frontiers that constrain them. ‘Citizens without frontiers’ signifies the kind of politics and political subjects that are emerging and what happens when they enact their political subjectivity by traversing frontiers. Yet, it is not enough to think about political subjectivity traversing frontiers. It is not enough to document acts that institute subjects without frontiers. It is not enough to interpret these acts through histories (or by giving them histories) that open up ways of enacting citizenship beyond the state and nation. The task ahead is also to participate in creating or constructing a traversal field in which a new figure can acquire capacities to act simply and purely as a citizen.