Acts of Citizenship

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Acts of citizenship can be seen as political when they move against religious or legal codes. Such acts rupture the habitus of citizenship and create moral paradoxes that ripple across the power structures that govern ethical and legal communities. While remaining answerable towards the Other, such acts uproot the taken-for-granted ethical or legal subject. The greatest classical example of this is seen in the 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis when God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his younger son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. While interpretations of this story have generally been limited to the domains of theology and moral philosophy, it can also be thought of as an act of citizenship—perhaps the original act from which all others issue.

Telling Isaac that God himself will provide a lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham leads his son to the top of a mountain in the land of Moriah, builds an altar, and prepares for the bloody deed. Having bound Isaac, and drawn his knife, Abraham is stopped at the last moment by the angel of the Lord, who explains that he has passed a test by showing his fear of God. Looking around him, Abraham finds a ram caught in a thicket and sacrifices this in place of Isaac on the altar. Finally, the angel, returning a second time from heaven, announces that Abraham’s reward will be that his progeny will multiply, and possess the gate of their enemies.

This story, at the heart of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions, has been the object of both an endless stream of theological and philosophical interpretations and a stubborn silence. In God’s command that Abraham sacrifice his son lies an unbearable contradiction. If he carries out this command, Abraham will be disobeying the universal ethical laws that God has laid down. However, if he refuses to carry out the command, Abraham will be disobeying God’s explicit
order. Even if this is not understood as a strict deadlock, in the sense that Abraham is rewarded for his readiness to disobey the universal ethical law in favour of an explicit order from God, this does little to ease the anxieties that the story of Abraham and Isaac provokes. The story remains at least a terrifying precedent for sinning in the name of God, if not evidence for the notion that obedience to God is, precisely, to sin.

Through the work that has been undertaken on citizenship in the last decade, citizenship has come to be associated with the existence of a body of citizens founded on universally comprehensible and applicable codes and laws. In prescribing the characteristics of the citizen, these laws serve to determine the external limit of the body of citizenship. That is, the laws erect a set of rights and obligations that apply to all citizens, and those who transgress the laws may well face becoming non-citizens or outsiders as punishment.

When imagined in the terms of citizenship presented above, the dilemma of Abraham and Isaac is irresolvable. Clearly, there is a body of citizenship constituted by God’s commandments. But it remains incomprehensible how God, as the principle that underwrites the laws of the body of citizenship, could nonetheless command the transgression of His own laws. Here, obedience is equivalent to disobedience in a strict paradox. Even the angel’s appearance to stay Abraham’s hand does not alleviate this tension, as what remains determinative is Abraham’s willingness to do the killing. If his will is sufficient to prove his faith, it is surely sufficient to convict him of sin.

There is, however, another approach to citizenship that suggests a way out of this deadlock. This approach focuses on the notion of the act of citizenship: an act that disrupts and undermines the stability of the laws that determine the limits of the body of citizenship. This act is a transgression, but one that simultaneously refuses the punishment prescribed by the law. Here, the non-citizen or outsider lays claim to the (ontological) principles that underwrite the (ontic) written laws of the body of citizenship, and turns them back on those same written laws. The non-citizen demands recognition as a citizen without, at the same time, giving up the characteristics that have determined his or her non-citizen status— that is to say, the non-citizen demands precisely what is impossible under the existing written laws. Thus, the act of citizenship appears as a demand that the existing written laws be cleared away to make room for something new.

When imagined in the terms of this approach to citizenship, the deadlock of Abraham and Isaac loosens somewhat. If, through an act of citizenship, a non-citizen can lay claim to the principle that underwrites the written laws, and use that principle as a justification for transgression, then God’s command to Abraham may be read in this same way. As that which grounds the (written) ethical laws, God may nonetheless approve an act that clears away those laws to make room for something new. This interpretation is still tentative, however, and it gives rise

‘The Sacrifice of Isaac’, Rembrandt van Rijn (© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)
to pressing questions. Why has God chosen this moment to demand an act of citizenship, and why must that act be Abraham's sacrifice of his own son?

The answer to these questions emerges from what has gone unsaid in the above explanation of this new approach to citizenship. Although this approach is associated with an act of citizenship that demands the clearing away of the old laws, it is nonetheless simultaneously associated with a demand for something new, implicit in which is a recognition of the need for laws as such. This approach to citizenship does not condone a state of permanent lawlessness, especially in so far as it sees laws as representative of a larger field of human interaction: convention, language, exchange and culture. Without law, there would be no society, ethical or otherwise. Nonetheless, every set of laws necessarily constitutes an outside of non-citizenship. As a result, there will necessarily always arise a moment in which the punishment suffered by the outsider becomes unbearable. A call may then emerge for an act that will temporarily clear the ground for something new.

But when is this moment? When does the punishment suffered by the outsider become unbearable? This is the fundamentally unanswerable question at the heart of this approach to citizenship. Because this moment demands the transgression of universal, ethical laws—because these laws are seen, in this moment, to have failed—the criteria for determining when the moment has come cannot be based on any universal, ethical law. The act of citizenship is strictly inexplicable and incomprehensible because the sole basis for explaining and for comprehending anything is the field of convention and language, which is precisely the field that this act seeks to disrupt. There is no way to describe the moment that demands an act, other than as a call.

God's command to Abraham can thus be seen as representative of the call that demands an act of citizenship. According to this interpretation, the laws that govern the body of citizenship of which Abraham is a citizen (which prohibit murder and human sacrifice) must have become oppressive, prescribing a level of injustice and unethical treatment for non-citizens (perhaps specifically for murderers or those who practise human sacrifice) that are intolerable to Abraham. As readers of the story, however, we are not privy to the specific situation of injustice, precisely because the characteristics of the situation itself cannot justify such an act. The only way this kind of justification would be possible is through the application of a universal rule, which is precisely what the act of citizenship disrupts. Instead, the story refocuses our attention from the situation onto Abraham himself, who, in his singularity, experiences that situation as a call. This call is inexplicable in universal terms. It becomes a command from God that neither has nor needs any other justification.

A claim to be a citizen belongs to the first level of abstraction in an act of citizenship. This plea is most often heard in the formal language of status. Status in turn gains access to the substantive language of rights and obligations as the second level of the same abstraction. The first level is the moment in which outsiders and insiders appear in the barest conceptual opposition. The second level appears through another discourse but also embodies the same binary opposition. The question arises as to what happens if each side becomes the other at a third cosmopolitan level? Can the insider and outsider distinction be retained in the same binary? A founding text in the Western tradition that best reveals these complex levels in acts of citizenship is the tragic story of Antigone. This act can be interpreted as an act of citizenship on all four levels of abstraction: as an attempt to assert the status of her brother, the traitor Polynices, as a citizen of Thebes; as an attempt to assert Polynices's status as a citizen of a different body, the family; as an attempt to assert Polynices's status as a citizen of a transcendent or cosmopolitan body; or as an attempt to radically defy the concept of citizenship itself.

The tragedy Antigone was written by Sophocles in 442 BC. Chronologically last in the trilogy of Theban Plays after Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone was nonetheless written first. It has had a major impact on the history of modernity, and continues to exert a powerful force of fascination on the modern imagination. The tragedy begins after Antigone's two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed each other over the rulership of Thebes, their home city. Antigone's uncle, Creon, has risen to the throne to fill the void of power, and as Eteocles defended the city from within, he is treated as a hero. Polynices, who enlisted foreign aid and assaulted Thebes from without, is treated as a traitor and