Performative citizenship: democratic and demagogic

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Engin Isin, Professor of International Politics, School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), Mile End Road, London E1 4NS; University of London Institute in Paris (ULIP) 9-11 rue de Constantine 75007 Paris.

This lecture is based on a chapter that will be published in *Oxford Handbook of Citizenship* edited by Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, and Maarten Vink (2017). I took up the challenge of making a broad case for the way I approach studying citizenship through a language of acts, enactment, and performativity. I am very pleased to deliver a revised and adapted version as the Inaugural Lecture of UCL Citizenship, Social Imagination and Collective Action Research Seminar Series organized by Dr Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou.

Introduction

If indeed being ‘a subject of rights’ means having both the capacity and the authority to exercise rights *and* duties then it seems obvious that citizenship as a legal status governs who may and may not *act* as a subject of rights within any given polity. Citizenship governs whether I may or may not travel to, work, or study in another country; how long I may stay there; to which country and how I pay my taxes; whether I serve as a soldier, I may drive, I may drink in public, I may vote, I receive health care or unemployment benefits, I may marry my same-sex partner, and when I may retire, and much else besides. Many such rights and duties associated with citizenship have developed
especially since the eighteenth century. Today a combination of such rights and duties can be described as the regime of citizenship of any polity. Yet, what we often forget, being a subject of these rights involves political dissent. I may or may not act to exercise my rights or claim other rights and rights for others or to refuse duties. I may ask questions about why I may not marry my partner. I may refuse to serve in the army, may refuse to vote in an election, may occupy public spaces as a protest. What citizens may or may not do involves political dissent because there will be disagreement not only about all these questions but also about who is a subject of these rights—citizens—and who does not enjoy them—non-citizens. In other words, because citizenship is constitutive of rights and because who can exercise and claim these rights is itself contestable, citizenship is practiced not only by exercising these rights but also by claiming them. Today I want to outline a perspective on citizenship as making rights claims across multiple social groups and polities. I have two main objectives. First, I want to shift our attention to the actions of actors, on how people creatively perform citizenship rather than following a script. I want to demonstrate that how people perform citizenship plays a vital role in constituting and contesting citizenship and attaching meanings to rights. Second, I want to highlight that those who perform citizenship are not always citizens in the conventional sense of members of a nation-state, do not always act in the context of democratic or Euro-American polities, and may contest and constitute more than one understanding of citizenship at a time.

I use ‘performative citizenship’ in five distinct but overlapping senses, that: (a) citizenship involves political and social struggles over who may and may not act as a subject of rights; (b) these struggles feature not only citizens but also non-citizens as
The Senses of Performative Citizenship

The first sense in which citizenship is performative concerns the issue of dissent. Although citizenship is often considered a more or less stable membership of a state, a performative perspective considers citizenship as anything but stable. Who may and may not act as a subject of rights is determined by ongoing political and social struggles over not only the content of rights but also who are or are not entitled to them. If performative citizenship is a struggle over the subjects of rights, this struggle creates a scene in which social groups contest their similarities and differences. This argument is predicated on a critical sociological proposition that in any given polity there is often a social group whose particular characteristics dominate as seemingly universal characteristics. If we recognize that since the eighteenth century first in Euro-America and then across the world the nation-state became the dominant polity, we must acknowledge those who were disqualified as citizens or were constituted as its others. The particular characteristics of a specific social group—propertied, adult, male, rational, white, relational actors; (c) citizens and non-citizens include different social groups making rights claims; (d) people enact citizenship by exercising, claiming, and performing rights and duties, and; (e) when people enact citizenship they creatively transform its meanings and functions. I will argue that all these senses are present when performative citizenship accomplishes its transformative possibilities. I will first expand on the five senses of performative citizenship I have just listed. I will then illustrate performative citizenship in democratic and non-democratic politics. Then I will consider performative citizenship not only across social groups but also across borders. I will conclude with a discussion on four typical objections to understanding citizenship performatively.
Christian, heterosexual, and able-bodied—became the dominant universal characteristics in the modern state. It is these characteristics that created subaltern social groups as subjects without rights: the poor, young, women, irrational, black, non-Christian (Muslim, Indigenous, Jewish), ethnicized minorities, queers (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex), and disabled people were deemed not capable of fulfilling the duties of citizenship and hence acting as citizens.

How easy it is to forget that it was only in the twentieth century that the struggles of these groups, especially women, blacks, and queers, started to resist this domination. These social struggles began unravelling the dominant characteristics of citizenship. This unravelling is still under way. We belong to an age when the dominant citizen-subject and his (only much later hers and their) characteristics are challenged yet where the subject positions of its contestants remain as precarious and subaltern as ever. Youth, children, disabled, Muslims, the poor, blacks, women, queers—in any combination of these—make rights claims to the characteristics of citizenship so that they might cross from their precarious positions to at least more liveable positions.

The second sense in which citizenship is performative concerns how social groups struggling for rights bring into play both citizens and non-citizens. The social groups I have mentioned do not struggle to become subjects of rights from identical positions. They occupy different subject positions ranging from citizens (insiders) to strangers, outsiders, and aliens. I have already implied that citizens are those subjects whose entitlements or privileges are instituted as civil, political, and social rights. By contrast, strangers are those subjects who, while citizens on paper, are still considered strangers in the sense that they have not yet fulfilled requirements to act as citizens. Modern examples
are women (in nineteenth-century Britain) and blacks (in twentieth-century America) as both social groups that were deemed strangers of citizenship because dominant social groups considered them as lacking capacities. Yet both women and later blacks were also understood as indispensable parts of the polity that fulfilled functions for it (reproduction for women as mothers, labour for blacks as slaves first and then as workers). Further out, those social groups who are deemed outsiders to citizenship may find themselves as migrants and refugees struggling for the right to be present in a polity. The difference between strangers and outsiders is often contingent on disposability or deportability: strangers are sometimes accepted as indispensable yet corrigible (i.e., subject ‘of’ but also ‘to’ discipline) whereas outsiders may sometimes become indispensable yet incorrigible (i.e., subject ‘of’ and subject ‘to’ punishment). Yet criminalization and imprisonment can also sometimes play on young black men, for example, such that they can straddle the positions of stranger and outsider. In fact, straddling or traversing these subject positions provides the dynamics of citizenship as play rather than a static institution. Finally, those deemed as aliens of a polity typically face total rejection (or ostracization) of compatibility with or even respectability for acquiring or accessing citizenship. Categories of people such as enemy combatants, illegals, or terrorists correspond to such irredeemable or rejected subjects.

The subject positions of citizens, strangers, outsiders, and aliens are neither static nor impermeable. There is a huge variety of social groups that move through or across these positions. The social boundaries between citizens, strangers, outsiders, and aliens are dynamic and permeable precisely because they are objects of social struggles. People actually identify with or are ascribed to various social groups constantly traverse subject
positions from citizens to non-citizens. Moving across these positions or breaking down the boundaries between them involves struggles over rights. Governing ourselves as political subjects means exercising rights that we may have (e.g., the right to vote) and claiming rights that we may not have (e.g., the right to same-sex marriage). It also means making claims for or against rights others do not have as members of multiple social groups. Through citizenship we sort out or negotiate these differences and settle on certain conventions by traversing these subject positions and their boundaries.

So far, I have discussed performative citizenship as though each polity develops its own distinct and independent conventions of citizenship. Yet, many social groups, even those defined as nations, stretch across not only these social boundaries but also borders of polities. The ways in which people act out performative citizenship traverse not only social groups within polities but also across polities. This gives rise to numerous performative contradictions in citizenship. These partly arise from the fact that, just as in relations between citizens and non-citizens, there are asymmetric power relations amongst polities. If indeed the sovereign state is the dominant polity of the modern age, it became dominant through a particular history involving Euro-American settler colonialism, colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism. Euro-American empires, such as Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian, French, British, American, and German, have left indelible marks on places they colonized through various governing strategies and technologies and imposed various citizenship arrangements on colonies. It is these arrangements that erased or displaced already existing ones between and amongst various social groups and replaced them with shades of imperial citizenship. These indelible marks of colonialism have not only inscribed names—such as America, Africa, Asia, and
the Middle East—but also citizenship arrangements in these places whose legacies remain today. Euro-American empires subjected the peoples of these continents to various forms of asymmetric rule and justified this asymmetry by categorizing practices according to the presence or absence of the characteristics of the dominant social groups in imperial metropoles. So, the citizen and non-citizen arrangements that obtained in each polity were transplanted across the metropole and the colony, creating both temporal and spatial arrangements of otherness. The colonial subjects were racialized for their ostensible tribalism and were seen to have never performed (i.e., being able to act like citizens) or developed the characteristics of citizenship and its unifying powers. If indeed colonial subjects were deemed to have performed citizenship, it was because it was ‘borrowed’ in postcolonial sovereign states. This makes studying citizenship in colonial and postcolonial states a vexed activity. Is the description ‘what citizens and non-citizens perform in making rights claims’ adequate to study citizenship in colonial and postcolonial states? I have to emphasize here that approaching performative citizenship is partly inspired by this question and a direct response to it. A performative perspective on citizenship enables us to study various acts of making rights claims in societies and states before, during, and after colonization without making prior assumptions about the presence or absence of that which might be called citizenship.

The third sense in which citizenship is performative is that it is enacted through ‘making rights claims’. I have already used this phrase several times to indicate both the content of struggles over rights and what people are doing when they perform citizenship. It is a concept that we inherit from social movement studies which have drawn attention to how movements for civil rights, gender struggles, environmental justice, global justice,
and minority recognition have often articulated their ‘claims’ as rights. The key lesson is that social movements use the language of rights to articulate the injustices people suffer and show that people resist the ascribing of duties to them and the denial of rights to them and others. Performative citizenship signifies both a struggle (making rights claims) and what that struggle performatively brings into being (the right to claim rights).

Let me explain this crucial difference between claiming to be a subject of rights and making particular rights claims. This is absolutely crucial to understand how people stage democratic dissidence and articulate claims against domination (e.g. oppression, repression, discrimination, inequality) and the injustices it precipitates. Their effect is not only on the exercise of rights and duties as they exist but also on claiming rights and duties yet to come as a result of social struggles. Still, we often focus on the content of these rights rather than on making rights claims. As Karen Zivi writes, however, ‘to approach rights and rights claiming from the perspective of performativity means, then, asking questions not simply about what a right is but also about what it is we do when we make rights claims’. I suggest that when performing the right to claim rights, there is a putative condition of equality between citizens and non-citizens. This putative condition of equality means that citizens and non-citizens are both performing a universal right to claim rights but the condition of difference means that the rights that they claim are particular. If we are unable to recognize the universal in the other we cannot claim to be performing democratic citizenship. It would be demagogical in the sense that we would be hiding our particular interests as the interests of the universal.

When making rights claims, people are effectively saying ‘I, we, they have a right to’ and enact performative tensions inherent in citizenship. This is the fourth sense in
which citizenship is performative. Both universal and particular rights that I have mentioned come into being and become effective through acts (e.g., declarations, proclamations, protests, demonstrations, occupations, resistance, strikes, withdrawals) and conventions (e.g., rituals, customs, practices, traditions, laws, institutions, technologies, and protocols). Often, performing acts of citizenship invokes or breaks conventions. When we make rights claims we both reference and cite these conventions and yet the performative force of our claims often exceeds or breaks them. As Judith Butler puts it, performativity often involves the ‘moment in which a subject—a person, a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a liveable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place’. Yet, I would argue that when there are clearly enabling conventions, making rights claims may still exceed those conventions. As Zivi writes, ‘analyzing [citizenship] from a performative perspective means, then, appreciating the extent to which our claims both reference and reiterate social conventions, and yet have forces and effects that exceed them’. There is a constitutive tension between the right to claim rights as a universal right and making claims for particular rights. When we perform acts of citizenship we play out these two tensions. This is what Butler describes as a performative contradiction which arises when a person or a group is ‘excluded from the universal, and yet belongs to it nevertheless, speaks from a split situation of being at once authorized and de-authorized’. This is an important reason why the object of analysis in researching performative citizenship is acts and how they transform conventions.

The fifth sense in which citizenship is performative is when through struggling for their rights, the rights of others, and the rights to come, under certain conditions, people
constitute themselves as citizens. Crucially, what makes citizenship performative in this sense is not only that it involves iterating or exceeding conventions about what people may and may not do but also that people often resist these conventions and transform them by applying principles such as equality, justice, liberty, emancipation, and solidarity. These principles enable or motivate people to struggle over rights by traversing the boundaries of social groups and borders of polities. By so doing citizens and non-citizens, with or without rights, assume responsibilities towards each other, across boundaries and borders, transform themselves and others, the rights under which they make claims, and the rights to which they make claims.

**Performative Citizenship in Democratic Politics**

I have so far argued that there are limitations on the rights of citizens in democratic polities. We can, for example, examine how these limitations generate subject positions of strangers, outsiders, and aliens with respect to specific citizenship rights. The right to vote as a right of political citizenship in some Euro-American polities already excludes various social groups such as prisoners, children, and mentally disabled. We can also explore how migrants and refugees experience various limits on their rights as non-citizens. We can explore how citizens are juxtaposed against aliens. We can explore minorities such as Muslims in non-Muslim democratic states and how they perform their citizenship. Although we can expand this list and examine how both citizens and non-citizens enact various forms of otherness as strangers, outsiders, and aliens, the broader point here is that these positions are inherent in performative citizenship in all societies. These positions are not contingent but necessary aspects of citizenship. They are important reminders that citizenship is inherently a differentiating institution and that
citizens and non-citizens are relational positions. The obverse of these limits imposed on the rights of democracy’s others is the rights that non-citizens can claim by invoking other legal orders. There has been a significant debate over the human rights of non-citizens in democratic polities. Some of these people are stateless and are able to perform some human rights. Some are citizens of other polities and are able to make rights claims through international law as well as in relation to their countries of origin. I want to illustrate this point with two social struggles in Euro-American societies over citizenship that have had far-reaching consequences for transforming the conception of the right to claim rights and of making rights claims: the struggles of indigenous peoples and the struggles of undocumented migrants.

Indigenous peoples in democratic postcolonial polities such as Canada and Australia raise particularly vexed questions about the rights of citizens. As James Tully has argued, the colonization of indigenous peoples proceeded with appropriation and usurpation of territories without consent or recognition of their resistance to colonization. For these postcolonial states the status of indigenous peoples has straddled across being aliens, outsiders, strangers, and even citizens and yet they still remain as oppressed peoples. Although there is a rich and provocative history of indigenous resistance to this oppression, a more recent struggle in Canada, the Idle No More movement, is now considered to have been a turning point. The movement began in November 2012 as a political response to a Canadian federal government bill that severely eroded indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections. The movement continued to grow not only by using the Internet for organizing itself as a resistance movement but also through hundreds of rallies, teach-ins, and protests for articulating alternatives to neo-colonialism.
Arguably, the Idle No More movement staged a performative citizenship which interrogated its relationship to and status within a Canadian citizenship regime. Some would object to this statement because, it could be argued, indigenous claims are not about citizenship but about sovereign self-determination. This would appear to be appropriate if we interpreted citizenship first and foremost as membership of the nation-state. However, performative citizenship helps us to recognize different subject positions as the claiming or acting out of citizenship. Idle No More is certainly not about being accepted into Canadian citizenship in the sense of status. But if we understand citizenship as performative acts of the right to claim rights and making rights claims, Idle No More must be seen as not only enacting its expressive demands but also performing dissident citizenship in its most evocative and poignant form.

What performative acts of Idle No More inscribe in our imaginary is that the ways in which indigenous peoples have been subjected to internal colonization should not be read as a side story of citizenship. The narrative here is not that there were indigenous peoples and that their rights were fought for within constitutional orders of colonial and then federal governments. Rather, indigenous rights and their democratic citizenship practices were subjected to strategies and technologies government deployed to extinguish, assimilate, incorporate, and accommodate the rights of indigenous peoples to govern themselves. The claims articulated by Idle No More are not about inclusion or recognition within Canadian citizenship but about demonstrating how Canadian citizenship constitutes indigenous peoples as its strangers, outsiders, and sometimes aliens. The movement therefore not only interrogates, once again, how this oppression remains a central aspect of Canadian citizenship but, perhaps more poignantly, how the
Canadian citizenship regime perpetuates this internal colonization. Whether the claims it enacted are for citizenship or not, the performative acts of Idle No More, beginning with its very naming, have moved the question of indigenous people into the centre of the politics of citizenship itself.

A similar point can also be made for another movement that has marked an important shift in citizenship politics: No One is Illegal. The struggles of undocumented migrants over the last three decades have been as consequential for the politics of citizenship as the resistance of indigenous people against citizenship regimes in which they are caught. What began as undocumented migrants destroying their identity documents to enable them to make rights claims as refugees, the sans-papiers (without documents) movement in countries such as France and Spain eventually mobilized a solidarity movement between citizens and non-citizens and thus troubled the boundaries that separate them. As various scholars have shown, the struggles of sans-papiers have interrogated the non-citizen in Euro-American democracies and raised fundamental questions about the boundaries and borders that separate it from the citizen. The key issue has been to recognize undocumented migrants as subjects of rights. But this requires, as McThomas writes, flipping round our ‘understanding of political obligation and ask[ing] what the state owes to those who perform the role of citizen, regardless of their documented status’. By drawing our attention to the dissonance between paper citizenship and performed citizenship McThomas argues that ‘instead of using a top-down approach in which we owe duties to the state because it protects us, we should use a bottom-up approach in which the performance of citizen-like duties trigger[s] the state’s protections’. For Butler, however, flipping between paper citizenship and performed
citizenship elides the performative force of claiming rights. For her ‘... when undocumented workers gather in the city of Los Angeles to claim their rights of assembly and of citizenship without being citizens, without having any legal right to do so, [by] acting like citizens, they make a [performative]... claim to citizenship...’ I would argue that from a performative citizenship perspective undocumented migrants are not only performing civic duties as currently understood but also resignifying these duties and transforming them.

What makes both indigenous resistance struggles and sans-papiers solidarity struggles instances of performative citizenship? Both struggles involve performative citizenship in all five senses that I have identified above: (a) contest who is the subject of rights; (b) question citizens and non-citizens distinction as absolute subject positions; (c) act across these positions through making rights claims; (d) enact the right to claim rights of those who are not subjects of at least citizenship rights by performing acts to draw attention to these struggles; and (e) transform conventions by enacting provocative acts such as No One is Illegal and Idle No More.

Performative Citizenship in Non-Democratic Polities

I have argued that the performative acts of indigenous people and undocumented migrants disrupt the conventional narratives between citizens and non-citizens. We observe performative struggles over rights claims enabling outsiders or even aliens to constitute themselves as political subjects—as citizens—not in the way in which it is already understood but as a transformed conception. This sheds light on the struggles of many social groups who find themselves ‘outside’ political arrangements or are defined as strangers, outsiders, and even aliens who always remain subjects outside citizenship
and yet somehow constitute themselves as citizens. To put it differently, for these social groups, or more precisely for those persons belonging to or identifying with one or more of these social groups, performing Euro-American citizenship is much more precarious and subaltern than for those who belong to dominant social groups. There is an obverse narrative, to which I now turn, whereby people constitute themselves as citizens in polities where democracy is not the explicit arrangement, or at least if it is the arrangement, it is not guaranteeing the putative equality that performative citizenship requires.

This is where I turn our attention away from Euro-American polities to postcolonial or decolonizing societies. For reasons discussed earlier, the ways in which citizenship is performed in Euro-American polities is historically and presently implicated in the ways in which it is performed in postcolonial or decolonizing polities. We may argue for example, that Chinese citizens ostensibly lack certain democratic rights such as civil and political freedoms but this neither means that Chinese history is bereft of performative rights claiming nor that contemporary China is alien to such performative acts. As Dorothy Solinger and Merle Goldman have demonstrated in both urban and rural China citizens perform citizenship in various ways through local or factory assemblies, protests, and demonstrations. So, although we would not describe China as a democratic polity we cannot overlook the fact that its citizens perform democratic citizenship through neighbourhood assemblies and associations. Similarly, Shirin Saeidi illustrates how the wives and daughters of soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) radically intervened in the flourishing of democratic citizenship practices in the Republic of Iran that were otherwise suppressed during the war. She
argues that ‘as martyrs became supreme architects of a revolutionary state at war through self-sacrifice, relatives—particularly mothers, wives and daughters—were nationally bequeathed a noble citizenry status and responsibility to sculpt the state that their loved ones were dying to create’. By assembling neighbourhood associations, organizing solidarity networks, reaching out to other wives and daughters, and enacting various forms of rights claims, wives and daughters of martyrs eventually overcame the negative reactions to their subject position, mostly created by the state, and transformed it into an affirmative and activist image through acts of citizenship. Maya Mikdashi illustrates how deeply the Lebanese state regulates sexuality by means of regulating religion. Its eighteen officially recognized sects and fifteen personal status laws regulate marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption and taken together, deeply divide the rights of women and men and of adults and minors. She argues that ‘the most far-reaching legal discrimination is citizenship law itself, which prohibits female citizens from transferring their legal status to spouses and children. Thus, there are almost thirty articulations of structural sex-based differentiated citizenship in operation.’ Mikdashi, however, documents how strategic conversions from one sect to another and from one sex to another challenge the gendered constitution of Lebanese citizenship law as subversive performative acts. This is a poignant illustration of crossing borders of ascriptive social categories to make rights claims.

I want to briefly reflect on the Arab Spring of 2011 where millions of people performed citizenship by making rights claims including to constitutional change and democratic freedoms such as association and assembly rights. There were numerous performative acts across the Middle East as demonstrations of people assembled
conventional and critical practices to articulate such rights claims. I want to mention here only one scene from Morocco because it involves ordinary acts. Morocco became a postcolonial state in 1956 after gaining its independence from France and Spain which had colonized it since 1912. Like many other postcolonial states, Morocco embarked on building a national state with ownership of communications and transportation infrastructure. Ostensibly a constitutional democracy for much of this period but operating as a state dominated by a social group called makhzen composed of royalty, civil and security service personnel, military, and landowning groups originally groomed by French and Spanish imperial authorities, Morocco until the twenty-first century provided only a modicum of equality for its citizens.

Up to the early years of the twenty-first century, the makhzenian state managed, at times brutally, to mitigate the potentially destabilizing effects of dissident citizenship. Since 2011 the Internet and the spreading waves of dissidence across the region empowered many social groups, especially the youth, where Morocco acquired the highest penetration of Internet users recorded anywhere in Africa. As El Marzouki says, ‘the old passive television spectators now have the tools to become producers of their own programming and thus challenge elitist and statist narratives of cultural identity and citizenship’. The emergence of satire as an expression of performative citizenship was spectacular. Morocco, of course, had rich traditions of story-telling, play, and drama before colonization, yet a sharp, courageous, and insightful satire through the Internet surprised everyone not least the dominant social groups in Moroccan society. The two YouTube satire programmes produced by young Moroccan activists using a dialect called darija brought performative democratic citizenship face to face with the makhzen regime.
The first show BM or ‘black mousiba’ destabilizes the makhzen’s dour and dull representation of itself as the guardian of modern life in Morocco. The second show, Skizofren, specifically focuses on figures or agents of the makhzen by catching them in their duplicity. As El Marzouki illustrates, neither show is itself free from contradictions, inconsistencies, and essentialism, combining elements of cosmopolitanism, nationalism, Islamism, and conservatism in turns. Yet, both illustrate that with a combination of drawing on historical traditions and engaging critically with images of modern life projected upon them by dominant social groups and subversively ridiculing these images, young people in Morocco and beyond also began producing imaginaries that are neither traditional nor modern.

What these performative acts from non-democratic polities demonstrate is that when we assume that democratic citizenship can only be found in legal and political institutions, we may overlook how people perform citizenship in different contexts by assembling traditions. In contrast, by studying performative citizenship in postcolonial or decolonizing societies, not only can we unearth performative acts of making rights claims in traditions but also understand how these traditions have been transformed by the right to claims rights. Moreover, studying performative acts enables us to engage in comparative research in a different key without making prior assumptions about the absence or presence of Euro-American institutions as master signifiers but also without neglecting imperial and colonial histories within which comparative elements are implicated.
Performative Citizenship Across Borders

The right to claim rights and the making of rights claims across polities performative acts complicate who is the subject of rights. A mention of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, the former US intelligence agent Edward Snowden, or British artist Banksy may immediately bring these complexities into sharp focus. When, for example, Ai Weiwei lies on the beach and invokes the image of Aylan Kurdi whose body was found on that beach after attempting to cross the border with his family, is Ai Weiwei performing an act of citizenship? Is it a protest for the rights that Kurdish migrants did not have? Is it a protest against the rights that European citizens have but do not perform? When Edward Snowden revealed information about mass surveillance by the United States and UK governments, whose rights did he think he was protecting? When Banksy paints graffiti in Gaza whose rights is he making claims for? I have argued today that because citizenship is constitutive of rights and who can claim these rights is itself contested, citizenship is defined not just by having these rights, but also by claiming them. The right to claim rights and making rights claims across borders raises complex questions of performative citizenship as citizenship itself increasingly assumes a transnational character.

To explore some of these questions let me briefly mention performative acts across borders that concern the rights of refugees. The rights of refugees have been a fundamental aspect of international and human rights especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, but over the last few years increasingly, performative acts for the rights of refugees to have safe passages and settlement in Euro-American polities have enacted new forms of international citizenship. These acts have taken many forms but
perhaps the most poignant have been those that exposed borders or rather border regimes for their punitive and unjust effects on migrants and refugees. Take, for example, Boats4People. In 2012, a number of freedom of movement activists moved to the border zone between Italy and Northern Africa to draw attention to the deadly consequences of the European border regime. They formed Boats4People as an international coalition with the aim ‘to end the dying along maritime borders and to defend the rights of migrants at sea’. Originally intending to intervene at the border to force rescue operations, the coalition increasingly turned towards commemorative rituals bearing witness to the suffering of the migrant at sea. As Maurice Stierl says ‘these emotionally charged commemorative [acts] had performative effects on those participating but also on those passing by’. By bringing collective grieving to European citizens, Boats4People performed a kind of European citizenship that called on people to show solidarity with migrants and refugees. But as Pierre Monforte argues these performative acts can also transform borders into zones of contention about European citizenship not only by calling into question its limits but also its force. By these commemorative and disruptive acts Boats4People not only brought attention to the EU border regime but also literally re-enacted its sites where European border regime authorities would rather remain invisible such as the central areas of European cities during the Christmas shopping season.

**By way of conclusion**

I have first signified citizenship as performative when people act as political subjects whether they are authorized or not (a). Then I resignified it by saying that citizenship is performative not only in that it enables people to act as political subjects but also as it provokes people to act across subject positions to which they are ascribed as citizens or
non-citizens (b). Then I resignified it again by reiterating that it also stimulates people to act across the borders of polities for solidarity, affiliation, and association (c). Then I have stressed that performative citizenship requires performing acts through which people become citizens in exercising or claiming rights and duties (d). I finally argued that when people act as citizens they are not only actively or passively following rules but are also creatively transforming them (e). I have given examples to illustrate each sense that collectively define performative citizenship, from Idle No More (Canada), No One is Illegal (Canada), BM and Skizofren (Morocco), and Boats4People (Europe). These illustrate how, as multiply positioned subjects (members of multiple social groups, belonging to intersecting subject positions), people find themselves in situations where a combination of various affiliations and identifications define their possibilities and potentialities and how these play out in performative citizenship. If a person is an artist, a Canadian, a woman, black, queer, and/or refugee, playing out this combination as a subject involves negotiating these positions by enacting the right to make claims and making rights claims in and by speaking against injustices, oppressions, prejudices, discriminations, and otherness.

These variations are inherent in performative citizenship and give rise to multiple tensions. These tensions partly arise from how we have come to conventionally understand citizens and subjects as diametrically opposed actors and democratic and non-democratic polities as discrete and sovereign polities. I have called both these understandings into question and developed a critical perspective on dichotomies of subject-citizen and democratic-non-democratic. Approaching citizenship as performative acts enables us to question an enduring narrative that contrasts citizens with subjects and
considers democratic and non-democratic states as discrete and enclosed regimes. This narrative often considers citizens as those with rights (civil, political, and social) and subjects as those who (must) lack these rights. It considers citizens as belonging to democratic states and subjects to non-democratic states. It assumes that only citizens enjoy democratic rights (free speech, universal suffrage, the rule of law) and can perform civic duties. This conventional narrative portrays a historical progression from subjects to citizens and from non-democratic to democratic states as well downplaying the importance of acting with dissent, resistance, or even disobedience as citizens.

It is this conventional narrative that a perspective of performative citizenship critiques. As some of my examples illustrate, there is now a literature that uses performative citizenship or acts of citizenship as a perspective for studying politics. This is an emerging literature and features many studies on performative acts with a focus on specific performances or enactments of politics with identifiable scenes, stages, actors, and rights. If indeed we see acts, as late Charles Tilly illustrated, like repertoires of action that develop through time and from which actors draw when performing, we open up the possibility for comparative research to investigate how similar repertoires generate different effects when performed in different stages within or across polities. An assembly, for example, to protest or dissent can have widely different consequences in squares and streets of Aleppo, Beijing, Cairo, Jerusalem, Madrid, or Seattle that requires different approaches to its enactment.

I would like close by briefly discussing four objections to performative citizenship. The first concerns whether performative acts are spectacular or everyday acts. Often, examples of performative acts feature spectacular acts that appear heroic,
original, and individual as the examples of Snowden and Weiwei imply. But as Catherine Neveu has argued, acts of citizenship can also involve, and perhaps even more effectively, quotidian enactments that lack the visibility of certain performative acts but nevertheless can be rather consequential. Similarly, Jonathan Darling and Vicki Squire have demonstrated how refugee politics is enacted through everyday performative acts with considerable transformative effects.

The second objection concerns whether performative acts produce ruptures when breaking conventions or incremental changes to these conventions. To indicate breaks from conventions often I use the term ‘rupture’ and this can be interpreted as a revolution, regime change, or revolt. It may well include these transformations but the term rupture, following the first objection, can also be quotidian or ordinary. The essential point is that a rupture that a performative act introduces draws people out of themselves to take notice of the taken for granted nature of a given state of affairs and turn critical attentiveness toward it.

The third objection concerns whether all performative acts are democratic. It is clear that nationalist, racist, nativist, misogynist, and homophobic acts also exercise rights to assembly, speech, protest, and demonstrate in order to claim rights to enact a particular understanding of citizenship. As Holloway Sparks illustrates, by performatively playing into anger conservative activists have enacted a particular version of American patriotism that conceals its nativism and racism, which has led to alt-right. The examples that I have provided in this chapter of social groups struggling over rights are what I consider to be subaltern or oppressed or dispossessed social groups whose oppression is based on historical injustices. There is a clear orientation in performative
research towards revealing subjugated social groups and their dispossessio,n. But this does not mean that performative citizenship is inherently progressive or emancipatory. There is a fundamental difference between democratic and demagogic acts. While it is absolutely important to understand that democratic acts are those that recognize not only the subject of rights making rights claims but also the putative universal right to recognize the other. This is as much an analytical requirement as a historically substantive claim. Acts that we interpret as acts of citizenship are acts of democratic citizenship in their capacity to recognize the universal rights of the other. By contrast, demagogic acts are those that mask (or masquerade) their particularism as universalism.

The fourth objection concerns whether rights, especially the performative exercising and claiming of rights are the exclusive domain of citizenship. Amy Brandzel has expressed this objection most clearly by arguing against what she calls sweeping all dissident and resistance acts into citizenship. Although she recognizes that those acts that are regarded as acts of citizenship may have transformative effects, she warns against realigning all resistant and dissident behaviours, practices, and bodies under the name of citizenship. This is an important warning for anyone approaching citizenship but from a performative perspective with a view to recognizing multiple, contradictory, and conflicting ways in which citizens and non-citizens challenge the meanings of citizenship and stretch its functions. For me the question remains whether we can study and do politics without its subjects, citizens, and their dialogical others, strangers, outsiders, and aliens.