The idea of the citizen in the University
Engin Isin on the tensions between the citizen, the scholar, the student and the state

CA News: You are well known for engaging in political activism, and also for questioning the concept of citizenship. Over the years our university has been seen as a space that forms and thinking about things differently. But what is the university itself? How do we think about the idea of the university? How do we think about the relationship between the university and the state?

Engin Isin: Arguably, the university is a space where critical openness to questioning ideas is maintained. The rhetoric of the university is that it requires. This is where the concept of ‘acts’ becomes more evocative. Over the years our university has been seen as a space where a person is qualified to do something to consider the issue of the function (the act or deed) of citizenship or not, we can better understand how sub- jectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

Isin: What are you trying to do with this concept ‘acts of citizenship’ is to open up a perspective from which we can better understand how subjectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

CA News: Given the wide scope and richness of your work, I wanted to ask you if you could tell us about your research on the tension between the citizen, the scholar, the student and the state. How might we understand this complex mix of different social groups in Mexico.

Isin: Arguably, the university from its medieval or even earlier origins, has always been a rather strange mix. The values of ‘equality, mobility and cosmopolitanism’ are more recent inventions than the Enlightenment era when a certain elitism prevailed over the rhetoric. My experience of the university over the last 25 years or so in Turkey, Canada and the UK is that it is a space of possibility. A space where critical openness to challenging ideas is maintained and thinking about things differently is cultivated. These values are not unique to the university but they are indeed more articulate and crucial to the production of knowledge. But it is also a space of contention if not confrontation. Because such critical openness often threatens dominant interests that seek closure, the university becomes a space where a tension is played out. The tension manifests itself on the contested values that comprise that figure we call the scholar. The image of the citizen articulated by scholars in the university is not only quite narrow but also restrictive. The Janus-faced character of the institution is a symptom of this tension. In Britain, for example, on the one hand, the audit apparatus increasingly impedes the ability of universities to render judgment on what they need to teach and research. On the other hand, the highly problematic insti- tuition of the UKBA into universities to monitor their international (non- EU) students damages the trust re- lationship that is so fundamental to education. It seems in Britain the electoral chances of a party depends on how it plays the ‘immigration’ card. The impossible division be- tween ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants spurs a security apparatus and there are more borders everywhere. The issue of ‘bogus’ versus ‘genuine’ students turns into introducing a monitoring apparatus in every university. Recently, the House of Commons Home Affairs Commit- tee denounced the UKBA as not fit for purpose with catastrophic failure of leadership. It remains to be seen what replaces it and what practices it will engender. Meanwhile, we have a right to ask if the UKBA had been ‘fit for purpose’ would the universities have been dragged into the monitoring business in the first place. The struggle for critical open- ness continues so does the vigilance that it requires.

Engin Isin is Professor of Citizen- ship, Department of Politics and International Studies and Direc- tor of the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance, The Open University

Above, graffiti on the walls of Central St. Martins College of Art in London, artfully framed by the author's entries in the margins.

CA News: You are well known for engaging in political activism, and also for questioning the concept of citizenship. Over the years our university has been seen as a space that forms and thinking about things differently. But what is the university itself? How do we think about the idea of the university? How do we think about the relationship between the university and the state?

Engin Isin: Arguably, the university is a space where critical openness to questioning ideas is maintained. The rhetoric of the university is that it requires. This is where the concept of ‘acts’ becomes more evocative. Over the years our university has been seen as a space where a person is qualified to do something to consider the issue of the function (the act or deed) of citizenship or not, we can better understand how sub- jectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

Isin: What are you trying to do with this concept ‘acts of citizenship’ is to open up a perspective from which we can better understand how subjectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

CA News: Given the wide scope and richness of your work, I wanted to ask you if you could tell us about your research on the tension between the citizen, the scholar, the student and the state. How might we understand this complex mix of different social groups in Mexico.

Isin: Arguably, the university from its medieval or even earlier origins, has always been a rather strange mix. The values of ‘equality, mobility and cosmopolitanism’ are more recent inventions than the Enlightenment era when a certain elitism prevailed over the rhetoric. My experience of the university over the last 25 years or so in Turkey, Canada and the UK is that it is a space of possibility. A space where critical openness to challenging ideas is maintained and thinking about things differently is cultivated. These values are not unique to the university but they are indeed more articulate and crucial to the production of knowledge. But it is also a space of contention if not confrontation. Because such critical openness often threatens dominant interests that seek closure, the university becomes a space where a tension is played out. The tension manifests itself on the contested values that comprise that figure we call the scholar. The image of the citizen articulated by scholars in the university is not only quite narrow but also restrictive. The Janus-faced character of the institution is a symptom of this tension. In Britain, for example, on the one hand, the audit apparatus increasingly impedes the ability of universities to render judgment on what they need to teach and research. On the other hand, the highly problematic insti- tuition of the UKBA into universities to monitor their international (non- EU) students damages the trust re- lationship that is so fundamental to education. It seems in Britain the electoral chances of a party depends on how it plays the ‘immigration’ card. The impossible division be- tween ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants spurs a security apparatus and there are more borders everywhere. The issue of ‘bogus’ versus ‘genuine’ students turns into introducing a monitoring apparatus in every university. Recently, the House of Commons Home Affairs Commit- tee denounced the UKBA as not fit for purpose with catastrophic failure of leadership. It remains to be seen what replaces it and what practices it will engender. Meanwhile, we have a right to ask if the UKBA had been ‘fit for purpose’ would the universities have been dragged into the monitoring business in the first place. The struggle for critical open- ness continues so does the vigilance that it requires.

Engin Isin is Professor of Citizen- ship, Department of Politics and International Studies and Direc- tor of the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance, The Open University

CA News: You are well known for engaging in political activism, and also for questioning the concept of citizenship. Over the years our university has been seen as a space that forms and thinking about things differently. But what is the university itself? How do we think about the idea of the university? How do we think about the relationship between the university and the state?

Engin Isin: Arguably, the university is a space where critical openness to questioning ideas is maintained. The rhetoric of the university is that it requires. This is where the concept of ‘acts’ becomes more evocative. Over the years our university has been seen as a space where a person is qualified to do something to consider the issue of the function (the act or deed) of citizenship or not, we can better understand how sub- jectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

Isin: What are you trying to do with this concept ‘acts of citizenship’ is to open up a perspective from which we can better understand how subjectivity is enacted in, for example, illegal migrants or others, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

CA News: Given the wide scope and richness of your work, I wanted to ask you if you could tell us about your research on the tension between the citizen, the scholar, the student and the state. How might we understand this complex mix of different social groups in Mexico.

Isin: Arguably, the university from its medieval or even earlier origins, has always been a rather strange mix. The values of ‘equality, mobility and cosmopolitanism’ are more recent inventions than the Enlightenment era when a certain elitism prevailed over the rhetoric. My experience of the university over the last 25 years or so in Turkey, Canada and the UK is that it is a space of possibility. A space where critical openness to challenging ideas is maintained and thinking about things differently is cultivated. These values are not unique to the university but they are indeed more articulate and crucial to the production of knowledge. But it is also a space of contention if not confrontation. Because such critical openness often threatens dominant interests that seek closure, the university becomes a space where a tension is played out. The tension manifests itself on the contested values that comprise that figure we call the scholar. The image of the citizen articulated by scholars in the university is not only quite narrow but also restrictive. The Janus-faced character of the institution is a symptom of this tension. In Britain, for example, on the one hand, the audit apparatus increasingly impedes the ability of universities to render judgment on what they need to teach and research. On the other hand, the highly problematic insti- tuition of the UKBA into universities to monitor their international (non- EU) students damages the trust re- lationship that is so fundamental to education. It seems in Britain the electoral chances of a party depends on how it plays the ‘immigration’ card. The impossible division be- tween ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants spurs a security apparatus and there are more borders everywhere. The issue of ‘bogus’ versus ‘genuine’ students turns into introducing a monitoring apparatus in every university. Recently, the House of Commons Home Affairs Commit- tee denounced the UKBA as not fit for purpose with catastrophic failure of leadership. It remains to be seen what replaces it and what practices it will engender. Meanwhile, we have a right to ask if the UKBA had been ‘fit for purpose’ would the universities have been dragged into the monitoring business in the first place. The struggle for critical open- ness continues so does the vigilance that it requires.

Engin Isin is Professor of Citizen- ship, Department of Politics and International Studies and Direc- tor of the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance, The Open University

I self London to move to Mexico City and live with my Mexican girlfriend. As a student in late 2010 in order to be with my girlfriend I found that my indefinite home, I am currently in London if truth be told, in no small part due the coalition's campaign against my education as well as my mounting suspicion that my gen- eration of politically active young people. It is an era that we lived in London, I have been treated with nothing but a grudging coexistence and ani- mosity. It is clear that a cuddlier version of racism (i.e., immigrants? How might we understand this complex mix...