Genealogy, ontology and the political: three conceptual questions to Engin Isin

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Engin Isin has written a remarkable book about citizenship, (Isin, 2002a). Its challenge to political geographers is both to rethink citizenship and to work through the geographical implications of such a rethinking. Other commentators here and elsewhere have examined the claims made about these issues. But there are three other key words in the title – ‘being’, ‘political’ and ‘genealogies’. Here I would like to offer some thoughts on each of these conceptual terms, as a series of questions on them.

Genealogy

The book explicitly promises genealogies of citizenship. Although the plural is intended to demonstrate that these are plural genealogies, both of different time periods and within those stages of history, genealogies that run counter to and against accepted stories, it seems to me that there is also a plural sense in the use of the term ‘genealogy’. In one of these senses, the unstressed one, genealogy seems to function little more as a synonym for history. A genealogy is a recounting of a story, cause and effect, tension and release, conflict and overcoming. That these histories run counter to the standard story is no more than a critical retelling of accepted narratives, a stress on the other, the outside, histories that run against the grain, reverse the flow, change the angle.

The second sense, one which is stressed, trades on the legacy of writers such as Nietzsche, Weber and Foucault. It is to this area that I want to address the first
question, or rather the first series of questions. What is genealogy? How does this oppose standard understandings of historiography? Given that Nietzsche is almost entirely critical of the practice of genealogy in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, while leaving open the possibility of a more critical, nuanced and subtle version to come, a possibility which is developed in the work of Deleuze and Foucault, among others, how does Isin both understand and deploy the term?\(^1\) Is the writing of counter-histories, histories with and against the sources deployed throughout the book, sufficient to understand genealogy? If historical sociology – the obvious example here being Weber – and cultural and social histories can be used as references in the retelling of the story, what needs to be done to these histories to make them genealogies of citizenship? Is this question not especially pressing given that the book makes use of these already existing accounts rather than undertaking either readings of primary texts or empirical analysis?

**Ontology**

Isin’s book is entitled *Being Political*. The question of being is the fundamental question of philosophy, the problem of metaphysics, the grounding issue of Western thought. It is stressed both here in the title and at critical junctures of the book itself, along with the question of ontology, the study of being, as Aristotle (1924, 1026a32) tells us, *as* being. As Heidegger has insisted, we miss this, thinking we are doing ontology when we study beings, rather than the much more fundamental question of what underlies and underpins them. In other words, it is not a question of ‘what is?’ but one of *‘how what is is?’* This question, which has links back to Kant’s question of how synthetic a priori knowledge is possible, raises issues of constitution, foundation, and conditions of possibility. Isin uses this vocabulary throughout the book, and the question of being – or often the more fluid, historical and transitory issue of becoming – is continually returned to.

The second question is therefore how the notions of being and ontology are thought of in the book, and how this relates to the previous issue of genealogy. For it seems to me that these are directly related, and that if we can find a basis for what is called genealogy within the continental tradition it is precisely through a historicisation of the Kantian problematic (see Elden, 2003). Not how is this possible, for all times and in all places, but what are the historical and geographical conditions for something to be, and be in a particular way, under a particular casting of being. *Being Political* seems to offer answers to these questions in relation to its theme of citizenship, but methodologically seems underdeveloped. That this is the case seems to be confirmed by an important piece in the new Danish journal *Distinktion*, “Ways of Being Political” (Isin, 2002b), explicitly noted to be a companion piece to the book, which develops some of the book’s claims but also raises related issues.

\(^1\) In this context it is worth referring to the important yet misguided work of Stevens (2003), where strong criticism is made of contemporary uses of the term ‘genealogy’ for their lack of fidelity to Nietzsche.
The political

Isin’s book is entitled *Being Political*. Self-evidently it is a book about politics, both in terms of its explicit subject matter of citizenship, but also in the issues that run through it – otherness, the city, community – and in the interest it has gathered in both political science and political geography. But the title promises not a book about ‘politics’ narrowly confined, but ‘the political’, a claim which is made clearly at the outset, (Isin, 2002a, p. x), and stressed in the article on “Ways of Being Political”, (Isin, 2002b). Once again I think this claim is conceptually underdeveloped. What distinction between politics and the political is being appealed to, and how does it relate to the previous questions I have raised? This distinction is one that functions in other languages – the French *la politique* and *le politique*, the German *die Politik*, *das Politische* – and is of importance in understanding considerable swathes of recent political philosophy. Indeed, in the article, Isin (2002b, p. 7) claims that “the essence of the political is comprised of the ways in which subjects as beings comport toward other beings and being. What is citizenship if not that comportment?”. But how does this distinction function in the book, and in particular in relation to the question of citizenship which, while obviously one of the ways in which beings comport to other beings, is surely neither the only way nor self-evidently in relation to being?

This question goes beyond a mere request for conceptual elaboration, in terms of a demand for an explicit linking of the approach to the subject matter. Rather, it seems to go to the very heart of the enterprise. Politics and political both derive from a Greek word, *polis*; citizenship from the Latin *civitas*, which also means a union of citizens and rarely city, all related to *civis*, citizen. A certain collapsing of these is found in the book, culminating in the extraordinary claim that “being political means being of the city”, (Isin, 2002a, p. 284; Isin, 2002b, p. 26). But this is untenable, at the very least in a Greek context. For it is well known that *polis* cannot simply be rendered as ‘city’. *Polis* is rather a human community, located in a specific place, and yet able to move, migrate and resettle while still remaining a *polis*. Thucydides (1954, VII §77) says as much, when he suggests that soldiers make a *polis* wherever they encamp, because “men make the *polis*, not walls or a fleet of crewless ships”.

Equally there is a danger in the privileging of the urban elements of the *polis*, even when established on a particular site. A *polis* would necessarily have some rural areas, because of a need to feed its inhabitants, demands of security, and through the establishment of certain shrines outside the walls (see Manville, 1990; de Polignac, 1984). There is therefore a danger in reducing *polis* to city, not least because of the exclusion of the countryside (though see Isin, 2002a, p. 64), but also because it allows a too easy equation of forms of citizenship to urban formations. We find this explicitly stated when Isin claims that “the city is a crucial condition of citizenship in the sense that being a citizen is inextricably associated with being of the city”. But this surrenders too easily to an exclusionary tactic that elsewhere Isin is at pains to dispute.

If the claim that “being political means being of the city” is therefore rendered suspect in a Greek context, we should, in the spirit of the previous two questions, ask
what makes such a claim historically possible? And here I think we are forced to come to terms with the Roman legacy, not only in terms of the Latin language which gives us the roots of the words city and citizenship (in the former case through the detour of the Old French *cité*, rather than the more common Latin *urbs*), but also in the conceptual and social organisation which gives rise to modern forms of these two words. As Isin (2002a, p. x) states, “*Being Political* is not about politics. It is about citizenship and otherness as conditions of politics”, about how they make politics possible. In what way does the notion of *politeia* – Greek for both constitution and what we now call citizenship – and the problematic notion of *zoon politikon* – Aristotle’s fabled political animal, or more accurately the being of the *polis* – become the Latin *civis*, which Nicolet (1993, p. 48 cited by Isin 2002a, p. 111) claims suggests both political man and citizen? The question then arises as to whether the collapsing of the political into the city is predicated on a reading of Greece through Roman eyes.

There is another point in relation to this question of the political. In the *Distinktion* article Isin (2002b, p. 7) similarly suggests “to claim that in the occidental imagination being political has been inextricably associated with being a citizen is to claim the uncontroversial if not the self-evident”. But is this and countless related uses of ‘political’ respecting the distinction being called for, if political in this sense is not the distinct term of ‘the political’ but merely the adjectival form of politics? Isin’s argument requires the political to be of the city, and politics to be citizenship, a collapsing both of the ontological to an ontic distinction, related to beings rather than being, a narrowing of the focus and a blurring of the boundaries. Too many of the instances given of being political are ontic, rather than ontological issues, an analysis of ‘what is’ rather than of ‘how what is is’. Is this not the kind of reduction that is necessarily implied by the claim that “citizenship is the essence of the political”, (Isin, 2002b, p. 11).

*Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* is an immensely important opening statement of a project thrown out as an offer and down as a challenge. These conceptual questions which I ask here seem to me to go to the very heart of the inquiry. For Isin is not aiming merely to dispute accepted views of citizenship, but also to fundamentally confront the ways in which these very questions are asked. In terms of his approach genealogy and ontology are at the very centre; the political the focus of his inquiry.

**References**


