

# Experiments with Freedom: Milieus of the Human

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## 1. Introduction: Effervescent Freedoms

Over 150 years ago, Karl Marx proclaimed that capitalism had opened up fractures and fissures in the solid crust of European society. “Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betray oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock” (577). Marx and Friedrich Engels’s famous phrase, “all that is solid melts into air” (Berman 5), captures the constant political and cultural upheavals that characterize global modernity. Today, the ruptures and revolutions are associated with contradictory globalizing phenomena. The interplay between a capricious world and experiments with freedoms threatens to render modern norms of citizenship and human rights “antiquated before they can ossify” (Marx and Engels 70).

The explosive growth and destruction of global markets is associated with various kinds of freedoms: freedom from old traditions, old obligations, spatial confinements, and political arrangements. Experimentations with freedoms—at the political, social, and individual levels—have historically accompanied capitalist expansion. The rise of nation-states in a global order has paralleled the growth of a world economy. These parallel developments have greatly complicated the meaning of freedom and obscured our understanding of the various forms it can take. What is citizenship if not the institutionalization of human rights as political membership in a nation-state? What are human rights if not the freedom from basic human want promised by a global community? Indeed, citizenship concepts that appear to us as enduring global norms of human existence are in constant flux, mirroring the constant upheavals of society and the eternal restlessness of capitalism.

Contemporary globalization once again opens up questions about the nature of human freedom and claims in environments of uncertainties and risks. Insecurities linked to mass displacements, economic downturns, and market exclusions highlight the protective

limits of citizenship and human rights against a variety of adversities. Here, I distinguish between two categories of individual freedoms. First, positive freedom refers to the rights and claims on the government to provide fundamental means of subsistence such as food, shelter, jobs, and so on. Positive liberty also includes individual rights to equal treatment and protection by the state. Second, negative freedom refers to freedom from state interference in speech, behavior, and movement, that is, the rights to human agency. This freedom is liberty from state encroachment and limitation on individual liberty. Negative liberty can include the exercise of autonomous neoliberal practices across national boundaries, or even freedom to reject democracy. These two understandings of freedoms—individual rights protection in the democratic nation-state, and negative rights to exercise human agency unrestrained by state power—are in constant articulation in transnational movements around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Economic globalization is viewed by humanists as an opportunity for transforming citizenship and respatializing claims and entitlements in transnational networks. The claim is that the intensification of interconnectedness associated with capitalism has created opportunities for the rise of feelings and institutions of global solidarity (cosmopolitanism). The proliferation of multilateral agencies such as the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOS), it has been claimed, is interweaving political communities in complex constellations for realizing global common good.

There is the claim that “cosmopolitan citizenship” is developing from the norms of exchange, dialogue, mediation, and mutual understanding that link different sites as “overlapping communities of fate” (Held et al. 445). Other views also claim that spatial freedoms linked to markets and mobilities are key to the formation of liberatory “postnational” identities. Missing from such discussions are the kinds of negative freedoms—freedom from state controls—unleashed in globalized environments.

Experiments with individual freedom do not always result in the realization of Enlightenment ideals of cosmopolitanism or the expansion of human rights. One can say that the ease of crossing borders is associated not primarily with goals of realizing the common global good but with specific individual goals or with political agendas that seek non-democratic visions. This article will discuss these two models of negative freedom—spatially driven affiliations and market-driven autonomous action—that are remaking the meaning of citizenship. These parallel processes of freedom from the nation-states are disembedding elements of citizenship from the territoriality of the nation-state. Emergent forms and norms of transnational ties and claims tend to be contingent and shifting and to respond to various political and ethical goals, not just human rights.

A neoliberal ethos is now transforming citizens into self-governing subjects whose human capital becomes a passport toward realizing individual freedom in diverse transnational realms. Extremist notions of individual freedom (“citizenship”)—to be forged by the autonomous action of free individuals—can be a threat to democracy. Meanwhile, other kinds of border-runners are engaged in clandestine, terrorist activities in the name of liberation from Western-imposed values and practices. These two kinds of transborder activities—free economic agency in borderless markets and terrorist networking to create alternative polities—are currently among the most powerful forms of transnational citizenship and yet also among the least addressed by humanists. In short, emerging norms and practices of freedom are diverse, less inevitable precursors to universal human rights than situated, fraught, and contingent solutions to the problems of contemporary living that are not inevitable precursors to universal human rights.

## **2. Diaspora: Cosmopolitanism**

Diasporas and contingent transnational ties are assumed to have normative goals of bringing about global solidarity, a kind of nascent transnational citizenship, or Cosmopolitanism with a big “C.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars have looked to the mass migrations spawned by global capitalism as the bearers of cosmopolitan ideals, expressed in antistate or anticapitalist sentiments. Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, among others, have attributed a humanistic, liberatory dimension to border-crossings, especially by subaltern groups but also middle-class migrants to Western metropolitan sites. The tendency has been to project onto “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” (Malcomson 238) political features that subvert the agendas of global capitalism and/or struggle against oppressive practices of the nation-state. One perspective explores how subaltern cultures of colonization, displacement, or resistance are endowed with normative ideals of feelings of solidarity beyond the particularistic ties of localized cultures. For instance, James Clifford argues that among “dispersed and connected” (482) Pacific islanders, diasporism is intertwined with indigenism. Their lateral relations of exchanges and alliances engage in “subaltern region-making” (475) outside capitalist circulations. Ongoing migrations are linked to the preservation and/or the recovery of indigenous traditions, as for instance, among “fourth world peoples” such as in the Canadian Northwest, and the Maoris in New Zealand.

Other perspectives seem influenced by the example of Salman Rushdie, who became a heroic diasporic figure after an Iranian

cleric issued a fatwa or religious edict calling for his death for blaspheming Islam in one of his novels. Rushdie was given extensive security protection in England and the US and became celebrated as a wonderful diasporic figure of freedom from ancient tyranny in the Old World. South Asian diasporic subjects in advanced capitalist societies are widely constructed as liberatory figures who subvert oppressive national cultures and even the capitalism that sustains their elite status. These approaches find in diasporism and cross-border identities the normative beginnings of postnational citizenship.

Popular academic constructions of diaspora tend to romanticize global movements, presenting transnational communities as invariably opportunities for the transborder actualization of human freedom. The valorization of diasporas has focused on the quest by oppressed peoples for positive freedoms in democratic metropolitan sites. But the question is what kinds of freedoms are being pursued, since there are different visions and practices of freedom that may not be liberatory in the democratic sense. There are expatriate and refugee streams that seek other visions of freedom, that is, negative freedoms from Western political institutions and values and positive freedoms to found alternative identities and nations. Running alongside transnational cosmopolitan trends are powerful diaspora reimaginings that interact with but reject the universality of Enlightenment ideals.

### **3. Diaspora: Deterritorialized Nation**

If nations are imaginary constructs, they can always be reimagined in ways that depart from the present order of modern nation-states and in favor of separatist polities. Benedict Anderson, who coined the concept of imagined communities in his 1983 book of the same name, is skeptical about the liberatory promise of expatriate cultures and claims. He warns that “long-distance nationalism” (73) by overseas compatriots can be dangerous because it lacks accountability institutionalized by the international system. Indeed, the accelerated flows of the rich and the poor, of professional elites and low-skill migrants, of investors and refugees have engendered a variety of imagined solidarities based on a kind of political freedom that comes with deterritorialization. Scott Malcomson has reluctantly conceded limits to the universalization of this aspect of Western culture. “As for the extension of cosmopolitan ethical practice, I tend to think that will come from the non-Western world, which is today the more natural forcing ground of cosmopolitanism. Among other things, those outside the West have a far greater self-interest in true—that is, non-imperial (and non-“rational”)—cosmopolitanism” (241–42).

Broadly speaking, non-Western transnational groups are organized according to highly particularistic attachments of ethnicity, nation, religion, or culture, but which now freely stretch across conventional borders. Transnational claims of citizenship may very well be precursors to new (or very old) forms of alternative nation building. Among contemporary migrants, worldly experience can engender not only a consciousness about the differences between the New World and the Old<sup>3</sup> but also a desire to recover the glories of ancient cultures. In an age of Asian economic emergence, precolonial hauntings about the greatness of Chinese civilization, the glories of Hindustan, or the might of the Ottoman empire have become intensified, especially among elite emigrants relocated to Western metropolitan sites. Some transnational groups have developed chauvinist agendas to act on behalf of their “own people,” a grouping no longer circumscribed by the borders of a single nation-state.<sup>4</sup> The universal serialization of ethnic, racial, and cultural categories by the global mass media and popular culture has provided the institutional grammar for mobilizing scattered populations on a global scale.<sup>5</sup> Cyber-driven nationalism combined with print capitalism is creating opportunities to construct borderless ethnicities and deterritorialized nations.

For instance, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, some overseas Chinese professionals based in the West set up a Global Huaren (Chinese) website to intervene on behalf of Chinese Indonesians who were attacked. Drawn from different countries to Western metropolitan centers, these professionals imagine themselves as belonging to the same ethnic series, and by invoking “diaspora,” they stretch the Chinese category to incorporate diverse populations into a global ethnic network. The cyber interventions in the Indonesian situation, while casting a welcome light on the atrocities of state-instigated attacks, also threatened to derail Indonesian attempts to rebuild community belonging following the event.<sup>6</sup> This would-be global ethnicity, based on networks of ethnic wealth and education acquired in global sites, shows that there is nothing “natural” about “diasporic groups.” They have to be constructed by actors invoking an ethnic grammar and connected through techno-material forms that enable a global reach.

The most vivid examples of transnational identities are promoted by radical networks that seek to remake existing nation-states and establish new nations.<sup>7</sup> Despite Anderson’s wariness of expatriates’ “unaccountable politics,” one need not view all forms of long-distance nationalism as a “menacing potent for the future” (Anderson 72). Some expatriate movements can install, and have installed, democratic reforms in their homeland. Nevertheless, some radical militant networks have other goals of universalism. Only a tiny fraction of

Muslims in diaspora are involved in violent jihadist politics, but their transnational activities represent a kind of alternative political globalization.

The radical Islamic Al Qaeda network may be said, with some simplification, to have a dual jihadist goal: to be rid of an American presence in the Middle East and to eventually found “purer” forms of Islamic polities free of Western secularist influence. Such groups have a religio-military vision of borderless identity inspired by both a geographical and a spiritual diaspora. Radical Islamic networks mobilize Muslim adherents from diverse countries to a goal that is both broad and simple and thus easily translatable across cultures. On the one hand, militants capitalize on the deeplyfelt sense of Islamic brotherhood and, on the other, they tap the belief among some Muslims that they are dutybound to respond to the call of the jihad and to die for the cause (*istimata*). Al Qaeda and its affiliated groupings have recruited disaffected Muslims living in Europe and North America. In another case, diasporic Muslims originating from Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Algeria and living in Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands were linked by an ultraorthodox sect founded by Takir wal Hijra in Egypt in the 1960s. Members of this network carried out the Madrid bombings early in 2003 and the recent murder of a Dutchman who made a film crudely satirizing Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Besides terrorist attacks in Western milieus, militants associated with Al Qaeda seek to recreate the Arab caliphate in the Middle East as a defense against Western domination.

Diasporic jihadist unity is expressed by providing teaching, military training, and resources to like-minded groups and their varied regional agendas. Al-Qaeda is loosely connected to Jemaah Islamiyah (“Muslim Nation”), a radical network based in Java, Indonesia. Besides Osama bin Laden, the paradigmatic diasporic militant figure was Hambali, or Riduan Isamuddin, an Indonesian member of Jemaah Islamiyah who was operations chief for Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia. Hambali was suspected of masterminding a series of attacks, including the October 2002 Bali bombings, in order to chase Westerners from the region. The purported goals of Jemaah Islamiyah are to attack secular states and to eventually realize the goal of “restoring” a caliphate state in Southeast Asia. The power of terrorist networks suggests a vision of transnational citizenship that rejects modern nation-states, that seeks to reterritorialize nation-states currently divided by political borders as a transnational community rooted in a great religion.

Jihadist solidarity stretching across far-flung sites is frequently aided by local women. Media attention has focused on female suicide bombers and militants in Israel, Chechnya, and South Asia. But I am referring to ordinary women in various locations who give less

spectacular but ultimately more practical support to transborder militant operations. Precolonial trade between the Arab world, South Asia, and Southeast Asia traditionally relied on marriage to local women to forge economic links, incorporate migrants, and spread Islam. This practice has been used by radical networks like Al-Qaeda as a consistent strategy to bond with local groups, gain resources, and influence political action. Some foreign operatives marry the kinswomen of local leaders, thus acquiring legitimacy, residency permits, translation services, new identities, and cover to carry out covert action in foreign sites. Other overseas militants marry unknowing young women in Southeast Asia. For instance, Indonesian Mira Agustina was introduced by matchmakers to an Al-Qaeda operative Omar Al-Faruq, a Kuwaiti who was later arrested in Thailand and turned over to American custody. When Mira learned that her husband had planned to bomb the US in September, 2002, she exclaimed, “My husband can’t be a terrorist!” (“Married” 3). Unbeknownst to her, her father’s villa was used to plot attacks around the region.<sup>9</sup> The most notorious Al-Qaeda terrorist in Southeast Asia was Indonesian Riduan Isamuddin who married a Malaysian-Chinese Muslim although he already had wives in Cambodia and Pakistan, who were all apparently unaware of his activities. The Islamic focus on the sacredness of family, culture, and sacrifice is a powerful draw on female support everywhere. Thus, marriage and kinship practices embed foreign operatives in sympathetic environments, providing cultural translation and social cohesion that integrate long-distance diaspora politics. Religion and marriage, more than jet planes and the Internet, are the vital elements in forging links in the diasporic chain, enabling the spatial freedom for diverse and shifting forms of coalitions that seek, through secrecy and violence, to found deterritorialized nations. The popular view of diaspora as ethnicity has elided the fact that diaspora is really a political formation seeking its own nation.

Diasporic yearnings are deeply anchored in political desires for return to a spiritual home that can be realized in this worldly culture and geography. As scholars, we have focused on those diasporic communities that are purportedly invested with Western “rational” universals, and in whose border crossings we can see a glimmer of a cosmopolitan future. But the postcolonial hauntings intensified by cultural and transnational displacements can also inspire antihumanistic, antirationalist goals. Other ethical considerations come into play, in the form of the desire not for solidarity as world citizens but for the kind of ethno-racial or religious segregations that threaten the global community. One need not subscribe to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” as his 1996 book is titled, to observe that actual existing aspirations to transnational citizenship are not always

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framed in cosmopolitan terms but seek rather to politically consolidate transnational ethnic and religious powers of freedom. Clearly, not only diverse militant but also fundamentalist and moderate transnational Muslim movements are responding to deep yearnings for a resurgent Islamic sociality—an Umma—that ignores the man-made borders of nation-states. The new “Islamic world” is not a geographical space but a metarealm, a “satwhal” or emerging reality based on the aspirations of many Muslims in the global South to be merged as an international community.<sup>10</sup>

It seems wise to consider diaspora not as a pregiven instrument of cosmopolitan politics but as a contingent strategy of power that pursues different kinds of freedom, including freedom from secular Western culture. Some diasporic communities may seek subaltern emancipation outside the nation-state in the transnational spaces already shaped by capitalist forces. But more powerful migrant groups build on the mobilization of transnational resources to construct alternative ways of global belonging based on exclusive categories of ethnicity, race, and religion. Thus the goals of diasporic nations can also threaten Western values of freedom, democracy, and human rights that underpin the contemporary global system of nation-states. Emergent cross-border identities, affiliations, and nationalisms actually attest to the limits rather than the universality of cosmopolitan ideals. Meanwhile, Western notions about individual freedoms have not remained unchanged, going through permutations linked to global market forces.

#### **4. Individual Freedom as Neoliberal Logic**

While the above approaches focus on migrant populations generating new notions of citizenship, I consider the migration of social technologies as an equally important contributor to mutations in citizenship. By “human” or “social technology,” I mean rational means-ends procedures designed to produce desired outcomes in human conduct. Nikolas Rose has argued in *Powers of Freedom* (1999) that in advanced liberal democracies such as the United Kingdom, market-driven logics have infiltrated the thinking and practice of governing. The post-World War II welfare state is withering, withdrawing, nominally, from caring for all citizens, but now wants them to act as free subjects who self-actualize and act on their own behalf. “Government at a distance” (Rose 49) is a decentralized mode of power that depends on a loose network of social agencies and actors to disseminate key values and norms of self-governing conduct. An ensemble of institutions—schools, museums, corporations, NGOs—diffuse ideas and techniques for acting on the self and for reforming/reengineering the self in order to confront globalized insecurities and challenges.

There is thus a fundamental shift in the ethics of subject formation, or the ethics of citizenship, as governing becomes concerned less with the social and collective management of the population (biopolitics) and more with instilling behavior of individual self-management (ethico-politics). Ethics is used here not in the sense of the moral guidelines but as the practice of self-care that determines how the individual constitutes herself as a moral subject in a political community. An ethical regime can therefore be construed as a style of living guided by given values for constituting oneself in line with a particular moral code.<sup>11</sup> The neoliberal ethical regime requires citizens to be self-responsible, self-enterprising subjects. Such ethics are framed as an animation of various capacities of individual freedom, expressed both in freedom from state protection and guidance and in freedom to make calculated choices as a rational response to globalized uncertainties.<sup>12</sup> These ideas were first promoted by Frederic von Hayek, centering on the figure of the *homo economicus*, a self-maximizing figure forged in the effervescent conditions of market competition.<sup>13</sup> The ethics of individual economic action as an efficient way to distribute public resources (“neoconservatism”) were gradually implemented under Reaganite economics in the US and the Thatcherite regime in England. But while Rose and others such as Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) attribute these new ethics of compulsory individual freedom to advanced capitalist societies, I maintain that such rationalities of governing and ethics of citizen-formation are not confined to the West but have migrated to emerging sites of hypergrowth.

I call such ethico-politics technologies of neoliberalism with a small “n,” and its adoption is changing the ethical basis of citizenship in politically diverse locations. The universalizing, mobile figure of neoliberalism interacts with diverse political regimes—capitalist, authoritarian, and postsocialist, among others.<sup>14</sup> The new logics of market-driven individualism subvert the freedoms enshrined in citizenship by stripping away the old guarantees of citizenship protections. In the US, more people, along with welfare recipients, are actually losing entitlements as citizens. Middle-class lives are in jeopardy as college-educated individuals become unprotected from corporate decisions to outsource well-paying jobs. In socialist China, the authorities no longer provide subsidies for housing, food, and health, causing millions of peasants to migrate to cities to seek jobs in the private sector. In authoritarian Singapore, extensive social services are now conditional upon high individual achievements in education and entrepreneurial skills. Increasingly, citizens in diverse political milieus are obliged to become free of state supports and to develop skills as free agents of their own lives.

In diverse Asian growth zones, citizenship values are now pegged to the demands and dynamism of markets. Whether we are talking about Singapore, an emerging hub of biotechnology, the megacities on China's coast, or cyber centers in India, the ideal "citizens" are "global talent," or locals and foreigners who have acquired globally marketable knowledge and skills to contribute to the growth of particular sites. Singapore has constituted such specialized zones by mobilizing foreign technology and actors to help create an environment for the accumulation of intellectual capital in science and technology. In China, the new stress is also on developing "human talent" (*ren cai*) and on concentrating professionals and experts in a few centers of growth in information technology industries. For instance, Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong, is drawing technical experts from all over the country to build a global media industry. Shanghai, the Manhattan of China, will be the site of a world fair to showcase its international professional standards in many fields. Hyderabad and Bangalore in India are zones for software engineering that have attracted skilled jobs from the US. In these milieus, "global" refers not so much to foreigners as to globally relevant knowledge and skills that can be acquired by the self-enterprising subject. Neoliberal calculations now directly engage the problems of managing labor and life in these disparate centers with different political traditions. Thus, this globalism as market-relevant knowledge is in itself a cosmopolitan (universalizing) force, without necessarily bearing or proliferating democratic values.

The new norm of belonging to "Asian world cities" is not as a citizen who makes demands on the government but as individuals who take the initiative as mobile, flexible, and reflexive actors responding autonomously to market forces. There is thus a shift in the ethics of citizenship, from a stress on equal access to rights and claims on the state to a focus on individual obligation to maximize self-interest in turbulent economic conditions. Responsible citizenship is to be enacted in autonomous actions of individual self-enterprise and risk taking, without state support. In addition, there is the requirement of self-enterprising citizens to interact with technological systems and to remake themselves as reflexive knowledge workers.

In East and South Asian environments, neoliberal ethics of self-responsible citizenship are linked to social obligations to build the nation. In India and Malaysia, discourses about "knowledge workers" and "knowledge society" urge citizens to self-improve in order to develop high-tech industries.<sup>15</sup> The accumulation of intellectual capital as an obligation of citizenship is most extreme in Singapore. Ordinary citizens are expected to develop new mindsets and build digital capabilities, while professionals are urged to achieve norms of "techno-preneurial citizenship" or lose out to more skilled

and entrepreneurial expatriates and be reduced to a second-class citizenry. A journalist told me that Singaporeans are accustomed to being told that they are to compete with foreigners on their own home turf. It's a matter of merit, not race or ethnicity, she claims: "If you're no good, you're no good. The job goes to better educated people," no matter where they are from.

Despite having a population of four million that is already one-quarter expatriate, Singapore has an aggressive headhunting program that recruits experts in all fields in order to make it "a fertile ground for breeding creativity" ("Contact"). There is the construction of the island as a globalized nursery for growing intellectual capital. Nonbreeding subjects are rendered nonworthy subjects. Talented expatriates enjoy better salaries, housing allowances, and preferential tax breaks than run-of-the-mill citizens. Consequently, the problems of living, working, and productivity increasingly pivot around individual self-actualizing talent rather than conventional citizenship claims. The influx of exciting, risk-taking, and creative foreigners, it is hoped, will shake up narrowly trained, security-conscious citizens constrained by Confucian norms and group thinking. Neoliberal ethics trump Confucian ethics as governing technologies seek to animate self-governing subjects who can make calculated investments in their lives for uncertain times. The moral measures of citizens, expatriates, and habitués of globalized sites are now set spinning by the gyrations in global markets. Residents in such globalized sites are valued and protected not because of their citizenship status but for their powers of self-management and cutting-edge skills that sustain the competitiveness of growth zones.

In short, this form of "transnational citizenship" is rooted in an instrumentalist definition of individual freedom as economic optimization in the realm of borderless markets. These "global citizens" do not, practically speaking, rely on a specific citizenship status to make a living but travel the world to perform globalized functions in the nodes of a far-flung archipelago. They are substitutable for one another in any given site, members of a circulating intellectual "labor aristocracy" (including writers and professors) who serve the contemporary demands of global capital. In Asian growth zones, the discourse of constant self-improvements is directed at contributions to "civic society," in political solidarity with the national community. The common feature is that regardless of settings, the stakes of citizenship are raised for the majority. Especially in places like Singapore, those who cannot scale the skills ladder and measure up to neoliberal ethics of citizenship are increasingly marginalized as deviant, even risky subjects who threaten the new normativity. The adoption of neoliberal criteria systematically undercuts juridical principles of citizenship that promise universal rights to all.

## 5. Milieus of the Human

But what about “cosmopolitan citizenship,” the kind of “good” global solidarity that is linked to human rights? Briefly, there are two aspects of this discussion. First, in Western democracies, the discourse of cosmopolitanism has been about ways of incorporating noncitizens. In the European Union, where the federalization of nation-states has created social conditions of a broadened civil society, debates over the integration of diverse communities with non-European origin have focused on balancing an imaginary of European civilization and the need to give migrant communities some legal protection. There is a process of “disaggregating” citizenship into different bundles of rights and benefits, so that migrant workers can experience a limited measure of political representation. In *Limits of Citizenship* (1994), Yasmin Soysal maintains that human rights discourses have influenced European states to differently incorporate migrants and noncitizens. Such bundles of limited benefits and civil rights constitute a form of partial citizenship, or “postnational” political membership. But clearly, a stronger version of cosmopolitan citizenship that would offer permanent asylum to refugees is yet to be realized or perhaps not realizable in countries feeling overwhelmed by immigrants from outside Europe.

Cosmopolitanism as intra-European solidarity based on liberal democracy and civil rights is easier to countenance. Jurgen Habermas notes that the divisive onslaught of deregulated markets has threatened the democratic achievements of European societies, thereby creating a “democratic deficit” in public life (14). He argues that distinctive European rights—inclusive systems of social security, social norms regarding class and gender, investment in public social services, rejection of the death penalty, and so on—constitutes a substantive conception of citizenship that must be protected. He invokes the image of a transnational public sphere and an EU constitution that can give symbolic weight to a shared political culture. But despite the proliferation of transnational connections, cosmopolitanism in the sense of transnational solidarity to protect European cultural distinctiveness may be more easily agreed upon than a true cosmopolitanism that absorbs illegal migrants and asylum-seekers from outside the continent. Observers such as Douglas Holmes in *Integral Europe* (2000) have noted the rise of subnationalist identities in the wake of demands for European integration.

Second, cosmopolitanism as the universalization of the human rights regime is represented in an array of United Nations (UN) conventions in defense of the tortured and the displaced, exploited children, trafficked women, and migrant workers, among other globally disadvantaged groups. But the ideals of basic human rights are only enforceable (short of occupation by another sovereign power) by

nation-states within their own territories. In practice, the assemblage of UN bodies and NGOs that seek to spread rights mainly do two things: apply pressure on errant governments to stem abuses against their own citizens (using aid as a carrot) or intervene in humanitarian crises by providing relief funds. Thus, despite the UN legitimation and coordination, NGO practices tend to be specific, strategic, temporary stop-gap measures. Private NGOs such as Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, and Oxfam International are also said to constitute the ligaments of an emergent global civil society. The global NGO response to the 2004 Asian tsunami calamities is a heartwarming and striking example of how NGOs coming together in a particular crisis create a sense of the world not as divided nations, but as a series overlapping “communities of fate” (Held et al. 445). The media glare on victims in ten countries and global competition in donor generosity create a picture of intense feelings of global solidarity. But nevertheless, despite claims about emerging “transnational civil society” (452), NGO interventions tend to be sporadic, uneven, and shifting, driven more by particular crises than a sustained commitment to implementing values or rights of social equality. Transnational NGOs, numerous though they are, do not coalesce into a system of global governance that can actually safeguard the human rights of the globe’s inhabitants, as many European theorists tend to claim. The discourse says that human rights should be protected, but the NGOs cannot actually deliver human rights.

I tend to view NGO interventions in contingent and limited terms, as situated and strategic interventions into the problems of diverse milieus of living. NGOs are practitioners of humanity, and, in an everyday sense, they wrestle continually with the ethical implications of particular situations of life and labor. Ethically speaking, citizenship is about resolving problems of life and labor in particular milieus, creating solutions that are contingent, provisional, and varied, in connection with political and economic uncertainties.<sup>16</sup> In ordinary but especially emergency situations, NGOs sort out different categories of human beings, determining who should be aided, live, or die. The triage system in desperate humanitarian interventions unavoidably grades humanity into different categories of biological worth. For instance, local NGOs who fight on behalf of foreign domestic workers in Southeast Asia—many treated like slaves—do not invoke human rights. Rather, NGOs seek to secure minimalist conditions for sheer survival. Malaysian NGOs do this by appealing to the moral economies of the host societies and noting that the biological welfare of migrant workers will yield higher labor productivity. There is thus a convergence between appeals for the moral protection of migrants’ rights to biological survival on the one hand and a concern to link their welfare to the economic interests of

affluent households that hire them.<sup>17</sup> These NGOs are not making absolute judgments about equal access to human rights nor demanding that these contract migrant workers be given citizenship in nation-states that refuse to absorb low-skill workers as permanent citizens. As mentioned above, even in Europe there is extreme resistance to granting citizenship to migrants from the South. Promigrant NGOs in France have been able to claim the biolegitimacy of HIV-positive migrants as legitimate grounds for claiming citizenship. But again, this is by no means an established institutional practice.<sup>18</sup> Gradations of the “biopolitical backwardness” of migrants and the relative wealth of the host society affect the capacity of NGOs in Southeast Asia to make effective claims on behalf of poor migrants. In short, NGO interventions make only on-the-ground decisions about who can or should survive, how this can be done, and how and when to make claims, depending on situated constellations of political and ethical forces.

Humanists continue to uphold human rights as a global ideal, but they should not thereby develop willful blindspots to actually existing transnational politics. Experiments in freedom in the transnational realm include the pursuit of individual freedom as well as the violent realization of particularistic and exclusivist identities. Transnational human rights regimes can only spread a thin and fragile cover over bare life. Meanwhile, the numbers of globally excluded populations daily crowd the planet and our conscience.

Fast-changing markets, knowledge, and human practices have intensified volatilities surrounding citizenship and what it means to be human. Advances in biotechnology are creating “post-human” beings and a variety of living forms that challenge the concept of individualism, individual subjectivity, and the nature of the human.<sup>19</sup> These new animations and articulations are happening in particular laboratories and at the truly planetary scale by putting at stake our existence as humans. It appears that we are at the dawn of a discussion of the complex, contingent, and tenuous links between individual humans and individual rights. Human and nonhuman life forms are in flux.

Given our acute sense of the unknown emerging in the horizon, claims about universal human equality can only be made with a great deal less certainty than in the heyday of the post-World War II human rights declaration. The conversion of claims of sheer survival into political rights, from alien status to legitimate citizenship, is more contingent than ever. It would appear that spatial freedom and movements we associate with diasporas and market-driven mobilities are no guarantees of the spread of human rights; on the contrary, these border-crossing movements often attest to the rise of nondemocratic forms of negative freedom. Transnational NGOs can only intervene in specific milieus, tinkering at the edge of sheer life, falling far short of claims about “a single normative rights standard” (Ignatieff 318).

## Notes

1. For consideration of “negative” and “positive” freedoms in a human rights regime, see Amy Gutmann’s Introduction to *Human Rights as Politics and Ideology*/Michael Ignatieff, ed. Amy Gutmann (2001) vii–xxvii, esp. ix.
2. See Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (1991).
3. The concept of double consciousness popularized by Benedict Anderson and Paul Gilroy must be broadened to include adherents beyond trafficked slaves in early modernity, anticolonial leaders, and diasporic peoples. Indeed, other migrant populations may experience multiple consciousness, depending on specific itineraries and peregrinations through centuries of travel, as exemplified by the experiences of overseas Chinese. See Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong, “Introduction: Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity,” *Ungrounded Empires*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (1997) 3–36.
4. Israel is the preeminent example of a nation-state founded through the diasporic longings of “a people,” but some contemporary diasporic groups seek to “recover” polities that straddled contemporary national divisions.
5. See Anderson’s *The Spectre of Comparison*.
6. See Aihwa Ong, “Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics among Transnational Chinese,” *Interventions* 5.1 (2003): 82–100.
7. One may point to Israel as a nation-state founded by diasporic groups, and the existence of which depends on endemic violence against other inhabitants of the land.
8. See, e.g., “New Terror Threat in EU: Extremists with Passports,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 Dec. 2004: A1, 5.
9. See also Zuraidah Ibrahim, *Jemaah Islamiyah Wives: Supportive Bystanders or Ignorant Partners?* M.A. thesis in Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2005.
10. See Yasushi Kosugi, “Islamic Regionalism,” presented at the “Regions in Globalization” conference, Kyoto University, 25–27 Oct. 2002.
11. See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” *Ethics, Vol. 1, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (1994): 281–302.
12. See Rose 188.
13. See *The Essence of Hayek*, ed. Chiaki Nishiyama and Kurt R. Leube (1984).
14. See Aihwa Ong, “Neoliberalism as Exception, Exception to Neoliberalism,” *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006).

15. See Aihwa Ong, "Ecologies of Expertise: Assembling Flows, Managing Citizenship," *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (2005): 337–53.
16. See Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff, "Regimes of Living," *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (2005): 29–30.
17. See Aihwa Ong, "A Bio-Cartography: Maids, Neo-Slavery, and NGOs," *Neoliberalism as Exception*.
18. See Didier Fassin, "The Biopolitics of Otherness," *Anthropology Today* 17.1 (2001): 277–82.
19. See, e.g., Sarah Franklin, "Stems R Us: Emergent Life Forms and the Global Biological," *Global Assemblages*, ed. Ong and Collier: 59–78.

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