

## Openings and Retrospectives



### REFUSAL AND THE GIFT OF CITIZENSHIP

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Refusal is a political stance. It is an effort, at least minimally, to redefine or redirect certain outcomes or expectations or relationships. It is, maximally, to reject anticipated reactions or responses, and thus to challenge authority or structure or the rules of engagement in the first place. This we know. We know refusal can be a political move, but it can also be an ethnographic one. Since 1959, Tibetan refugees have collectively refused citizenship in South Asia. This refusal disrupts and bypasses established post–World War II political possibilities for refugees in favor of different ontologies of becoming and belonging. In so doing, Tibetans posit citizenship as a claim rather than a status. In Tibetan as in English, refusal can be both active and passive (as can its opposite, acceptance; *khas ma len/khas len*). She refused. She was refused. Both are political and ethnographic acts.

In the context of refugee life, the ethnographic and the political are code-terminative. In a Tibetan Buddhist sense, they are interdependent, one informing the other, one impossible without the other. The political is power, force, and authority. For an anthropologist, it must be understood ethnographically rather

than in abstract or universal terms. Here the ethnographic is the gritty domain of lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, and possibilities of any given cultural group. As a working concept, refusal is not so much fixed as in formation, arising as practice and effect in relation to both ethnographic grounds and political projects (Stoler, *forthcoming*; see also da Col and Graeber 2011).

Curiously undertheorized in current political and social theory, refusal was addressed almost a century ago by Marcel Mauss (1967) in *The Gift*. In positing that a gift economy was more prevalent over the course of human history than a market economy, Mauss argued that the giving of gifts and thus exchange, rather than self-interest, was key to human relations. Giving involves receiving, with social obligations to give, to receive, and then to give in return. Key in these exchanges is the creation, maintenance, or deepening of personal or collective bonds between givers and recipients. To refuse is to cut social relations, or as Mauss (1967, 11) puts it, “the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse.” Or is it? Mauss continues to detail possibilities for refusal in various societies. In some instances, refusal was never possible, but in others it was only prohibited at specific times. For yet other societies he notes that there were circumstances in which a refusal could be “an assertion of victory and invincibility” (Mauss 1967, 39). In times and places where refusal was allowed, it led to other sorts of obligations and necessary rituals. It is these other obligations and rituals I find especially interesting. What if to refuse can be an element of group morality, a generative act, a rearrangement of relations rather than an ending of them? I believe such a reading of refusal is both optimistic and possible.

Optimism, writes Lauren Berlant (2011, 14), is ambitious. It is “a social relation involving attachments that organize the present.” Refusal is optimistic. Refusal involves attachments, connections to a goal, relations to ambitions. It is a no committed to generating a yes. It is ambitious with respect to the possibilities, and not just the ambiguities, of both dissent and consent. The attachments that organize the present also organize pasts and futures. Yet for Tibetan Buddhists, attachment is to be avoided. Attachment signals the worldly in a mundane sense, the world of suffering in which humans are trapped until they reach enlightenment. Attachment is to be defeated and tamed, and yet attachments define human life. Refusal is one form of attachment. Gifts are another.

To many, citizenship is a right. To refugees, it is often posited as a gift. Citizenship is heralded as a gift in that it confers the privileges and safety of a new home, or perhaps the reclamation of one’s original home via the gift of

return. Such a gift should be accepted. One should graciously accept the gift of citizenship, of home, of belonging. Yet this is not always the case. Tibetan refugees in South Asia, for example, have long refused citizenship as a nonnegotiable political claim.

### REFUSING CITIZENSHIP

“We refused it. We didn’t accept citizenship here.” When I began research on citizenship in the Tibetan refugee community, exile government officials told me this, told me that the exile government had refused citizenship in India and Nepal. They had rejected it, I was told, so as not to cancel out their claims to Tibet, to Tibetan sovereignty, to citizenship in their own country rather than in a foreign one. Since 1959, three generations of Tibetans have lived in India and Nepal without sufficient, or even any, legal status. Tibetans did not receive citizenship and its accompanying documents and rights, but they were allowed to stay as refugees. Other claims followed: they had been refused rights and papers by the governments of India and Nepal. It was thus not just a matter of refusing, but also of being refused.

Tibetans refused citizenship, but were they ever offered it? We do not know. Negotiations between the Dalai Lama and Jawaharlal Nehru remained private. Transcripts and other documents from the discussions have never been released, neither by the Government of India nor by the exile Tibetan government that the Dalai Lama headed from 1959 through 2011 (and which is now led by a democratically elected leader). In Nepal, the U.S. government strongly encouraged King Mahendra to let Tibetans stay there. And Tibetans did stay in both countries. In the past six decades, the Tibetan refugee community in South Asia has grown to more than 100,000 individuals. But neither India, nor Nepal, nor any other country in South Asia is signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or to the 1967 Protocol that updated the convention. Tibetans’ political status is thus not subject to the protections, privileges, or pretenses of international refugee law. This is really not so much a status as it is an absence of status. Such a presence in India and Nepal is insecure and fragile, resting on the benevolence of successive host government administrations, as well as on earlier British colonial conventions. It is also subject to contemporary interference from both the Chinese and U.S. governments.

In India, the political identification and documentation of Tibetan refugees is based on the date of entry into India. Most Tibetans who entered India between 1959 and 1979 (or those whose parents did) have official Foreigner’s Registration

Certificates, but those who came to India after 1979 are not eligible for any form of state documentation from the Government of India. In Nepal, the government has never had an official program to identify and provide documentation to all Tibetan refugees, although prior to 1989 they sporadically issued identity documents to some Tibetans. Complicating the story is that some Tibetans have gained citizenship in India or Nepal. These are mostly politicians, diplomats, aristocrats, and businesspeople, although there are also individuals who were resident in India prior to the 1950s and those who have fallen afoul of the exile government for some political reason or other. This situation comprises a broad range of statuses, from undocumented and unapproved residence to legal resident noncitizen to full citizen. These are paired with voluntary, citizenship-style membership in the Tibetan refugee community as marked by the possession of an exile government-issued passport-sized “Green Book.” The Green Book signifies that one is a tax-paying member of the Tibetan community, and thus truly a Tibetan refugee (McConnell 2013). Membership in the refugee community has long signified that one was *not* a citizen of India or Nepal. This is a claim, not a status. This is belonging as refusal.

However, this stance was challenged when Tibetan refugees began to migrate to North America in the 1990s. Although a small number of Tibetans had settled in Canada in the 1970s (and an even smaller number in the United States in the 1960s), a U.S. government program brought over several thousand Tibetans from India and Nepal in the 1990s and gave them a legal path to citizenship. Thousands of Tibetans followed unofficially, some settling in the United States and others traveling on to Canada, home now to many of these unofficial migrants, as well as to a new group of official government-sponsored immigrants. In South Asia, refusing citizenship created a normative lack of legal status across multiple generations of Tibetan families. The national morality embedded in this claim outranked the potential legal and material advantages of citizenship, such as state-secured rights, legal documentation, the ability to vote, have a bank account, own property, seek employment, and the like. Following the lead of the exile government, Tibetans collectively refused these advantages in favor of a claim to being Tibetan, that is, a claim to be refugees temporarily and Tibetans permanently. However, while such a claim could replace the need for status in South Asia, it could not in North America, where one needed legal documents alongside political claims and where legal refugee status could be pursued. As such, citizenship in the United States and Canada became something for Tibetans to pursue and accept, rather than refuse. This is how a change in citizenship refusal is

explained, not as conditional on the political promise or power of any given country's passport, but as a condition of living one's life, and as a possibility present only in some places.

What does this mean for refusal as political stance? In India, some Tibetans have made new claims to citizenship. For its part, the Tibetan exile government now assures its subjects that acquiring citizenship is acceptable, but not all Tibetans are convinced this assurance is genuine. Others continue to assert the necessity to refuse citizenship in favor of claiming a once and future citizenship in Tibet. At stake are not only individual political statuses but also the sense of nation that refusal produces in articulating a shared political project, one that now needs retuning as the diaspora spreads. This sociality of refusal is rooted in "the idea of the nation-state as a producer and distributor of hope" (Hage 2004, 108). Yet hope for Tibet might not rest on just one type of refusal.

### REFUSAL AS A POLITICS OF HOPE

If anger is the first political emotion (Critchley 2013), then might hope be the first anthropological emotion? In these initial decades of the twenty-first century, hope appears repeatedly as an important concept in social theory. Isabelle Stengers's contention that hope is the difference between probability and possibility (see Zournazi 2002) resonates in anthropological scholarship (Crapanzano 2003; Hage 2003; Miyakazi 2006). Refusal is hope that things will be different. Even more, it is the insistence that they will be. This generative aspect of refusal might lie in its willfulness. Being willful signifies the possibility of deviation, of struggle within and between subjects, and of a refusal to be aspirational in the right way. In Sara Ahmed's (2014) hands, willfulness becomes queer, material, and affective; in Tibetan refugee terms, these combine as a political and social claim on the world, a claim to a denied history and subjectivity. Refusing citizenship constitutes one means of asserting a right to sovereignty, of producing a state history and a subject-body, and thus of generating desired political effects at the level of the individual and the collective. To refuse is to hope for a different Tibet, one to which you may go home, regardless of your politics—of either independence/*rang btsan* or autonomy/*dbu ma'i lam*.

Citizenship is not the only thing Tibetans have refused. During the summers of 1990 and 1991, I worked as an intern at Cultural Survival, an anthropology human rights organization founded by the late David Mayberry-Lewis at Harvard University. Cultural Survival had a small Tibet project that coordinated with the Washington, DC-based International Campaign for Tibet, which at the time was

connected to the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government-in-exile. Due to Mayberry-Lewis's longstanding research in the Brazilian Amazon, indigenous peoples were (then as now) Cultural Survival's primary focus. More than once, colleagues in the Tibetan activist world explicitly told me not to use the word *indigenous* for Tibetans. Specifically, I was told that Tibetans did not consider themselves indigenous, as they were people with their own country, a country they had lost within the living memory of many exile community members. *Indigenous* was thus interpreted by Tibetans to mean a small-scale group of people incorporated into a larger state who were fighting for rights vis-à-vis the state, but not for their own state sovereignty. At the time, Tibetans framed their struggle as one of a sovereign people against an occupying state. This refusal of indigeneity is one some Tibetans now reject three decades later, especially young Tibetan activists in Canada aligning with indigenous activists on issues of sovereignty and decolonization (Coulthard 2014).

Tibet is now in a time of self-immolations. So far over 150 Tibetans have self-immolated, set themselves on fire, and refusal is again operative. Now refused are the Chinese terms of political engagement. Chosen instead, or rather created anew, is refusal in a Tibetan idiom. Chosen is a religious framework, in this case the giving of one's body as an offering of light and fire. This is religious practice repurposed for political protest. Self-immolation involves communicating to the Chinese government, to the international community, and to fellow Tibetans about what actions are needed at this current moment (McGranahan and Litzinger 2012). Tibetans overwhelmingly consider the self-immolations to be selfless acts designed to help bring change, and thus to end the suffering of others. This is not to say that these are acts devoid of pain; pain most likely compels and comprises the act, as well as defines it visually. As understood by Tibetans, self-immolation constitutes a moral act, a refusal of the Chinese presence, and a sacrifice of the individual for the collective. In many of the testimonies self-immolators leave behind, this is the language used. Consider the words of Lama Sobha, a reincarnate lama who self-immolated on January 9, 2012: "I'm giving my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering" (International Campaign for Tibet 2012). Such testimonies compel the witness to respond, to do more than acknowledge, but rather to receive and then to transform in some way.

## RETURN TO THE GIFT

Tibetans collectively (albeit in a decidedly top-down manner) refused and were refused citizenship in South Asia. This marked a refusal of what was supposed to be, a refusal of how refugees' stories are supposed to end, with a durable solution of either citizenship in a new country or repatriation to their home country. Neither of these has yet happened for most Tibetan refugees. Positing their lack of status as a refusal of citizenship stakes a political and ethnographic claim to community, and makes these claims to both themselves and to the broader world. Refusing citizenship, however, also creates a different relationship with the governments and people of India and Nepal. Rather than one of dependence or assimilation or acquiescence, Tibetans assert this relationship as one of interdependence and connection and hospitality. This is a refusal of the modern expectation that all peoples have a place, an attachment, a status named and known under international law, or that they will acquiesce to political occupation or other disaster. It is a refusal that is lived daily as possibility and burden, an embodied politics of refusing and being refused, and a practice that does indeed lead to other obligations.

One cannot receive a gift that is not offered. Whether or not citizenship was offered to Tibetans in India or Nepal, we do not know for sure. However, what was offered and what was accepted is refuge. Refuge in spiritual, political, and geographic senses: refuge was offered, and refuge was accepted. And yet: "We refused citizenship." In this move, we can recall [Mauss's \(1967, 77–78\)](#) argument for studying systems in their entirety. He argues that in studying the complete and the complex rather than the abstract, we are able "to catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards others." The refusal of citizenship is paired with the acceptance of refuge, and this tells us about Tibetan society and the precariousness of its situation regarding others in a very particular moment, one its members hoped would be more fleeting than it has turned out to be.

## NOTES

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