

# My Experiment with Being Stateless

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In 1985, I chose to become stateless. I have maintained this choice over the years, and I continue to view it as an experiment in following my conscience and living responsibly in the global community.

## What does it mean to be stateless?

To be stateless is to be a citizen of no country, a subject of no government, a member of no state.

Statelessness exists in two forms. The unintentionally stateless person lacks citizenship status against her will. She is an alien in search of a state. The intentionally stateless person lacks citizenship status on purpose. She elects to be a *sovrien* (pronounced SOV-ree-in), a hybrid of sovereign and alien.

There are many stateless people in the world. Almost all of them are unintentionally stateless. In many cases, a state collapses, leaving its nationals devoid of a citizen-state relationship. In some cases, due to unusual legal circumstances at the time of birth, an individual ends up without citizenship status. In some cases, a state withdraws its consent to the citizen-state relationship, intentionally denationalizing a person. In rare cases, an individual refrains from consenting to any citizen-state relationship, choosing instead to be a sovrien.

## Why did you decide to become stateless?

I made this choice, and maintain it today, for two primary reasons. First, I feel compelled by conscience. The demands of state membership often conflict with principles I try to follow: nonviolence, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, personal responsibility, and consensus-building. States routinely prioritize the short-term self-interest of their citizens over the long-term well-being of the global community, they do not give quality attention to minority concerns, and they depend on coercion and harm as necessary tools for governing and global relations. Because my conscience is troubled by these core characteristics of states, I cannot in good faith maintain status as a citizen.

Second, because I want to live in a more free and responsible society, I feel I must work to be more free and responsible myself. I believe that a society cannot change significantly unless the individuals who constitute that society change significantly. By choosing to be stateless, I challenge myself to engage more intimately in the task of balancing freedom with responsibility.

## Don't you have to be a citizen of at least one country?

No. Statelessness is always an option.

Citizenship, by definition, is a reciprocal relationship between an individual and a state which requires the consent of both parties. The individual consents to the authority of the state, agrees to pay allegiance to the state, and agrees to support the work of the state with labor, goods, or taxes. In return, the state consents to provide basic protection and services to the individual, such as military defense, police protection, a judicial system, health care, and basic education. If either party opts to withhold its consent, then the individual is not a citizen of that particular state.

This means that if no state consents to provide basic protection and services to a certain individual, that individual would be stateless. And if an individual does not consent to the authority of at least one certain state, that individual would be stateless.

Arguments against the stateless option inevitably lead to the distasteful conclusion that citizenship does not require consent, and that membership in a political association can be imposed against one's will. Unless we discard the defining qualities of citizenship, everyone always retains the option to be stateless.

## How can you be a responsible member of society if you are not a citizen of some state?

Since I became stateless, I have endeavored to make regular and meaningful contributions to the greater community. In particular, I have spent much of my adult life working as a volunteer, or for relatively low wages, to address community needs (e.g., working with people with disabilities, working as a mediator, and producing educational programs and materials about nonviolent conflict resolution).

It's important to acknowledge that formal status as a citizen does not correlate with being a responsible member of society. Many citizens regularly abandon legal and moral responsibilities on the grounds of anger, fear, anxiety, ignorance, and self-interest. And many citizens fail to engage in any activity to support the greater community other than making grudging and under-calculated payments of taxes. Being a responsible member of society is not a function of citizenship status. It is a matter of individual character and commitment.

## Were you a citizen before you became stateless?

United States citizenship was assigned to me automatically due to the circumstances of my birth: I was born in the US, and I was born to US citizen parents. Although I never formally consented to become a US citizen, I did acquire the documentation of citizenship when I was young. As a child, I acquired a US birth certificate and a US social security number. As a teenager, I acquired a US driver's license and a US passport.

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### **How did you become stateless?**

As a young adult, when the outlines of my conscience became clearer, I felt that I could not, in good conscience, be a citizen of any particular state. So, I decided to withhold my consent from participating in any citizen-state relationship and to live accordingly.

On September 1, 1985, I formally renounced my US citizenship via a written statement which I submitted to the President and the Secretary of State. This act of expatriation (i.e., the voluntary renunciation or abandonment of nationality and allegiance) was knowing and intentional. My intent was to formally, absolutely, and entirely renounce my US nationality, together with all the rights, privileges, obligations, and duties of allegiance which are legitimately linked to one's status as a US citizen.

Since the time of my expatriation, I have refrained from acquiring citizenship status with any other state. This choice to remain stateless is also voluntary, knowing, and intentional.

### **What does being stateless mean in regard to your daily life?**

As a sovrien, I do not maintain citizenship ties with any government. This means that I refrain from the obligations of citizenship (e.g., bearing faith and allegiance to the government, subordinating the guide of conscience to the rule of law, participating in the political process, paying for government operations, and performing military and other service when required). It also means that I refrain from the privileges that are legitimately reserved for citizens (e.g., voting, holding government office, collecting social security and similar government assistance, bearing a passport, and relying on police and military power in times of fear and conflict).

Since the daily activities of human existence cannot reasonably be construed as rights or privileges that arise from citizenship status, I continue, to the extent that I can manage, to reside in my homeland, to travel, to earn a living with my labor, and to conduct the ordinary affairs of life.

### **How do governments treat stateless people?**

Governments want everyone to be a citizen of at least one state. It's much easier to conduct the basic tasks of governing (collecting money and labor, delivering services, enforcing laws, etc.) if everyone consents to be subject to at least one government.

In regard to unintentionally stateless people, who are willing to offer such consent, governments typically work together to ensure that anyone who wants to be a citizen is partnered with a state.

In regard to sovriens, who withhold their consent to being a citizen of any state, a government has three

broad options. It can acknowledge the sovrien's stateless status and work with the individual as a hybrid sovereign-alien. It can acknowledge the sovrien's stateless status and treat the individual as a non-entity with no rights. Or it can refuse to recognize the sovrien's stateless status and treat the individual as a citizen of one state or another.

In my situation, according to letters I received from officials at the US Department of State, the US government currently refuses to recognize my stateless status. Despite my formal statement of expatriation, my renunciation of nationality, my severing of the ties of citizenship, and my lack of allegiance, the US government continues, curiously, to regard me as one of its citizens. (However, if I left the territory claimed by the US government, it appears that the government would then recognize my stateless status.)

### **So, are you a citizen?**

If you'd like a straightforward legal answer, one does not exist. The matter of intentional statelessness raises strong and conflicting opinions among lawyers, scholars, and traditions of international law.

If you believe that it is reasonable for a government to impose membership in a state, and that an individual can be classified as a citizen without their consent, then it would make sense for you to regard me as a citizen. If you believe that membership in a state cannot be imposed, and that citizenship status cannot exist without the consent of both the individual and the state, then it would make sense for you to regard me as stateless.

### **Do you think other people should become stateless?**

I think everyone should do their best to live kindly and work in the best interest of the global community as a whole. If one feels that participating in a citizen-state relationship is an essential tool for this work, then one should be a citizen. If one feels that the obligations of citizenship generally interfere with this work, then one might consider becoming a sovrien.

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For a more detailed review of intentional statelessness, please see *The Sovrien: An Exploration of the Right to Be Stateless*, by Clark Hanjian (Polyspire 2003), which is available online and in many university libraries.