Interview with Saskia Sassen

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STAR: You were introduced yesterday as an eminent public intellectual. Could you discuss what the title of public intellectual means to you and how your personal politics inform that?

Sassen: There are two ways of being in the public for an academic. One is that you put on a generalist's hat and you basically spout a bit of nonsense. As an academic you have a very hard time coming down to a level that you think is necessary, to make it into brain food so that a person can just swallow and doesn't even have to chew. I really object to that. I always believed that the audience is up to much more, even a non-academic audience. For me, being a public intellectual is entering the political. I have a voice. I have authority. My university has gravitas in the public domain. If I come out in support of a cause or against a move, I should explain it in terms of research findings that I or someone else has gathered, or provide an alternative interpretations that is the result of careful work. I think that is the best I can do. It is not putting on a generalist's hat and spouting nonsense, or superficial tropes.

I recently wrote an editorial in the *Guardian* of London in support of three sociologists from Germany. They were German citizens—they were not Muslim naturalized citizens—who had been thrown into solitary confinement. They had been there for two weeks, and nobody knew. For what? For writing about gentrification and displacement, stuff that supposedly could lead to terrorist activities. In the German case, the prosecutor had very few choices as to what law to use for an indictment—either a very light violation of the law kind of charge, or a draconian law that came out of the terrorism of the Badder-Meinhoff armed attacks

decades ago. So the prosecutor wound up using this extreme law. We wrote a very forceful statement that included this argument, about the lack of choices, and the costs for democracy, etc. It made the rounds around the globe. It was picked up by all the major media in Germany, and became a shameful incident: the prosecutor was told by the government to let them go, albeit conditionally. That is a public intellectual's way of clarifying matters. I write regularly for OpenDemocracy a critical web-based publication—I recommend it!—about stuff that is happening out there about which I do research. I bring my opinion and my knowledge about these subjects to clarify, eliminate distortions in the public understanding, but I also bring the complexity of my analysis to bear on such subjects. I don't need to say stuff everybody else is already saying, because that is often what academics wind up doing. My notion of entering the public domain is, in the last analysis, about the political in a very broad sense. There is a whole parallel world where a growing number of academics are involved in constructing alternative explanations of major public issues—this is political work also . . . public/political are connected words.

STAR: That leads into another question. You mentioned your latest book, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, has a section on the making of the political. Would you care to expand on that a bit?

Sassen: I think that when you look at history in periods of transformation - periods which unsettle existing arrangements, existing conceptions, existing rethoricizations—one must ask, "What is the account that explains this? " The aim is to produce a persuasive account that is not empty. There are a whole bunch of accounts floating around. The neo-liberal account is probably the best known, "the market knows best" . When unsettlements happen the flaws of existing arrangements become legible, their faults become legible, their shortcomings become legible, and a void is often created where even the powerless can enter the picture and begin to reshuffle those very meanings. I think that this is one of those times. So my question then is "Where can we make the political?" In the book I discuss two or three sites. One is the executive branch of govern-

ment in the current period. The executive branch of government, starting with Reagan, has remade a good part of formal politics by grabbing an enormous amount of power to itself. In the book I have one section that I've titled "The Executive's Privatizing of Its Own Power." So, the executive ceases to be as accountable as it ought. Mind you, I see this as going beyond party politics. It also happened with Clinton — Clinton was just a more *sympatique* cowboy. My argument is that it's a systemic trend, but political parties and individuals do matter, because under Clinton it was certainly different than under Reagan and Bush/Cheney. Yet the power of the executive was also growing under Clinton. The second argument I make, which comes out of this trajectory is that a good part of the power grab of the executive is not simply the result of the state of exception (in our case the Patriot Act as a national emergency) and hence anomalous; it is the normal condition in the current phase of the liberal state. Sometimes it means well, as with Chavez in Venezuela, sometimes it is close to evil, as with Bush/Cheney.

Another site that I am interested in is how the powerless might make the political. For this I enter the realm of the city, especially global cities: the complex city enables the making of informal politics, politics that does not run through formal systems. It brings politics down so it is not dependent on mediating institutions, formal systems, electoral systems, propaganda machines. Actors who are actually making the political may not necessarily be aware that they are doing so. When immigrants went on the street last year (2006) and claimed the right to have rights, they were making the political. Out of that, by the way, came the first western hemisphere meeting of immigrants, held in Zacatecas (Mexico) in August 2007. Immigrants came from throughout Latin America. In other words, the Bolivians who had migrated to Buenos Ares, the Koreans who had migrated form Peru to Sao Paulo, and of course lots of Mexicans from the US. One of the people who organized this for the US side was from Chicago, a hairdresser. She was not a professor who was going to help. On the agenda of that meeting at Zacatecas was, "What is our politics? What do we want? As immigrants, what are our claims? What do we want to ask from the government?" It is about the right to have rights. Citizenship

is today still the best vehicle to get rights, to be a rights-bearing subject. But citizenship here is a vehicle: it is not the nationalist project of being an American, an Italian, or whatever. There is today a movement for the rights to the city which makes politics very concrete. There's a global network of mayors now who have signed on to this movement for the rights to the city for everyone, not only the advantaged. When you ask for rights to the city, you're asking for green parks, better public transport, clean air, etc. That makes politics concrete, also often informalizes politics. It makes it immediate rather than mediated. To me these are instances of the making of the political.

On a more abstract level the ascendance of the human rights regime is remaking the political. The International Criminal Court (ICC) is remaking the political. So is the making of new global jurisdictional geographies that I talked about yesterday --that we as citizens don't have to wait for a global state, we can do informal but also formal global politics from national bases. But it's a matter of making them, not simply consuming existing formats, as is voting in elections (which we should of course also do). About this making of jurisdictions, it needs to be distinguished from choosing a jurisdiction: in a dispute that goes to court, people often try to find the right judge, the right jurisdiction to handle it. It's not like that, it's not "forum shopping"—that's the standard phrase. "Let's do it in Alaska because we'll get a better deal," or "Let's do it in Delaware." Corporations always want their disputes settled in Delaware because it's corporate central. The citizens-initiated cases I referred to yesterday were ones that use existing national laws to make new kinds of jurisdictions. To me those are all tools for making the political. Whether and how it eventually is institutionalized and formalized, history will tell. Some of it, I think will remain informal, and informal politics is not a bad thing.

STAR: We talk often about what the term "globalization" refers to. I was wondering if you would like to talk about the "why" of globalization; why globalization now? why are these things we are talking about occurring at this period of history?

Sassen: Well, something has changed. There is a global corporate economy that didn't exist in this way before. We have always had multinationals. In the late 1800s the Americans, the Germans, the French, the Brits, they all had multinational corporations. They all had affiliates in each other's countries or in their current or past imperial spaces. The fact of multinationals is not enough to mark, to distinguish the current period. The difference is the level of institutionalization, and the spread. Now a growing number of firms are simply, in one way or the other, involved globally, either directly or indirectly via subcontracts or subsidiaries. I always ask my students "How many multinationals do you think there are today?" They rarely guess the right number. It's well over 200,000. So the difference with the past is made up of two things. One is the actual components: institutional, legal, regulatory, the variety of actors, etc, of the global corporate economy itself. It is simply another order of magnitude; it's a qualitatively different arrangement. The second point is there is a great difference between those past phases and now because in between the national state became such a dominant actor. It succeeded in nationalizing all critical components of the social order: identity, territory, security, law, authority. So the current globalization had to deal with the wall of the national. Past phases were part of (often quite institutionalized) imperial geographies.

So I think what raises the stakes and makes the whole thing more visible and more dramatic is the global corporate economy's expansion, its' growing formalizations, all of this in a context of the institutional thickening of the national, and the rise of the national state as an enormous power, as an actor dominating the international zone. Because the move had been to have all transactions go through the national state, the regulatory state became stronger. So suddenly what you have is an insertion of other actors — corporate economic actors, NGOs, and all types of religious organizations — who are entering domains once exclusive to the national state. This is the critical point. These actors are entering the international space once exclusive to the national state. In the past you had multinational corporations, but they had to run through the state, have authorization. There were tariffs. There were export restrictions. For me the

big elephant in the global room is the national state. And that is what created the drama. Before, there was a lot of internationalism, but it all ran through highly regulated national systems, the hegemons, and all had to pass through state notions of regulation.

STAR: In the lecture yesterday you discussed how states themselves are doing the work of de-nationalizing — of creating the global within the nation — with regard to finance, trade; and, within the nation-state, the implementation of global jurisdictional geographies, expansive citizenship and the diasporic. At the same time nations and national states still seem to wrestle with the issues surrounding globalization and national sovereignty. How do you rectify this?

Sassen: In prior periods of imperialism there was much reshuffling of the zones of control and of their boundaries. Today, most borders haven't changed. There are a few disputed borders, for instance between Peru and Chile, but these are acts of nationalism. There is of course the decomposition of the Soviet Union into the Commonwealth of Independent States, as they call it. National territories are still overwhelmingly under the exclusive authority of their national state. The borders are still there. However, the change isn't happening at that level, the visible level. It is the series of institutional changes that really captures how the border is changing, even if the actual geography of the territory does not change. The notion that national states have the right to exclusive authority remains a key but the reality is beginning to change. So the question then is, "Where does the difference lie for the current global phase?"

Coming back to your question, the state is still national. Thus sovereignty, nationalism, border control and protection vis-à-vis certain types of flows - all of these become extremely acute precisely because so much else is shifting. I argue, for instance, that we are seeing a renationalizing of membership politics which is an acute reaction to an acute unsettlement of the existing experience of membership. Under the Keynesian regime of the post-WWII decades citizens had far more entitlements. One of the arguments I develop in my new book is that we as citizens are losing rights. Last year we lost five rights. But they were very technical rights so nobody picks up on their loss not even the media. As members of a polity

our struggle should be to strengthen the rights — bearing subject, whether native or foreign born. It should not be immigrants versus citizens because we're on a slippery slope of losing rights. Nor is it just a matter of jumping onto transnationalism and the aspirational politics involved in transnationalisms and post- nationalisms. I think the question of the national state need not be seen as finished, as many have suggested, but as repositioned, rearticulated, with new content, and a possible denationalizing of membership that can happen deep inside the national.

We are seeing these transformations inside the national and inside the state itself. One of the pieces I did for OpenDemocracy.net, argues that when you look carefully you can see that no matter the nationalist speech acts of the sovereign — the "sovereign" is the designation of the state in international law, in this case Bush/Cheney — the executive branch of the government in liberal democracies is increasing *aligned*, not alienated, with global logics. This holds whether that is Sarcozy in France, or Blair until recently in the UK, or our government.

One source of executive power is that the major global regulators, notably the IMF and WTO, as well as many lesser known ones, only negotiate with the executive branch. As the global corporate economy and the supranational system have and continue to expand, executive power grows as well and so does the disadvantage of Congress. The executive branch is increasingly aligned with a number of global actors and processes that are critical to the global corporate economy. While the other branches of government are beginning to develop novel international relations (Speaker Pelosi's visit to Syria; the Supreme Court's emergent consideration of foreign law in its deliberations), these do not necessarily feed their power within the state. The development of an institutional apparatus geared towards the global war on terror, with its growing cross-border collaborations, involves largely the executive branch and particular agencies of the public administration. The globalizing of criminal networks for the trafficking of drugs, arms, and people, also feeds into the development of intergovernmental collaborations largely centered in the executive branch. To some extent this is inevitable. The concern here is with detecting the extent to which globalizing

dynamics feed executive power rather than simply weakening "the" state.

Inter-governmental networks centered largely in the executive have grown well beyond concerns with global security and criminality. The participation by the state in the implementation of a global economic system has engendered a whole range of new types of cross-border collaborations among specialized government agencies focused on the globalization of capital markets, international standards of all sorts, and the new trade order.

Look at Bush. Bush has no problem with economic globalizing logics. The legislature is far more domestic, less international — not such a good thing in a global world.

STAR: In thinking about Global Cities and what these spaces signify in the concept of globalization, what do you think about spaces on the opposite end of the spectrum, what they signify? Places and spaces like Western Kansas, where you find ghost barns signify — in terms of globalization — rural to urban migration, industrialization and globalization of agriculture, migration of agricultural labor. Is there more there to be tapped into?

Sassen: You know, it's funny. I got invited a few years ago to be the keynote speaker for the International Society of Sparsely Populated Areas, which is not my forte. I was very amused and said, "are you sure you want me?" They said "yes" because of precisely the same question you are asking me, "How does your lens triage, interpret, these sorts of sparsely populated spaces?" I think there are multiple issues. Number one, in the case of farm country, say, rather than ghost towns, the geography might be the same as many decades ago — farm lands, cattle grazing lands, etc. — the actual space economy that has developed there now is radically different from the past. It is a corporate space economy; and, in that sense, a new social form. Secondly, one of the issues for me is "What are the global circuits on which these spaces are located?" in this case spaces that look very isolated and where the workforce may be lowly educated, lowly paid? Take forests: forests are located on multiple, highly specialized global circuits. Thirdly, some of the global circuits involve increasingly specialized servicing. When

you see those corporate farms and that corporate space economy, (today's farmland in much of the US), you are looking at a vast increase in the complexity and level of specialization, as opposed to the family farm where families live, work with the local bank, etc. It may have been an export sector all along, but it was different. So, that geography that we see as rural is actually part of a very specialized global service economy. I make the same case for big harbours — such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Rotterdam — they are specialized service economies, and not just about cargo. To me it is very important to recover the fact that it's not just about the rurality of the landscape when you leave the cities and are in corporate farmland. Similarly, the vast amounts of cargo in harbours does not exclude the fact that harbors are also a highly specialized service economy — even though the space economy of the services is a different area, it leaves the harbour and enters the city, so to speak.

A final point I would make concerns Germany and its vast industrial heartland, the Ruhr, which belonged to an older industrial phase. It is today a space economy with a lot of small highly specialized firms, a lot of small cities, not mega cities, but also what are now described as "shrinking cities." These are cities that people have left, abandoned as the big factories and mines closed. They are now piles of cement in a slightly devastated rural space. Kansas' ghost barns are another such space, one that coexists with a corporate farm economy. One of the issues for me theoretically is that geographic terrain can be inhabited by several very different space economies. For instance, I argue that a lot of what people see as suburbanization is an older social geography that is still very present. But increasingly that suburban geographic terrain is also inhabited by a space economy that has little to do with the suburban. For instance, Goldman Sachs has an automated trading floor in the suburbs of Connecticut. You might think this is suburban, but no, that space is digitally connected to Wall Street! That is not at all a suburban space economy! It is a Wall Street global financial space economy.

I don't know the landscape you are alluding to, but it just strikes me that it might be a case of a given geographical terrain inhabited by

more than one space economy. The older space economy is gone, is dead. In some of the shrinking cities in Germany, for instance, there are new inhabitants that are making a new type of space: artists who have little money but want big spaces, immigrants who inhabit those spaces. It has nothing to do with the older, social and economic space and its actors. A final example: the United States also has a rurality, a rural world that is really Third World. There are particular areas in Appalachia, for instance. These are yet other rural spaces.

There are a bunch of issues that one can bring to bear on all of this. We need to interrogate the meaning of "the rural" because the rural is no longer "the rural as different from suburban and the urban." The whole notion of rurality is, in some cases, a changed concept . . . it may be in a rural space but that does not make it a rural social order. It may well be a global corporate order.

STAR: So we need to recode how we think of urban/suburban/rural, much like we need to recode our understanding of powerlessness, as you were saying yesterday?

Sassen: Yes, I think we need to do that. Nor is this the first time recoding has happened. When industrialization hit Europe, the first phase was just manufacturing with hands and tools, not really machine-production. In fact that earlier manufacturing was located also in rural areas; it changed the meaning of the rural economy. Today that is even stronger: it is the rural guided by the logics of urban corporate economies. The rural has lost some of the autonomy it once had as a space. The modes of producing in rural space (think industrial chicken and turkey raising, and corporate agriculture) are actually a massive disruption with the cycles of nature. You know, several multinationals farmed and raised cattle in vast stretches of land in Central America, Kenya, and so on. Over-exploitation of the land, not respecting the cycles and the reproductive conditions of nature has killed the earth in many of these areas. They will recover, but it will take time. I say that this is dead land, and I ask should we keep that land on the global circuits that led to its death? And I say, "Yes, as it captures the trajectory of that un-natural cycle of use." There is a lot of interesting theoretical and analytical work we can do now with the rural.

STAR: I was wondering if you wouldn't mind giving a few of your impressions on the visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Columbia University and the surrounding controversy, as someone well versed in the various intersections involved.

Sassen: First, when [Ahmadinejad's visit] was announced, it was very controversial. There was a lot of opposition from various groups, donors, etc. So, when the decision was made [to invite Ahmadinejad], Bollinger promised that some tough questions would be asked. I think what happened was that Bollinger did not have the right compass. You can't blame him. We academics, we don't necessarily have the talent to run departments or to be diplomats, or administrators. So, in my view, (and I am not the only one, this is a public debate and conversation), he just did the wrong thing by being so offensive. There was no need to make a martyr out of Ahmadinejad! Nobody needed that! That gave him the high ground right from the beginning.

Now, Ahmadinejad is also in this kind context his own worst enemy, the way he responded, to the question about homosexuality in Iran — "We don't have that! Show me! Show me one!" But with Bollinger, I am sure that some of his pro-Israel supporters encouraged him to do this. I don't know that, but one senses that. He must have checked with people. He is a president of a university which is a corporation. In the past he has demonstrated that he listens to what certain constituencies say. We assume that he thought there was support for this line of attack — to immediately come out with the big guns. I don't know whether he actually checked the content of his comments with his various constituencies. It is one thing to come out with the big guns to say "Mr. President, it is in the spirit. . ." I liked the norm that was invoked, but Bollinger undermined the norm. The norm was freedom of speech. The norm was not to create spectacle, but Bollinger managed to make it into spectacle. He did the opposite of freedom of speech. We who all take it seriously, we triage the details that came out. My version was, "the norm, the umbrella was freedom of speech." So, we have to make sure that that norm is enacted at all times. Because of what Bollinger said, it was no longer freedom of speech. It was something else.

As an academic, when you enter the public domain, you have to be very clear about what norm you operate under. As academics, we are meant to bring something different. We are not politicians, nor diplomats, nor journalists. We do not need to repeat what the media are saying, though we can bring in data to support or contest the media's assertions about a given topic. I am interviewed a lot, and sometimes I simply decline because I can tell they want me to say something that supports whatever position they need supported. They need some talking head to say "that's the way this is." For instance, the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. That was also a freedom of speech issue. The West, the French, everybody, was saying "freedom of speech." And I said, "You know, when you have just declared a War on Terror and your objective is to hit some sub-group of the Muslim world, then the law, or the freedom of speech norm, ceases to be just a legal condition." I literally said "it becomes a sociological condition." We simply cannot look at this through the lens of freedom of information. It's messier than that! I loved it that many people picked up later that the law is not always just the law. In certain settings the law is also a sociological condition. I think all of this, especially in periods of unsettlement, calls for sociological analysis. It identifies and dismembers a bundle of assumptions. It's important if you enter the political domain as a social scientist to be clear from what stance you are speaking.