

POWER, MOBILITY, AND DIASPORA IN THE GLOBAL CITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH SASKIA SASSEN

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Saskia Sassen is widely recognised as one of the leading theorists on globalisation, and is perhaps best known for her comprehensive work on the 'global city' (Sassen, 2001). She has written 12 books that deal with a vast range of issues relating to globalisation, from immigration, state sovereignty, and the movement of people and capital (Sassen, 1988, 1996, 1998, 2000) to digitisation and global networks (Latham & Sassen, 2005; Sassen, 2008a Ch 7 & 8) and most recently cities and urban warfare (Sassen, 2007b, 2008b). While she is regarded for her extensive body of work on globalisation and its implications for place, scale, nations, and individuals, she is most renowned for coining the term 'global city' to describe the ascendance of a new type of cities and regions which serve as the strategic spaces for global capitalism. For Sassen, global cities – such as New York, Paris, London, and Tokyo – are not only the command centres where much of the global economy is organised, managed, and controlled, but they also embody the local places where the effects of globalisation become most visible and 'assume concrete, localised forms' (2008a).

A central thread that runs through Sassen's work is her argument that globalisation and the national are not distinct, separate realms but remain firmly embedded in one another. While globalisation has given rise to the global financial market, cross-border activities, digital networks with global span, and international organisations such as the UN and WTO that operate independent of nation-states, these remain materially embedded at the local, national level: the headquarters of financial firms, or the physical infrastructure (servers, cables, computers) which serves as the backbone for the internet (2008a: 340-6). Sassen explores the impact of globalisation at the micro-level, and in particular its consequences for the people living in these cities; from the highly specialised workers of legal, accounting, and advertising firms, to the powerless, 'invisible' individuals who live on the fringes, such as migrant and low-wage workers and the homeless or disadvantaged. Most recently, her work has focussed on the potential for digital technologies to overcome some of these

barriers of globalisation by allowing local, immobile individuals previously excluded from the political process to exploit the highly networked spaces of the contemporary city and emerge as a new 'social force' in global politics (Sassen, 2007b).

Born in the Netherlands, Sassen grew up in Buenos Aires and Rome before moving to the United States to study sociology and economics at the University of Notre Dame. In her fascinating autobiographical chapter from *The Disobedient Generation* she describes herself as 'always being a foreigner but never an expatriate' (2005, p. 222) and in this interview she elaborates on how her own experiences as a migrant, political activist, and global traveller shaped her work as a global theorist. Currently, she is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and a member of the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University in New York, and Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. In addition to her many books, chapters, and essays, she has been published in the *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, the *Financial Times*, *OpenDemocracy.org* and *Le Monde Diplomatique* to name only a few. Sassen has also served as an advisor to several international bodies, and has contributed to a recent five-year UNESCO study on sustainable human settlement. In this interview, she provides an account of her work since the publication of her first book *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988), as well as an insight into her research approach and her influences.

PLATFORM: You've said that emphasising the importance of 'the local' in the process of globalisation allows you to situate your work in specific contexts rather than standing back as a 'global observer'. When did you first become interested in the sociology of globalisation, and how does this approach provide a different perspective from other globalisation theorists who tend to take a broad, macro-level approach?

Saskia Sassen: Emphasising place in a complex global economy is one way to address what I see as the need to destabilise the accepted dominant narratives and explanations of globalisation. I already was doing this in my first book *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (Sassen, 1988) – linking global migration to certain features of global capital. The dominant narratives have produced the global as a master category that obscures as much as it reveals. The aim is to generate new questions for research, questions excluded by dominant narratives. A second feature is the need to develop conceptual architectures that allow us to detect what we might think of as countergeographies of globalisation. By these I mean conditions, processes, and actors riding or using the mainstream infrastructure produced largely by and for the global corporate economy, but for other aims, ranging from emancipatory struggles to organised crime. There are multiple instances of these countergeographies.

On a more foundational level it can be seen as a research practice that contests the power of master categories to tell the full story. We need to problematise these categories, yet problematising can itself engender new master categories as this is a task that is continuous. A master category is one way of structuring a discursive space, with its own power logics and exclusions. Master categories have the power of illuminating a complex issue with great efficiency, but they do so with a clarity that is blinding. They thereby also keep us from seeing other presences in the landscape. They produce a vast penumbra around that centre of light and it is in that penumbra that I have gone digging over and over again, across a variety of subjects and over twenty years.

P: You began your career as an academic working on immigration policy, which as you've written led you to become interested in global cities. How did this trajectory come about, and how did your own experience as a migrant living in the U.S. shape your ideas about globalisation and the movement of people, communities, and cultures?

SS: Growing up in three countries with five different languages must have had something to do with my choice of academic subjects, or so I am told. But it is not a self evident proposition. It might be the case, and it might be interesting to study whether it is indeed so, that such beginnings lead necessarily to an interest in international or global subjects. Conceivably, it might lead on in the opposite direction: a search for clearly demarcated subjects, where closure is primary and the fuzziness of the international is evicted from the category. More interesting, perhaps, is whether not knowing a single language perfectly inflects one's way of thinking. In my experience, imperfect knowledge of all the languages I work in is consequential. I keep running into conditions not well captured in any of these languages. The result is a proclivity to invent terms or to use existing words for unexpected or unusual applications. Language is seeing. Juxtaposing different languages is seeing differences in that seeing. When you throw into that mix the third component, imperfect knowledge of the languages in play, you get my experience: little gaps across these languages, gaps that point to interstitial spaces where there is work to be done. One possible move, and it was my move, is to compensate imperfect knowledge of language with theory. It is this indirect connection, rather than the fact itself of growing up in more than one country, that captures the influence of my life on my scholarship, and on my way of thinking. This has shaped my perhaps peculiar way of theorising – theory gets constituted through the text itself, rather than through a model that stands outside the specifics of the subject under consideration. And it has shaped my need to develop new categories for analysis, such as that of the global city, and, more recently, the denationalised state.

P: Can you explain why you chose to focus on cities and regions in your

research, and briefly summarise your concept of the ‘global city’?

SS: Indeed, the more expected focus would have been on self-evidently global institutions. This question of the scaling analytics in my work has recurred. Today, this question is reframed in terms of some of the issues (and scalings!) that organize my book *Territory, Authority, Rights* (Sassen, 2008a). One of the issues I raise in this book is the importance of focusing on the sub-national shaping of the global even inside the national state; for instance, the Executive branch of government and its growing alignment with globalization. I am hearing the same type of surprise: why focus on the Executive branch of government to understand globalisation? Or in my research on immigration, which I argue is contained in and constitutive of specific global systems.

A basic hypothesis in my 30 years of research is that the global is partly endogenous to the national rather than a formation that stands necessarily outside and in opposition to the national. Endogeneity can be the result of an originally national condition that becomes reconstructed as global; for example, the fact that what we call global capital is in part an amalgamation of what often were national capitals. Global capital can then be seen as comprising not only new forms of capital but also denationalised national capital. Or endogeneity can result from the partial endogenising of global dynamics and entities into national institutional orders – for example, the fact that global electronic financial markets are partly embedded in, and dependent on, a network of national financial centres.

This approach has theoretical, empirical, and political implications for developing critical globalisation studies. The global is not simply defined as that which is outside and in contestation to the national, nor is the global only that which is part of a space of flows that cuts across borders. There are, in my view, components of globalisation that we keep coding in national terms, and there are global actors whom we think of as local, who may not move across borders and lack the characteristics of what have become dominant representations of the global. If we understand the global as indeed partly endogenous to or endogenised into the national, we expand the range of actors who are conceivably global. We can then include even those who are immobile, resource-poor, and not able to travel global circuits.

P: In your autobiographical chapter from *The Disobedient Generation*, you wrote that ‘it was always a politics against the abuse of power’ that stirred you and which influenced your decision to become a sociologist. Did your experiences with power and political agency as a political activist inform your work on global cities, where you have often been concerned with issues of powerlessness and marginalisation in urban space?

SS: Yes, focusing on a complex city to understand the global means you are going to deal with the low wage workers and economic sectors, such as industrial services (trucking, warehousing, etc) that we do not associate with the leading knowledge economy sectors. In short, you cut through the stereotypical imagery which makes all these other workers and activities invisible. You discover the teeming masses of workers in low wage and backward jobs that are part of the infrastructure of global cities, including the most advanced sectors of the knowledge economy, which we think is only about high-level professionals.

P: You've argued that globalisation has enabled a new kind of political subject, one who does not necessarily identify with the nation-state but with his/her position as a marginalised individual living in a particularised space. What role have new media technologies played in the emergence of this new 'social force', and how have they contributed to the new possibilities for diasporic communities and marginalised citizens to participate in global politics?

SS: There are forms of global activism that enable localised and perhaps immobile people to experience themselves as part of a global network, or even a public domain that is at another scale from the locality from which they work. As part of a larger network, human rights activists or environmental activists, who may be obsessed with the torturer in their local jail, or with the forest near their town and the water supply in their region, can begin to experience themselves as part of a broader global effort without relinquishing their localness. It is this combination that is critical for my argument about cosmopolitanism, or, rather, against the widespread assumption that if it's global it is cosmopolitan. So I talk about non-cosmopolitan forms of globality. The new information technologies, which are designed to eliminate distance and to produce space-time compression, can actually also have the effect of revalorising locality and local actors. I make that argument for a diversity of actors, for instance, financial markets as well as activists. I contest this notion of the collapsing of the global with the cosmopolitan. Financiers are non-cosmopolitan globalists, and I argue that most human-rights, or environmentalist, activists, who are actually on the ground, are that too. I want to get at the multivalence of both globalisation and what it means to be a non-cosmopolitan globalist – re-inventing the local as alter-globalisation. In a very different domain, I would say that there is going to be a real push towards re-localising all kinds of markets, pulling them out of the supranational market and making them local but inserted in horizontal global, or at least, cross-border, networks. We don't need the standardised production of multinationals that can sell you the same production no matter where you are.

We see the emergence of various types of subjects contesting various aspects of power, of the system – people working against the market as conceived of by WTO and the IMF, against landmines, against the trafficking of people, against

environmental destruction. These hundreds of contesting actors in different localities have wound up producing a kind of synthetic effect – they constitute the multitude. A critical question then is to understand the many informal political architectures through which the multitude actually is constituted. There is making, “poesis,” in these informal political architectures. There are many different kinds of making being built from the ground up, and there are different terrains in which new kinds of political subjects and struggles are emerging. A single city can have hundreds of terrains for political action. All of this begins to bring texture, structuration to the notion of the multitude. What I care about is the making of these specific, diverse, political architectures within the multitude. I want to capture this negotiation, the constituting of a global multitude of sorts but one that is deeply localised (and may have nothing to do with cosmopolitanism!). There’s a kind of global politics in the making which has, as a critical component, multitudes that might be global even though they are not mobile.

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