

‘Relocating Global Assemblages’: An Interview with Saskia Sassen

CONDUCTED BY ANEESH ANEESH

Aneesh Aneesh (AA): *As you know the notion of assemblage has received a variety of interpretations in the last two decades. Science and technology studies follow a variant of the concept that mostly eschews the virtual and celebrates the actual, emphasising the hybridity and heterogeneity of elements in actor-networks. Earlier, in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, virtual/actual dimensions of becoming, difference and emergence—such as the emergent assemblage (agencement) of the wasp and orchid—acquire significance. You have yourself produced a prominent version of the idea in your work. I wonder if you could elaborate on your contribution to this growing theoretical field.*

Saskia Sassen (SS): Very glad you asked this question as it is a chance to clarify my specific use of the term. As a concept, assemblages is a pretty straightforward and clear term. Carpenters also use it: that is one way of putting it.

For me it is part of a longer struggle I have had with dominant categories in the social sciences. I have long been tracking formations that bring together elements of established fields that usually do not mix. I think this is partly the result of the types of questions that tend to guide my research, or, more directly put, that obsess me.

General standard categories—society, the state, the city, the economy, the global economy, the developed world and the underdeveloped world . . . these and so many more—do not work for me. I use them mostly for shorthand or to communicate. But they are not quite *working* categories for me: they are more like a familiar code, one that all readers can understand.

Aneesh Aneesh (corresponding author), Professor of Sociology and Global Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201, PO Box 413. E-mail: aneesh@uwm.edu

Science, Technology & Society 22:1 (2017): 128–134

SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/Melbourne
DOI: 10.1177/0971721817694927

But neither do I want to use the very complex and brilliant category as developed in the works of Deleuze and Guattari. When I use these authors' meaning, it is usually to describe a condition, not to discover something.

I have come to understand that I need categories that facilitate discovery—discovery rather than replication is my *modus operandi*. In that mode, then, I have long seen the rise of new types of formations beneath familiar events, and beneath the general language deployed by the social sciences. It may be the foreigner in me; I did grow up in four countries and in six languages, so I do not know a single language perfectly.

Methodologically, I have made some moves that might clarify my specific use, and, more importantly, need for the concept, the category, assemblages. A first step in much of my work—something I have come to see *ex post*, in an effort to explain my *modus operandi*, is that I am far more interested in the ambiguous, often weak, edges of the paradigm, than in its strong centre. I have developed some of this as part of a long lecture I did for the American Pragmatists Philosophy convention.

Practically speaking, here are three markers of my methodological practice which lead to a reassembling of elements that tends to diverge from standard categories. This also tells you that assemblage for me is a working category, a tool, not only an outcome, a result.

One is: What don't I see when I focus on the strong centre of the paradigm. A simple image: strong light on a street on a dark night; the stronger the light, the more I see what is inside the circle of light and the more difficult it is to see what lies in the penumbra around that circle of light.

A second marker is the need to actively destabilise existing categories and definitions. Destabilising can take on diverse formats and entail diverse practices of research and interpretation. One simple illustration: 'The' economy—what does the formal category with its specific obligatory measures and interpretations of those measures, actually not include. . . such as the very long term-unemployed, the growing stretches of dead land that reduce the operational field of an economy, the survival tactics and practices of the displaced that often entail the need to make an economy (including here not only the familiar informal economy notion, but also something like the fact that older refugee camps have become informal cities).

Third, which is partly a matter of my preferences and the focus of much of my research, is to make the category 'territory' work much harder than it is working now. I think of a territory as a complex condition that includes logics of power and logics of claim making, that cannot be reduced to land. And that cannot be reduced to 'national sovereign territory' as is customary today, partly because the unit that is a national territory has far more dead land than is recognised politically. Dead land is easily forgotten land in a utility driven economy. This then raises a question: what do governments actually govern when it comes to territory.

There is more to be said, but perhaps for now . . .

AA: *This is very interesting. So, when you look at the category of 'economy', for instance, you focus on what it excludes, what its formal operations by default leave out or fail to recognise. And consequences of such exclusions can be serious, particularly for a dominant system like 'the' economy. Is one of your goals, then, to expand the penumbra of its operations so that it includes more, or is it to dim its intensity so other things become more visible? I know I may be stretching your metaphor but I am curious about your vision.*

SS: Interesting way of putting it! Yes! I had not quite thought about it that way. What guided me, though there might be more at work in all of this than I say here, was to problematise the measures we use. While such measures have never been and have never pretended to be perfect representations, in the current period they are particularly ineffective. They leave out too much, especially of the negatives. Furthermore, given the sharp rise in the financialising of more and more components of our economy, this leaving out of the negatives does double duty: a straightforward reduction of the negative, and, second, a further enabling of financial instruments by camouflaging the actual negatives. In this sense then, I argue it is a kind of economic cleansing.

AA: *In your recent work, particularly, your article in this volume, you appear to be suggesting a radical idea about the role of high finance. Apparently, you are describing a situation in which finance subsumes its own foundation, turning what was supposed to be logically prior and the basis of its operations, for instance, housing, into a domain infiltrated by techniques of finance. Are you suggesting that this dissociation of finance from its foundations is a predatory formation?*

SS: Yes, that dissociation makes it a predatory formation, or as I often say, high finance today is marked by a logic of extraction; basically, finance is an extractive sector, as is Facebook mostly. Extractive sectors are not only the familiar ones, like mining. I see high finance (from now on simply referred to as finance) as radically different from traditional banking. This notion of a logic of extraction also holds in my view for the period that takes off in the 1980s with deregulation and privatisation: the so-called neoliberal period. It does not mean that everything is subject to such a logic. Thus mass consumption continues to matter to the economy, but it is not the dominant logic as it was in the post-1940s decades until the 1970s–1980s. I see the dominant logic in the post-1980s as marked by extraction: from finance and Facebook to mines and water and land grabs.

Let me also say: traditional banks are reasonable institutions, and we all need to make loans. We only need finance if we have far more money than we know what to do with. At the same time, I like to posit that if we could only materialise those unreal values that finance accumulates, and transform them promptly into a useful condition—cleaning up toxic dumps, setting up good trains systems everywhere, etc.—it might be almost ok.

To elaborate a bit: A key difference that marks the current period of advanced capitalism is the extreme power gained by particular types of private actors and

the extensive participation of national governments in the making of this private global space. This participation is especially centred in the executive branch of government (whether presidential or prime ministerial). I develop this at length in my *Territory* book. In my analysis, this branch of government has actually gained power through that participation. In this finding, I go against much of the prevalent scholarship, which deals with the state as a whole and tends to see a zero-sum relation between ‘the’ state and the global economy, along the lines of ‘what one gains, the other loses’.

Through the work of making private powers, the executive branch has also gained more private, unaccountable power, even as the legislative branch of government has become weaker. This divergent trajectory is critical to my analysis.

Back to finance. One distinction I make often in my work is that the traditional bank sells something it has, whereas finance sells something it does not have. In doing this, finance needs to invade other sectors: they provide it with grist for its mill. To invade those sectors requires often enormously complex instruments based on algorithmic math—the work of brilliant physicists, hundreds of whom work for the top financial firms, and for whom this is simply work. . . they are not the guilty parties in this set-up! I develop this at length in a paper titled ‘Global Finance and its Institutional Spaces.’ The case of the sub-prime mortgage is a simple example to understand these dynamics. This instrument had little to do with providing housing to modest-income households. It was about making a financial instrument that contained an actual asset (in this case the little modest house or a piece of that house). The ‘asset’ was then mixed with high-grade debt to camouflage the modesty, that is the low value of the asset in order to make it an instrument of interest to the top-level investors who were asking the financial system to make asset-backed instruments rather than simply yet another derivative based on a long chain of derivatives—all derivatives derive their value from something . . . so adding a piece of asset was what was being asked. The result is that many investors made a lot of money selling these instruments, and so did the financial firms. But it was a bit of a fiction, so it generated a crisis of confidence. This is when the losses began and those who had held onto these instruments basically lost a lot, but many of the key buyers and sellers had sold them on. It illustrates the predatory character of finance: it used over 14 million households to generate an instrument on which a good part of the financial sector made massive profits while those who had hung onto the instruments went into crisis. But the biggest crisis was the over 14 million households, according to the Fed, who lost it all. The instrument has now been declared illegal in the United States but is circulating in Europe and, most likely, also India and China. This illustrates the mix of brilliance and extractive logics that mark finance today.

I confess, it gave me great satisfaction when I saw in my analysis that I had uncovered the extractive character of finance—a rather unusual way of describing that sector.

AA: *In recent years, there has also developed what is called high-frequency trading, which employs complex algorithms to analyse global market conditions and execute orders at very high speeds. The traders with faster execution speeds tend to profit more than the ones with slower speeds. Its advocates argue that they provide much needed liquidity to the markets. Where do you place these developments? Do you find them extractive as well?*

SS: If they are just executing orders at greater speed, that is one thing: yes, it gives an advantage to some and generates a distortion in the market (for instance, if profit escalates, those in the slow world may just read that as a good deal while, in fact, the ‘good’ deal lasted an hour and it may already have passed).

But what if it actually directly affects those who are not even in the market as in the sub-prime mortgage case. Even as the crisis was unfolding, the conditions for profits were still there for those who generated an asset-backed securities based on highly problematic instruments, who could make a significant profit by selling those securities immediately, leaving buyers of the securities who did not sell immediately with a future loss (a future that could be a day, a month). And of course, also keeping the fantasy of the sub-prime mortgage alive for those who thought they could get a house given the conditions for buying—nothing to pay for the first five years, for instance.

AA: *Recently, you have focused on the idea of brutality but not in a traditional way. You refer to a kind of brutality that cannot be limited to the operations of the rich and powerful; rather, it is systemic. Could you further explain what you mean by it?*

SS: The basic tension I want to bring out in my book, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, is precisely that tension between brutally simple outcomes that are produced by admirably complex forms of knowledge (the physicists developing brilliant instruments in the backrooms of financial firms—the space where the secretaries used to sit). It is not all brutalities nor is it all complexities. And yes, it is a feature embedded in many of the logics that have generated our advanced economic systems. One effort is also to bring, into the same frame, pieces of a production process that are usually left out. I have long obsessed about what all is left out of analyses of a particular economic sector or knowledge economy. From there I also argued, for example, that the cleaners and janitors in the financial firms are actually part of a strategic maintenance domain. They cannot be reduced to the actual tasks they do: they are to be distinguished from cleaners generally in a city; and they could, in principle, have a better chance to organise and make claims, precisely because they are part of a strategic set-up. And, in fact, janitors have organised, but only in major corporate centres in US cities (and in cities in other countries). And domestic workers also have. . . but only in high-end central neighbourhoods. For me this is an indicator that my conceptualisation was capturing something. I develop this in

some detail in a piece where I was asked to describe my research process in much detail—how it took me to janitors in order to understand advanced economies.

AA: *In the last decade, you have developed a new vocabulary to describe and analyse social transformations. Thinking about your concepts like capabilities and tipping points, I'm reminded of the Marxist notion of how productive forces develop capabilities to a point where old production relations can restrain them only briefly before the restraints burst asunder, toppling all institutions along with them. However, your analysis doesn't seem linear or modernist in nature. Instead, your work suggests that social formations are not governed by some law that contains the truth of history; rather, they are arrangements of certain capabilities, authority relations and institutions that are stable only to a point, and once they disassemble, old capabilities may continue but under an entirely different configuration whose development couldn't have been predicted far in advance. I'm sure this reflects a very limited understanding of your endeavour; could you throw some more light on this issue? Also, could you talk a bit about 'capabilities' and if they cover something different or more than technical or technological capabilities in the context of humans and machines?*

SS: Yes, and yes. Beautifully said! Regarding capabilities, one element in how complex systems change which I develop in my *Territory* book is that capabilities from time 1 can switch valence by shifting to a new configuration at time 2, a process that is often not very visible. Another issue is the positive valence associated with the concept. We must liberate the category from its intrinsic/embedded positive valence. This also led to an engagement in a special issue of a law review, with Nussbaum, who, like Sen assumes, takes for granted, that capability is a positive. We had a bit of a debate on this. I find this automatic positive designation deeply problematic: it suggests we the observer/narrator/interpreter/theorist know. It may be positive time 1 and turn negative time 2. Further there are many capabilities that are much wanted by certain types of actors (rich people, powerful firms, etc.) and seen as destructive or negative by other actors. Building a dam requires an extraordinary set of capabilities, genuinely admirable and admired by many, even though it is the kiss of death of many villages and trees and plants, if only they could talk and scream, who will disappear under the water.

Thus, we need to continuously interrogate the category, we need to establish its positives, and for whom, and then interpret the larger meaning.

REFERENCES

- Sassen, S. (2006). *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . (2010). Strategic gendering as capability: One lens into the complexity of powerlessness. *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 19(1), 179–200.

- Sassen, S. (2014a). Global Finance and its Institutional Spaces. In Karin Knorr Cetina & Alex Preda (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Finance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . (2014b). *Expulsions: Brutality and complexity in the global economy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- . (2016). The Global City: Enabling Economic Intermediation and Bearing Its Costs. *City & Community*, 15(2), 97–108. doi: 10.1111/cico.12175