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## Saskia Sassen

### Interviewed by Shamus Khan

**Shamus Khan (SK):** I want to start with *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*. This book engages with major themes like capitalism, migration, and what I'm going to describe as the "heart" model—as in your physical heart—

**Saskia Sassen (SS):** In the sense that it keeps the rest alive—

**SK:** Yes, it keeps the rest alive. I'm going to suggest that your work moved from a kind of heart model to a network model. In this early work, what you did was explore how the internationalization of production drove the formation and direction of migration. At the core was an interest in how economic processes influenced migration. This is the beginning of your work, and we see it sort of bloom out into many other ways we can think about nations. What I mean about the heart model is the heart that sort of pumps out and pulls back, pumps out and pulls back. Or what we sometimes think of as the hub and spoke. Your new work actually fights against this a little bit, because it puts us in this dense matrix of relations. I'm curious if this was because of a particular reading of capitalism at the time, or if it was because the early empirical work really drew upon the American case in this book.

**SS:** Well, you know, when I was writing that I was still profoundly a foreigner in this country, so I had a transversal way of getting at "America." And I should say this book, which when it came out was much praised and admired and it really made a difference, is the book that I sent to twelve publishers who each said "No, we cannot publish this book." The rejections always had these two halves: the first half, "This is excellent, this is good," but the second half, "We don't know how this fits into any of our established lines of publishing." They probably had better English than that. So it was a book that was clearly born out of a transversal

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perspective—I think this is important—and that had a very hard time getting published.

**SK:** Do you think some of this was because a lot of the work at the time looking at capitalism and production was looking at something quite different? You have Michael Burawoy's work, and he's studying factory floor processes. Yet part of what you're doing is connecting these things to how the internationalization of production is actually driving migration processes. You're looking at the interconnection of these macroprocesses.

**SS:** I never thought of that. But yes, I think that is part of the story. The other part is that my starting question, actually, was, how does a new migration flow get going? Once it was an established flow, it became far less interesting to me. So my interest was *why*—why, when there are so many poor countries, so many poor people, it's actually a very small minority of countries, or situations, and of people who wind up being migrants. I thought that most of the analyses of immigration at the time focused on the immigrants—the immigrant was the source of information—and I said no, it's not the immigrant. When I see these migrants, my question was and remains not why did they leave or who they are but what is the story they're telling me about where they're coming from? And the second vector was, *what if* immigration actually begins in the boardrooms of corporations and of the military of the receiving countries, such as the military occupation of the Dominican Republic by Reagan (after the Dominicans had voted in a social democratic government)? A whole new migration to the United States took off after that. I was coming from a political economy perspective. I was not necessarily an immigration expert, an immigration person, though I was an immigrant.

So what you captured in my work was in there, but the starting question was different. You know how it goes in the academy, I was not at all persuaded by the way immigration in the United States was narrated by the experts. They said, well, poverty produces migration. So my first question was, where are all the poor in the world? My God, they were everywhere. So that was the start: poverty was not enough of an explanation. And I went in search of the bridges that the receiving countries might have contributed to build, knowingly or not. . . . In a way, you are absolutely right on two things you just said. I was interested in how complex systems actually function, and this meant moving into the interiority of the system, looking from the inside. And the other is what you just said, this push and pull, the heart. So I'm continually moving across different data and academic domains, which can also get messy. I think that is why the book got rejected by twelve

publishers! How many people do you know who after the third rejection keep on believing? I never changed a word. Never. I knew that that was the book I wanted. Maybe I should have changed a few words. That's another matter. I believed so hard in it that, at some point, I was in a battle, one visible only to myself, you understand, not the publishers. And I made a point of not changing a word. So, for me, the book itself has its own interesting trajectory. I was really mixing levels of analysis, and I was mixing disciplinary forms of knowledge. I guess I am still doing that.

**SK:** So three years later comes *The Global City*—

**SS:** Yeah, but there is a story here. I worked for eight years on the mobility book. I started it when I was on my post-doc at Harvard's Center for International Affairs. And because of all the rejections, it took years to get it published. I started working on *The Global City* eight years before *Mobility* came out. And you see in one of the last chapters that the global city appears—"The New Labor Demand in Global Cities." So I was already moving in that direction because I realized, okay, here is the next phase. I do find that long-term research projects open windows into emergent realities . . . Each of my three big books—I consider myself really the author of three books, *The Mobility*, *The Global City*, and *Territory*—in a way, has taken me eight or nine years.

**SK:** Absolutely. In many ways I think that what emerges in *The Global City* that was not in the previous one is what I would think of as cities, a network model, and then deeper attention to one of the things you're most famous for, that is, globalization as a broader process.

**SS:** Ah, that is interesting to me, and it makes me think that a focus on cities can lead to that network model in a way that a focus on the mobility of labor and capital does not—the actual material conditions are so different. There is an irony there: the city is immobile and yet, it can generate networked dimensions.

**SK:** What we have in *The Global City* is a kind of shift, and the idea is that within a complex globalized production network, there are new forms of financial and managerial services and that these services are often complex and require highly specialized skills that tend to cluster in a limited number of spaces. I think what's interesting here is the introduction of a few core ideas. The first is what I would think of as a network model instead of the heart model, and then the second is this idea of complexity, which becomes a central theme then throughout your work.

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The third I would add to this is a much more historical attention which we also see in *Territory, Authority, Rights*. You make an implicit comparison within this book between the nineteenth-century city and today's more networked global cities. I want to focus a little bit on this idea of complexity and, in particular, this idea of complexity within this network model.

I think the great advantage of the central heart model is that there's a clarity of perspective. That is, there's this sort of core driver of a process. You have this very simple thing that's happening which is an internationalization of production processes, and it's influencing the tracks of migration. The network model is probably more accurate, but it requires a kind of contingency of perspective, and there is a resulting messiness. I don't mean analytic messiness. When you're within a network, your position within it influences the field of vision. Following a flow through the network becomes both critical and an incredible challenge. I'm curious how you are able to maintain some analytic clarity under conditions where the things you're describing are marked by this deep complexity.

**SS:** Each of my three big books is driven by a project that I then have to develop and give content. So I begin to think about a book, I begin to see something here is changing, happening. This was a content very different from that of *The Mobility*. The provocation now was all this language about digitization and the economy—remember, this goes back a long time; I was doing that research thirty years ago. All the talk at the time was about a borderless world and the notion that everything can be digitized and can flow freely . . . and I thought, wait a minute. I resisted the notion of that much fluidity in our world. I recognized the digital capabilities but contested, literally fought hard, against the generalizations. I was not an urbanist at that point—very important—I was a political economist working on international development, and I think *The Global City* is not a typical urbanist's book. It is a political economy of cities in a networked global world, so I decided to focus on the most digitized, most advanced, and richest sectors—in other words, those that can buy whatever technology they want, whose products can be delivered digitally, thus, sectors that can drive innovation. The aim was to use these sectors to discover the limits of digitization even under the most favorable conditions, such as the case of high finance—digitized, rich, powerful . . . a “masters of the world” type of sector. The question became, is it really the case that they don't need a territorial moment (i.e., friction) in their process of production? I liked inserting this notion of production into the most digital and abstract sector—you can understand the delight of that tension. That is how my research for *The Global City* book started. You can imagine that actually landing on and

going digging into a space made of stone and asphalt was an adventure. My methodology was to track specialized components of the intermediate economy—the production of instruments of all sorts for firms, not consumers. Indeed, I defined the global city function in its narrowest and most precise sense as an intermediation function. I just did a short piece on this for ASA's *Urban and Community Journal*, as part of a discussion about the book. I tracked the global circuits, global mobilities, locational patterns of leading corporate services firms, most prominent among which is finance. All kinds of places emerged including obscure towns in the United States that I had never heard of for the insurance companies, which mostly had become routinized operations so could locate anywhere, in contrast to other sectors.

I realized at some point that I would have to take a city or two to study in depth, and I went for New York and Los Angeles. I actually accepted a visiting professorship at the University of California, Los Angeles, to do my fieldwork. But as I was analyzing my data on these global flows of specialized services and finance, Los Angeles never appeared. What kept appearing in the form of specific firms in different sectors—truly a messy matrix—were New York, London, and Tokyo. This was the late 1980s. Those were the cities that had the most specialized service firms catering to firms operating globally. In that early first phase, those were the cities. And they accounted for 60 percent, 70 percent of all transactions in specialized intermediate services. By the way, I want to rectify a common misunderstanding. Often authors write that I argue there are only three global cities. This misses a historical dimension. Today, after three decades of expansion of a global operational space, there are about a hundred. It is a networked system, but frankly, there's a hierarchy. This raises an interesting question as to the intersection of networks and hierarchies.

Returning to the start of the research, discovering through my own research that Los Angeles would be of no use, I had a bit of a crisis. So I'm sitting there in Los Angeles, and I have to be in London and in Tokyo! Now London was something that I could imagine managing. Tokyo? I had zero interest in Japan. People still think now that I'm somehow a Japan scholar. I'm not at all. I didn't speak the language. If you arrive without your conceptual tools finely honed, you get lost. You can get rid of the haunting question "What am I doing here?" I luckily had honed my instruments, so I knew what I was looking for in these cities. It also involved walking in neighborhoods, because of the bit of gentrification and a new economy installing itself with its own types of buildings.

I began to understand that all of these sectors, they belong to a special economic space that had to do with intermediation. They can rarely lose, but they have an

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enormous capacity to destroy other firms. This is a sector that can deliver specialized knowledges. The example I love to use is, okay, you're a firm that wants to enter Mongolia, but you need only thirty-three hours of Mongolian accounting, fifty hours of Mongolian lawyering, et cetera a year—so you're not going to hire a full-time, in-house staff for that, in fact, you wouldn't even find that. And so I began to build up this notion of intermediation empirically, all along noticing the differences in the three cities. These are highly networked, digitized sectors, yet their operational geographies were quite different, especially Tokyo's.

The fact of specialized differences across the three cities was something that, again, few commentators really picked up on. This was maddening. Because of the fieldwork that I did—fieldwork included doing interviews with financiers, [and] I was very young then, and always played dumb. The Japanese told me stuff that I never wrote about in the book because it related to dubious practices in terms of Japan's law. It became clear that New York, London, and Tokyo were not only very different, but their functions within this emergent system were radically different. I always said Manhattan—at that point Wall Street—was the Silicon Valley for inventing financial instruments. London was the ultimate entrepôt—an intermediary center happy to take capitals from no matter where in the world, and no matter how small, which Wall Street wouldn't even consider. And Tokyo was actually the exporter—no matter how advanced its economy—the exporter of a raw commodity that we call *cash*, as in currency issued by central banks, in other words, the real stuff—not a derivative based on an interest rate and so on.

**SK:** It's interesting how books have lives of their own, independently of what's said within them. *The Global City*, to me, is one of those books, because when I returned to it in anticipation of our conversation, one of the things that surprised me was the argument—you do *not* make the argument that these three cities are doing the same thing. There is no argument that there is *a* global city, a kind of city that has this. Within it, there are differences, ways in which these specialized businesses facilitate flows that are actually quite different and reliant on the specialization of knowledge and actually the local culture and dynamics and history. And so, to me, that was actually one of the most interesting things in returning to it, which is because now people ask, "Is this a global city or not?" as if there's a form called the global city. But actually the arguments made in the book are about these assemblages of knowledge, expertise, the core of finance and specific ways of understanding the economy, which are actually quite variant across the New York, Tokyo, and London cases.

**SS:** Yes, yes, and yes! Very glad to hear this. And those particularities contribute to constitute the globality of that specific system. The globality is not that it's the same everywhere.

**SK:** Because it's not McDonald's.

**SS:** Exactly, it's not the consumer sector—which is increasingly standardized across the world. The global city function is about intermediation—how to facilitate all those specialized differences to work, interact, and construct an operational space where these differences are valued because they serve to expand (globalize) their diverse operations.

**SK:** But I think that what's interesting, to belabor this a little bit, is that often when people think about global cities, what they say is . . . there are the same stores everywhere, there are the same restaurants. Jean-Georges Vongerichten has a restaurant in Hong Kong, he's got one in New York, there are some in Paris, there are some in Chicago. People make the kind of McDonald's analogy, and they impose it upon this idea of the global city—I mean consistency, it's always the same everywhere. And that's not the argument you're making. In some ways, at these high levels of knowledge and finance, the dynamics are actually quite different.

**SS:** At the heart of the global city function is intermediation—not standardization, as in consumer markets. This highly intermediated global economy is quite unreachable, but there are moments when it hits the ground and it becomes men and women who want it all and get it all, and at that point they leave this massive footprint on urban space—the expansion of the luxury zone. You know, saying that everything is the same would lead us to have one über financial sector? True, this new financial system has eliminated many small banks, and quite a few financial centers. But the network of major financial centers has expanded—all kinds of centers once small and unknown are now connected to a global financial space. One argument I developed in *The Global City* concerns an error of interpretation, a very common one: to overlook, to miss the fact that much of the built environment we simply see as “buildings” is actually (I argue!) infrastructural—and I define the infrastructural as necessary but indeterminate. So, then, the question becomes, how is it getting used? In the near past, the 1960s, the office building spoke a clear language: it told us “we're about office work.” And it was true. Most of the jobs were secretarial or supervisory. Today, most of the buildings in

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the corporate center do not make visible what work is getting done—it is not the work of secretaries but that of daring financiers and brilliant physicists developing new algorithms. In this sense, then, these buildings are more akin to infrastructure, and we must ask, how is it getting used, rather than assume that all financial centers are doing the same type of finance.

What has become standardized is more and more of what we used to think of in far more specific terms, and I say we should think of this as infrastructural. So our office buildings are more akin to infrastructure—again, necessary but indeterminate. Then, the question becomes, how are they getting used? Think train tracks: they are infrastructure, and they can be used to carry bombs or to carry food for the poor. It also tells us that the infrastructural has advanced.

In short there is more indeterminacy in our complex systems than used to be the case—along with the more familiar growth in standardization. The fact of more indeterminacy requires another mode of research, and other questions for research. It is not enough to see an office building as a space for office work, as might have been the case in the 1960s in Manhattan and Chicago. Today it is mostly not about generic office work—that type of work is now digitized, or is exported to clerical factories in suburbs or abroad. There is much standardization in today's global business world. The International Standards Organization is a major instrument facilitating economic globalization. State of the art office buildings have to meet a whole range of standards. But in my view, it is all infrastructural in the sense that the key question becomes how is that standardized office space used?

Once we recognize all of this, then it becomes much easier to emphasize the significance of the specialized differences in these cities. If you just take the visual order, you wind up thinking most cities are the same. Politically that means most cities are competing with one another. Who wins from that? Well, not the cities themselves but the big corporates. Today's research agenda pushes matters further and asks how is this standardized built environment getting used? If you take New York and Chicago—the two leading financial centers in the United States—they have the same infrastructure, their buildings are state of the art, the technical facilities are state of the art, but they're radically different when it comes to the actual financial work they develop, and they don't even compete very much with each other on this. If you take the four major financial centers of China—Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen—the infrastructure (infrastructure understood also as built environment, facilities, etc.), it's all the same. I love this term *infrastructure* and this notion that the infrastructural is expanding its domain.



**SK:** But that it has to be used.

**SS:** Yes. So a lot of the high-end shops, restaurants are similar, often dominated by Western designers. But when you stand in front of these office buildings you must ask how they are used. In China, for instance, its four financial centers are radically different. And this holds even with highly centralized state power. Thus China thought it could replace Hong Kong with Shanghai. But it ran into zero chance of that happening. While much foreign money goes into Shanghai, it's a national financial center, mostly. Hong Kong is China's major global financial center, and no matter the special supports and resources given to Shanghai by the national government, it cannot rise above Hong Kong.

**SK:** So you didn't mention *Guests and Aliens* as one of your three major books, but—

**SS:** Ahhh, Shamus, you would notice! I loved writing it.

**SK:** And I want to quote from it, so I'm actually going to read something back to you that you wrote in 1999. The interesting puzzle for you here was what you described as “the refusal to recognize the incompatibility between the new economic regime aimed at neutralizing borders and the immigration policies aimed at total control of borders” (Sassen 1999: xvii). It captures today, and it's also a little bit of a turn, that as much as you were interested in the dynamics of the global, in this book you took the national and national variation quite seriously.

**SS:** Yes, it makes me very happy that you see it. And of course I also bring in the national in *The Global City* in the form of a subnational space that connects with other such spaces.

**SK:** As in *The Global City*. I think, also, it comes to a kind of apex in *Territory, Authority, Rights*, where we really see you looking at this idea of the world of private power and its relationship to the nation. But it's interesting to me to think about this quote and how prescient it is. I can't help but think in my sort of parochial way of the United States case, where the Obama administration has been negotiating a range of trade deals throughout the Americas, which are really about the neutralization of borders, at the same time that we have all of this political rhetoric where we're thinking about the total control of borders through immigration processes. This folds us back to almost your first book, to think about flows

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of capital and flows of people. But in some ways it puts tension on the process or suggests the kind of political nature of this and the ways in which nations—

**SS:** Yes! You are right in all of this. And it brings in politics.

**SK:** It does bring in politics.

**SS:** In *Mobility* it was the economics of an epoch and its new flows of people, seemingly unconnected. My hypothesis was that there was a connection, that the flows emerged within that economic system. In *Guests and Aliens* suddenly politics comes into the frame, and politics had not been my forte.

**SK:** But I'm curious, why this shift in interest?

**SS:** Part of the answer is the second proposition that organizes *Guests and Aliens*, one I do really care about because it goes beyond “good and bad people”: In Europe’s multiple internal migration histories, when the “foreigner” was basically your cousin in terms of phenotype and religion, he was not welcome, and was seen as dangerous, untrustworthy. Including the outsider was never easy in Europe. I tell a story in *Guests and Aliens*, about Haussmann. He is rebuilding Paris, and needs more workers, and he very carefully—I mean, we don’t know what went through his head—selects German and Belgian Catholic workers. Now, not long before that, French Catholic workers had murdered Italian Catholic migrants working in the salt mines of the south, in Mortes Agues, because they were the “wrong Catholics.” So Haussmann didn’t take Italians, he went and looked for Germans and Belgians. And guess what, the French workers complained once again, they were not the right Catholics. In short, the foreigner, even if basically your cousin in terms of phenotype and religion, was easily seen as undesirable. I use a range of these cases to argue that Europe has long had a problem with the outsider, long before today’s Muslims, which are so often seen as trouble because of religious and cultural distance. Today much of Europe sees Muslims, and Africans, in terms of a sharp cultural distance. But we should really interrogate this notion that cultural distance warrants mistrust and fear, when in the past we felt the same about a Catholic who was from Belgium or Italy, rather than French. I tried to problematize the way nationhood imagines itself.

When I give a talk sometimes I say—I wouldn’t use it in writing—“We Europeans are a creole people.” I include myself, mentioning I was born in the Nether-

lands. Using the creole, which we associate with a particular geography and period, bringing it into Europe where creole is not part of its self-identification, is a sort of wake-up call.

Now, coming to your question, with all of that baggage, so there are two things. One is *de facto*. Given the strengthening of national states and their own political systems, it took much work and time to construct the economic union. The big corporations pushed hard on economic union and single currency—it was their game. Already then, in that early phase some very smart observers and commentators were saying that just having a common market and common currency is not enough. There were all these other issues. For instance, employment policy was a mess as each country had a different employment policy and a different economy. At the grandest level, one must recognize that the European Union project is an extraordinarily complex one because of all these histories of nationalism. And this is a deep history: at one point Europe had six hundred plus different sovereign nations! What we see here are two very deep histories—anti-immigrant sentiment in most countries and distinct national economies—that can, under certain circumstances, and they regularly have, come together to create an explosive nationalism.

The countries of Europe have for a very, very long time needed both each other and “the” other. I see the current moment marked, as so often happens, by a kind of active refusal of one’s own good and bad histories. The good thing is that, at some point in the 1900s, the struggles by the outsider, notably immigrants and women, for access to public transport, access to medical services, to education, resulted in the installation of public-sector goods, from transport and housing to education and health services. There is something important to be recovered from these struggles for incorporation. Most importantly, perhaps, that the claims by outsiders (immigrants and women) in the long run generated an expansion of public goods for all. So the presence of immigrants contributed to a positive, a collective good.

When I think about today’s refugees and migrants, it all seems intractable. I’m impressed with Angela Merkel: she stood her ground. It takes a kind of intelligence to see the good in an overwhelming situation—I think opening up Germany to refugees and pushing other EU countries to do so was an intelligent move by her, rather than a political move—and she knows how to use her intelligence. . . .

**SK:** Specifically, what about the move are you interested in?

**SS:** Well, as a first, very modest, little step, it’s her recognizing that Europe has got to deal, to confront the situation. The main absence in the discussion about

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immigration in Europe and in the logistics deployed are the other major countries that are part of this new global map of human catastrophes, the United States, Australia, et cetera. The invasion of Iraq was the beginning of much of this. It's one of those decisions that blows one's mind: Who are we, the United States, to launch such a chain of destructions? I think that Merkel puts in her one minimal positioning by opening Germany to refugees in a rapid move (hoping that others would follow suit!). And it is both a decisive act regarding the refugees and an invitation to other governments to do their bit. She could have picked up the phone and told Obama, "You know what? The US government is far more directly guilty of the causes that have led to this massive outflow of desperate people. . . ." But she begins to take in these people regardless of what others do. Her move is not a solution, but it is a stance. And it took courage (again I tend to think in her case it was intelligence that moved her, rather than courage), and it is a step in the right direction. But none of this is a solution to what has happened, which to me is a horror. I think now other actors have decided the more we kill the better—I am thinking of Syria's Assad, who clearly has decided that those who were willing to contest the regime might as well be eliminated. It's enemy cleansing of a murderous sort. I can imagine a practical calculus: "When we get back in, we get to rebuild whole cities, and this activates the economy, and we will only have supporters living there."

So, to me, these deep histories of Europe are in play, and the project for the European Union reveals itself as a thin project. It was and is an economic project in many ways, not in all ways, but the most successful, like the euro. One question that I have and have written about is, should we have fought much harder for a European union that was not only geared toward some of these economic interests but that included basic political responsibilities by all members, a sense of obligation to a commons? This did not quite happen. So one can then stand back and say, are the Hungarians obsessed with building an impenetrable wall totally crazy? You can't quite say that. Theirs is not an attractive position, but you cannot say that they're crazy. I think we have to do some serious rebuilding and confronting of difficult issues. It's going to take a lot more than what has been done so far.

**SK:** I'm going to not quite fold together *Territory, Authority, Rights* and *Expulsions*, but I want to talk about both of them in concert. And I don't know if this has been brought up to you before, but I see a kind of parallel in what you're doing to what Michel Foucault's work was interested in, and I'll give you three reasons for it. The first is the relationship between power and knowledge and so, if we think

of *The Global City*, the ways in which you understand knowledge and expertise as being central to the workings of power. The second is methodological and, if we just think of the answer you gave us or the work in *Territory, Authority, Rights*, as a kind of archeology, of understanding the ways in which there are these often covered-over circuits and workings of meaning that you uncover in your work. If we take *Territory, Authority, Rights*, part of what you're arguing is that globalization is shifting the locus of authority away from states to the world of private power, but power nonetheless still operates through national institutions, and that the history of those national institutions is really important. We see this in your previous answer: a kind of archeology of uncovering these dimensions.

And then, third, you have a theory of power, which we see in *Expulsions*, that you describe as subterranean, or a kind of subterranean power. This is *not* actually the Foucauldian analysis of capillary power, but it has a kind of similar character to it. I've been thinking about the two works just discussed and the ways in which you move to this kind of historically grounded understanding of complexity where old institutions have a historical import, where power and forms of knowledge are incredibly important for understanding them, as a sort of parallel project to the Foucauldian project. But rather than being interested in institutions such as education, penal institutions, mental health, or sexuality, you're interested in the economy, economic processes, and, as much as you say you're not interested in political processes, political process—

**SS:** The state, absolutely—

**SK:** And the state—the role of the state and nations. And so reading these two books, I couldn't help but think of these as parallel projects . . . Foucault's with this kind of historical approach and yours with a different kind of approach.

**SS:** Wow, that is so interesting. The way you put it, I would say yes . . . In *Territory, Authority, Rights* I argue these existing categories may have functioned very well for much of our modern history. But the state is where problems emerge. To say that because of the global, the state loses, is simply not a helpful proposition. For instance, I argue that legislatures and parliaments lose functions because of the privatizations and deregulations launched in the 1990s and onwards. They are hollowed out. But those functions do not disappear, they move into the domain of the economy, where they become private, for-profit functions. The judiciary varies enormously, one cannot generalize, but in the United States it actually gained

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power. It's now even making law, which it shouldn't be doing—that is the role of the legislature. As for the executive branch of government, I have done extensive research about this question in *Territory* and found that it gains power but it is a kind of ironic power because it aligns itself increasingly, in very particular, practical, pragmatic ways, with the global corporate world. This is not a project of the state, it is not its aim necessarily, but it winds up becoming that. And hence it begins to benefit from privatization and deregulation. In contrast, the legislature suffers much loss of power and influence because of this privatization and deregulation. The executive branch, whether presidential or parliamentary, gains this ironic power from the global corporate sector. The core agencies of the executive branch of government, such as the Fed and the Treasury, become very powerful actors in this global economy.

I also ask myself whether we see here the making of a sort of ironic power. The executive branch of government, especially in the United States, has learned how to be international. Pity that it is an internationalism centered on the corporate economy, rather than on social justice and such. But could it be that the continuous US interventions in all parts of the world—political, economic, military—has enabled it to acquire a certain knowledge about the international, about what it means to be an international actor? And the question then is whether this could be redirected toward a series of much needed enablements and supports across the world that might actually help the disadvantaged. So when you speak of the “capillary,” that is what I mean about this potential mode of global participation aimed at enabling the disadvantaged. It is also this mix of vectors in today's world that leads me to write that we can barely speak of “the” state in this particular moment. We actually have to enter it so as to understand today's state, inside of which operates a complex global structure.

Add to this Bloomberg News's freedom of information request to the Fed to make public the actual funds the Fed transferred to the global banking system to avoid a banking crisis. At the time there was a robust debate in the legislature centered on whether TARP [the Troubled Asset Relief Program] should give \$324 billion to the major US banks. It took the Fed over two years to release the information requested by Bloomberg News. And by then the debate was long over and the information obtained by Bloomberg News barely hit the general media, even though it was quite shocking: the Fed had transferred US\$7.7 trillion to major US and foreign banks . . . and had basically tried to keep it secret. Delaying the release of this information—a rather dodgy decision—made it a far less visible event. It is disturbing to think that the secretary of the Treasury and the head of the Fed

participated in the debate about the controversial US\$324 billion transfer to the banks, at a time when cuts in social programs were escalating, and sought to keep secret its US\$7 trillion gift to the big banks of the world. It is astounding how few people know about it, including economists—of course, the typical academic economist, who is typically a microeconomist, is just in his or her own model, and can do without knowing what happens in the world. This brings up what is to me an issue: how much which is there in plain view fails to become part of a dominant narrative or the facts about a given condition. Thus few discussed the *Financial Times* front page analysis of those \$7.7 trillion. It reported that over twenty-one thousand requests had come in for this cheap US money put at the disposal of the major global banks—though the data also shows that General Electric, hardly a bank, had asked for and received some.

Another such case, which I document in *Expulsions*, where the material is not enough to communicate or make visible, is the 14 million people, households that lost their homes. That is up to 30 or more million people—we cannot see this with our eyes, we can only imagine it. There is a scaling issue here that the social sciences can have trouble with. So, in much of my work I go digging. I'm interested in seeing from another angle . . .

**SK:** But I think it's interesting that in *Territory, Authority, Rights* you have this idea that, while institutions are serving a new logic, there are traces of the old logic and that they remain—but there are these new assemblages, [yet] they occur within structures that were built within this previous logic. So this to me is the archeological character of the digging. But what's interesting to me is when Foucault ends up talking about power, he talks about capillary power, which we think of, I would say, as subcutaneous, [as] underneath the skin, [as] the way in which the capillaries are working. Whereas you have this much more archeological sense of subterranean, that there are these circuits working underneath where power is flowing, but it's a very different conceptualization, and I kind of like it. And so I think, [reading] *Expulsions*, one of the things I thought about was, what does a subterranean model of power mean?

**SS:** In *Territory*, I ask myself how do complex systems actually change? And in the many years it took me to do that book and given the many diverse systems I examined, I decided that complex systems change by repositioning what are often existing capabilities in new or different organizing logics. Thus you can see that in the rise of the nation-state, and you can see that in the current globalization—the

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capabilities represented by the national sovereign state were not all neutralized, but they were repositioned in often very different logics (e.g., deregulation and privatization). This also meant, for instance, that the legislature lost powers (less and less to regulate and govern as it became private) and the executive branch gained a new type of power, an ironic power, as it became the key enabler of many of the deregulations and privatizations that entailed losses of long-established powers and acquisitions of new types of powers. Profound transformation does not necessarily mean that you throw out everything that was there and you put something new in. I asked how does the secular sovereign manage to generate its own authoritativeness. I argued that in the case of Western Europe, it had to be connected to the divinity of the sovereign that precedes the secular sovereign. And then I look at contemporary pieces of law—you alluded to that already, I think—that can be used in one way in time but can actually switch domains and serve a very different purpose. I think of it as a systemic mobility of capabilities camouflaged as more of the same.

**SK:** “Jump tracks,” I think, is the language you use.

**SS:** That’s right—capabilities that jump tracks. That is why I went digging deeper and deeper into history, because I realized, my God, where did this all start? That was not my plan necessarily, but once I got into this project it swallowed me up . . . Did I tell you this story—this is a footnote—I wrote *Territory*, which I think is my best book, as I said at Chicago, and I think I could not have written it in Manhattan, let’s put it that way—

**SK:** Why? I’m just curious . . .

**SS:** At the U of C you can easily become a monk . . . not in Manhattan . . . When I moved to the contemporary period, most of my interactions were with legal scholars. I began to ask myself how this jumping of tracks, the shift of existing capabilities to a new organizing logic, comes into play in the law. How do existing laws shift organizing logics. Among the more extreme or revealing shifts I found were particular aspects of private commercial arbitration. This is an old European continental practice that got partly reinvented (Americanized) when the current global era took off. In the case of a business dispute, private arbitration became a way of avoiding falling in the hands of the national courts of whatever countries might be involved. An alarm clock went off for US firms operating abroad when a failure of a US chemical factory in Bophal, India, killed over three thousand



people and more across the years. If the case would have been adjudicated in an Indian court the US firm would have been liable for far more than would be the case in a private arbitration. So what we see here is the use of an old tradition for new reasons. A second example of this shift is the fact that in the earlier decades of this global era up to 70 percent of private commercial arbitrations used New York State commercial law—mind you, for arbitrations that might have nothing to do with New York State. It is one of the oldest, most international laws, and New York State was of course a very international and commercial and trade-oriented state.

This is a great instance of jumping tracks: capabilities made for X in time one can actually be reinserted in a very different setting. This also explains, I think, the level of complexity that marks the knowledge spaces involved in global transactions.

As for the “subterranean,” the argument I make in *Expulsions* is that there is a kind of knowledge to be had, but it exists in a zone that is conceptually subterranean. It is so in the sense that this is knowledge embedded in existing specialized fields with their walls, or constituted only vis-à-vis particular fields, all of it making it difficult to see how such knowledge might be pertinent to another field. But once you begin to disassemble that specialized knowledge and reposition it you can see it. . . . My favorite example to make the point is juxtaposing Norilsk, in Russia, one of the largest nickel production setups in the world, and the Montana gold mines. In the traditional geopolitical mode of analysis, one is positioned as belonging to a deeply communist history, the other one to a deeply capitalist history.

My question then, is, how do I interpellate these two situations in today’s world, and not in terms of that old geopolitics. One critical vector today is the environmental question, and at that point what matters about these two cases is that both are extremely destructive of the environment. This is the mode through which I position a whole range of situations in today’s world. What are contemporary zones—of practice, of method, of theory—that we need to reposition, away from the inclusions and exclusions of older categories, and toward the new types of spatial formations in today’s world. Thus in *Expulsions* I also examine, for instance, the rise of predatory elites that have far more in common across countries than they have with the average native of their countries. In short, I see the need for conceptually marking new types of alignments that are shaping spaces—for action, for membership, for identification—that cut across familiar boundaries, and shape new types of boundaries.

In my graduate seminar I always use an article by Bruno Latour, whose content

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I brutally reduce to an operation: let's take all these different concepts and nail them all down to the ground, no matter the different conceptual weight or grandiosity . . . bring them all down, flattened into ground level. This runs also through my *Expulsions* book—for instance, the example of Norilsk and the Montana gold mines, or putting long-term prisoners and displaced-peoples camps on the same conceptual ground at the end of chapter 1. The effect is to dislodge these content-rich concepts from the larger bodies of knowledge that shape them but also limit their capacity to travel analytically. I don't reject past methods or instruments, but I need to engage them and reposition them. I imagine a knowledge zone, or several knowledge zones, that we rarely engage but is ripe for analytic digging, for exiting the boundaries of the particular discipline or type of empirical reality that gave it life at some point. Knowledges we have made across the centuries, across the decades, across disciplines, whatever it might be, that can function in this different way if we take them out of their encasements. Back to my example of Norilsk and Montana: up to twenty years ago or less, the critical variable was geopolitical. Today it is their capacity to destroy the environment. I have long been interested in how we use existing knowledges. Having grown up in so many different countries I find myself moving into existing knowledge systems in divergent ways. Again, back to my *Mobility* book rejected by twelve publishers. I think I have done that in all my books.

**SK:** So I want to end with this discussion of *Expulsions* and also with where you're going. . . . *Expulsions*—it's not your first really political work, but it's the one where you sort of talk the most about violence and brutality. You go across a range of expulsions: men and women from their jobs, people from their home countries—

**SS:** I let go in this book—

**SK:** Incarceration, farmers from their land, poor from their homes, the biosphere from pollution. And it's a moment where, whereas previously the politics was very restrained in your books, and people could look into them and see almost what they wished, you don't let the reader do that in this book. Even the title *Expulsions* has a politics to it. I'm curious about the decision to do this and if this is indicative of where you're going.

**SS:** You are absolutely right in sensing a difference in this book. I had actually signed a contract with Harvard to do a more theoretical work—and yes,

restrained, as you say. But had been giving lectures and doing a lot of interviews, and writing some articles on the issues I raise in *Expulsions*. I also got going on the whole focus on inequality: I found it lacking. Inequality is a variable and all complex systems are marked by it . . . So the question is: When does inequality become a major negative force? *Expulsions* was born from that transversal move into understanding what marks our epoch. I told my editor at Harvard that I had to get this book out first. They loved it, gave me a contract . . . It is a book that engages frontally, without much mediation, this epochal shift. The “Ungoverned Territories?” book is going to be far more intermediated—where the realities I explore are windows into larger histories and dismemberments.

**SK:** I’m wondering what released you to write. I mean, you’ve always seen these things happening . . .

**SS:** I think the brutality of our epoch, the fact that forms of knowledge we admire and respect are increasingly deployed to produce elementary, little, not grand brutalities was what really got me going, and the fact that the exclusive focus on inequality of this moment is not enough.

**SK:** So this is really the first time it’s in a book form.

**SS:** I guess so. I had not quite thought about it, but all my writing has a sharp edge that is a sort of guide as I navigate across knowledge spaces. I have written a lot of short, more general pieces and certainly given a lot of talks across the decades where I’m pretty direct and tough. I do think one of the great features of the academy is that you’re allowed to write a book like the territory book on which you spend nine years and where you create a much more intermediated framework of knowledge—which I think is critical, as that opens up a text to interpretation. But I also enjoy de-theorizing, going back to ground level, clearing my eyes, asking what am I seeing, how does what we have ensconced in very differentiated theories actually tell us something about a larger process than what we have allowed it to do. I really think that the social sciences have produced an amazing range of such forms of experimental thinking—look at Alondra Nelson, how she engages a well-housed subject (in the sciences) and invites it to take a walk on the wild side.

This way of working also has led me to explicate something I have long been doing as research practice but never narrated. The name of this little project is “Before Method.” It basically aims at formalizing much of what we have been talking about. The basic argument is that, at a time when our major categories are

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being destabilized by emergent histories and geographies, we need to interrogate those categories . . . not throw them out of the window. That is too easy. I have given this lecture across the world and enough times in the United States that a press has offered me a contract to write a little book called “Before Method.” As you know, there are at least a couple of famous books called “After Method.”

One empirical case I use to illustrate the need for such a “before method” moment is the current migrations and refugee flows that got going over the last few years, some just in the last two years. I argue that the well-established categories for understanding migration and refugee flows do not capture enough about the current phase. My core question is whether by using these established categories we keep ourselves from seeing, capturing a deeper history in the making. It comes back to an earlier question in this interview—my interest in understanding what a new migration tells us about what’s happening in places of origin. Why did this flow start? One key thesis is that some of these new flows are caused by a massive loss of habitat, with war the most extreme case, but many also due to other, less recognized factors. Among these: the expansion of mining, water and land grabs, climate change. I explore aspects of this loss of habitat in *Expulsions* (chapters 2 and 4). Third element: we have a regime that recognizes war-induced flows. But we lack any regime to recognize that more and more migrations may be happening due to these other nonwar factors. When those migrants appear at our border they cannot invoke any law, any principle that justifies their claim. This is profoundly unjust.

**SK:** This is exciting. I can’t wait to read the new territory book! I’m going to stop us here. Thank you, Saskia. It’s been such a pleasure.

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**Interview:**  
**Saskia Sassen**

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