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## When the center no longer holds: Cities as frontier zones<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This viewpoint argues that today's frontier zone – a strategic frontier zone for global corporate capital as much as for those who lack power – is located deep inside our large cities.

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### Introduction

The large complex city, especially if global, is a new frontier zone. Actors from different worlds meet there, but there are no clear rules of engagement. Where the historic frontier, as seen from imperial centers, was in the far stretches of the 'colonies', today it is deep inside those imperial centers. These cities, whether in the global north or south, have become a strategic frontier zone for global corporate capital. It is here that in much of the work of forcing deregulation, privatization, and new fiscal and monetary policies on the host governments was done. The result was a set of formal instruments that amounted to the equivalent of the old military 'fort' of the historic frontier: the regulatory environment they need in city after city worldwide to ensure a global space of operations.

But these cities have also become a strategic frontier zone for those who lack power, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities. The disadvantaged and excluded can gain presence in such cities, presence *vis-à-vis* power and presence *vis-à-vis* each other. This signals the possibility of a new type of politics, centered in new types of political actors. It is not simply a matter of having or not having power. These are new hybrid bases from which to act, spaces where the powerless can make history even when they do not get empowered.

One outcome is the making of informal politics by actors-with-a-project. I include here the informal political project of global firms and high-income gentrification. For the powerless it is particularly the work of making the public and making the political in urban space that become critical at a time when national political space is increasingly dominated by powerful actors, both private

and public, that are basically unaccountable to the larger public. There is a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives, and make legible the local and the silenced. Global cities are one key space for this making.<sup>1</sup> It is, I argue, one of the few frontier spaces with all the inequities, conflicts and potentials for *making* such a space entails. It is the possibility of making that concerns me here, given the ascendance of increasingly parallel bordered spaces for respectively those who gain and those who lose ground.

### Bordering capabilities

This emergent frontier-space function arises in a context of increasingly hardwired borderings inside cities and across cities. Gated communities are but the most visible moment of these borderings. The uses that global corporate capital makes of 'our' cities are part of that hard bordering. The common assertion that we are a far less bordered world than 30 years ago only holds if we consider the traditional borders of the interstate system, and then only for the cross border flow of capital, information and particular population groups. Far from moving towards a borderless world, let me argue that even as we lift some of these barriers for some sectors of our economies and society, these same sectors are actively making new types of borderings that are transversal and impenetrable. It is in this context that the complex global city becomes a frontier space with political consequences.

Today the border is a mix of regimes with variable contents and locations. Borders always have been that in some way (Sassen,

<sup>☆</sup> This is based on the author's *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Sassen, 2008b).

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere (Sassen, 2011), I have examined a particular angle of this disjuncture by focusing on everyday life in cities at a time of growing velocities, the ascendance of process and flow over artifacts and permanence, massive structures that are not at a human scale, and branding as the basic mediation between individuals and markets. The work of design produces narratives that add to the value of existing contexts, and at its narrowest, to the utility logics of the economic corporate world.

2008b, chapter 2). But each epoch has its specifics, and my focus here is on the current global epoch that takes off in the 1980s. Different flows – of capital, information, professionals, undocumented – constitute bordering through a particular sequence of interventions, with diverse institutional and geographic locations. The actual geographic border is part of the cross-border flow of goods if they come by ground transport, but not of capital, except if actual cash is being transported. Each border-control intervention can be conceived of as one point in a chain of locations. In the case of traded goods these might involve a pre-border inspection or certification site. In the case of capital flows the chain of locations will involve banks, stock markets, and electronic networks. The geographic borderline is but one point in the chain; institutional points of border control intervention can form long chains moving deep inside a country.

The sites for the enforcement of border regimes range from banks to bodies; this is one image we might use to capture the multiple locations that constitute ‘the’ border. When a bank executes the most elementary money transfer to another country, the bank is one of the sites for border-regime enforcement. A certified good represents a case where the object itself crossing the border is one of the sites for enforcement: the emblematic case is a certified agricultural product. But it also encompasses the case of the tourist carrying a tourist visa and the immigrant carrying the requisite certification. Indeed, in the case of immigration, it is the body of the immigrant herself which is both the carrier of much of the regime and the crucial site for enforcement; and in the case of an unauthorized immigrant, it is, again, the body of the immigrant that is the carrier of the violation of the law and of the corresponding punishment (i.e. detention or expulsion).

Let me elaborate on this mix of themes.

### Emergent transversal borderings

One trend of the last two decades is the emergence of a variety of transversal bordered spaces that tend to aggregate into a stark bipolar differentiation.<sup>2</sup> A segment of firms and professionals now can move in protected global spaces. These bordered spaces are impenetrable. No coyote can take you across those novel borderings. At the other extreme are the less protected, those who need to justify their claim to entry, whether tourists from particular countries and ethnicities or migrant workers. At its most extreme, this aggregates into a less protected, more persecuted mix of people for whom the crossing of the border has degraded into an operation marked by the violation of their most basic rights as human beings.

Two distinct bordered spaces are taking shape: both cut across traditional borders, but they do so in very different ways. The cross-border space of corporations and high-level professionals enhances protection and opportunity. The cross-border space of migrants, whether documented or not, is marked by a shift from opportunity to confinements of all sorts; at its sharpest this becomes a space of capture and detention. In this context, the city can become a refuge, and even more important, a space where powerlessness becomes complex and in so doing enables the powerless to make a history and to make the political.

A direct effect of globalization, especially corporate economic globalization, has been to create increasing divergence among different border regimes. Thus the lifting of border controls on a growing variety of capital, services and information flows has taken place even as other border regimes maintain closure, and impediments to cross-border flows are made stronger, e.g., the migration of low-wage workers. We are also seeing the construction of spe-

cific ‘borderings’ to contain and govern emerging, often strategic or specialized, flows that cut across traditional national borders, as is the case, for instance, with the new regimes in NAFTA and WTO, especially the GATTs, for the cross-border circulation of high-level professionals. Where in the past these professionals may have been part of a country’s general immigration regime, now we have an increasing divergence between the latter and the specialized global, rather than national, regime governing these professionals.

The multiple regimes that constitute the border as an institution can be grouped, on the one hand, into a formalized apparatus that is part of the interstate system and, on the other, into an as yet far less formalized array of novel types of borderings lying largely outside the framing of the interstate system. The first has at its core the body of regulations covering a variety of international flows – flows of different types of commodities, capital, people, services, and information. No matter their variety, these multiple regimes tend to cohere around (a) the state’s unilateral authority to define and enforce regulations, and (b) the state’s obligation to respect and uphold the regulations coming out of the international treaty system or out of bilateral arrangements.

The second major component, the new type of bordering dynamics arising outside the framing of the interstate system, does not necessarily entail a self-evident crossing of borders; it includes a range of dynamics coming out of specific contemporary developments, notably emergent global law systems and globally networked digital interactive domains. It also includes, and this is pertinent to the question of cities, the recurrent instantiation of the global in a certain type of space, with the global city only the most familiar and strategic of these spaces. This is a type of space that mixes critical elements enabling some of the most powerful and some of the least powerful to execute their ‘projects’. Power enhancement and legitimating for the former, and ‘making presence’ for the latter, where making presence includes a range of contradictory dynamics, such as the *making* of their space partly enabled by racism and segregation, e.g. the immigrant community, and the fact that many become key workers in the maintenance of the households and work places of the powerful who would have a bit of a crisis without these types of low-wage and often oppressed workers. In this dynamic contradiction, the powerless make presence.

The claim to a national bordered territory as a parameter for authority and rights has today entered a new phase (see Sassen, 2008a, for a more detailed development of this issue). State exclusive authority over its territory remains the prevalent mode of final authority in the global political economy; in that sense, then, state centered border regimes – whether open or closed – remain as foundational elements in our geopolity. But these regimes are today less absolute formally than they were once meant to be. Critical components of this territorial authority that may still have a national institutional form and location are actually no longer national in the historically constructed sense of that term; they are, I argue, denationalized components of state authority: they look national but they are actually geared towards global agendas, some good (e.g. global civics), some not so good at all (e.g. global high-finance).

In short, the formation of global law, globally networked interactive domains, and other such spaces, multiplies bordered spaces. But the national notion of borders as delimiting two sovereign territorial states is not quite in play. Global law systems are not centered in state law – that is to say, they are to be distinguished from both national and international law. The most powerful example is TRIPS (the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, administered by the WTO), which bypasses the national jurisdiction of states (see Sassen, 2008b, chapter 5). Or global digital interactive domains which are mostly informal,

<sup>2</sup> I have developed this at length in *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Sassen, 2008b, chapters 5 and 8).

hence outside the existing treaty system; they are often basically ensconced in sub-national localities (whether neighborhoods or financial centers) that are part of cross-border networks.

### Bordering inside the nation-state

The 'border function' is increasingly embedded in the product, the person, the instrument: a mobile agent that endogenizes critical features of the border, a subject with formalized cross-border portable rights. These are the new transnational professionals who move with the protections of the global trade regime, not only WTO but also the proliferation of regional trade organizations. It allows these professionals to circulate across borders and move freely through the networks that connect the 75 plus global cities in the world today. This is a transversal border that cuts across conventional state borders, but is a tighter border than those geographic borders, and even than the weaponized fence between Mexico and the US (and possibly that the EU wants to build in the Mediterranean and off West Africa). The professionals who move through this regime are in a space that separates them radically from working class and poor migrants. It is a border that cannot be crossed – the instruments to enter that space are far less accessible than a trafficker, and even the courage to take a run over the river and into the desert or hide in a truck or a fast train cannot get you across that border.

The other historic agents in this shifting meaning of the territorial border are the Multi National Corporation and global financial firms. The formalizing of their right to cross-border mobility is producing a large number of highly protected bordered spaces that cut across the conventional border. If there is one sector where we can begin to discern new stabilized bordering capabilities and their geographic and institutional locations it is in the corporate economy. But also the global city is such a space.

The sharp shifts from geographic borders to transversally bordered spaces are now far more common and formalized for major corporate economic actors than they are for citizens and migrants. The global city is one space where these segmentations are enacted. Neoliberal policies, far from making this a borderless world, have actually multiplied the bordered spaces that allow firms and markets to move across conventional borders with the guarantee of multiple protections as they enter national territories. Firms are now enveloped with a range of new types of institutionalized protections through these new transversal bordering capabilities, while citizens and migrants keep losing protections under neoliberal regimes.

Such specialized types of *re-territorializing* represent an insertion of a transversal bordered space into the exclusive territory of state authority. But they are not to be confused with the latter. In that sense they denationalize what has historically been constructed as national. This is a highly bordered event, but the nature of this border is foundationally different from that of the nation-state, that is, from interstate borders.

### Cities as frontier spaces: the hard work of keeping them open

In this context the city is an enormously significant space, more an assemblage of diverse elements that make it far more complex and diverse than those transversal bordered spaces. The city is a space that can still encompass internal conflicts and diversity. But if the city is to survive as a space of great complexity and diversity – and not become merely a built-up terrain or cement jungle – it will have to find a way to go beyond the fact of conflicts – conflicts that result from racisms, from governmental wars on terror, from the future crises of climate change.

Historically, cities have tended to transform conflict into the civic – through commerce, through the need of peaceful coexistence in

dense urban environments. In contrast, the logic of national states is to militarize the response to conflict. This capacity of the city also implies the possibility of making new subjects and identities.

For instance, often it is not so much the ethnic, religious, phenotype that dominates in urban settings, but the urbanity of the subject and of the setting. Yet these shifts to the urbanity of subject and setting do not simply fall from the sky. What can bring this shift about is the need for new solidarities when confronted by major challenges. The acuteness and overwhelming character of the major challenges cities confront today can serve to create conditions where the challenges are bigger and more threatening than inter-group conflicts and hatreds. This might force us into joint responses and from there onto the emphasis of an urban, rather than an ethnic or religious identity.

Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and new identities are *made*. Cities have played this role at various times and in various places, and under very diverse conditions. This role can become strategic in particular times and places, as is the case today in Europe. One important instance in the making of norms concerns immigration. What must be emphasized here is the hard work of making open cities and repositioning the immigrant and the citizen as urban subjects, rather than essentially different subjects – as much of the anti-immigrant and racist commentary does.

I address this issue from the perspective of the capacity of urban space to make norms and make subjects that can escape the constraints of dominant power systems – such as the nation-state, the so-called 'War on Terrorism', often aimed at citizen Muslims, the growing weight of racism. In my reading, over and over across time and space, the challenges of incorporating the 'outsider' became the instruments for developing the civic in the best sense of the word. Responding to the claims of the excluded has had the effect of expanding the rights of the included. Obversely, restricting the rights of immigrants has led to a loss of rights of citizens.

When governments confront major challenges the feedback effects on the civic urban order (and society in general) can be quite negative. The 'War on Terrorism' is perhaps one of the most acute examples. Climate change and its impacts on cities could also be the source of new types of urban conflicts and divisions. But I would argue that all these challenges contain their own specific potential for making novel kinds of broad front platforms for urban action and joining forces with those who may be seen as too different from us. Fighting climate change can bring together on one side of the battle, citizens and immigrants from many different religions, cultures and phenotypes. And, fighting the abuses of power by the state in the name of fighting terrorism, can create similar coalitions bringing together residents who may have thought they could never collaborate with each other. The spread of asymmetric war and climate change will affect both the rich and poor, and addressing each will demand that everybody join the effort. Furthermore, while sharp economic inequalities, racisms, and religious intolerance have long existed, they are now becoming dangerous mobilizers in a context where the center no longer holds – whether this is an imperial center, the national state, or the city's power classes.

Against the background of a partial disassembling of empires and nation-states, partly through the new closed transversal systems, the city emerges as a strategic site for contesting all these divisions and borderings.<sup>3</sup> Where in the past national law might have been *the* law, today subsidiarity, but also the new strategic role of cities, makes it possible for us to imagine a return to urban law. For instance, in the US, a growing number of cities have passed local laws (ordinances) that make their cities sanctuaries for

<sup>3</sup> One synthesizing image we might use to capture these dynamics is the movement from centripetal nation state articulation to a centrifugal multiplication of specialized assemblages.

undocumented immigrants; other cities have passed environmental laws that only hold for the particular cities (Sassen & Dotan, 2011). We see a resurgence of urban law-making, a subject I discuss in depth elsewhere (see Sassen, 2008b, chapters 6 and 7).<sup>4</sup>

In my larger project I identified a vast proliferation of such partial assemblages that remix bits of territory, authority, and rights, once ensconced in *national* institutional frames. The specifics and the normative import of such partial assemblages vary enormously, from cross-city alliances around protecting the environment, fighting racism, and other worthy causes to the making of new regulations for self-governance at the level of the neighborhood and the city.

A final point is the strategic importance of the city for shaping new orders that can contest the power of the new transversal borderings. As a space, the city can bring together multiple very diverse struggles and at the same time engender a larger, more encompassing push for a new normative order.

These developments signal the emergence of new types of socio-political orderings that can coexist with older orderings, such

as the nation-state, the interstate system, and the older place of the city in a hierarchy that is dominated by the national state. Among these new types of orderings are complex cities that have partly exited that national, state-dominated hierarchy and become part of multiscalar, regional, and global networks. The last two decades have seen an increasingly *urban* articulation of global logics and struggles, and an escalating use of urban space to make political claims not only by the citizens of a city's country, but also by foreigners.

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<sup>4</sup> The emergent landscape I am describing promotes a multiplication of diverse spatiotemporal framings and diverse normative mini-orders, where once the dominant logic was toward producing grand unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings (see Sassen, 2008b, chapters 8 and 9).