

Interview

Saskia Sassen

Saskia Sassen is the Helen and Robert Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and a member of the newly established Committee on Global Thought. She is also a Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. Her new books are *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2006) and *A Sociology of Globalization* (Norton 2007). She has just completed five-year project on sustainable human settlement for UNESCO, for which she set up a network of researchers and activists in over 30 countries. She serves on several editorial boards and is an advisor to several international bodies. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Cities, and was chair of the Information Technology and International Cooperation Committee of the Social Science Research Council (USA).

Maider Zilbeti — The understanding of globalization has been changing as new dynamics and subjects are part of it. How can we currently understand globalization?

Saskia Sassen — The most common definition of globalization emphasizes the growing interdependence of the world and the formation of global institutions. One key assumption in this type of definition is that the global and the national are two mutually exclusive conditions. This easily leads to the notion that what the global gains, the national loses, and vice versa. And it implies a correspondence of national territory with the national: that is to say, if a process or condition is located in a national institution or in national territory, it must be national.

This type of understanding of globalization is inadequate. The global — whether an institution, a process, a discursive practice, or an imaginary — can partly inhabit national territories and institutions. It is not only about that which transcends the nation-state and is self-evidently global.

Conceiving of globalization not simply in terms of interdependence and global institutions, but also as inhabiting the national, opens up a vast agenda for research and politics that remains largely unaddressed. Research on globalization needs to include detailed studies, including ethnographies, of multiple national conditions and dynamics that are likely to be engaged by the global and often are the global, but are so inside the national. Examples are global cities, but also particular state institutions. This does not mean that everything about these cities or those state institutions is global; it might be simply that they house or enable particular global dynamics and conditions. And as for politics, it opens up a series of political options centered in the possibility of national actors (legislators, courts, citizens, local NGOs, etc.) doing global politics from inside the national; it also suggests that the immobile, those who do not or cannot cross borders, may nonetheless participate in global politics.

I am contributing to the mapping of an analytic terrain for the study of globalization that captures this more complex understanding. It includes, but also moves beyond, understandings of globalization that focus on growing interdependence and self-evident global institutions. Thus part of the research work entails detecting the presence of such globalizing dynamics in thick social environments that mix national and non-national elements. We can use many of the existing research techniques and data sets developed with the national in mind. But the results need to be analyzed through new conceptual and interpretive frameworks — frameworks that recognize that the national can be one of the sites for the global —. Surveys of factories that are part of global commodity chains; in-depth interviews that decipher individual imaginaries about globality; and ethnographies of national financial centers: all expand the analytic terrain for understanding global processes.

Which keys could give us denationalization that the concept of globalization hides?

Globalization involves two distinct sets of dynamics. One of these involves the formation of explicitly global institutions and processes, such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, global financial markets, the new cosmopolitanism, and the International Criminal Court. The practices and organizational forms through which these dynamics operate constitute what is typically thought of as global scales. Although they are partly enacted at the national scale, they are to a very large extent novel and self-evident global formations.

But there are processes that do not necessarily scale at the global level as such, yet, I argue, are part of globalization. These processes take place deep inside territories and institutional domains that have largely been constructed in national terms in much — though by no means all— of the world. Although localized in national, indeed sub-national, settings, these processes are part of globalization in that they involve transboundary networks and formations connecting multiple local or «national» processes and actors, or involve the recurrence of particular issues or dynamics in a growing number of countries. Among these processes I include cross-border networks of activists engaged in specific localized struggles with an explicit or implicit global agenda, as is the case with many human rights and environmental organizations; particular aspects of the work of states, e.g., certain monetary and fiscal policies critical to the constitution of global markets that are being implemented in a growing number of countries, often with enormous pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the U. S. government; the use of international instruments, whether linked to human rights or World Trade Organization (WTO), in national courts; non-cosmopolitan forms of global politics and imaginaries that remain deeply attached to or focused on localized issues and struggles, yet are — knowingly or not — part of global lateral networks containing other similar localized efforts in often faraway countries.

The category of «denationalization» that I use and developed in several works captures an increasingly common effect arising from the interactions of the global and the national. A critical element in this interaction is the highly institutionalized nature and the socio-cultural thickness that characterizes the national. Something has to give in such institutionalized settings. Therefore, structururations of the global inside the national can bring with them a partial, typically highly specialized and specific, denationalizing of particular components of the national.

Does the transformation of the cities have to do with new subjectivities that denationalization puts on the table?

Large cities around the world are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assume concrete, localized forms. These localized forms are, in good part, what globalization is about. If we consider further that large cities also concentrate a growing share of disadvantaged populations —immigrants in Europe and the United States, African-Americans and Latinos in the United States, masses of shanty dwellers in the mega-cities of the developing world— then we can see that cities have become a strategic terrain for a whole series of conflicts and contradictions.

We can then think of cities also as one of the sites for the contradictions of the globalization of capital. On one hand, they concentrate a disproportionate share of corporate power and are one of the key sites for the overvalorization of the corporate economy; on the other hand, they concentrate a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged and are one of the key sites for their devalorization. This joint presence happens in a context where (1) the transnationalization of economies has grown sharply and cities have become increasingly strategic for global capital, and (2) marginalized people have found their voices and are making claims on the city as well. This is further brought into focus by the sharpening of the distance between the two.

These joint presences have made cities a contested terrain. The global city concentrates diversity. Its spaces are inscribed with the dominant corporate culture but also with a multiplicity of other cultures and identities, notably through immigration. The slippage is evident: the dominant culture can encompass only part of the city. And while corporate power inscribes non-corporate cultures and identities with «otherness», thereby devaluing them, they are present everywhere.

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The space constituted by the worldwide grid of global cities, a space with new economic and political potentialities, is perhaps one of the most strategic spaces for the formation of new types, including transnational types, of identities and communities. This is a space that is both place-centered, in that it is embedded in particular and strategic sites, and trans-territorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other. It is not only the transmigration of capital that takes place in this global grid, but also that of people both rich (i. e., the new transnational professional workforce) and poor (i. e., most migrant workers), and it is a space for the transmigration of cultural forms, or the re-territorialization of «local» subcultures. An important question is whether it is also a space for a new politics, one going beyond the politics of culture and identity, though at least partly likely to be embedded in these.

The centrality of place in a context of global processes engenders a transnational economic and political opening in the formation of new claims and hence in the constitution of entitlements, notably rights to place, and, ultimately, in the constitution of new forms of «citizenship» and a diversity of citizenship practices. The global city has emerged as a site for new claims: by global capital, which uses the city as an «organizational commodity», but also by disadvantaged sectors of the urban population, frequently as internationalized a presence in large cities as capital. The denationalizing of urban space and the formation of new claims centered in transnational actors and involving contestation constitute the global city as a frontier zone for a new type of engagement.

Could you go further in to the concept of global city as frontier zone? Frontiers have the power to subvert meanings and actions. In this «strategic terrain for conflicts and contradictions», which kind of politics are developing and which actors are emerging?

Globalization and the new ICTS have enabled a variety of local political actors to enter international arenas once exclusive to national states. Multiple types of claim-making and oppositional politics articulate these developments. Going global has been partly facilitated and conditioned by the infrastructure of the global economy, even as the latter is often the object of those oppositional politics. Further, and in my analysis, very importantly, the possibility of global imaginaries has enabled even those who are geographically immobile to become part of global politics. NGOs and indigenous peoples, immigrants and refugees who become subjects of adjudication in human rights decisions, human rights and environmental struggles, and many others are increasingly becoming actors in global politics even when they are deeply localized. In these processes non-state actors can enter and gain visibility in international fora or global politics as individuals and as collectivities, emerging from the invisibility of aggregate

membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign.

Beneath the reinvigorated imperial logics that organize the political economy of the US today, emergent social dynamics are enabling disadvantaged and minoritized groups to make new forms of the political. New types of political actors are taking shape, changing the relationship between the state and the individual. If we see citizenship as an incompletely theorized contract between the state and the citizen, and locate our inquiry at that point of incompleteness, we open up the discussion of politics. Some of this is not formalized, and might be thought of as pre-political, but I argue that it is better seen as informal or not-yet-formalized types of politics.

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 was in the far stretches of colonial empires, today's frontier zone is in our large cities. It is a strategic frontier zone for global corporate capital. Much of the work of forcing deregulation, privatization, and new fiscal and monetary policies on the host governments had to do with creating the formal instruments to construct their 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 it is also 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. There are new hybrid bases from which to act. One outcome we are seeing in city after city is the making of informal politics.

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Does informal politics have a direct relation to informal economics? Can we draw a direct relation between informal politics, informal economics and women as both economic and political actors?

Another localization which is rarely associated with globalization and informalization, re-introduces the community and the household as an important economic space in global cities. I see informalization in this setting as the low-cost —and often feminized— equivalent of deregulation at the top of the system. As with deregulation (e. g., financial deregulation), informalization introduces flexibility, reduces the «burdens» of regulation, and lowers costs —in this case, especially the costs of labor. Informalization in major cities of highly developed countries (whether New York, London, Paris, or Berlin)— can be seen as a downgrading of a variety of activities for which there is an effective demand in these cities, but also a devaluing and enormous competition, given low entry costs and few alternative forms of employment. Going informal is one way of producing and distributing goods and services at a lower cost and with greater flexibility. This further devalues these types of activities. Immigrants and women are important actors in the new informal economies of these cities. They absorb the costs of informalizing these activities.

The reconfiguration of economic spaces associated with globalization in major cities has had differential impacts on women and men, on male and female work cultures, on male —and female— centered forms of power and empowerment. The restructuring of the labor market brings with it a shift of labor market functions to the household or community. Women and households emerge as sites that should be part of the theorization of the particular forms that these elements in labor market dynamics assume today.

These transformations contain possibilities, even if limited, for the autonomy and empowerment of women. For instance, we might ask whether the growth of informalization in advanced urban economies reconfigures some types of economic relations between men and women. With informalization, the neighborhood and the household re-emerge as sites for economic activity. This condition has its own dynamic possibilities for women. Economic downgrading

Could you please tell us in which processes of the public sphere are women becoming public actors?

through informalization creates «opportunities» for low-income women entrepreneurs and workers, and therewith reconfigures some of the work and household hierarchies in which women find themselves. This becomes particularly clear in the case of immigrant women who come from countries with rather traditional male-centered cultures. There is a large literature showing that immigrant women's regular-wage work and improved access to other public realms have an impact on their gender relations. Women gain greater personal autonomy and independence while men lose ground. Women gain more control over budgeting and other domestic decisions and greater leverage in requesting help from men in domestic chores. Also, their access to public services and other public resources gives them a chance to become incorporated in the mainstream society: they are often the ones in the household who mediate this process.

It is likely that some women benefit more than others from these circumstances; we need more research to establish the impact of class, education, and income on these gendered outcomes. Besides the relatively greater empowerment of women in the household associated with waged employment, there is a second important outcome: their greater participation in the public sphere and their possible emergence as public actors.

There are two arenas where immigrant women are active: institutions for public and private assistance, and the immigrant/ethnic community. The incorporation of women in the migration process strengthens the settlement likelihood and contributes to greater immigrant participation in their communities and vis à vis the state. For example, immigrant women come to assume more active public and social roles, which further reinforces their status in the household and the settlement process. Women are more active in community building and community activism, and they are positioned differently from men regarding the broader economy and the state. They are the ones who most likely face and cope with the legal vulnerability of their families in the process of seeking public and social services for their families. This greater participation by women suggests the possibility that they may emerge as more forceful and visible actors, and that their role in the labor market will become more visible as well.

There is, to some extent, a joining of two different dynamics in the condition of women in global cities described above. On the one hand, they are an invisible and disempowered class of workers in the service of the strategic sectors constituting the global economy. This invisibility keeps them from emerging as whatever would be

What is the issue with feminist subjects? Does the landscape that you have been describing give us new gender technologies for achieving feminist aims?

the contemporary equivalent of the «labor aristocracy» of earlier forms of economic organization, when a low-wage worker's position in leading sectors had the effect of empowering that worker (i. e., through the possibility of unionizing). On the other hand, the access to (albeit low) wages and salaries, the growing feminization of the job supply, and the growing feminization of business opportunities brought about with informalization do alter the gender hierarchies in which they find themselves.

There is a kind of gendering that I refer to as strategic, which becomes evident in the global city. It occurs both through the sphere of production and that of social reproduction. The critical background variable is that these cities are a crucial infrastructure for the specialized servicing, financing and management of global economic processes. It means that all key components of this infrastructure need to function like clockwork. One such key component is the professional workforce. Gendering becomes strategic in a specific function of globalizing firms: cultural brokering. Professional women are emerging as a key type of worker insofar as they are considered good at building trust across sharp cultural boundaries and differences. The globalizing of a firm's or a market's operations entails opening up domains (sectors, countries, the world of consumers) to new kinds of businesses, practices, and norms. This kind of cultural brokering is critical especially given the mistrust and the resistances that had to be overcome to implement economic globalization.

Gendering becomes strategic in the global city for the social reproduction of the high-level professional workforce. There are two reasons for this. One is the growing demand for women professionals, and the other the strong preference among both male and female professionals for living in the city given long work hours and very demanding responsibilities at work. The result is a proliferation in cities of what I like to refer to as «the professional household without a wife». What matters here is that the absent «wife» is a factor precisely at a time when professional households are crucial to the infrastructure for globalized sectors and need to function like clockwork. The demands placed on the top-level professional and managerial workforce in global cities are such that the usual modes of handling household tasks and lifestyle are inadequate. As a consequence we are seeing the return of the so-called «serving classes» in all the global cities around the world, made up largely of immigrant and migrant women .

Most of the research on this subject has focused on the poor working conditions, exploitation and multiple vulnerabilities of these

household workers. This is a fact. But analytically what matters here is the strategic importance of well-functioning professional households for the leading globalized sectors in these cities, and hence the importance of this new type of «serving class». For a variety of reasons developed elsewhere, immigrant and minoritized women are a favored source for this type of work. Theirs is a mode of economic incorporation that makes their crucial role invisible; being immigrant or minoritized citizens facilitates breaking the nexus between being workers with an important function in the global information economy, that is to say, in leading industries, and the opportunity to become an empowered workforce — as has historically been the case in industrialized economies —. In this sense the category «immigrant women» emerges as the systemic equivalent of the offshore proletariat.

References

Bibliography for all these issues can be found in the following publications: Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press/Sage Publications, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization* (NY: W.W. Norton 2007).



