

**SASKIA SASSEN (2006) *TERRITORY, AUTHORITY,
RIGHTS: FROM MEDIEVAL TO GLOBAL
ASSEMBLAGES*. PRINCETON: PRINCETON
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Saskia Sassen's extensively researched project attempts to capture transformations brought on by constructed nation-state formations and the attendant assemblages of territory, rights, and authority (TAR). The book recovers systemic changes of TAR as transhistorical components and Sassen engages them as lenses to analyze a more contemporary shift into what she has been calling *denationalization*. With a keen focus on the means by which national and normative forms arrange partial denationalizing dynamics, she points to instances where the nation-state structure sets up a tipping point in the 1980s, which is less 'global' in outlook and more internal state adjustments in the organizing logic of the national. Conceivably then, globalization, in fact, occurs implicitly, from within the national to a greater extent than is commonly recognized. Territorially, they are partly imbricated, as Sassen demonstrates in her analysis of financial firms, networks, and markets produced nationally yet delivered with a global economic framework. This endogenous aspect of the global in the national allows for territorializations and legitimacy of authority even in its frequent illegibility and need for multiple insertions. In this sense, the state becomes a strategic site; or, has it been this way all along? Sassen emphasizes internal disassembling, a deviation underfoot, a foundationally 'new organizing logics' underway.

This particular award-winning work galvanizes Sassen's past articles and books, incorporating and further developing many of the key concepts and topics (such as labor, global cities, citizenship, technology, and denationalization). She folds in her previous subjects and arguments and builds on them to clarify 'global' and 'national' connections and conditionalities compiling what some

have called a 'magisterial' contribution.¹ The book brings the social into the globalization discourse while attesting to other enabling and constricting participations, imbrications, and adaptations with the state.

As a sociological work of political economic history, Sassen's tracing includes the 'active construction of the legal persona of the worker in juxtaposition to that of the owner of productive capital' (110). But staying true to her field of social science, she analyzes political history and the social effects to measure movement and assess possible formation tangents. To some extent, she critiques what she sees as flawed all-or-nothing views in many social science works on the subject of both globalization and technology. This work's recesses, perspectives, and analytic assertions would benefit any scholar remotely interested in globalisms of any kind for there is much to untangle and many angles from which to depart.

One of the main tasks of the book is questioning and expanding the analytical terrain and tools. The work challenges existing globalization debates and not only questions previously held historical views on the global but also reviews historical and interpretative arguments on state formation as well as digital technology and networks. Sassen does not necessarily build on historical studies, like the world-systems perspective; rather, she interprets the contemporary details of scale as foundationally different. Diverging from studies that portray the evolution of the state, Sassen questions the necessity of leaving the domain of the national state when it comes to rights, and she complicates the relationship between citizen rights and human rights. She is careful not to reduce territorial regimes to one basic historical type, the sovereign state, and seeks out the submerged, the assemblages that cannot be confined, and the (potential) forces and engagements that come with expansion (such as global cities) on all fronts and by all subjects. Furthermore, despite accusations, she does not accentuate the declining relevance of the state, but only a partial realignment of what its relevance entails.

Sassen's position is neither that the state has evolved rather than changed; nor that the state is declining in significance. She does not present the national and the global as separate entities. Instead, Sassen locates her argument between those who contest globalization and those who posit its development as an atypical process. She also does not assume that a given set of continuities or discontinuities will produce the same assemblage and argues in

'middle-range theory' fashion with Wallerstein's world-systems analysis at points.² For Sassen, the nation-state made way for the global era, and the process of denationalization is also one of globalization. Many of the neoliberal associations bandied about in current studies, like deregulation and financialization, although appearing to withdraw from the state do not 'register all the ways in which the state participates in setting up new frameworks' that contribute to globalization and transform the state from within (234).

As demonstrated in Part I, 'Assembling the National', TAR is an assemblage that predates the nation-state in a more urban territorial form and at the same time frames the nation-state.³ Partly constituted through 'the decomposition of the feudal order' (79), TAR was the source of the nation-state formation, as was the notion of freedom and the right to set taxation levels. Under John Locke's influence public policies reflected the belief, Sassen conveys, that 'the working classes were not capable of governing themselves' (97). The need for empire grew as national development was already partly dependent on global circuits. With this approach, she manages to leave the past unsettled in a generative way. In many ways, the medieval disassemblages of TAR, she believes, parallel what is being produced in today's contemporary networked dynamics. This is partly why she postulates that the Internet does not escape all authority. By applying TAR to digital domain formations she implicates both the invasive global economy and the numerous emergent forms of international or global law as sites to investigate the limits of state authority. In return, she finds that 'globalization' by virtue of denationalization destabilizes the TAR assemblage.

Sassen's concept of denationalization is a move away from the often bifurcated national and global debates and the all too common mistake of rushing to interpret 'failed states' or states that have relinquished some of their functions through privatization and marketization on various levels. With a more thoughtful and refined focus on internal differences and a subtle assessment of the granularity, Sassen contends that denationalization can be detected and deconstructed. In the second part of the book, 'Disassembling the National', she historically tracks what becomes constitutive of the 'global,' as we easily call it today: the capabilities to privatize, to provide normative authority and other institutional components that begin to realign from the national towards the global. However, without entirely taking the wind out of the 'global' sails, Sassen

explains that the nation-state lays down the foundation for the global—hypermobility has to be produced through a vast materiality that is not so mobile. This is where the multiple spatio-temporal orders come in. The global becomes global by being inserted in the national.⁴ She distinguishes denationalization from the postnational, without disputing its application in a citizenship context, and acknowledges the scope, complexity, and institutional embeddedness of the transformations taking place in the national through denationalizing dynamics. In some respects, the effect is a partial weakening of exclusive authority of the national. The dynamic between state authority and national territory is part of the change—an unbundling in often highly specialized formations, such as global economic networks and practices.

Globalization, she decides, has either started or shifted in the 1980s when the unbundling of TAR assemblages reached a tipping point. By illustrating capabilities developed during Bretton Woods and the Marshall Plan and even further back, the rise of transnational banks for instance, Sassen argues that the tipping point secured the rapid spread of a new organizing logic within nation-state formations.⁵ Working from William H. Sewell's concept of 'event', Sassen contends that this 'tipping point' focus in her analysis avoids the bifurcation of national and global. Centering on the U.S. she points to the reduced role of congress and a new normative order of maximizing efficiency marked by augmented deregulation, privatization, and segmentation of transnational legal regimes, which coincide with the move away from Keynes and the British model of economics. Sassen notes that much of the deregulation occurred in the Reagan era. Incongruous and proliferating economic management prompted a rise in the number of executive agencies within the Treasury, Federal Reserve, and other regulatory departments and systems. The accumulation of executive power that law scholar Alfred Aman elucidates in several works supports much of her 'tipping point' theory, as well as others who also research administrative law.⁶ The historical details in most of the book rely on secondary sources to cull the existing pieces for details that pull in the world scale and the process of building capabilities, like the 16th century import controls over balance of trade and national production towards economic governance. The foundational capabilities provide a new organizing logic that includes more privatized executive authority over the public and an erosion of citizen's rights, changing the position of the private-public divide and bringing about the complex question of marginalization in light of human rights and their emergence.

This new innovative phase of financialization, as she determines, appeared alongside novel and extreme levels of trading and speculation and growing authority of nonstate actors, but also cross-border financialization and legalities (like WTO's intellectual property rights, commerce arbitration, and an increase in 'soft law'). Without ever using the term 'neoliberalism' she analyzes the organizing logic of transnational networks of regulators, and other means of establishing multilateral capabilities and conditions for competition, protection, and management of international contexts. The tipping point constitutes an increased *centrifugal* dynamic distinguished by a discontinuity of internal shifts and a redistribution of power, 'a democratic deficit', such as The Patriot Act as well as the use of private firms for specialized warfare and data mining to locate terrorists (183). Part II and III address specialized instances of dynamics that construct the switch (the tipping point), but also show how the centripetal dynamic of the nation-state is still partially in effect, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri might concur.⁷ The new, dizzying, organizing logic is a foundational, yet overlapping, realignment, according to Sassen, that is intertwined with national interests—a denationalization. One analytical example of this complex 'borderland' interaction that Sassen offers is the 'Vulture Funds and Sovereign Debt' Appendix from 2004, where she breaks down the social and economic outgrowths and strains underlying the intersections of Latin American debt purchases. She claims that the micro aspects and partialities show exit options, however this facet of their presence is not annotated in the text much.

Like Part II, Part III, 'Assemblages of a Global Digital Age', presents numerous case studies that demonstrate the disassembling of the nation-state and track the multiple practices and contingencies of networks formed by digital technologies on two fronts, global finance and global activism. These types of territorialities and assemblages forming are as yet barely legible for many reasons; all the same, Sassen feels some analyses fail to capture the imbrications and limitations in the relation between digitization and a multiplicity of social conditions (342). Sassen dives into the social architecture of markets that require 'cultures of interpretation' in their operation. She argues for the possibility of undermining private digital networks, as a contested space where other actors can emerge, but the details of contingency and contestation are lacking in that regard, or they are at least still needed. Sassen does not answer the question of how, or how deep have the utility functions of private actors, like NGOs and financial firms, in the global political

economy shaped public policy. She only intimates that it is a key factor in the tipping point and the shift in norm making for governance, a kind of 'social bloc reorganizing the private sphere' (194). Moreover, the legal persona of the corporation that Sassen speaks of in reference to the guaranteed internationalized ownership of capital in the late 19th century reflects the recent Supreme Court ruling in the U.S. upholding corporate personhood. This 'right' also supports the private sphere of executive power.

Sassen points out the constitutive differences in the relations of executive power to deregulated and privatized public functions that its authority brings today. In the history of claim-making, the proliferation of non-national forms allowed, filtered, and legitimated through national legalities underscore 'a possibility for citizens to demand accountability' (308) and a road that could contribute to the end of financial capitalism, as she discusses in a more recent article online. Accelerated financial growth and its imbrications with digital formats, instruments like derivatives and hedge funds so liquid they are vaporous, are indicative of a new operational logic, and she briefly walks through the setting up of these systems, the subcultures, the new participants and their networks of multitudinous links (which is why Part III can usually stand alone as a contemporary globalization outlook in course readings). The analysis of financial firms and risk assessment is exceptional, and along with the two appendixes, she cites many cases of authority delegation to private actors and attempts to capture 'a *presence* [that] signals the possibility of a politics,' something transnational, yet focused on the materiality of the local, that moves out of the margins into a 'broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity' (319, my emphasis).

Even so, this assumes a center-periphery model. Sassen does attribute this 'presence' to the destabilization of nation-state centered hierarchies, but stays close to an enforced and semi-formalized privatization all the same, not to mention a top-down analysis. She does make room for the destabilizing horizontal elements like transnational citizenship or economic network absorption of risk (transferred by firms)—the 'new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system' (375). On the other hand, Sassen sticks to binary surfaces like the two digital networks she analyzes: global finance and global activists. With the two, Sassen presents a more contemporary battle for TAR on the Internet. She may simply be confirming that the expanded repertory of actions inherent in digital mediums offer vast

capabilities, that transnational networks in general may signal ‘a deterritorializing of citizenship practices and identities’ (147), but where is the ‘derivative’ parallel in activist networks? Why is the latter always set against rampant and saturating risk, uncertainty, and the vulgarity of its penetrating reach?

Somehow, within the depth of research nuances are missing; in the excavation of TAR the particular legitimacy and enactment of rights, along with any ‘Atlantic’ and global south type perspectives on trade and other alternative economic cultures, shows up missing and unquestioned, confirming a hierarchical and isolated development narrative. For instance, how does TAR move as it gains momentum and affects nation, mobility, and citizenship? What is ‘global’ about TAR? Nation, mobility, and citizenship mean different things in places like Niger or Zambia—how do sub-Sahara African differences come into play and what would a sociocultural and economic consideration do then? Sassen watches for potentials that signal change in the institution of citizenship, but any kind of summary of ‘globalization’ tends to reek of homogenous integration where the ‘global’ borders on idealization, a pretext. There is a subtle teleology in showing ‘how everything led up to it’ (Cooper, 2001: 205). The (post) colonial mostly seems to find itself separate from nation-state and globalization analyses, an exception of sorts. Even so, with many of the strands Sassen offers, as cultural studies scholars, maybe we can move beyond globalization discourse, aim to be even more refined when analyzing the connections, their limits, and all the transnational complexities and contexts of specific crossings.

Endnotes

¹ Paul Kantor provides this critique in a quote on the back of the edition reviewed.

² Sassen claims to impart a more decentralized reading of the historical manifestations than Wallerstein, less ‘world’ (trade) oriented and more of a focus on local structures and practices that include the forces of empire *and* the church (39 & 75). Also less focused on capitalism per se, overall, she states in a footnote, the nation-state appears to have developed prior to any world-system.

³ Although acknowledging the polyvalent theoretical nuances surrounding the word ‘assemblage’, Sassen simply means gathered

or collected conjunctions in the descriptive understanding of the word, as explained in the introduction.

⁴ In light of deconstructing the national/global bifurcation, Sassen's point is to elucidate the differences and 'the need for detailed research about the internal structuration of states as part of the globalization research agenda' (169).

⁵ Bretton Woods, a 1944 semi-international delegate conference, is named after an area in northeastern U.S. where it took place. The conference culminated in a system of agreements that brought about several monetary policies regarding exchange rates and currency. These international policies lead to the development of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Marshall Plan (also called the European Recovery Program) also came out of Bretton Woods and set up economic aid to Europe after WW II and a foundation for transnational corporations and European integration.

⁶ Sassen cites four of Alfred Aman's works to support her tipping point argument: 'Aman has perhaps most directly and pointedly addressed this shift in the context of globalization' (170).

⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri surmise in their book *Empire*, 'the centrifugal movement of production is balanced by the centripetal trend of command [i.e. executive power]' (2000: 297). Sassen also arrives at this hybrid supposition.

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