

REVIEW ARTICLE

Triangulating Globalization

Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, xiv and 493 pages, US\$35.00 cloth.

Saskia Sassen argues that to understand contemporary globalization it is vital to examine how historical assemblages of territory, authority and rights have been reworked and remade. Her central thesis is that national-state capabilities that were themselves complex reworkings of medieval assemblages have not now been destroyed and deterritorialized but rather denationalized and reterritorialized as state practices have increasingly come to serve global economic interests. The book in this sense represents another studied attempt to resist and complicate the simple soundbites about ‘the end of the nation-state’ made by neoliberal ‘There-Is-No-Alternative’-touts and assorted globalization pundits. Most such pundits use twos. They tend to tell dualistic stories of transition that focus on discontinuity in ways that present us with blockbuster binary oppositions between the pre-global and the new and supposedly inevitable or alarming or just ever so exciting global age. Academic accounts generally and, by this point, quite routinely, instead offer sobering correctives about change with continuity. They thereby also invite us to consider more complex combinations of, for example, fours¹, fives², and, in one dualistic, but also, it seems, deliberately disorganized case, assorted sixes, sevens and nines³. Sassen herself prefers threes, and amongst the repeated reference to threes throughout this text – there are nearly always three important arguments, analyses or alliterations throughout all three parts of the book – we hear much about three particularly important threes: three historical eras (the medieval age, the national age, and the global age), three analytical abstractions (capabilities, tipping points and organizing logics), and three elements of assemblage (the ‘territory, authority and rights’ of the title which we learn to term TAR inside).

As the T at the beginning of TAR might suggest, Sassen’s trinitarian tropes also enable her to triangulate diverse territorial transformations too. These include transformations of borders, towns, global cities, cross-border geographies, and cyberspace, as well, of course, as transformations of the territorial nation-state itself. Herein lies much of the book’s overt appeal to geography. However, despite the frequent use of the noun geography, and notwithstanding nods to John Allen, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Erik Swyngedouw, and the Global and World City (GAWC) study group, the work of other geographers is largely absent, or at least uncited, in the 423 pages of analysis. Perhaps this is a good thing insofar as a number of the scholars of globalization who are prominently cited are used like Wallerstein and Weiss as straw-men and straw-women against whom Sassen subsequently defines her own intellectual third way. But mainly the absent engagement with geographical research seems just a repeated lost-opportunity.

The omissions occur repeatedly, but in a stylistic way they also repeat an instrumentalizing tendency that until recently was also in vogue in the humanities: a tendency of using geographical terms to metaphorise and problematize social relations while leaving space itself largely unexamined and unproblematized.⁴ ‘Specifying

analytic borderlands' - to use an example that comes from Sassen's triangulation of her 'third entity' heuristic - 'has its own particular challenges' (p. 380). Indeed it does, but such challenges for Sassen have little to do with researching actual cross-border borderlands where citizenship and state authority are being remade on the ground. Instead her focus is on fashioning 'theoretical tools to resist [the borderland's] collapse into a line that simply separates two differences' (p. 380). The obvious and immediate foreclosure here of any engagement with critical geographical research on borders and borderlands - research that notably nuances the generalizations Sassen makes about citizenship and cosmopolitanism - is illustrative in turn of many other lost opportunities.⁵ They are lost because what Sassen claims is a 'grounded theory' (p. 402) could have been a lot more grounded if it had actually engaged with the copious geographical scholarship on the changing spaces of globalization. Such studies do not delineate a simple ground truth at all. Instead, Marxist geographers, post-colonial historical geographers, and most especially feminist geographers have all developed materialist and otherwise embodied accounts of globalization that collectively complicate our understanding of its grounds while also thereby highlighting the salience of Sassen's own main argument: to wit, that the legacies of prior assemblages of territory, authority and rights become the grounds of new assemblages in subsequent periods. While a book review is not the place to reference the many articles and books that are thereby overlooked, surveys do exist elsewhere that document the wide diversity and complexity of the geographical groundings covered-over by Sassen's TAR.⁶

Here the challenge is to do justice to the insights of what remains a book of great sophistication by a sociologist who is able to draw very effectively on a wide range of other fields including economic, legal and political history, as well as the broad synoptic approach to sociological history developed by Max Weber. Building on these broad foundations, and yet also reflecting a global-conference-circuit sensitivity to the diverse criticisms that can be ventured against a typological Weberian foundationalism, the book provides insight into a wide array of emergent assemblages. It should be noted in this respect that Sassen explains in a footnote on page five that she only wants to use the word 'assemblage' in its 'most descriptive sense,' and this refreshingly frank refusal to play around with the more obfuscatory theoretical formulations of the term by anthropologists referencing (but not always reading) Deleuze and Guattari may itself offer insight into the built-in obsolescence of the term in the global futures market of academic authority. Focused more on political-economic assemblages of authority herself (and thus, in the authoritative discourse of derivatives markets, shorting the theory), Sassen is especially insightful on the ways formerly national political infrastructures have enabled the rising influence of global market forces, and in particular on the ways in which they are mediated by increasingly powerful private agencies such as risk ratings firms. She offers many other valuable ideas about how transnational legal regimes have also come to re-regulate national governance even as they draw on national-state sources of authority to do this denationalizing work. Here, though, given the limits of space, it makes sense to take a triangle out of Sassen's own trade-mark trigonometrics and focus on just three key areas of insight in the book that seem to speak especially well to ongoing debates amongst historical-geographical scholars of globalization. The first concerns history, the second, neoliberalism, and the third, citizenship.

Even at just a methodological level, much can be learned from Sassen's approach to history. She explains in the introduction that the book 'uses particular historical conjunctures as a type of natural experiment' (p. 7). In the conclusion she argues in turn that this has allowed her to accommodate 'a mix of variables, potentials, and constraints' while also revealing 'the outcome' (p. 402). Some historians may well recoil from this sort of revelatory chemistry experiment with the past, and when Sassen says she would like to 'distil' (p. 28) factors from historiography they may prefer to reach for a glass of real vintage whisky, but yet much is gained in the book by its scrupulous efforts to work out how enduring assemblages of territory, authority and rights emerge as distillates of complex historical processes. Historical geographers of the Middle Ages in Europe will therefore find much of interest in Sassen's investigations of feudalism, church and empire in Part 1. It is also in this part of the book that Sassen comes closest to elaborating the actual geography of territory with her assessment of territorial boundaries under historical regimes ranging from the Roman Empire to the Capetian Kings. And historians more generally will no doubt be engaged by her parallel points about how a mix of Roman, feudal and Christian law came to define Western legal norms. It should be said, of course, that it is primarily historians of 'the West' rather than of 'the Rest' that will find insight here in what remains a profoundly Euro-centric turned US-centric account of history. Notwithstanding these literal geographical limits, or even, in part, because of them, Sassen's history is nevertheless especially illuminating about the early authorization of forms of authority that are globally ascendant as a result of Western domination. Likewise, without reducing globalization to Americanization, indeed, by explicitly refusing such reductionism, she is able to historicize the emergence of global market society in a way that highlights its origins in American institutions. As a historical contribution to a critique of the TINA-touts' presentist-turned-globalist maps of globalization, this seems like a vital first step. Again, though, more geographical steps might have also been possible – steps that would have elaborated the American interestedness of the flattening maps⁷, and steps that might have therefore also helped Sassen avoid invoking America as model – had she engaged with work on the uneven historical geographies of American empire⁸, American market hegemony⁹, and American popular culture¹⁰.

Sassen's take on neoliberalism is in its own way historically telling too: attuned to the administrative and legal orchestration of market power, but relatively deaf to anti-neoliberal critiques of protesters challenging the legality of market-mediated administration. Written in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on America, the book is also historically *and* geographically symptomatic in its preoccupation with the ways in which the rise of executive privilege has enabled diverse forms of deregulation and privatization. This makes sense in an American context where the same executive authoritarianism that brought us outsourced torture (extraordinary rendition) also continued to enable the outsourcing of everything else (including the extraordinary privatization of overt military operations on which the book could perhaps have said more). Like many other liberal commentators outraged by the Bush administration, Sassen's concerns about rising executive privilege inspire her most unhesitating political interventions too (most notably, in this book, a long and useful Appendix on Executive Secrecy and Discretionary Abuses, 2001 – 2005).¹¹ However, outside of the American context, and thus basically outside of the purview of Sassen's account of contemporary

globalization, it is hard to tell how well the hypothesis about rising executive privilege enabling neoliberal entrenchment really is. In the case of the People's Republic of China the argument would certainly need a lot of adjustment to take account of the communist party's long odyssey into illiberal-liberal capitalism. And more globally it might just as easily be argued that in most parts of the Global South the external authority of global financial organizations – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the US Treasury – have operated in conjunction with the global market mediators highlighted by Sassen to systematically lock down any independent executive agency over national governance. She reluctantly acknowledges that 'some would say' (p. 267) this is a story of neoliberal imposition, but, had she listened to some of the voices saying so, it might have led her to revise her argument. For example, Michael Manley's reflections on being the prime-minister of Jamaica during its debt crisis tell the story of executive straitjacketing with a sense of executive exhaustion (see the movie *Life and Debt*¹²). And even in America, the hypothesis is hardly convincing. After all, certain departments of the executive branch such as Health and Human Services have actually been deauthorized and defunded by a conservative but, by the same token, still profoundly effective legislative branch. Furthermore, if we consider what is happening today in 2008 to the most executive of all executive agencies in America – the US Federal Reserve – it seems that another of Sassen's arguments ends up trumping the one about executive privilege. As the contradictions of America's current and capital account imbalances start to unwind, the Fed is trapped by domestic recession on the one side and imported inflation on the other. Walking an ever finer line between easy money and rate hikes, it is increasingly looking powerless to steer global capital flows. In Sassen's terms, authority in and over market forces has in this way 'jumped tracks' in what may well be the historic tipping point that finally ends the dollar dominance inaugurated at Bretton Woods and the associated 'extraordinary privilege' (as Charles de Gaulle once put it) of US executive privilege in and over global finance.

In any case, what is perhaps more important than executive privilege, and what Sassen nevertheless helps elucidate with her legal explorations of denationalization, is the development of legal lock-in mechanisms that make pro-market reforms made by one set of elected leaders next to impossible to repeal by subsequent governments elected on the basis of reformist platforms.¹³ This in turn speaks to the question of citizenship, but for Sassen this is more of a sociological than a political question. She therefore explores the changing assemblage of citizenship with some knowledgeable engagements with the literatures on transnational migration, global cities and digitalization. Her primary interest is in the emergence of new kinds of transnational citizenship and affiliation, and while she has next to nothing to say about transnational alienage and deportation, she still usefully distinguishes between different forms of elite transnationalism and their working class counterparts. In this regard, her historical attention to the ways in which class has been repeatedly regulated and consolidated through the law becomes very suggestive indeed, pointing up whole new avenues for research into how today's transnational legal regimes such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) regulate who can be given cross-border citizenship rights and who cannot on the basis of class. But CAFTA and NAFTA and the many protests they have generated also introduce another, more political aspect of citizenship on which Sassen's reluctance to engage with radical critiques of neoliberalism

leaves her quiet: namely, the deep diminishment of democracy. The most critical comment she can muster is that the changes in democratic participation are ‘problematic’ (p. 203). Not surprisingly, anti-neoliberal protestors prefer other comments, like those held aloft in Seattle that said: ‘No globalization without representation!’ Analysis of such alter-globalization arguments might well have allowed Sassen to talk about de-democratization within the framework of her denationalization thesis because, by reworking the rhetoric of the American revolution, the protestors were clearly drawing on historic norms of national authority to make a critical argument about declining democracy in the global era.

That she does not follow alter-globalization critiques is another missed opportunity because Sassen’s account of the rise of transnational legal authority illuminates a key mechanism through which today’s anti-democratic developments are taking and shaping place: to wit, the legal locking-in of transnational regimes that are systematically designed to give rights to one class of citizens – the transnational business class – over all others. Nevertheless, while a sense of concern for the political geographies of those being legally and democratically dispossessed in such transnational regimes is missing from the book, Sassen still provides insight on how to conceptualize the expanding territory, authority and rights of today’s capitalist elites. For this, to reassemble some globally-routed but nationally-rooted working-class back-chat, we can say: TAR very much!

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References

¹ David Held, Andrew McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global transformations: politics, economics and culture*, Stanford, 1999.

² Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* New York, 2000.

³ Scott Lash and John Urry, *The end of organized capitalism*, Madison, 1987.

⁴ For further deconstruction of this instrumentalizing invocation of space as the space of theory see Matthew Sparke, *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State*, Minneapolis, 2005.

⁵ In my own work on the cross-border geographies of the NAFTA region I seek thus to complicate commentary on the soft-cosmopolitanism of expedited crossing lanes by exploring how the emergence of such privileged cosmopolitical citizenship has coincided with the carceral-cosmopolitanization of non-citizens through expedited removal and extraordinary rendition. Matthew Sparke, A Neoliberal Nexus: Citizenship, Security and the Future of the Border, *Political Geography*, 25, 2 (2006) 151 – 180. Other explorations of cross-border cosmopolitanization on grounds outside of North America further highlight the multiplicity and complexity of the transnational routes and roots involved.

See Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, editors, *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, Minneapolis, 2007; Olivier Kramsch, O. and Barbara Hooper, editors, *Cross-border governance in the European Union*, London: 2004; Marcus Perkmann, M. and Ngai Sum, editors, *Globalization, regionalization and cross-border regions*, London: 2002. Some of the best historical research in this field is not necessarily by professional geographers (e.g. Eve Darian-Smith, *Bridging divides: the channel tunnel and English legal identity in the new Europe*, New York, 1999), but by persisting in offering critical geo-graphical re-search on the graphing of the cross-border geo it actually maps (rather than simply metaphorises) the changing spaces subtending the space-spanning hyphen in nation-state. For further persistent critique concerning the terrorized others of the territory, authority and rights implicated in the geo-geography of the hyphen, see Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Calcutta, 2007.

⁶ For such reviews see Eleonore Kofman, Political Geography and Globalization in the Twenty-First Century, in Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, editors, *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, New York (2008) 14 – 28, as well as Matthew Sparke, Political Geographies of Globalization (3): Resistance, *Progress in Human Geography*, 32, 1 (2008) 1 – 18; Matthew Sparke, Political Geographies of Globalization: (2) Governance, *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 2 (2006) 1 – 16; and, Matthew Sparke, Political Geographies of Globalization: (1) Dominance, *Progress in Human Geography*, 28, 6 (2004) 777–794. For an especially inspirational feminist account of how embodied geographical examination refuses simple ground truths while problematizing the god-tricks of globalization gurus see Richa Nagar, Victoria Lawson, Linda McDowell, and Susan Hanson, Locating globalization: feminist (re)readings of the subjects and spaces of globalization, *Economic Geography* 78 (2002) 257–284.

⁷ See Gillian Hart, Denaturalizing dispossession: Critical ethnography in the age of resurgent imperialism, *Antipode* 38 (2006) 975–1001; and Matthew Sparke, Geopolitical Fear, Geoeconomic Hope and the Responsibilities of Geography, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97 (2007) 338 – 349.

⁸ Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, Berkeley, 2003; and, Neil Smith, *The endgame of globalization*, New York, 2005.

⁹ John Agnew, *Hegemony: the new shape of global power*, Philadelphia, 2005.

¹⁰ Joanne Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity*, Minneapolis, 2000.

¹¹ Sassen's account is classically liberal in its concern for how human rights have been violated in the context of contemporary American authoritarianism. In this sense, though, its politics should clearly be distinguished from those of the post 9/11 post-liberal authoritarians critiqued so well by Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual*, New York (2006).

¹² Directed by Stephanie Black, *Life and debt*. New York, New Yorker Films (2001).

¹³ For further useful discussion of the neoliberal lock-in effect created by recent trade agreements, discussion which might have simultaneously buttressed and radicalized some of Sassen's points, see in particular: Stephen Gill, Globalisation, market civilisation and disciplinary neoliberalism, *Millennium*, 24 (1995) 399-423, Stephen Gill, New

constitutionalism, democratisation and global political economy', *Pacifica Review*, 10 (1998) 23-38; and Stephen Gill, The constitution of global capitalism, Mimeo, available at <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/press/010gill.htm> (accessed May 20, 2008).