

Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages

by Saskia Sassen, Princeton University Press, 2006, 502 pp.

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The former director of the London School of Economics, Anthony Giddens, was fond of saying that there were two dull things to say about globalisation: the first that it meant everything, the second that it meant nothing. Saskia Sassen seems to agree. Her new book, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, sets out to dispel the myths peddled by both sides of the increasingly fractious globalisation industry: that globalisation is a process which has torn asunder the very foundations of modernity, or that the term is no more than a mirage, smokescreen or chimera which has done little to disturb the rise and rise of the nation state. As with any attempt to produce a via media between two seemingly diametrically opposed and passionately held positions, Sassen is forced to navigate this terrain with great care. The result is a book which defies easy summary, something much to its credit. There is a great deal of guff spouted about globalisation, and Sassen cuts through the blather with due diligence and considerable erudition. This is a big topic and Sassen has produced a big book – both in size and in stature.

It is no exaggeration to say that Saskia Sassen is one of the world's leading public intellectuals. Over the last thirty years or so, Sassen has produced works of both academic significance and political consequence. Perhaps best known for her contributions to debates about the emergence of global cities, migration, and the 'other side' of globalisation – what she terms its 'discontents' – Sassen has become a figure of considerable international renown, admired as much because of her thoughtful interventions into heated political debates as for the sophistication of her academic work. Sassen's current professional appointments – she holds joint chairs at both the University of Chicago and the London School of Economics – help to nurture this sense of an 'A list' public intellectual. As such, *Territory, Authority and Rights* (TAR) has a great deal to live up to.

Much of TAR, as might be expected, distils and extends themes from Sassen's earlier corpus. In *The Global City*, for example, Sassen argued that great metropolises like London, New York and Tokyo have taken on a novel form as linchpins in a world-

scape of political economy which is, to some extent, 'denationalising' state capacities. Sassen now claims that there are forty such cities, each acting as conduits, brokers and agents in the disembedding of national capabilities. The hollowing out of national political and economic orders, which Sassen sees as originating in the rush to privatise, liberalise and marketise in the 1980s – the infamous Thatcher-Reagan years – amounts to a decay at the heart of the nation state, a decay in which power is moving both upwards in terms of the formation of a global political economy, and also downwards via the establishment of private spheres of authority over law, welfare, education and the like.

TAR explicates the longer-term dimensions of this movement, and equips it with a fuller empirical explanation. Along the way, the book contributes to a vast range of debates: the when, how and where of globalisation; the balance to be struck between structural transformations and specific tipping points; the development of abstract frames alongside time and place specificities. In the process, Sassen has produced something rather unfashionable – a work of classical sociology, much of it rooted in Weberian ideal-typical, mid-range analysis which seeks to sort through, and in the process sort out, five centuries or more of world history. In terms of scale and ambition, TAR is a work of considerable stature.

Sassen's starting point is a disarmingly simple question: where does the nation state end and globalisation begin? Yet, as is so often the case, behind the simplest of questions lurk the greatest of complexities. Much scholarly blood has been spilled over just this issue: the significance, or not, of the spread of capital, particularly finance capital, around the world; the development of an increasingly thick international political sphere populated by institutions such as the UN, the WTO and the IMF; and the emergence of what has become known as global civil society – the smorgasbord of activists who lobby against the inequities of both global capital and power politics. On the other side of the divide, indeed on the other side of history it seems, are those who see much hype but little substance to these trends, concentrating instead on the continuing capacity of nation states to carry out their core functions even as these are occasionally parcelled out to international bodies which are formed of, and controlled by, states themselves.

It is into this charged atmosphere that Sassen makes her intervention: globalisation, even as it adds to a sense of decreasing state capacity, must still be shaped, channelled and enabled by institutions and networks which are rooted in the nation state. The book sets out to provide less a grand theory à la Castells, Held, Giddens or Negri

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than to conduct exhaustive research into how this imbrication of global and national is taking shape, digging, as Sassen puts it, 'in the penumbra of master categories.' She uses three abstractions – territory, authority and rights – to assess how forms of rule, political economy and citizenship have changed across time and place. This method allows Sassen to specify the ways in which the emergence of the global has disrupted earlier ways of imagining and conducting political, economic and social relations. Her construct is geared towards navigation rather than determinacy, providing 'analytical pathways' which unravel the extent of the shift from medieval to national to global. As such, Sassen is embarking less on a voyage of determinant discovery than one concerned with mapping the intricacies of the journey by which we have arrived at the present day.

Sassen uses three analytical domains by which to orient her narrative: *capabilities*, the formations which allow orders to develop, change and switch tracks; *tipping points*, the catalysts which mark the transformation of particular orders; and *organising logics*, the master view by which to assess changes across time and place. Crucially for Sassen, capabilities do not just disappear when their immediate function is rendered obsolete. Rather, they are 'regeared' into new logics which form part of the new order. The 'multivalent' ways in which capabilities are produced and organised gives us a story of both continuity and change – perhaps the leitmotif underpinning Sassen's narrative is one of old wines being re-corked in new bottles. Certainly her 'analytics of change' provide finely graded lenses by which to study processes of disassembly and reassembly, the death and rebirth of capabilities, and the tipping points which mark transitions from old to new.

Sassen's story is told in three main parts – assembling the national, disassembling the national, and assembling the global. TAR begins, as is customary amongst most historical sociologists, world historians and world systems theorists, in medieval Europe where, Sassen argues, the nation and the world political economy, characterised by the formation of states and advanced via imperial conquests, developed the first 'world scale' for political and economic operations. Three trends – conflicts over the control of particular territories, the formation of revenue-extracting state bureaucracies, and the legitimating authority vested in the idea of divine rule – are central to Sassen's story. Equally influential, perhaps unsurprisingly for a scholar of global cities, are a number of urban trends: the ways in which municipal law enabled the emergence of secular authority, the development of informal political practices which engendered the emergence of

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constitutional forms of government, and the implications of inter-city transactions for the construction of forms of territoriality.

For Sassen, the rise of the early modern state in Europe helped to cement a notion of national territorial authority even as imperial expansion engendered a nascent world economy. The reaction of states to the extension of capitalism around the world generated highly nationalised forms of capitalism, but, as Sassen's story continues, so rivalries become played out less on the battlefield than in mechanisms which formalise inter-state and inter-capitalist activities – concerts, treaties and the like. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, processes of denationalisation come on apace, not least as the structural tendencies of global capitalism pull authority away from nation states and towards transnational forms of authority. Despite moments of nationalistic reversal, the nation is increasingly disassembled as a unitary sphere for the articulation of authority, territory and rights.

For Sassen, the global age is launched in the 1980s as the Hayekian revolution serves to neutralise and naturalise the market, in the process acting to destabilise the public sphere and to generate openings for novel, mostly private, actors to emerge. Declining state control over the economic sphere marked by the increasing importance of stock markets, the privatisation of exchange rate mechanisms, and the withdrawal of constraints on capital flows transform public-private relationships. Private actors ranging from business federations to offshore financiers and diaspora lobbies assume ever greater holds on public policy making. The result is a major re-articulation of what it means to be national as interactions between citizens and the state shrink markedly – levels of welfare provision fall, prisons, schools and health care systems are part-privatised, and voluntary, professional armies replace conscript forces. As a corollary to these trends, loyalty to the state is eroded, replaced by a notion of consumer citizenship in which firms and brands rather than nations become the keystones of public fidelity. Voting and jury service are out, Sainsbury loyalty cards are in.

So far, so bleak, and a fairly convincing victory for the forces of globalisation it seems. But for Sassen, the encroachment of the private into the public is only part of the story. The current conjuncture, she argues, is marked primarily by instability and flux in which global forces intersect with local relations *inside* the national; hence the formation of private legal institutions such as arbitration courts and the development of local variants of global human rights legislation which allow for significant levels of interpretation. Sassen is at pains to stress the importance of

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processes of renationalisation, not least over policies of migration and security, or via the loss of 'little rights' such as the right to start class action suits in the United States. Most notably, one of the foundational principles of liberal democracy – the protection of individual privacy from public scrutiny – is, Sassen argues, becoming inverted via surveillance mechanisms ranging from CCTV cameras to the Patriot Act. And of course, one does not have to look either too long or too hard at the gruesome situation in the Middle East to see the continuing hold of notions of sovereign territorial integrity, or indeed the part played by nation states in issues of international conflict, geopolitical manoeuvring and war.

The key message of TAR is that the present day – 'the moment in which the future begins' – is marked by uncertainty. The subterranean explosion of authority and rights *beneath* the nation state, matched by the denationalisation of authority, rights and territorial integrity above the nation state generates a double movement which, in turn, produces flux rather than stability. As such, there is everything to play for and no clear outcome to be foreseen. Sassen makes no pretensions to be a soothsayer but nor does she hide her progressive cosmopolitan leanings. Indeed, the climax of TAR is marked by optimism in the capacity of political activists to find new spaces by which to exploit the uncertainties of the global age. For Sassen, the disruptions apparent in the contemporary global assemblage generate an 'in-between' type of order which includes global financiers and political activists. The future may not be perfect, but nor are its primary contours pre-packaged like some kind of supermarket ready meal.

The master frame of TAR is denationalisation – not understood as a zero-sum trade off between the global and the national but as the means by which globalisation is imbricated within the nation state. In this sense, Sassen's narrative is no simple account of the ashes of the national being reborn in the phoenix of the global, and nor does she see globalisation as a master process which reduces state capabilities to rubble. Rather, Sassen has a more subtle tale to relate – a story of how the global is constituted within or inside the national, and of how local experiences of these forces both affect and play into broader global relations. As such, TAR is geared at moving the debate about globalisation beyond a simplistic either-or to a more complex account of partiality, specialisation, and time and place variation. Sassen stresses the emergence of a 'bits and pieces world' in which capabilities are parcelled out, territorial authority takes on a melange of subsidiary forms, and power moves both upwards towards global forms of economic, political and social activity and also downwards towards private spheres of activity, in the process producing

curious local variants and hybrids. This is a complex tale and one which requires some concentration. It is also convincingly chronicled and powerfully told.

Despite being a big book, Sassen's argument is swift and demanding. At times her prose is dense and, as with any book which seeks to cover so much ground, the overall shape of her argument can be lost amongst the minutiae. Certainly, TAR does not feel like a crossover hit likely to become a mainstay of mega-book retailers – a stocking filler it most certainly is not. Nor is there an easy premise to TAR which is readily graspable and translatable into public-speak, at least nothing along the lines of global cities. This is not the scholarship of the soundbite but a work of considerable erudition, a landmark achievement which, if it were a film, would be nominated for several Oscars. Perhaps not for its cinematography though – the book could do with improved signposting. In general, some of Sassen's analytical tools and broader narrative tones lack the crystalline quality of Michael Mann, Anthony Giddens, or Immanuel Wallerstein, all of whom have produced works of similar scale and scope. And as often happens with projects of this scale which seek to marry high theory with significant attention to detail, some may find TAR unsatisfying – not enough detail for the nitpickers, not enough broad sweep for the generalists.

The great virtue of TAR is in, to borrow one of Sassen's own terms, the assemblage of multiple strands of research into a single volume. Although the term global assemblage is not exclusive to Sassen (it has been used for example by the anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier), its reconfigured use in TAR provides a useful means by which to move the debate about globalisation on. Given this, it is disappointing, although not surprising, that Sassen pays relatively little attention to literature from International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE). Although some IR and IPE notables are duly name-checked and referenced, there is little sense of an immersion in these broad fields of enquiry. Sassen does better than most, indeed much better than most, in avoiding interdisciplinary shallowness, but it is noticeable that IR and IPE remain on the fringes of her story. In part, this reflects a broader sense in which these subjects are not fully recognised by mainstream historical sociologists. But both in general terms and more specifically in the case of TAR, this lack of engagement is a shame, not least because there are many historical sociologists working within IR and IPE – John Hobson, Justin Rosenberg and Benno Teschke to name but three – who have much to contribute to TAR's core subject matter.

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Perhaps more surprisingly, Sassen does not engage significantly with the world beyond Europe. Hers is a primarily monochrome inside-out story of Europe's pristine development, miraculous rise and eventual mastery. Not only is this normatively problematical, it is also empirically misleading, for as numerous world historians are now chronicling, much of what we understand as globalisation has actually been enabled by trends, processes and resources drawn from outside Europe. Portfolios, ideas and institutions which we take for granted in the take-off of European modernity were, in fact, a product of global assemblages – not least the adoption of Afro-Asian trading systems, Islamic financial practices and Chinese technologies. The rise of the West, the centrepiece of Sassen's tale, did not come de novo but drew on existing capabilities from beyond the Mediterranean. That Sassen does not adequately address the emerging literature surrounding 'the new global history' is TAR's most serious shortcoming.

There will be other holes picked in Sassen's story – some concerning historiographical niceties, others concerning her choice to eschew ultimate primacy, determinacy and necessity in favour of middle-range analysis, messiness and complexity. But it seems almost churlish to dwell for any length of time on these issues. TAR is a tour de force, a work of impeccable scholarship and boldness. Its engagement on multiple levels – intellectual, normative and political – will ensure that it circulates far and wide. The synthesis that TAR provides of numerous, apparently distinct, topics into a composite whole is no mean feat in itself. But the book is also much more than that. Indeed, TAR is a work which lies somewhere between monumental and magisterial, an opus which cements Sassen's place as one of the world's most important intellectual figures.

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References

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