

# Key Thinkers on Space and Place

# 46 Saskia Sassen

## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Saskia Sassen was born in The Hague, in the Netherlands, in 1949 but moved with her parents to Buenos Aires within a few years. This move from the Netherlands to Argentina was to be one of many international relocations experienced by Sassen, with time spent in Italy, the US and France during her early years, studying at the Università degli Studi di Roma, the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and the Université de Poitiers. As she points out, this constant mobility made her somebody who is 'always a foreigner, always at home' (Sassen, 2005) and this transnational perspective continues to influence her work.

One way that mobility has influenced Sassen's work relates to her use of language. Growing up competent in five languages gave her an awareness of particular 'gaps' in a given language compared to another, and vice versa. This awareness projected itself on the larger stage of research and explanation because, for Sassen, it made theorising important and meaningful as part of an attempt to compensate for existing language's deficiencies. Another influence of mobility was the experience of acting

in ways that were 'out of place' due to a lack of situated knowledge. Sassen found that small actions, particularly when 'out of place', could have an effect on even the most powerful events or processes. This led her eventually to develop the proposition that, under certain conditions, powerlessness can be complex and thereby be a factor in the making of a history and a politics (see Sassen, 2007a, and Gane, 2004 for a more detailed discussion of these points). In addition, Sassen's time at universities in different countries facilitated encounters with a range of philosophies and theoretical perspectives as diverse as Marxist political economy, the work of Berger, Luckman, Kuhn, **Deleuze-Guattari**, **Foucault** and Althusser. This would influence her in a variety of ways and most importantly would encourage her to develop an approach to research that focuses on what she sees as strategic empirical domains – that is, conditions that are heuristic in that they produce knowledge about more than themselves: cities, immigration, and nation-states are three such subjects.

In the context of her nomadic early years, it is perhaps unsurprising that migration acted as the focus for the research which led to Sassen's first major publication – *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988 and continuously reprinted since then). In this book her original contribution is to contest the notion that foreign direct investment will actually

develop countries and keep them from becoming labour-exporters; her research suggests quite the opposite. In *Guests and Aliens* (2000) Sassen follows up on this work and uses 200 years of intra-European migrations to explore two commonly-held beliefs about migration: firstly, if richer countries do not control their borders, they will be invaded by poor migrants; and, secondly, when the outsider is from the same religion and race, discrimination does not occur. She concludes that Europe's history shows that both of these commonly-held notions are wrong.

Sassen is also a prolific writer on the sociology of globalisation, developing her arguments through several key books. In *Globalization and its Discontents* (1999) she covers a number of key issues associated with globalisation: immigration, cities, the feminisation of survival, the nation-state, and networked technologies. In doing this she highlights the negative consequence of processes of globalisation for many. Most recently, in *A Sociology of Globalization* (2007b) Sassen examines a vast scholarship in the social sciences that has never engaged with the question of globalisation and shows that such work provides significant resources – empirical, methodological and theoretical – for studying the mix of current processes, conditions, and subjectivities that are commonly grouped under the term globalisation.

*Territory, Authority, Rights* (published originally in 2006 and in an updated form in 2008) examines the making of global spaces and is particularly focused on the global spaces that inhabit national institutional and territorial framings. Sassen finds that much of the transformation we call global is actually better described as a *denationalising* of what was historically constructed as national. It is, however, the books *The Global City* (first published in 1991 and revised in 2001) and *Cities in*

*a World Economy* (first published in 1994 and revised in 2000 and 2006) that have gained Sassen most acclaim. The books, which set out Sassen's understanding of the role of global cities such as London and New York in the global economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have gained Sassen worldwide recognition in academic and public policy circles. Both books offer a complete rethinking of the processes that make cities and define their role in globalisation.

The above only begins to summarise Sassen's impressive list of publications. In addition, she has also authored numerous journal and newspaper articles and has published interviews, book chapters and edited books. Her publications have been translated into 19 different languages in total. This has all been achieved whilst working at numerous institutions, including at Harvard University where she had her first appointment in the form of a postdoctoral fellowship, and the University of Chicago, Columbia University and the London School of Economics and Political Science. In addition Sassen has held various positions on editorial boards, has been awarded numerous honorary degrees and has secured herself the position as one of, if not the leading figure, in the study of the sociology of globalisation.



## SPATIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

It is difficult to capture here all of Sassen's contributions to spatial theory but three do stand out as being especially important. First, Sassen has provided inspired analysis of the nature, role, causes and consequences of migration in the global

economy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, challenging many early assumptions about the process. Her work has helped place migration at the centre of debates about globalisation and has shown the impossibility of explaining contemporary geographies of migration without reference to geographies of the global economy. The importance of this theme in Sassen's work is unsurprising considering her biography: in addition to mobility during the early years of her life, Sassen now constantly commutes between London and New York and has homes in both cities which she shares with her husband, the esteemed writer Richard Sennett.

Initially through *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*, a piece of work inspired both by the experience of living in multiple countries, witnessing a range of social, economic and political tensions, and being involved with Chavez's efforts to get a child-care centre established for the children of Mexican farm workers (see Sassen, 2007a), Sassen redirected thinking about labour migration and revealed it to be a phenomenon encouraged by and an integral part of economic globalisation. Developing this idea more recently, *Globalization and its Discontents* and *Guests and Aliens* both highlight how contemporary economic migration, especially to the US in the latter part of the twentieth century, mirrored processes that had been experienced worldwide and, as such, was not a new phenomenon but a particular manifestation of the United States' leading role in the global economy. Sassen also uses this work on migration to highlight the inequality and hardship associated with many forms of migration. Those fulfilling demand for maids, nannies and cleaners, entering the informal economy such as in clothing sweatshops or becoming part of the underground economy such as the sex

industry in major cities have been shown to be the 'losers' of global capitalism, being exploited and suffering inequality, particularly in the context of migration to global cities (see below). Her participation in the accompanying documentary to the film *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón is just one example of how Sassen has conveyed these arguments to the general public using the world of the media.

Secondly, in relation to the theorisation of globalisation, Sassen's work comprehensively documents the value of studying not the outcomes of globalisation (e.g., transnational corporations) but the underlying infrastructures and practices that make up the global economy. As she puts it:

A key proposition that has long guided my research is that we cannot understand the x – in this case globalization – by confining our study to the characteristics of x – i.e. global processes and institutions. This type of confinement is a kind of endogeneity trap, one all too common in the social sciences and spectacularly so in the globalization literature ... There are consequences to a type of analytics that posits that an explanation of x needs to be configured in terms of non-x. For one, it demands a focus on the work that produced the new condition – in this case, globalization.

(Sassen, 2006b: 4)

By focusing on the non-x – i.e., the institutions, technologies and infrastructures that evolved during the twentieth century to produce globalisation – Sassen has been able to engage both in debates about the distinctiveness of globalisation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (see Held et al. (1999) on such debates) and about the spatial architecture of the global economy (see **Castells** (2000) in particular). Most recently this has led her to highlight the way that the global and national are interdependent and, therefore, that

globalisation as a set of processes interacts with the national scale in more ways than many have recognised.

Sassen's third major contribution has been to develop ideas about the importance of place and local and national scales in globalisation through theorisation of the role of cities in globalisation. Through careful analysis of cities including London, New York and Tokyo, the books *Cities in a World Economy* and *The Global City* show that cities – as particular types of place – have actually become more important in recent global times. In particular Sassen argues that cities are strategic places for the making of the organisational instruments needed to redeploy economic activities across the globe. As she puts it:

Since the 1980s, major transformations in the composition of the world economy, including the sharp growth of specialized services for firms and finance, have renewed the importance of major cities as sites for producing strategic global inputs.

(Sassen, 2006a: 7)

The inputs produced in cities are both informational and directly related to global finance but are also political and infrastructural, ranging from technologies to regulations. In particular, Sassen reveals through her work on global cities that the deep economic history of complex cities have produced the key components of the so-called knowledge economy. This also explains why as corporate economic globalisation expanded in the 1990s and onwards, the number of major and minor global cities continued to grow. Sassen's work on cities has, therefore, provided the foundations for further investigations of the uneven geographies of the global service economy in the same way that **Doreen Massey** and others had earlier laid the foundations for work on the geography of global manufacturing (see

Massey, 1995). In addition, her work has made her a leading member of public policy groups such as the Mastercard Worldwide Centres of Commerce programme.

## KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

Sassen's aim in all of her work has been to unsettle existing modes of thinking and theorising. As a result, each of the three major contributions discussed above have advanced theory and understanding of globalisation and set new agendas for research. In particular her theorisation of the sociology of globalisation has redirected thinking by highlighting the importance of a range of *practices* that constitute the global – ranging from the construction of monetary and fiscal policies to the exercising of political imaginaries and production of international law. As a result she has been able to highlight the folly of the way:

When the social sciences focus on globalization – still rare enough deep in the academy – it is typically not on these types of practices and dynamics but rather on the self-evidently global scale. And although the social sciences have made important contributions to the study of this self-evidently global scale ... there is much work left. At least some of this work entails distinguishing (a) the various scales that global processes constitute, ranging from supra-national and global to sub-national, and (b) the specific contents and institutional locations of the multi-scalar globalization.

(Sassen, 2007a: 91)

Through her work, and especially through her book *Territory, Authority, Rights*, she

has, therefore, forced scholars of globalisation to take seriously the ways in which the global is constructed through multiple institutions, technologies and infrastructures rather than existing as an independent, singular process. In doing this Sassen has argued that the national scale is far more important in globalisation than many have realised, in particular because globalisation is actually a process of denationalisation in which the apparatus constructed to support the role of the nation-state in the past is reconfigured to support global institutions and frameworks in the present.

In addition to advancing theoretical debates about the process of globalisation, Sassen has also forced a rethinking of the way migration and its role in the global economy is theorised. *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* countered claims that growing levels of foreign direct investment into developing countries would prevent worker migration and showed that investment actually drives emigration rather than encouraging citizens to stay and work in the newly established branch plants. By highlighting what at the time was a relatively novel concept – *transnational space* as created by foreign direct investment – Sassen showed how the US had become connected to developing countries in new ways, not least because of the presence of US firms overseas and the growing awareness of the ideologies and supposed ideals of US life this created. When coupled with increasing demand for low paid labour in the US, this spurred flows of migrant workers. By developing these points in her subsequent work, Sassen has shown how migration is intimately tied to processes of globalisation, not just in the form of the transnational elites conceptualised by Castells (2000) and Sklair (2001), but also in the form of poorly paid labourers who flock to global cities. She has shown

that these workers are an integral part of the global economy (what Sassen, 2006a, calls the 'other workers of the advanced corporate economy') and, as a result, it has become clear that low-skilled as well as high-skilled migration has to be central in any theorisation of the 'human side' of the global economy.

Finally, Sassen's work on global cities has emphasised the fact that the information economy is *made*, that it has a production process, and hence needs a range of specific places and diverse types of workers, from experts to cleaners. This suggestion that the informational economy is produced, contextually, is in line with her suggestion that the national and global are not mutually exclusive and allows her to highlight how production and innovation in global cities produce the technologies, infrastructures and regulations that constitute globalisation. As a result, Sassen has shown that cities need to be conceptualised as sites of global economic productivity as well as sites of struggle, thus making them a crucible for economic, social and political processes in the context of contemporary globalisation.

As a leading light in the study of globalisation, Sassen has both laid the groundwork for and developed work by a range of other leading scholars of space and place, including Manuel Castells, **Immanuel Wallerstein** and in particular **Peter Taylor** and his work on globalisation and World Cities (as manifest in the GaWC network and project). At times she has disagreed with some of her fellow theorists. For example, Rantanen (2006) notes that for a long time Castells disagreed with one of her first published articles where she argued that low paid migrants are an integral part of the global economy. Likewise, Sassen prefers to use the term global city when referring to the production capitals of the global economy, in line

with her belief that a fundamental reconstitution of the economy has occurred as part of globalisation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, while others (e.g., Taylor, 2003) prefer the term World City to reflect a subtly different conceptualisation based on world systems analyses. Nonetheless, such differences are overshadowed by Sassen's achievement in gaining widespread recognition for the idea that globalisation is a socio-technical achievement, with the socio rather than the technical being

emphasised. As a result, she has been at the heart of successful attempts to counter hyperbolic assertions of globalisation as the 'end of geography' (O'Brien, 1992) and the emergence of a 'borderless world' (Ohmae, 1992) and has promoted a social analysis of technology and globalisation which parallels the work of Karin Knorr-Cetina (see, for example, Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger, 2002) but which is distinctive because of its emphasis on the importance of social place in the production of globally networked economic space.

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