

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #43

SASKIA SASSEN ON SOCIOLOGY, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE RE-SHAPING OF THE NATIONAL

Theory Talks

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SASKIA SASSEN ON SOCIOLOGY, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE RE-SHAPING OF THE NATIONAL



Globalization has been a key feature of contemporary IR, but nobody has challenged our understandings and misunderstandings of that contested concept as eloquently as sociologist Saskia Sassen has. For over twenty years, she has contributed to IR theorizing by vigorously arguing for a sociological view on the shifting relations between the national and the global. In this *Talk*, Sassen, amongst others, discusses global cities and the differences that sociological approaches to IR make, and elaborates on the constant and multiple re-articulations of the national and the global.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

Good question...but to answer it, I need to expand it to include much more than IR. IR is one formalized knowledge vector. There are others. I found it interesting to read the *Theory Talks* interview with Keohane ([Theory Talk #9](#)): Here is a foundational IR theorist who tells us also that he needs a broader framing and, in that spirit, proceeds to speak of global politics. Wendt ([Theory Talk #3](#)) also agrees. I think there is a historical reality out there that is pushing us to recognize the need for more encompassing frameworks.

IR, narrowly defined, can keep producing good work that adds to our knowledge. But eventually it will be dealing with a smaller and smaller segment of global politics. At one time—the height of the modern inter-state system—the 20th century-IR captured most of what there was to be said with regards to formal international politics, especially in terms of formal actors and institutions.

That no longer holds. The domain of global politics has expanded to include a growing diversity of other actors and vectors—it now includes, besides the familiar actors, such diverse entities/ideas/manifestations as the politics of Tahir Square in Cairo, the informal jurisdictions that the Somali pirates have carved out, and the power of global financial institutions over national state policy even in the most powerful states. Indeed, Keohane and Joseph Nye ([Theory Talk #7](#)) wrote an early book on transnational relations, which they defined as international processes that are not government-to-government relations—such as the activities of multinational corporations or international tourism. I was at the center at the time, at Harvard, and added irregular international migration as a section of all transnational migrations.

In my own work, I have sought to generate disciplined concepts and analytic strategies to capture this transformation. Pivotal in my research is that the global—whether an institution, a process, a discursive practice, or an imaginary concept—both transcends the exclusive framing of national states, and also partly emerges and operates within that framing. Seen this way, globalization is more than its common representation as growing interdependence and formation of self-evidently global institutions. It also includes sub-national spaces, processes, and actors (as I have argued in [this](#) article). The global gets partly structured inside the national—and this process entails a denationalizing of what was historically constructed as national.

Denationalization, by which I refer to this fact that much of the global gets constituted partly inside the national, has three consequences. First, it means that much of the global is dressed in the clothing of the national, even though it is not national. The national is gradually becoming a different condition from what it used to be up until about 20 years ago. Second, this process of denationalization can coexist with ideological nationalisms; in fact, the insecurity it brings about might well fuel passionate nationalisms. But, in the meantime, history continues to re-position the meaning of the national in the deep structures of society and political systems. Third, understanding the global must then focus in greater detail on what happens inside the national. It is not only about counting the number of global firms and foreign investors. Immigrant communities and high-level foreign professionals, and international artists are also part of this process.

This is largely absent from the most widely accepted definitions of globalization. I agree with that definition in many ways, but I think it leaves out those critical parts of the global that get constituted inside the national—and thereby leaves out the consequences of this for the state, for citizens, for norm-making, for the definition of what is “national security,” and further, for what is membership in the “nation”. Moreover, it leaves out the potential internationalism that is brewing deep inside the national, no matter the ideological nationalism.

In this context, IR is one component of global politics; it leaves out multiple, less formal international processes as well as the creation of global politics inside nation-states.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I have come to recognize that one succinct way of understanding my trajectory as a scholar/researcher is that from the beginning, when confronted with a powerful explanation, I was immediately on alert, and wanted to understand what was actually being obscured/hidden by that explanation. So, when the study of globalization began in the 1980s and then really took off in the 1990s, I found myself interested in, and researching, the counter-intuitive elements that one can find in that or any complex other situation.

You can see this in what I think of as my three “big” books, each of which took me about 8 to 10 years (that is why I love doing little books; they keep me sane). In the first (*The Mobility of Labor and Capital*, 1988), I went against established notions that foreign investment in the global south would retain potential emigrants. In my research I found that it can actually raise the likelihood of emigration if it goes to labor-intensive sectors and/or devastates the traditional economy. In the

second (*The Global City*, 1991), I went against established notions at the time that the global economy transcends territory and its associated regulatory umbrellas; in my research, I found that leading global firms, far from being placeless, need very specific territorial insertions, and that this need is sharpest in the case of highly globalized and digitized sectors such as finance.

In the third (*Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press, 2008), I went against established notions about globalization, e.g., that the stronger the global, the weaker the national state. In my research, I found that today's foundational transformations consist not only of globalizing dynamics but also of denationalizing dynamics. By the latter, I refer to a) in my reading, much of the global gets constituted inside the national, b) it does so at a price: it denationalizes the national as historically constructed. This denationalizing can happen in economic, criminal, governmental, cultural, subjective, and many other domains. I also think that even with these developments, the national continues to be probably the most significant and encompassing condition, but that the imbrications of global, national, and denationalized will proliferate and begin to produce overall dynamics we have not yet seen.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I hear two very different questions here. To become an IR person... On that one, I would say you have enough IR people answering that question in Theory Talks—they probably have said it all, though let me add that some IR scholarship is far more rigid or strict; I would argue that IR is precisely that which global politics is not. I can see this in my own research.

What it takes if you are doing my kind of research is probably far less familiar than standard IR. Let me develop this idea. Rather than national states and the inter-state system, you focus on transversal flows that cut across existing units. For instance, I have developed and constructed empirically emergent geographies of centrality, especially among global cities that connect across old divides. Another instance of these transversal processes are operational [spaces](#), for instance WTO law allows firms to bypass national states and deal directly with local jurisdictions—that is a constructed operational space for global firms. WTO also gives formal, cross-border, portable rights to professionals hired through WTO, which are recognized in all signatory countries—that is another operational space. One of the aspects I emphasize in my work is how national governments have been critical for the making of a global operational space for firms: there is no such legal persona as global firm, but there is that operational space that allows them to conduct themselves as if they were a global firm established as such in law (that is, as a legal persona). I only mentioned economic actors and spaces here, but this also holds for other domains, especially civil society and the new types of cross border arrangements amongst various groups of states that have proliferated over the last 15 years—anti-terrorism agreements, drug trade policing agreements, etc.

To make that explicit, doing this kind of research requires going beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries: you need to mix not just the empirical information about technologies, jurisdictions, transnational firms, the specific national laws of countries governing the diverse domains you might be covering—from economy to civil society. Beyond—the empirical, which in a way is not so

difficult—though it takes a lot of time—there is the challenge of developing conceptual framings that allow you to accommodate these fragments from diverse disciplines. In my experience one has to construct a kind of conceptual architecture that encompasses (as does a building!) many diverse elements. The critical challenge here is the organizing logic.

With its bias towards the state, cities are not a widely studied unit of analysis in IR. What’s the big ‘selling point’ of cities; that is, how do cities help us understand dynamics such as globalization in ways that studying states can’t?

The city can make concrete what can otherwise remain rather elusive. For instance, what we call “global governance challenges” become material and urgent in cities. Additionally, I think that the critical dimension is transversal cross-border geographies that connect cities, and scalar dynamics: Much of what happens in the global cities of the world is already global phenomena [that is cloaked in the guise of the national] as I mentioned before.

It becomes clear that ours is a multi-polar world through the proliferation of global cities. This multi-polarity is wired into the functioning of just about all of our cross-border systems. It might become far more consequential and “real” than the G2 notion (China and the US). Already you hear people talking about how the G20 is the real entity, even though it is informal!! The multi-polarity of the diverse cross-border networks of global cities is also informal. I think these formats are the future, not the big, slow-moving heavy dinosaurs of leading nation-states, such as the US and China...

To borrow a title from an existing article: “Is globalization today really different than globalization a hundred years ago?”

Indeed, I have devoted some very serious research time and writing time to this question. I find there are major and significant differences: the surface resemblances are not enough to support the comparison. I also focused on a more recent period the Bretton Woods agreement, which is often seen as the beginning of the global era—it was not. Nor was the era of the big transnational banks of the 1970s the beginning.

All I can give you here are brutally short answers. The late 1800s contained many of the capabilities with think of today as necessary for a global world. But the larger organizing logic was one of empires in the traditional historic/geographic sense of the concept. There were enterprises that operated globally; there were agreements between firms to collaborate on certain massive projects in mining and transport; and there was an international (largely among the major European powers, of course!) regime of patents and property rights. This is a fascinating history that I develop at some length in *Territory, Authority, Rights*.

Secondly, the Bretton Woods system that dominated the international political economy up until the 70s was definitely an international agreement—but at the heart of its internationalism as developed in the post WWII years, was the notion of the need for such an international agreement to protect national states from excessive fluctuations in the international economy;

there was an effort to strengthen national states in their capacity to govern their economies. This is the opposite from the global era that takes off in the 1980s (though it begins to develop in embryo already in the 1970s). I develop this difference in chapter 4 of *Territory, Authority, Rights*.

Thirdly, the transnational corporations (TNCs) of the post war era operated in a period of massive protections—sure there were tariffs on exports and imports, but there were also the major European powers privileging in ways small and big, their TNCs. Again this is different from our current global neoliberal era.

In your most recent book, *A Sociology of Globalization*, you explain that globalization consists both of global institutions and of local accommodations or agency. Hasn't the first pillar of globalization, global institutions, received a blow since the year 2000? The United Nations seem increasingly incapable to warrant international peace; global financial institutions have difficulties dealing with the unfolding financial crisis; and the growth of the BRICS relative to the US-EU-Japan triangle seems to predict multipolarity. How deeply institutionalized is global agreement on economical and political cooperation?

I see other alignments. The IMF and the WTO have done their jobs, but they matter less in this phase, even though there was a bit of a resurgence in response to the 2008 financial crisis. But, to interpret this loss of power as meaning 'less globalization' is not quite right: they have done their job, they matter less now. The work is done.

Further, global institutions are different from the supranational system you refer to, which is centered in national states, even though sometimes they operate as if they were global institutions. Strictly speaking, we have very few global institutions and global laws. So, much globality gets constituted inside the supranational system in the zone of international relations, and inside the national, including certain branches of the national state itself.

Again, with the current wide-spread economic crisis, unfettered globalization seems to be subject to the elasticity [Karl Polanyi](#) was talking about—is the liberal restructuring of the state you wrote about now finished, or is this crisis yet again an impulse to restructure state-market relations?

I have a sense of the decay of the liberal state. Decay is different from responding to new challenges and thereby contributing to the future of the institution. What you describe was the case over the last several centuries in the history of the west, but now the west is seeing the decay of this algorithm. There is much to be said about finance and the hyper-financialization of our economies; it has certainly contributed to this decay of the liberal state (at least that is my view). To give an example: in the most extreme sites, we were seeing the disassembling of the middle class: some strata became richer than they ever expected, forming a high-income professional class, a tendency most extremely visible in global cities; but, it also created a more provincial form of this upward mobility. However, the more modest sectors of the middle class became impoverished, ceased to be, as I like to put it, the historic subject that constituted Keynesianism—with its vast incorporation of people as workers and consumers given mass production, mass consumption, mass construction of suburban housing, etc. The future

renovation/reinvention of the state may lie elsewhere—in Morales' project for Bolivia, in Indonesia's effort to develop an electoral system that is also a Muslim state...

How does a sociological approach to international relations differ from a political-science approach?

One key difference is the notion that the global gets partly structured inside the national—and this process entails a denationalizing of what was historically constructed as national. This is mostly not part of the most widely accepted definitions of globalization—which focuses on the growing interdependence of the world—with which I agree only partly. Why only partly? Because I think it leaves out those critical parts of the global that get constituted inside the national—and thereby leaves out the consequences of this for the state, for cities, for citizens, for norm-making, for the definition of what is “national security,” and for what constitutes membership in the “nation”. These are all either deeply social/sociological questions or, if not (e.g. national security) they taken on a very different form and content when examined through sociology.

More generally, I would say we have created the technology of globalization, the economics, the politics, and the culture—perhaps not as aptly as possible, but we have done it. What we have not done is the sociology of globalization... This is a project under construction. The social is far more elusive, in a way, than technology. Where the national and the global begin when it comes to the social is an empirical question, which is not as easily an *a priori* as you could have with real politics.

Final question. Can you help us to make methodological sense of contemporary global relations?

Theory is critical: we need to grasp that which we cannot reduce to empirical measures. Empirical data to document globalization is important, but it is not enough. We are dealing with new interaction effects, new scalings, and new subjectivities; my denationalization notion is but one example. Let me use the rise of organized religions to illustrate how I think at least some of us should be working the empirical materials of our period.

The rise of organized religions is *structurally* part of our complex global modernity, even when their doctrines are not modern. I make a similar argument about a range of very diverse contemporary trends that we experience as regressive or as belonging to the past. This argument rests on my research (2008) about the partial and often highly specialized post-1980s disassembling of the nation-state as historically constructed in the West. That disassembling produces structural holes, or blank spaces, in the older (secular) fabric. A key outcome of these tendencies is that “the center,” as constructed in modern history, holds less today than in the 20th century. That “center” found its most complex instantiation in the modern state. The disassembling made room, so to speak, for the rise of older complex assemblages that had been pushed out of diverse spheres of the polity and of social life through the expanded power of the secularizing modern state. Organized religions are a major example of this possibility. They are also heuristic in that their high visibility helps us understand how old formations can resurface as

part of new global organizing logics. Insofar as this rise is linked to large structural transformations that produce structural holes in the older secular fabric, I see this rise as part of our modernity. Whether this is good or bad is a separate matter.

This disassembling of the national as the dominant condition of early modernity also enables the emergence of *novel* types of assemblages at both the global and sub-national scale. Among these are global financial networks that have little resemblance to traditional nation-state-centered banking. A very different example is that of the complex organizational architectures we see in global civil society struggles, with Oxfam, Amnesty International and Forest Watch as examples of diverse causes. The key organizational feature is the link between multiple local (non-cosmopolitan!) struggles that take on global projection through the existence of a major organization with worldwide recognition. The rise or global expansion of old and new organized religions also follows this pattern.

In sum, conceiving of globalization must not occur only in terms of interdependence and global institutions, but also as inhabiting and reshaping the national from the inside, which opens up a vast agenda for research and politics. It means that research on globalization needs to include detailed studies and ethnographies of multiple national conditions and dynamics that are likely to be engaged by the global and often *are* the global, but function inside the national. This will take decoding: much of the global is still dressed in the clothes of the national. Deciphering the global requires delving deeper into subsumed phenomena and structures, rather than simply considering the self-evident.

Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Her research and writing focuses on globalization (including social, economic and political dimensions), immigration, global cities (including cities and terrorism), the new networked technologies, and changes within the liberal state that result from current transnational conditions. She serves on several editorial boards and is an advisor to several international bodies. She is a Member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Cities. She has received a variety of awards and prizes, most recently, a Doctor honoris causa from Delft University (Netherlands), the first Distinguished Graduate School Alumnus Award of the University of Notre Dame, and was one of the four winners of the first University of Chicago Future Mentor Award covering all doctoral programs. She has written for The Guardian, The New York Times, Le Monde Diplomatique, the International Herald Tribune, Newsweek International, Vanguardia, Clarin, the Financial Times, among others.

Related links

- [Saskia Sassen's home page](#)
- [Faculty profile at Columbia University](#)
- Read Sassen's *The World's Third Spaces* (openDemocracy 2008) [here](#) (html)

- Read Sassen's *Globalization or Denationalization?* (Review of International Political Economy, 2003) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the first 10 pages of Sassen's first book, *The Mobility of Capital and Labor* (1988) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the introduction of Sassen's 2006 book *Territory, Authority, Rights* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Sassen' *The Global City: Strategic Site/New Frontier* (American Studies, 2000) [here](#) (pdf)