

# Saskia Sassen and the Rise of Urban Globalization

EVERY AGE CREATES fashionable terms around which popular discussion gravitates, if only for a while. The life spans of these catchwords can be remarkably shorter than their initial popularity suggests, with their original associations eventually fading into an arcane obscurity penetrable only by experts. Sometimes, the very reason they remain intelligible is that they help us recall a vanishing time: Beatnik, Iron Curtain, Atomic Age, and Reaganomics are examples. Globalization, now much in use, may similarly recede into history, but if it proves to have staying power, Saskia Sassen will deserve much of the credit.

Sassen, a Dutch-born American, is a professor of sociology at Columbia University and the London School of Economics. While she did not invent the word *globalization*, or the idea behind it, she is important to both—and to urban thought—because she is the preeminent promoter of the concept of the global city. Although it is difficult to predict how vocabulary will evolve, it seems highly likely that civilization ultimately will be so interconnected that to point out this condition will sound trivial. If so, globalization in its presently popular sense, denoting a tendency toward transnational interdependency, will become a retro term whose continuing use will require deeper shades of meaning.

Sassen's presentation of the idea of the global city already is revealing these aspects. Knowledge of her work thus provides an interesting window on how people will think and speak in the future about both globalization and cities. To appreciate her contribution, it is necessary to see how Sassen differs from three streams of conventional thought—the notions of globalization that preceded her; the rather simplistic references to global trends that abound in today's

media; and commonly accepted definitions of the city.

Her book *The Global City* (1991, revised 2001) introduced an important new element into traditional discussions of global affairs. For a century or more, economists and political scholars had explored interdependencies among nations from the standpoint of national sovereignty. Organizations like the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the European Union, and the many



international organizations that administer treaties governing cross-border economic, military, cultural, and other cooperation, have all traditionally taken as their starting point the supremacy of the indivisible nation-state. Sassen robustly countered this presupposition in a series of formidable papers and books, including *Cities in a World Economy* (1994, 2006), *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (1996), *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (1990), *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (1998), *Territory,*

*Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (2006), and *A Sociology of Globalization* (2006).

Sassen showed that when cities reach sufficient critical mass, they share more interests with similarly large and complex cities in other countries than they do with their own countries. An example is Hong Kong. A British crown colony from 1843 until its government was ceded to China in 1997, Hong Kong conducts a capitalist economy. The People's Republic granted the city effective autonomy until 2047 in all matters except defense and foreign relations.

Now that they are being empowered even further by teletechnology, such global cities can be expected to increase their cooperation, forming a transnational realm of intercity cooperation. More initiatives are expected, like the Cities Alliance, a global coalition of cities jointly organized by the World Bank and the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (Habitat).

The trend toward globalization, however, can easily be oversimplified. Here, the second aspect of Sassen's individuality arises: her deviation from some ideas about globalization that pervade the contemporary mass media. Much contemporary journalism characterizes globalization as a vague unifying force that is somehow bringing all things together. This belief, evident even in such thoughtful reportage as Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), lends itself well to the media's preference for simple, rapidly purveyed ideas that project the up-to-the-minute immediacy of the latest headlines while seemingly offering plausible frameworks for masses of factoids.

However, Sassen is aware that the processes of globalization are too subtle and layered to be so

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starkly caricatured. Her conclusions are based not on superficial resemblances between malls in great cities and the sharing of internationally franchised brand names, but on painstaking studies of migration and other changes in the deeper fabric of the societies that have built the cities. She does not rush into print but works many years to formulate her arguments before taking them public. Such deliberations have persuaded her that while globalization brings unities, it also creates new differences—for example, between the global city and the indigenous population that gave it birth.

This finding has been independently supported by studies of the growth of Internet technology, which suggest that although telecommunications shrink the world on one level, they foster new regionalisms on another. The emergence of global cities, distinct from their countries and thus occupying a new political landscape, is only one example of a broader social fragmentation that the Internet enables.

Even as global commercial transactions appear to bind nations more closely, the Internet and the World Wide Web provide to previously marginalized groups unprecedented tools to pursue their separate interests globally with a communications scope and an impact far disproportionate to economic resources or population size. Indeed, these tools are available to very small ideological coteries, ethnic blocs, regions, towns, villages, and even individuals. Socially and politically, therefore, the new teletechnologies complicate rather than simplify the world.

This brings us to Sassen's third fresh insight: that what happens in cities is not merely of local interest, but offers important clues to the direction in which society is evolving. Cities not only are places in which large populations assemble. As a great city grows, it influences, and often changes, the rest of the region

or country in which it is located. It can also provide advance warnings of challenges and choices that are on their way for the rest of the country, but that are evident sooner in the city because of its size. Sassen thus compels us to recognize that urban problems, opportunities, and looming disasters portend much more than their local government status suggests.

Although Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford, two of the most influential urban writers of the 20th century, had predated Sassen in making similar observations, Sassen differs from them in two major respects—in her theory that global cities constitute a distinctive politico-economic domain, and in her formal academic background as a sociologist and economist, which neither Jacobs nor Mumford possessed. Their lack of this background gives Sassen an edge over them in today's intellectual climate, which bestows on anything that smacks of science and statistics a rhetorical advantage over the seemingly vaguer generalizations of philosophers.

This scientific character of Sassen's work comes at a cost, however. The issues she addresses are so large and elusive that they lead all too quickly to philosophical speculation involving imaginative and conceptual skills that differ substantially from those of the social scientist. This difference is highlighted when Sassen is compared with Canadian mass media theorist Marshall McLuhan, one of the 20th century's most stimulating prophets of globalization. McLuhan was a professional scholar of literature and the humanities, which deprived his analyses of the unique authority that statistical research commands. Indeed, McLuhan's studies lack conventional forms of precision all round.

Compared with Sassen, McLuhan is an exasperatingly rambling author, lost in opaque clouds of words. Yet, to read McLuhan and Sassen side by side is to realize that thinkers of such

philosophical sweep persist in attracting wide attention because humankind continues to be beset by large questions whose answers seemingly demand flashes of insight from large, bold, and intuitive imaginations.

Though an unruly thinker, the irritating maverick McLuhan brought forth out of his messy reflections two ideas that challenge anyone who wishes to develop Sassen's work further—the perception that globalization and media technology are inextricably linked, and the notion of the global village.

The latter idea is more obviously and directly related to Sassen. The more popular interpretation of a global village sees all nations as so strongly linked by a shared media culture and infrastructure that they become villagelike in their unity. The deeper interpretation, which is a consistent refrain throughout McLuhan's works, is that advancing technologies now enable even the smallest communities to project their economic and other interests globally.

Globalization and technology together now appear to encourage a growing awareness of the fragmentation of society, as Sassen has noticed. But McLuhan's observation requires us to reexamine some of our most basic assumptions about the city. Internet technology makes us rethink what we actually mean by the words "city" and "urban." The sophistication and the clout, both economic and political, that were once considered possible only for enormous concentrations of people in one place—that is, cities—now can be possessed by villages.

This gives "global village" a new meaning that is, in a way, the opposite of what most people envision as a global village or globalization. It represents a subtle philosophical shift that promises to upset all previous presuppositions about urban life. It also presents Sassen's global city formulations with an intriguing prospect—that the further development of globalization may be urban

not because it will be driven by global cities, but because we will all soon be urban regardless of where we live.

As these considerations are fueled by the changing nature of technology, especially media technologies, it follows that McLuhan's other central theme—that globalization and media technology are inextricably linked—is also decidedly relevant to Sassen's theses. To study globalization today is to study technology, and to study the changes that await the economics, planning, culture, and sociology of urban life is to study the impact and evolution of new technologies.

We are at the dawn of a new era in this regard, in which urban thought, technological studies, and global studies—both economic and political—have reached an unprecedented confluence. As the greatest single source of technological expansion and impact on society, the Internet is a phenomenon of such unlimited range that we have yet to begin to comprehend its practical meaning for civilization, and we are even further from comprehending its philosophical significance.

Whether or not Sassen will play a central role in furthering an understanding of what is happening to civilization in this larger historical and philosophical context remains to be seen. But her dedication to understanding globalization, especially in its urban context, has already ushered in a fresh, more rigorous awareness of the complexities of global change. She is a major contributor to discourse on the new world taking shape today. **U**

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