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**Interview: Muriel Degen, Denis Hänzi und Marc Höglinger**

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# „Is politics possible when you have no power?“

Saskia Sassen lehrt Soziologie an der Universität Chicago und ist Gastprofessorin an der London School of Economics. Ihre Bücher - etwa die Bestseller „Guests and Aliens“ (1999) oder „The Global City“ (Neuaufgabe 2001) - sind in mehr als zehn Sprachen übersetzt worden. Zurzeit stellt sie ihr neuestes Werk fertig, das noch dieses Jahr erscheinen soll: „Denationalization: Economy and Polity in a Global Digital Age“. Im Interview mit soz:mag erhellt Saskia Sassen ihr Globalisierungskonzept und beschreibt ihr Selbstverständnis als Forscherin und multiples Subjekt. Ein Gespräch über die aktuellen Projekte der USA, die Politik der Machtlosen, Identitätsbildung im „global age“ und die Bedeutung „aktivierender“ Soziologie.

Interview: Muriel Degen, Denis Hänzi und Marc Höglinger

*In your concept of globalization, you use the term denationalization and mention the fading of borders, on the one hand, and some very concrete local effects of globalization, on the other hand. Taking this in account, how are space and economy interrelated?*

Well, first, there are many different ways in which space and economy relate. There's not just one way. On the one hand, you have new opportunities because of the new technologies, but also because of new laws that allow the emergence of the global. You have what I call an imperial economic geography, an imperial space for economic activities of global firms and global markets. And it's in some way reminiscent of all the imperial economic geographies - the British, the Dutch - but it is really different because what is in between all these

**„The global city net is a strategic place which can produce the potential for imperial control.“**

national states, has been constructed and legitimized. So it's not the Empire of the British or the Empire of the Dutch - it's a different kind of imperial geography. And it has entailed the participation of national states.

On the other hand, you have a kind of relationship between space and economy that is the consequence of - and the global city is one emblematic case - the coexistence of two dynamics: this imperial geography and, at the same time, a limited number of actors who want to maintain control over that. And in that sense it is an imperial geography, rather than just an international geography. Because of a limited number of companies - about 200.000 - who want to keep control. And the work of maintaining control needs to get done. It doesn't fall from the sky.

*And the place where such control is concentrated are the global cities?*

Yes, that work gets done in the network of global cities, there are about 40 now, in my view. The global city net is just a very strategic production place. It can produce this potential for imperial control. But because of the new technologies, this space of centrality - which historically has corresponded with the geographic terrain of an urban or village center - can now be partly deterritorialized and occupy a geography that is not just simply the geography of the urban center. That could be a metropolitan region for instance.

*Could you elaborate on the concept of „metropolitan region“?*

A metropolitan region is a given geographic terrain which can contain multiple spatialities. I mean Zurich: You have

around Zurich a whole set of knots where headquarters and corporations are because there's not enough room in downtown Zurich. But that region also houses other things: parks to go for a walk, little villages where people live: multiple spatialities. But one of the arguments I make is that social scientists - except for geographers - have not known how to handle space. And so we see one terrain, one social geography. We say: Headquarters are suburbanizing. Well, not necessarily! It could be. But not necessarily.

*Other social scientists argue that globalization is not directly linked to cities. What's your take on that?*

I think there is an urbanization that develops without cities. You know, waste stretches of these huge metropolitan areas can barely be called a city. And by the way, this image of flowing movements leads into this obsession with mobility and the reduction of a very complex set of dynamics that we don't have all the names for yet. So we call it all globalization. But this implies both mobility and fixity.

*What theoretical tools do you apply, in order to draw these conclusions?*

I see theory in the original Greek sense: „Theoria“, which means to see things. I build theories, as if I were to climb on the top of a mountain here in Switzerland to see (laughs) what you can't see when you're sitting here. Well, theory is that mountain, but the mountain has to be made first. And so the question is: How do we make it? How high do we go? How many different mountains do we climb? I'm someone who likes to stay on lower mountains as well, and climb a lot

**„The way I am doing research is bringing actors into the scene that we usually would not put on that table.“**

of them, and then look. Other social scientists build very tall mountains and climb them by themselves. Alone.

*Since you pursue some kind of „activating“ sociology, do you define yourself as a pragmatic scientist?*

Right: „activating“. That's a good term. Rather than just mapping it out and describing it, you know. The way I am doing research is bringing actors into the scene that we usually would not put on that table. For example, I wrote about informal political actors: the multinational and the Sans Papiers. I mean, they made claims. They are political actors. But they are in zero power and very often it turns out badly. But they have this sense of a political actor. I love doing this. It's a way of „activating“ certain actors and putting them into light.

*Regarding this, you stress the "micropossibilities"- new opportunities for the powerless which arise out of globalization. But does their position really improve? Aren't the powerless always one step behind the "global players"?*

Two things: One is that we are living in a period of enormous devastation: Power is not just power. It is relentless. It is unstoppable. The overall situation is very bad. When I talk about these political possibilities on the part of the powerless, I really go digging. I'm not talking about two titans like the Barbarians and the Roman Empire. Barbarians had power, and the Roman Empire of course had built the „highways“, on

**„Power is expressing itself without shame now.“**

which the Barbarians then came and invaded Rome. But I'm talking and entering a very particular zone of the powerless. And there I wanted to ask two questions: Is politics possible when you have no power? And secondly, the question of social change, that is a sort of broader framing.

The Roman Empire was not simply brought down by the Barbarians. That took centuries. And the Soviet Union was not simply brought down by the massive effort of a part of the United States. There were other factors. Same thing with the Latin American dictatorships. So, is something there? This zone of the extremely powerless is one element of the informal political map. Informal because it is not part of the system, they are outside and invisible. Take the blacks; it took them an amazing amount of organizing, thirty years in fact. Many died. Many were put in jail. I mean that was horrible. And then suddenly it enters this little, little space that we, the average burgher, see. But there is all that other stuff that happens in the Penumbra of history. And I look at these little things, this part of that broader issue of social changes. Now the possibilities. It's not that I can nail it down - it's part of research. I can give you some cases, "micro cases". For instance the organizations which the World Bank now feels obliged to include in the debate. They are being consulted. It's just amazing all this. There are many such organizations. But it's not easy to get out that much.

*Isn't that just for show?*

It's just a different kind of politics. For instance the famous march of February fifteenth - where you had this big demonstration against the war in Iraq - happening in more than 600 cities worldwide that brought together an incredible mix of people. If they had sat together round a table and discussed their politics: forget it! They would have killed each other. It's not politics in the traditional sense; it has a strong cultural element to it. You also saw that in the demonstrations against WTO. Where you have theatre, you have culture. The Love Parade in Berlin, the Afro-Caribbean Parade in London and in New York: these are political. And my emblematic image is Capoeira. The dance of the slaves in Brazil which was actually a martial art. In doing that they were developing this super strength in their arms.

*However, it didn't help much.*

It didn't help. That's true. But there is something that we social scientists and historians don't understand: the multiplicity of political energy which feeds into some broader stream and brings about change. I wasn't thinking about this

fifteen years ago. Fifteen years ago I thought we have to do something for them, the powerless. I have changed my mind.

The French constitution and the American constitution made this big change, which is that the sovereign is no longer divine - and no longer different from the people. The sovereign is the people. But that happened not because the sovereign decided: „I'm not divine“. It's because of the people. How many died and didn't live to take advantage of their success? And of course it has worked only partly.

It's a very theorized argument, but what I'm really trying to do is to understand the politics of the powerless. And how that fits into what is ultimately a multi causal dynamic. Social changes are the result of many different things. And we have understood some of these things. But there is something that we have not yet understood. And that is where I position myself. Sometimes it makes a difference. A little bit. The struggles that first-nation people are performing, the struggles of local indigenous people to protect the forest and so on. And work in politics also makes an important difference in how people experience themselves and their work, including oppressed work.

*Still it's only a small part of the people who think like this, act like this.*

We don't know that.

*At least there are also other strong movements, conservative ones for instance - even within the critics of globalization. What makes you so sure the currently powerless will have more opportunities in the future?*

When an empire is as powerful as the United States, it alone has the power to bring itself down. And it does that. All empires have used their power in ironic ways, where they didn't

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need it. There are multiple associations of that, many different ways. One way is the total abuse of power. And the United States is exhibit number one.

*So the things that have happened in the last two years, the war on terror, more control and the like are in your view a sign that the power is in crisis?*

Well, I think that it is a very messy map right now. But what is also one interpretation: that power is expressing itself now without shame in the economy. Before rampant greed was all so camouflaged. It was intermediated. And in a similar way the power of the United States government. We went from embedded liberalism to what I call disembedding liberalism. I have lost rights as a citizen, already under Clinton. So it's a messy map, okay?

But this is a more long-term way of interpreting it. The United States is tearing apart its own civic fabric. And that is why it matters that I as a citizen have lost rights. And obviously this is very specific: you can name all these things. These are not ideas. This suffering is really happening: through the legislator, through the judiciary and through the executive. And it is actually destabilizing its own project.



The U.S. has two projects: one is an imperial project of power and control. Even purely economic, it really is a military political project. They hate the notion that there is a country in there like Iraq. They can't stand it. It's like an obsession, telling the rest of the world what to do. And they do it in little

**„The U.S. is tearing apart it's own civic fabric“**

benign ways. Now, the other project of the United States: it's constructing a society that is centered on liberties. We have lots of liberties. We have very little democracy in the U.S. in a narrow technical sense. The electoral system is a disaster. There's a huge democracy gap. But my god, do we have liberties! So it's the second project of the United States. It's a project of individual liberty. That project is getting undermined, with some of the measures of the last two years. And the way September 11th has happened and the way of what has happened to Iraq is showing us the limitations of the modality of the American Empire, which is a military-political and, sure, an economic empire. Centered on militarism.

So I look at it that way. And then I ask the question: Well, does it make a difference if these multiple different communities inside the United States have polities? Not power, but polities. And I say yes, it makes a difference. Now what is going to happen - how they make their history - I don't know. And I wouldn't trust anybody who's going to tell me: „I know.“ They, they, it's also us. I feel that very much. And there are going to be many different projects. It's not a one-party thing. But I don't have the negativity of simply seeing

all the defeats. Because I position the defeats as indicators of an empire that is really itself part of - you know - the defeats.

*Margaret Thatcher once argued that there is no such thing as society. She said: „There are individual men and women, there are families. [...] And people must look after themselves first.“ Now in your concept of global society you point out a somewhat autonomous sphere that contains its own forms of empowerment and options for civil action. To what extent do you agree with Margaret, then?*

I can't categorize civil society. It's just one component. And secondly I think that each one of us is a multiple subject. So we are also the family person, whatever, and we are the civil society. The way Maggie Thatcher speaks is centralizing. No! We are so many different things. I'm also a mother, and I'm a wife, and I'm a daughter. But I am also a researcher and a theorist who sits there by herself, figuring out things endlessly. And I am also civil society. Coming back to the question of the powerless is to recognize what the multiple scales are on which they are acting. And for the powerless, there are going to be scales that we don't recognize as significant.

*For instance?*

Well, we look at a sweatshop and say: „That's what it is, man! It's a sweatshop.“ And that's not untrue. But for somebody else this is the space within which he executes some project that is not simply his own individual survival. The powerless are powerless. And then they are a bunch of other things. And among all those things they can be political subjects. Global civil society is an emergent thing. There is hope, we don't know what it is. Global civil society is an incipient zone



where we can participate. It's there to be constituted. There are significant elements that activate, that make a dynamic. I would say that Maggie is socially essentializing. She fails to recognize the importance of scaling. I am an individual holder, member of the family. Well, you take it on another scale, and there's a whole new politics. Where is Maggie talking about that? It's just incorrect. We are operating in multiple scales. And we need to recognize what these different scales are.

*In this concept of civil society on a global level, with all its very different scales and possibilities, what are, in your view, the foundations on which people will construct their identities?*

First of all I dismiss this notion that there is one identity. Because we've moved to a new stage in the analysis of identity. There is a deployment of identities, a „dédoulement“: that we are many, many things at the same time. One of the notions that I use is the „unbundling“ of identities. We have had representations that are very unitary: I'm a U.S. citizen. I'm a housewife. I'm a professional...

*Don't people need such unitary representations any more, in a global society?*

Yes they need it, but they have many. And that's beginning to happen. We say: the immigrant is the immigrant is the immigrant. But the immigrant is also a woman, a grandmother, a worker. I think the representations we have used may not be capturing everything that is actually going on. Now, the question that remains: what are the grounds on which people construct their own subjectivities - no matter how many they

have, right? Here I feel much more comfortable when I talk about the political subjectivity than about: „Does a lesbian think herself lesbian? Or is it happening on the basis of her local community of lesbians? Or is it a global network of les-

**„I dismiss this notion that there is one identity.“**

bians?“ I get lost. I don't know enough. What I see is that the base of constructing yourself is the political subject. So the sweatshop can be one space among a multitude of spaces. The multitude is a very powerful event. But the risk is that we see the multitude out there. We need to go inside the multitude. And to detect, to understand the many political architectures inside the multitude. We have a hell of a time. So we talk about the poor, the oppressed, the powerless... And that's true. They are there. It's part of their subjectivity: they are poor, they are oppressed, they are without rights, they are tortured. That's all true. But that's not all. I'm particularly interested in these political issues.

*What does that mean for sociological research?*

It means a lot of work. I mean, you Europeans are way ahead of the Americans. In the United States sociologists are interested in what another sociologist has written about. And that's the debate then. Whereas you are far more interested in these countries here. In what is actually happening in the real world. So for sociology, I it needs a work of thinking through. A work of narrating. Ethnographies of globalization, for instance. It's a lot of work.