

Saskia Sassen.

Territory, Authority Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages.

Princeton University Press, 2006, 502 pp.

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The death of Milton Friedman, together with a very great number of think pieces comparing his legacy to that of Keynes, reminds us of the possibility of cognitive advance within social science. By and large, economics has fared much better than sociology. We are largely bound by the ideas of the classical sociologists, blind to the fact that they reflected a very particular world — that of the long nineteenth century peace whose key social processes centered on industrialization. It is this background that gives Sassen's new book its importance. She is extremely ambitious, claiming that we are living at a time of epochal transformation as great as that of industrialization. The author is well-known for previous work on globalization, and one can say immediately that this book provides the most sensible account of new social processes available. Her fundamental point is simple: global processes work through a reconfigured state — it being wholly mistaken to see the global and the national as opponents, involved in a zero sum game. She provides novel concepts designed to theorize complex social processes, and she draws our attention to empirical matters — above all, changes in legal and financial affairs — that normally fall outside the expertise of sociologists. The book is very serious, extremely dense and clearly based on a vast amount of simple labor. In the end, I think it does not completely succeed, but it should be clearly stated immediately that it deserves wide readership and considered debate.

There are splendors and miseries to her methodological approach. Great originality and sense is evident in the concepts she develops to deal with social change. There are echoes of Marx in the way in which she sees new principles being created with a particular social system, only capable of having their full impact once a tipping point has occurred so as to create a new organizational logic. One has a real sense of tools useful for grasping complex historical processes — not least, of course, in the notion of assemblages, seen here through the prisms of territory, authority and rights. In contrast, I was not at all happy about the use of historical data. France, Britain and the United States are taken as exemplars of the late medieval, nineteenth century and mid twentieth century worlds. A lot of objections could be made to these choices. The greatest worry is that historical data is used to illustrate theses putatively established by social theorists, rather than having the historical record make us refine our sociological concepts.

The book has three parts. The first seeks to account for the creation of the national state out of feudal materials. A great deal is made of the legal innovations made possible by the autonomy of European cities, with concentration thereafter on the institutionalization of national capitalisms, and of their hyperbolic conflicts in the age of imperialism. The second part at once shows the creation of a new logic, that of American hegemony insisting on peace whilst allowing variety within capitalism, and the start of its erosion. Great originality is shown in the dating of this process to the 1980s rather than to the 1970s. The indicators of change include a vast increase of the powers of executives within national states, the privatizing of decisions once held to be part of the public arena, and an enhanced ability of capitalists, especially in the financial arena, to set norms regulating state behavior. The final part of the book is particularly impressive when discussing the internet. On the one hand, Sassen demonstrates the continuing importance of the social, political and national construction of the internet. On the other, she makes a good deal of something like the opposite, that is, the ability of civil society groups, locally and internationally, to use this new means so as to

change the agenda of what counts as political. An interesting set of conclusions claims that we should discuss borderlands.

The book brims with ideas, and is wholly convincing at key points — with this reader being especially impressed with the analysis of global cities and of the limits to state capacity when dealing with the new software of financial markets. Yet, I must draw attention to two areas which seem to me deficient and add these to what has been said about the limits to her use of history.

The first part of the book does not really convince. One should note, to begin with, that the recent anti-eurocentrism of scholars such as Bin Wong and Ken Pomeranz is not addressed, although I do not find this much of a failing given my own doubts about their contribution. More troubling are assumptions that national capitalisms needed empires, and that such conflict led to war. There is a lack of analytic clarity here. Is it nationalism, state conflict, or capitalism which matters — or, which of these in which proportions? The specific logics of these forces are not spelt out properly, with nationalism being seen far too much in epiphenomenal terms. Then there is much to doubt in the view that national capitalisms developed from the sixteenth century as the result of their empires. Imperialism was brutal, for sure, but there is little evidence to show that the growth of any national capitalism — even that of Great Britain — depended upon the possession of overseas territory. Max Weber as fleet professor did believe this for Imperial Germany, but was famously and correctly criticized in Vienna in 1907 by Austrian economists well aware of Germany's ascent to great economic status free from the possession of a significant empire. There is much evidence here of naïve marxist assumptions, ignoring geopolitical developments which do most to explain the onset of world war.

Finally, I am not fully convinced by Sassen that we are living in the midst of an epochal transformation. Her whole book is about this, and again, all her arguments need to be assessed properly. Still, let me make a couple of negative points. She notes that various authors claim that identities are now stretching outside or beyond the nation-state, perhaps particularly in Europe, and seems to endorse this view. There may be something to this, especially at the elite level. But a vast body of evidence suggests that it is not true for most Europeans. In this connection, it is worth noting that Europe, perhaps the key site of globalization, has failed to move in a transnational direction, cementing a good deal of its character as *'l'Europe des patries'*. More generally, I am deeply influenced by studying Denmark. This small nation-state knows now, as it did before, that it must swim inside larger seas, and it very consciously tries to do so with maximal effectiveness. But I see little sign of the end of Denmark, of a loss of national identity. Levels of equality have not changed much and the state is just as present — acting in different ways for sure, but very much the commanding co-ordinator of old.

John A. Hall
Dartmouth College and McGill University
johnahall@hotmail.com

John A. Hall is currently completing a biography of Ernest Gellner. New research, with John Campbell, concerns the economic consequences of the size of nations: this will feed into a longer term project on nations, states and empires.

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