COMMENTARIES

A Response to Sassen – Expulsion, Extraction and the Silent Enabler

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Professor Sassen’s 2019 Montesquieu Lecture, delivered at Tilburg Law School to a packed theatre of faculty and students, drew heavily on her previously published article, ‘Predatory Formations Dressed in Wall Street Suits and Algorithmic Math’. This comment refers both to this printed text and to her delivered lecture, which is available to view on Youtube.1

Expulsion, extraction

Sassen is one of our most influential analysts of globalisation. Her efforts to locate actors, such as nations or cities, within and against the various dynamics of globalisation have had a deep impact on how we conceptualise contemporary globalising forces. Her notion of assemblages of Territory, Authority and Rights (TAR) have given us a vocabulary for discussing how globalisation is constructed, undone and reformed; and her broad historical approach has given us greater insight into contemporary changes by allowing us to understand them as part of a longer trajectory, detailing how key concepts and notions have flowed and mutated from the Middle Ages onwards. In the context of her present lecture, two themes stand out in Sassen’s work. The first is an interest in electronic, capital markets as an elemental marker of twenty-first century globalisation. This is evidenced, for example, in her most well-known work (at least among lawyers), Territory, Authority, Rights,3 and has become the focus of her later work on high finance. The second theme is her interest in the dark side of globalisation, in its ‘discontents’4 and in those subject to ‘expulsions’5 – an interest that is represented here as the victims of the brutality of globalisation’s extractive logics.

As with the idea of TAR assemblages, the characterisation of globalisation as extractive provides us with a powerful vocabulary for identifying and expressing the huge negative costs of economic globalisation to humans and the environment. It gives us a vivid way of understanding the harms done, not as a side-effect to be mitigated, but as the core logic of global capital. The language of extraction represents a shift from Sassen’s earlier vocabulary of expulsion and is a welcome one. ‘Expulsion’ as a term spoke to the brutalities of the global economy, and Sassen used it to refer to both the physical and social expulsion of individuals and communities from place and liveable space. Yet the term was less evocative than that of extraction: while it is easy to grasp how the global market in land leads to the expulsion of local people from the space that was once theirs, it is less easy to visualise how global capital leads to social inequalities and exclusion through the language of expulsion. It is certainly the case, as Sassen argues in this lecture, that city-dwellers are being pushed out as global capital seeks safe havens for their investments. Yet, on the whole, poorer citizens are not expelled from society; they are instead slowly but inexorably pushed out to the margins of social life and then out of sight. Expulsion is a dramatic often highly visible action and, as such, arguably fails to capture the processes of marginalisation that are precisely non-dramatic in their method, yet dramatic.

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1 Science, Technology & Society 22:1 (2017): 1–15.
2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5gDIrU3HAE (last accessed 3rd August 2019).
3 Saskia Sassen, Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages (Princeton University Press, 2006).
4 Saskia Sassen, Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money (The New Press, 1999).
5 Saskia Sassen, Expulsions. Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy (Belknap Press, 2014).
in their consequences. By reframing her analysis as extractive logic, Sassen overcomes this by drawing our attention away from consequences to the process itself, to the essence of how global capital functions. As Sassen notes in passing in the final chapter of Expulsions, “[t]he mechanisms for … extractions are often far more complex than the outcomes, which are often quite elementary.”

While Sassen’s emphasis on her analysis in her lecture to high finance and property, it is easy to see how the notion of extractions in particular can help us understand other sectors and other global crises, such as, for example, the opioid crisis. Where the creation and production of medicine to treat illness has been one of the greatest triumphs of modernity, the pharmaceutical industry instead sees patients not as patients in need of cure but as sources of profit. Being able to identify such sectors as extractive or predatory, and call them out as such, is an important contribution to globalisation studies. Sassen is a master at offering the right vocabulary at the right moment.

Moreover, the concept of extraction – drawing as it does on the terminology of the extractive industries of mining – is also better able than the notion of expulsions to capture the environmental costs of global capital. Whereas ‘expulsion’ might capture the impact of environment degradation on human communities, it does less well at explaining the impact on nature itself or the geopolitical repercussions of localised environmental harm. As such, the notion of extraction fits very well with another new vocabulary, that of the Anthropocene or Human Epoch. Much of the early work within the social sciences on the Anthropocene has focused on detailing evidence of a new geological era and on reflecting about the likely impact – both for how we see the world and how we live in it – of an environment irrevocably altered by human behaviour. The language of extraction makes clear how humankind is remaking its environment and gives us a place to start in rethinking our relationship to nature.

Yet, while extraction as a logic or the related notion of predatory formations provides us with a powerful means to understand the logic of global capital, I wonder whether it is fully adequate as a vocabulary to capture the system of economic globalisation. Extraction helps us identify the loser of globalisation – the prey – and it identifies the suits and algorithm whiz kids of high finance as the winners or predators, which is hugely helpful – and yet, there is surely another category within economic globalisation who are neither ‘prey’ to the parts of the system they suffer from high house prices and from the gutting out of old communities, but who are able to save, to educate their children, to go on nice holidays and to build new communities based on function rather than location (tennis clubs rather than streets, professional networks rather than fellow citizens). How should we understand the role of this, sizable, group in perpetuating the system? Are they simply bystanders, ebbing and flowing with the capital tide? If so, their role does not really require elaboration. But perhaps it is worth identifying and exploring their role in the system, as it may be more critical than at first seems. In any case, I look forward to seeing Sassen elaborate further on extraction as a logic in forthcoming work.

The Silent Enabler

Sassen’s work has done much to place law at the heart of how we think about globalisation – one of the main reasons that her work is so beloved by lawyers. Her reflections on authority, as opposed, say, to power, and on the relationship between authority and territory, have made an important contribution to how we engage with the law and with the law discipline as a whole. The law profession, the professional middle classes who, you suffer from high house prices and from the gutting out of old communities, but who are able to save, to educate their children, to go on nice holidays and to build new communities based on function rather than location (tennis clubs rather than streets, professional networks rather than fellow citizens). How should we understand the role of this, sizable, group in perpetuating the system? Are they simply bystanders, ebbing and flowing with the capital tide? If so, their role does not really require elaboration. But perhaps it is worth identifying and exploring their role in the system, as it may be more critical than at first seems. In any case, I look forward to seeing Sassen elaborate further on extraction as a logic in forthcoming work.

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