

Digging the global mine

An interview with Saskia Sassen

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Ever since I started doing the interviews for *Global Media and Communication* I have wanted to interview female academics who have made a difference in their studies on global issues. As readers may have noticed, so far I haven't had much success, since it is not only gender but also geography that matters for our journal. I have often met with an academic couple, and they clearly either inspire each other and/or work together, but female academics tend to decline to be interviewed with their spouses. When Saskia Sassen agreed to this interview I did not even try to include her husband, because I wanted to hear a solo female voice in this still very male academic world.

Ironically, when I knock on Sassen's door in London's Clerkenwell in March 2005, it is her husband Richard Sennett¹ who receives me in their beautiful loft apartment with modernist design and furniture. Sassen is still at work after having just come back from a week's journey of visits to five countries. When she arrives she looks tired, but gives me 90 minutes of her precious time. Sassen says she does not mind travelling, since she is good at working on the plane. She then gently sends her husband to another room by saying that she does not want to appear sitting on his lap during the interview. Sassen does not have to worry (and I don't think she really does) about appearing intellectually dependent on her husband, since her academic work and credentials are superb by any standard.

Sassen is a cosmopolitan academic *par excellence*: she was brought up in five languages in four countries. She once described herself as 'somebody who is always a foreigner, always at home' (Sassen, 2005). Sassen was born in 1949 in The Hague, but grew up in Buenos Aires where her parents moved when she was a toddler. Sassen spent a year each at the Université de Poitiers, the Università degli Studi di Roma, and

the Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires, studying philosophy and political science. She studied sociology and economics at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, where she obtained her MA and PhD degrees. In addition, she has a French master's degree in philosophy from Poitiers. After being a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, Sassen held various academic positions both inside and outside the USA. She is currently Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Centennial Visiting Professor of Political Economy in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Sassen has a breathtaking publishing record. She has published 10 books, which are translated into 16 languages, and over 50 articles and chapters. She serves on several editorial boards and is an advisor to a number of international bodies. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Cities, and Chair of the Information Technology and International Cooperation Committee of the Social Science Research Council (USA). Her comments have appeared in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *La Vanguardia*, *Clarín*, *Die Zeit* and *The Financial Times*, among others.²

But there is more to Sassen than meets the eye. In March 2006 she generously answered my additional questions by e-mail from different European cities, but I still did not understand what was her driving force. Then she mentioned quite casually her biographical chapter in *The Disobedient Generation* (Sassen, 2005). This chapter tells a story about a young adventurer who effortlessly changes places and has several simultaneous lives as a single parent, an academic, an activist and a sound poet. Only after reading her beautiful piece did I finally understand the questions I should have asked when I first met her. *Takaia zhizn* (such is life), as Russians say, with the wisdom that comes from their experience of a long history of revolutions.

Global cities

Sassen has written extensively on the issues related to globalization, on global cities (see, e.g. Sassen, 2001[1991], 2000a, 2002a), inequalities in the world economy (see, e.g. Sassen, 2000a), the transnational mobility of people and money (see, e.g. Sassen, 1998), immigration trends and policies (see, e.g. Sassen, 1999), digital technologies (see, e.g. Sassen and Latham, 2005) and global changes in state power and political sovereignty (see, e.g. Sassen, 1996). But above all, she introduced the concept

of the global city as a key space where she keeps returning in her research. For Sassen, a focus on cities does force her to see that the global is not simply that which operates outside the national, and in that sense to see also that the national and the global are not mutually exclusive domains. She says that the global city is a thick environment that endogenizes the global and filters it through 'national' institutional orders and imaginaries. It also helps render internal (national) components of the economy global, and can also enable global, though partial, imaginaries among different types of groups, both powerful and not (Sassen, 2004: 127).

TR: Your first book, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Sassen, 1988) still has the term 'international'. Do you remember when you started using the term 'global'?

SS: Well, I started using it in the early 1980s, actually. One of my first published papers was called 'The New Labor Demand in Global Cities' (Sassen-Koob, 1984). But I already was, if you like, embedding the global in sub-national specifics. I'd always been interested in cross-border dynamics, but I used to use 'international' and 'transnational' – international being that which happens within the formal apparatus of the interstate system, and transnational being that which crosses borders, but is not governed by national states, not happening inside the interstate system. In the early 1980s I was looking at various issues and began to see that something was happening, arising out of capital mobility and labour migration – these were my two lenses, if you like. These lenses eventually escalated to global finance and global markets, up from foreign direct investment. I moved from the international as represented by foreign direct investment, and transnational, as represented by migrations, including undocumented ones, to the global as represented by global finance and emergent global subjects, such as denationalized professional elites and global activists.

I actually tracked when is a market no longer just an international market but a global market. I never took it for granted. I was digging. But I was using the term globalization when nobody was using it; it was not a common term. And it was a way of capturing a distinction. First, I captured the international/transnational distinction. I was also dealing with the transnational long before this whole new generation of transnationalists. Because for me it had a very precise meaning. It was not just anything that crosses borders. In that same spirit, by the early

1980s, it was becoming evident to me that there was yet another type of cross-border dynamic and cross-border institutional formation taking place. Having established the distinction between international, transnational and global, I then began to use the term global. At that point these three terms allowed me to draw distinctions, to capture a difference. So in that sense they were instruments. They captured different historical formations, no doubt about it.

TR: So you say that you were using it in the early 1980s. When I asked, for example, Tony Giddens (Rantanen, 2005a), he couldn't remember where he picked up the word. Do you remember where you did?

SS: No. Some people think that several of us just began to use it, though we were coming from different angles. Robertson was coming at it from the dimension of religion – an almost natural way of arriving at the global, given the global past of many organized religions. We used the word globalization on the model of 'internationalization', as in internationalization of the division of labour. These were interesting concepts. It was not just the interstate system. The internationalization of markets, of labour – moving among these concepts was a very particular, active choice. And so from global flows I went to globalization, as a way of capturing something – a reality in the making. Again, for me these were active working practices. To name things. So I think I just slid, literally, from the internationalization of capital and of labour to global markets and global subjects. I should go back to my articles and see when was the first time I actually wrote about it. I know that I used global before I used globalization. In one of my first articles (Sassen-Koob, 1982), I spoke of long-distance management (in firms with off-shore operations), and distinguished this from the much talked about transnational firms and banks at the time. Long-distance management became a building block for the global economy, and already then my emphasis (which continues today) was on the specialized work of running the global economy.

TR: These days the word globalization is overused, not only by academics but also by politicians and by ordinary people. Do you feel that it has become everything and thus nothing?

SS: Mostly, yes. I tend to use it as an adjective, as in 'global city', 'global flows', 'global markets', 'global whatever', because then it has meaning. But I think by itself, without designating something, I find it prob-

lematic. In a way, I like to disaggregate whatever it is we are trying to name with that term. And hence we can speak about cities, about the national state, about immigration, illegal trafficking, a lot of entities, as somehow constructed – as circuits and practices that cross borders, imaginaries about the global can also be held by people who do not move, who do not travel across borders.

I am a digger; I don't surf. According to people who come from political science, I'm a constructivist – in political science this is a term that carries meaning. In many other disciplines we don't know exactly what that means. But it's true that I'm interested in seeing and capturing the making, the constructing, rather than positing givens. It creates trouble for me this – the notion of making. It's why I started with global cities. The common notion is that there is a global system and my question was: how do I know that there's a global system, and how do I know when I'm looking at it, how do I know I'm seeing it? The question for me was: where is the global economy? What does it take to make it, to run it, to govern it, to debug it? And so you wind up in a totally different space, conceptually and practically, from those who start with the term globalization. Now, mind you, once I'm in a text, within a subject, I will use the term, because it's a sort of shorthand.

But, frankly, globalization has been used, abused and diluted. It has been hijacked by a new liberal discourse. It's problematic, but I don't totally agree with those who say we should drop it, not use it ever again, and just say 'empire'. I think there are kinds of globalization which are not imperial. I work a lot on the condition of the powerless, and so to me it's very important to recover that version of the global – the globalities made by the powerless who today can connect across borders even when they are immobile, stuck, too persecuted to leave their country.

TR: And do you think globalization is a consequence, or is it a cause?

SS: Well, as I said, the practices matter, the capabilities that get mobilized matter, and the projects for which those capabilities get deployed matter. In this book that I've been working on for eight years, and have just finished (Sassen, 2006), I try to deal with complex transformations that are epoch making. It doesn't mean that everything changes. I try to deal with what so often gets labelled as globalization in terms that avoid using either the global or the national, and avoid using the global and the national as two opposites. I chose territory, authority and rights as the building blocks for my analysis. They are trans-historical conditions,

present in all societies, but at the same time they are deeply historical because they get constituted in very specific ways. Certainly now, with digital technology, each one of these assumes whole new meanings. I try then to track the trajectories of these three foundational components of all societies by looking at major systems both formal and informal. I try to understand what change has actually happened.

Arguing whether there is or is not globalization is no longer a valid project for me, I must say. So the project becomes one of focusing on very specific research agendas, and very specific globalization agendas. And that is ultimately a collective research project because in my analysis the global consists in part of multi-sited systems which partly get constituted inside different nation-states; hence we need researchers from all over the world. Further, the pertinent processes can get captured differently by different forms of disciplinary knowledge – if you're a political scientist you pick up on this, if you're an economist on that, if you're an anthropologist, a new media person etc., on still other aspects – that is the project for me rather than asking whether globalization is real.

This way of looking at whatever transformations are taking place produces a viable research project, a viable theorization project, rather than this debate about whether it should be globalization or empire. The current transformation contains imperial modes (the global corporate economy, the US global deployment of military power), but it also contains new types of emancipatory or contestatory modes; it is contributing to the formation of new types of political subjects – subjects who do not need to function through the formal political apparatus, such as global environmental activists, or mothers who protest against violence as mothers in many countries across the world do.

Intellectual influences

TR: Who were the people that influenced your thinking when you started your career? Who were your favourite academics at that time?

SS: I have long been a bit odd as a researcher because I avoided theories that existed out there, ready-made, on the shelf, waiting to be used. I wanted to go digging. I wanted to discover. I spent a lot of time looking at empirical materials. I have to try to remember now. I can't believe how late I read some books that I should have read long ago. I had an early stage, in my teens and early 20s when I read a vast amount – I was reading Kant in German at 16, barely understanding it; same with Sartre, Camus, you name it. Endless numbers of novels. But as I became a writer

myself, this changed. I remain a voracious reader and I know a lot, but there is a kind of ignorance that I have which stems from the way I do research.

I'm very different from Giddens and Castells, I think, in that I have discovered my key theoretical categories, concepts and heuristics through very detailed empirical work. I started out in philosophy and then moved on to anthropology and then to sociology and economics. I'm not totally captured by a particular discipline. Nor are Castells and Giddens, it's clear. I grew up in five languages, but I know no language perfectly. And I was educated in several disciplines but am a master in none. For instance, I read Poulanzas, but I couldn't quite use him. I did a Masters thesis, which was very important for me, in dialectical logic, but I rarely refer to it, and most people who know my work have no clue that this thesis exists, filed in the French library system. So I had my own very peculiar way of reading and studying. What I didn't do much was to read other very accomplished people who had been mapping the same terrain as me. I started with immigration, and immigration was under-theorized. So I brought in capital, because people were just looking at social problems, at families, at networks, kinship networks, at labour market conditions. Introducing international capital flows into an account of immigration was a new thing to do. My concern was explicitly with labour-intensive, export-processing oriented investments, because these had the capacity to disrupt the traditional economies of places, which may have been inefficient but gave jobs to many, and because, I argued, this type of foreign investment was building subjective, and some objective, bridges between the capital-sending countries and potentially labour-sending countries that received these labour-intensive investments.

When I did *The Global City* (Sassen, 2001[1991]), I could have been so much more influenced by various authors. But I was too busy doing the empirical research – if you look at that book, there is a vast amount of it in there, very boring. I started to read Harvey and Wallerstein, but I never got very far. I started to read a bit of Castells. But I never read very far, partly because I was overwhelmed with the task at hand, the research. So the truth of the matter is that for years and years I've been so busy doing research that I did not read enough books. Shameful. For my last book, which I've just finished, I went back to Wallerstein (2004[1974]). I had questions and I wanted to know what answers he had come up with. It was a whole experience. I read his 1974 volume word by word, and every detail mattered. This was a very different way of reading than what I had done as a student, when what mattered was to get the overall idea.

That's how I work. Not like my husband. He's civilized. I'm uncivilized, I really am. I don't just go and read a book because I know this is an important book to read and I ought to read it. I relate to it as though it was a mine, as in gold mine: 'I'm going to go digging into this mine and come back with whatever I need out of it'. It comes out of having little time and a sense of having a massive research project. It produces a kind of ignorance.

TR: But what about your colleagues? When I was interviewing Castells (Rantanen, 2005b), he mentioned that he had been working with you.

SS: Well, we were working together in a way in the early 1990s. It was a project for the Social Science Research Council in New York. He had been doing work on the new informational mode of accumulation, including a strong focus on cities. We spent time together in this process, one that involved a number of people. Out of that came a book called *Dual City* (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991). I think it came out later than my *Global City* (Sassen, 2001[1991]) book. Castells and I did intersect, and we did disagree. Mind you, I was a great admirer of his book *La question urbaine* (Castells, 1972), an enormously important book. At the SSRC project I argued that the workplace of immigrant workers was also part of the global economy, and he disagreed with me. I remember this was a published debate in some journal, where he criticized me. And about two years later he said, 'Saskia, you were right!'. I was a bit more junior than he was, and I really appreciated that. It was very, very nice. We had some other collaborations of this sort – one, a project on the informal economy. Because we both speak Spanish, we both work in the US, there is a kind of solidarity. Also, I think, a way of seeing. There are similarities; a way of seeing that was very much not the Anglo way, not the American way. This builds solidarity. Sometimes the solidarity gets tested, but there is something nonetheless.

Marxism

TR: Marx has so far somehow influenced most of my interviewees, even if they now have changed their former position. What about you?

SS: Oh my god, yes. In Argentina I was partly educated in this ridiculous English high school – where you had to study the rivers and kings of England, in English. It was also elitist – we had to wear a special, terribly cute uniform and a hat, making it clear to anyone that we were going to

that school. Eventually, at 14, I couldn't take it any more and presented my parents with the fact that I was leaving that school. So I went to study in the public school, the people's school, which happened to be a great one, and I did two years of high school there (actually three years of required work in two years, as I was getting interested in being done with high school). One of my teachers was a historian, actually a university professor who had probably been expelled for political reasons – the dictatorships were beginning at the time and there were military interventions in the universities. Teaching history in high school was probably his only survival option. For the first time in my life, and I'll never forget it, I learnt a Marxist interpretation of Latin American history; it unsettled what were famous events in the self-glorification of any nation-state. The materials he made us read, or at least me, as I had gotten very interested – university papers, unpublished materials – fantastic, an eye-opener. That professor was one of the most significant influences I have had. So was another university professor at that same high school, probably also expelled, who taught us about Ferdinand de Saussure and other structuralists. I learnt more from these extraordinary professors in exile from their universities than I learnt from some of my graduate school teachers years later.

TR: So Marx influenced you a lot?

SS: Enormously. But also, for instance, when I finished high school, in the last year I was doing philosophy in the university, and I remember reading Fromm's (1942) *The Fear of Freedom* – these were the books that blew my mind. I was very young – 16. And there I started to read Marx. Then when I went to France I wanted to study the Hegelian reading of Marx. Absolutely unfashionable at the time, when the Althusserian rupture *epistemologique* reigned supreme, and Deleuze and Foucault presided over the intellectual world! Along those lines, I spent a year reading about dialectical logic and it influenced me deeply. I really got my method from that work as a student of philosophy in France. I wrote a thesis that I'm still proud of, in French, which really dealt with the question of method. So I have been a hardcore, not a nice civilized well-rounded intellectual.

TR: But were you a Marxist?

SS: Marx is many things. I never presented myself as a 'Marxist'. Maybe at some point early on I did, in particular types of situations – when

dealing with a right-wing person or setting, to provoke. But there are elements of Marx's work that I took as a foundation for my own thinking and analysis – a sort of anchor. Marx is critical in my thinking for the way he worked with the issue of the place of labour. I'm not saying we can just use the labour theory of value, but his recognition of the fact of labour, embedded, frozen labour, the critical shaping of capitalism through the function of labour in the production process and in the realization of profit (whether through lowering wages, raising consumption capacity, class struggle). Nick Gane (2004) interviewed me and asked about the role of social class in my work; I found myself struggling for a clear concise answer. The other feature in Marx's work that matters to me is the dynamic quality of the analysis – actions have consequences, and the results are likely to be dialectical in that there is no full exit even for the powerful. That's also Engels. The possibility of putting in one unit what so easily could be seen as simple opposites, mutually exclusive factors. It's at the level of method.

When I was 13 I liked communism, I was an avid reader about communist Russia. I decided I was a 'communist' and I began to study Russian – did so for four years. Nobody asked me, I just wanted to do it. It was hard work.

TR: That sounds very familiar . . .

SS: Liking communism . . . many of us have been there, right? But my engagement with Marx was through a different *filière*, more along the question of method as I said earlier. For instance, when the 150th anniversary for the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848) came up, Eric Hobsbawm (1998) did a great introduction to a new edition. To celebrate it all there was a big event in New York and I was asked to speak. It brought together some of the greatest (and oldest) scholars of Marx, many Germans. I wasn't going to pretend to be a Marx scholar, not in that group. But I knew exactly what I wanted to say on that occasion: I can only address this text, the *Communist Manifesto*, through the question: does it work analytically, for the types of questions I have about contemporary dynamics? And the answer was then, and is today, yes.

This did leave open the question, however, as to whether I was a Marxist or not. My little piece got published, actually, and some people really liked the point I was making. In re-reading the *Manifesto* for that occasion, I liked particular sections that I could recover for my own questions, including the whole notion of the growth of socio-spatial

polarization in advanced capitalism, particularly in global cities, one I got much criticized for. I saw in the *Communist Manifesto* elements that could deal with that issue, and with the associated questions of consciousness (at a time, today, of little class consciousness) and narration (when today the dominant accounts emphasize individual opportunity and individual making of one's economic trajectory). I had a similar experience with Weber. Of course I studied Weber, but am not a scholar of Weber. The anniversary of Weber a few years ago, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, brought together some of the most distinguished (and again oldest) scholars of Weber, some so famous and old that one thought they no longer lived! I was invited to contribute, and again confronted the question as to whether I should do this since I am not a specialist. My logic was the same as with the *Manifesto*: does Weber work analytically for me today? It was not simply a matter of, I understand Weber and get something out of his work. No. For me it's a much more demanding question of the text. With this question in mind, I re-read *The City* (Weber, 1966[1921]). And yes, it works analytically. In my new book, and in some articles I've written since, I show how there is a useful analysis. I have come to use Marx, Weber and others, often at a late stage in my development.

TR: If we can still go back to Marxism. Is it an academic kind of Marxism that appealed to you, or political? Which?

SS: Well, when I'm talking about the analytics, it's the academic. I find it difficult though to separate these analytics from the politics. It's not that simple. It's not an 'either/or'. There is the 'ra ra' part, certainly in the *Manifesto*, and that used to move me deeply when I was 15, but now a bit less. There is a substantive rationality in there, which I like – the attempt to disaggregate, to re-narrate, to re-position a critical dimension of the social condition easily misread, and the political consequences of that re-reading and re-positioning (in this case of the working class). I love that, and much of my work and my politics is centred in that type of analytic effort – I like to put it as me digging in the penumbra of master categories. I try to be precise, to interpret classic texts in ways that get to their substantive and analytic heart. I want to make these texts work.

TR: And are you still a Marxist?

SS: In a certain sense, yes. But my research does not necessarily scream out: 'I'm a Marxist'. I use Marx analytically. It can get confusing. For

instance, once at a large audience talk in Santa Cruz, a debate emerged from the audience about my talk and shifted to whether I am a Marxist or a Foucauldian – at the time Santa Cruz was a famous college for its ideological/cultural intensity. Each side had actually captured something about me. I'm a bit of a mixture of Marx and Foucault. I think it is one kind of trajectory; I don't think I am alone in that. I have thrown in a third element, my own idiosyncratic theorization and analytics. It is this third element which creates the type of confusion or disagreement as in the Santa Cruz example.

Feminism

TR: So how much of a feminist are you?

SS: Well, good that you asked that. There was a time in New York in the late 1970s, when I was very young, when I was engaged by questions of sexuality and gender. It was not just the question of women getting out of the home and having the right to a career, but more about psychoanalytic approaches to feminism. One of the great books of that period for me was *Women and Madness* (Chesler, 1972). Historical, it re-examined the cases of several famous women who were declared mad by their husbands and families – though they were not of course, but just wanted freedoms and options or suffered under the absence of these. It was a dimension I had not thought about: the extent to which the high incidence of 'mental disorders' among women could be linked to a socio-political condition. There were two or three books by feminists that have been incredibly important for me. One of them was by Kate Millet – talk about digging in the shadow of master categories!

TR: Are you an academic or political feminist?

SS: When I do my research I'm very aware of my research practices, very keen on precision, on detecting. But I am not a 'gender scholar' as the term goes, nor am I a specialist of feminist analyses. I develop feminist analyses around questions that have not been subjected to such analyses. But even then, my method is not the one that feminist scholars of feminism would take. I do not start with the question of feminism. I am keen on detecting at what point, and how, I stumble on the feminist question. My attitude is more: I start with global finance (or the new ICTs, or migration, or the democratic deficit) and I will sooner or later stumble on the question of gendering (and in my reading it cannot be

simply that men and women have different salaries and career options; gendering has got to be working structurally). So my position is let's see when and how I come across the feminist *filière* in global finance, or whatever other domain. Eureka, there it is. In the case of global finance and its vast technical apparatus, it took quite an analytic scaffolding to detect (to see) gendering. Mine is an attempt to detect analytically where and how gendering is a strategic element in a complex organizational architecture, especially one that is typically not assumed to contain gendering, such as electronic markets.

TR: Do you see yourself as primarily a female academic?

SS: As I go around the world or move in many very diverse contexts, I realize there are situations where I *am being seen* as either a female or an honorary man. My response is not necessarily to immediately hoist the flag of feminism. I'm not a fanatic nor a moralist. I don't feel the need always to point out 'that is wrong'. I will raise the issue in situations where I consider it is important – especially if it will enable, rather than hurt, the women of the milieu I am visiting in.

Information technology

TR: You are a sociologist and economist. How did you become interested in information technology?

SS: That is actually an interesting story that begins in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I had been working on global financial markets so was inevitably already researching digitization and digital networks long before researching the internet became a crowded field. I found problematic the assumed correspondence between technical properties that are meant to deliver distributed outcomes and notions of democratizing effects. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the aura of democratic enhancement attributed to these technologies was at its highest. I was disturbed by my research findings about how these networked technologies were producing greater concentration in global finance: in the case of financial electronic markets, the technical properties of digital interactive network technologies did not necessarily produce distributed outcomes. They did produce decentralized access by investors – maximizing the participation of investors – but once that was done, the strong pattern was towards concentration in major financial

centres, no matter how much the global capital in circulation expanded due to that growing participation of investors worldwide.

I remember one of the first occasions I had to present this type of finding to an audience of techies and new media activists and theorists was one of the annual Ars Electronica jamborees, in Linz, Austria, in the early 1990s. Geert Lovink (2002a, 2002b, 2003) was on that panel, and he immediately understood. But for most others this was a sort of revelation, since my findings went against the dominant ideas in the community of new media theorists and activists that was emerging, and who had not focused on finance. The outcome in finance was not democratizing. On the contrary it was a clear instance of the power law distribution: even as the new technologies raised the number of participants (investors and financial centres), choices, and the overall volume of the global financial market, the leading participants raised their global share. We now have a critical research literature that is documenting this type of result (for example in the world of blogging): open networks and multiple choices do not necessarily create more 'democratic' outcomes; on the contrary, they produce winner-take-all outcomes (thus, returning to blogging, the top 20 percent of blogs in terms of visitors account for 80 percent of blog traffic).

TR: You use the terms 'digital networks' (Sassen, 2000b) and 'ICTs' (new information and communication technologies) (Sassen, 2004), but you have written that 'new ICTs do not replace existing media techniques' (Sassen, 2004: 657). How do you see the relationship between your terms and media and communications?

SS: I think what I wrote was that new ICTs do not *necessarily* replace older, existing technologies. As for the differences in the terms: to some extent these are constructs. When we say Media and Communications we are invoking an older category: in the academy it refers to all media (radio, print). When we say ICTs we are basically focusing on networked technologies (computer-centred). When I use digital networks I am confining myself to that specifically, it is a far narrower and more precise term than ICTs. But in many settings, still, especially large general audiences, you have got to use the term ICTs to communicate. If you use digital, or networked technologies, chances are many in the audience will not necessarily understand what exactly you are referring to.

TR: You have also used the concept of 'mediating practices' (Sassen, 2002b: 370). Could you elaborate it a bit further?

SS: By mediating practices I am trying to name a series of operations (social, subjective, cultural, technical) that mediate between the user and the technology. This bundle of operations is (still) often reduced to such variables as the 'interface', technical competence and kindred notions. In a way it shows us the extent to which we have naturalized one particular mediating practice. I want to capture the many different kinds we can find in the world today (a massive research agenda), or can conceive of. It problematizes the matter. It extricates an analytic border zone between user and technology where there is a tendency to collapse the matter into a dividing line between the user and the technology. It also allows for a more critical understanding of the user. For instance, you see in the literature a series of assumptions about who is the more likely savvy user: the young, the Westerner and the modern subject. And yet, subjects (users) that we understand to be very traditional (for instance scholars of the Koran) have been found (see Eickelman and Anderson, 1999), in certain cases, to be by far the more sophisticated users. Thus the readers of the Koran when they create online communities of interpretation are far more sophisticated users, as they hyperlink their way through multiple interpretations and annotations of the sacred text and create new links, than the 'Westernized' youth who basically cruise and visit favourite sites. I sometimes use the term 'cultures of use' which is a bit more specific than mediating practices. But returning to my example: the members of the community of interpretation of the Koran bring with them a culture of use that is more complex than that of many a Westernized consumer and cruiser of the internet. The electronic interactive domain is then a complex social ecology shaped by technology and by diverse cultures of use. It cannot be reduced to a set of technological properties.

In more recent work I have expanded this analysis to include 'actors' (as in electronic activists, or financial instruments circulating electronically), not just 'users'. Then the matter shifts from mediating practices to 'endogenized social logics' – endogenized into the digital networked/interactive domain (Sassen, 2006: Chap. 7).

TR: Do you think the media are interesting for your work?

SS: Very. For several reasons. Some have to do with the difference that these networked technologies make for the users, actors and domains that I research. Others have to do with the heuristic potential of such domains: they make legible issues of distribution (e.g. democracy), subjectivity (e.g. those who are immobile, stuck in their country or town,

can nonetheless participate in global networks around issues of interest, shared by localities and localized actors all around the world), power and its distortions (the case of finance and the technical properties of these technologies discussed earlier), and the complex interaction between the technical properties (the engineer's design and concept), and the social (cultures of use, the social logics users and actors bring into the networked domains). Much of this is discussed in my new book (Sassen, 2006).

TR: Are you more interested in technology than the content? Does the content matter less?

SS: In a way, yes. The content matters only insofar as it structures the networked domain, carries consequences for the intersection of technical properties and social logics – far less in the so-called 'content' literature, probably because I do not have time to really get into it. Who knows what all I would find if I did. But it would be a different type of project, analytically, politically and theoretically.

TR: Was there any previous work you found useful?

SS: Most useful were the critical new media theorists' literature and debates and meetings. I found the social science scholarship elementary in comparison, I will say. Elementary for two reasons: a perspective from the outside, sort of circling the animal. That is not enough. Second, especially in its earlier phase, the social science literature was caught up in the 'impacts of' approach – basically how the new networked technologies impacted on existing, familiar conditions (and thus familiar objects of study). In this type of framing, the technology functions as the independent variable, creating changes on the dependent variable. But the whole point of these networked technologies and their feedback potential is that they constitute whole new domains. Further, returning to the notions of cultures of use and endogenized social logics, the larger social context can alter the effect of the technical properties (distort, reduce, amplify, etc. those technical properties). Again, I discuss this at great length in my new book. Even today, I find that critical network theory is way ahead of the typical social science analysis.

TR: What is your latest project? What are you currently working on?

SS: In many ways my latest project is the new book (Sassen, 2006) I have just finished. It opened so many new doors in my thinking that I

am afraid I will be spending the next few years going digging in those new conceptual fields that I built for myself in that book. The book is long and detailed, and dense and boring. But it is pregnant – may it multiply.

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Notes

- 1 URL (consulted Jan. 2006): <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/sociology/whoswho/sennett.htm>
- 2 URL (consulted Jan. 2006): http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php-URL_ID=7373&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

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