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Diogenes 2004; 51; 59

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104043651

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Going Beyond the National State in the USA: The Politics of Minoritized Groups in Global Cities

Saskia Sassen

Beneath the reinvigorated imperial logics that organize the political economy of the US today, emergent social dynamics are enabling disadvantaged and minoritized groups to develop various forms of claim-making. New types of political actors are taking shape, changing the relationship between the state and the individual. Some of this is not formalized, and might be thought of as pre-political, but I argue that it is better seen as informal or not-yet-formalized types of politics.

This brief essay examines emergent spaces for politics and emergent political actors. The particular concern here is with types of politics that do not run through the formal political system, one with shrinking options for a growing number of US citizens and immigrants. Informal political actors and street-level politics in cities are major instances of this. US cities have a long history of street-level politics. The contents, the purposes, the mobilizers and the enactors of these politics have changed over time. Today's global cities are a very specific type of place because they bring together both the most globalized sectors of capital and the new transnational professionals, on the one hand, and a growing number of immigrants and native minoritized groups in a single, complex space. It is this feature I want to examine.¹

These new types of politics are not exclusive to the US. They are taking place in many countries around the world, with enormous variations in their manifestations precisely because they are not fully formalized. Yet the case of the US today is especially important because it is the dominant political, economic and military power in the world and because it has instituted the most severe and, in some ways, unconstitutional restrictions on the civil rights of citizens and immigrants.

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104043651

The spaces for politics

The space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics than the national political system. It can accommodate informal politics and informal political actors. And that is what is happening in major cities around the world. It is also happening in the US, notwithstanding the renewed nationalism and patriotism that have dominated the headlines. The formal political system is partly being destabilized through major current transformations, both at the international and at the subnational level. This is creating openings for new types of politics, at both the global and the local level, even as the national level remains as the most important and most institutionalized one. It is then a story of microtransformations and microsities in the US, but it is increasingly evident in a growing number of countries.

Internationally, globalization and the international human rights regime have contributed to create operational and legal openings for non-state actors to enter international arenas which were once the exclusive domain of national states. Various, often as yet very minor developments, signal that the state is no longer the exclusive subject for international law or the only actor in international relations. Other actors – from NGOs and First-Nation peoples to immigrants and refugees who become subjects of adjudication in human rights decisions – are increasingly emerging as subjects of international law and actors in international relations. That is to say, these non-state actors can gain visibility as individuals and as collectivities, and come out of the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign (that is, the government).

Subnationally, these trends along with the bundle of policies that we call neoliberal deregulation and privatization, are contributing to an incipient unbundling of the exclusive authority over territory and people we have long associated with the national state. The most strategic instantiation of this unbundling is probably the global city, which operates as a partly de-nationalized platform for global capital and, at the same time is emerging as a key site for the most astounding mix of people from all over the world. Further, the growing intensity of transactions among these cities world wide is creating strategic cross-border geographies – for capital, for professionals, for immigrants, for traders – which partly bypass the national state. This holds even for a state as powerful as that of the US. The new network technologies further strengthen these transactions, whether they are electronic transfers of specialized services among firms or Internet based communications among the members of globally dispersed diasporas and interest groups.²

These cities and the new strategic geographies that connect them can be seen as constituting part of the infrastructure for global civil society. They do so from the ground up, through multiple microsities. Among these microsities and microtransactions are a variety of organizations concerned with transboundary issues concerning immigration, asylum, international women's agendas, anti-globalization struggles, and many others. While these are not necessarily urban in their orientation or genesis, their geography of operations is partly inserted in a large number of cities. The new network technologies, especially the Internet, ironically have strengthened the urban map of these transboundary networks. It does not have to be that way, but at this time cities and the networks that bind them function as an

anchor and an enabler of cross-border struggles. These same developments and conditions also facilitate the internationalizing of terrorist and trafficking networks.

Global cities are, then, thick enabling environments for these types of activities, even though the networks themselves are not urban per se.³

Reinventing an old US history: the fight for recognition

The major cities in the US – New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, Boston, San Francisco – all function as spaces where non-formal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult at the national level. Nationally, politics needs to run through existing formal systems: whether the electoral political system or the judiciary (taking state agencies to court). Non-formal political actors are excluded from, and rendered invisible in, the space of national politics.

These cities accommodate a broad range of political activities – squatting, demonstrations against police brutality, fighting for the rights of immigrants and the homeless, the politics of culture and identity, gay and lesbian and queer politics. Much of this becomes visible on the street. Much of urban politics is concrete, enacted by people rather than dependent on massive media technologies. Street-level politics make possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system to 'exist'.

But the possibilities for these new types of politics and political actors are not confined to demonstrations and other kinds of activism. To get at issues that go beyond street level politics requires, however, a more indirect treatment. In the remainder of this essay I will discuss two kinds of issues. A first concerns the fact that even within the formal institution of the emblematic political actor – the citizen – US history has shown us a determination to keep incorporating new rights. This was clearly the case with the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. The question then becomes whether the current transformations afoot are once again signaling, especially to the disadvantaged, that citizenship is not yet a finished institution in the US.

A second kind of issue is that informal practices and political subjects not quite fully recognized as such can nonetheless function as part of the political landscape. Here I will discuss two instances of this. One of these is that of undocumented immigrants who are long term residents and engage in practices that are the same as those of formally defined citizens in the routines of daily life; this produces an informal social contract between these undocumented immigrants and the community. A second one concerns subjects who are by definition categorized as non-political, such as 'housewives', yet may actually have considerable political agency and be emergent political subjects.

The fight for substantive equality

There is today a growing tension between the legal equality contained in the institution of citizenship and the normative project of substantive equality. Enhanced inclusion has been an aim of various minorities and disadvantaged sectors. The struggles

of the 1960s were one such effort. Today the US is seeing an even broader array of minoritized citizens who are not satisfied with formal equality and are seeking visibility and recognition for their claim-making. A critical matter here is the failure in the US (and, indeed, in most countries) to achieve what citizenship is supposed to give: substantive equality, not merely formal equality.

Insofar as citizenship is at least partly shaped by the conditions within which it is embedded, today's novel landscape may well lead to a set of changes – one more in the long history of the institution. These may not yet be formalized and some may never become fully formalized. But the US has certainly been one country in the modern era that has evinced considerable determination on the part of minorities to gain rights. There is a specific American condition in all of this, given partly how the country was created: disadvantaged populations colonizing the lands of others and making them into disadvantaged peoples; slavery; robber barons. That is perhaps why few modern nation states have experienced the American trauma of the sharp tension between citizenship as a formal legal status and the reality of life as a citizen if one was not among the privileged. For the large masses of disadvantaged in the US, citizenship emerges as a normative project or an aspiration. It is the substantive exclusions suffered by lawful citizens which has in turn produced the strong politics of claim-making and of minority group rights that has characterized US history. The formal equality of citizens in the US after the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, has rarely embodied the need for substantive equality in social terms.

Today, with over 50 million Americans living below the poverty line and a massive attack on the civil rights of particular groups of citizens, we see a growing emphasis on rights and aspirations that go beyond the formal legal definition of rights and obligations.⁴ The growing prominence of an international human rights regime has produced areas of convergence even as it has underlined the differences between citizenship rights and human rights. The actual content and shape of the legal rights and obligations may also change.

There is in all of this a very American response. Because the principle of equal citizenship remains unfulfilled, even after the successful struggles and legal advances of the last five decades, there is a proliferation of political and academic initiatives. Groups who still face various exclusions from full participation in public life have multiplied their self-definitions – by race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and other 'identities'. This is especially so at the level of practices and high-visibility claim-making. Second, because full participation as a citizen rests on a material base (cf. T.H. Marshall; Joel Handler) poverty excludes large sectors of the population and the gap is widening. Feminist and race critical scholarship have highlighted the failure of gender and race neutral conceptions of citizenship and of rights.

At the same time, the disadvantaged position of these different groups also engendered the practices and struggles that forced changes in the formal institution of citizenship itself.⁵

In brief, citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded. This very American history of interactions between differential positionings and expanded inclusions signals the possibility that the new conditions of inequality and difference evident today and the new types of claim-making they produce may well bring about new forms of inclusion.

Informal political subjects as actors

There is in this American history a dynamic interaction between inclusion and exclusion. It is in this light that some of today's informal political subjects can be understood as political actors. In what follows I examine this in more detail by taking the case of undocumented immigrants who are a sort of non-persona, formally speaking, and the case of immigrant 'housewives' who are a kind of non-political persona – at least when functioning as 'housewives'.

Individuals, even when undocumented immigrants, can move between the multiple meanings of citizenship. The routines of undocumented immigrants in their daily life in the community where they reside (raising a family, schooling children, holding a job) earn them a particular type of recognition. It is often referred to as an informal social contract between such undocumented immigrants and their communities of residence (Schuck and Smith, 1985). Indeed, unauthorized immigrants who demonstrate civic involvement, social deservedness, and national loyalty can apply for legal residency in the US. Less formally, some interpret this as giving these undocumented immigrants informal citizenship claims even as the formal status and, more narrowly, legalization may continue to evade them.⁶

Different from the undocumented immigrant whose practices allow her to become accepted as a member of the political community, is the case of those who are authorized residents yet not recognized as political subjects. Beyond the case of discriminated minorities, this may also hold for regular natives who are not discriminated against. Here I want to take the case of legal immigrant residents, specifically the housewife as this is a non-political subject.

How to locate the informal political dimension in the subject that is the immigrant women in her role as housewife? Research on immigrant women in the US not surprisingly shows that immigrant women's regular wage work and improved access to other public realms has an impact on their culturally specified subordinate role to men in the household and in their role as housewives.⁷ More to the point of the argument here is the fact that it is precisely in their role as housewives that they are responsible for taking care of the children, which includes dealing with public state agencies: schools, health system, police, civic obligations. There are two arenas where immigrant women are active: institutions for public and private assistance, and the immigrant/ethnic community. These immigrant women are more active in community building and community activism and they are positioned differently from men regarding the broader economy and the state. They are the ones that are likely to have to handle the legal vulnerability of their families in the process of seeking public and social services for their families.

All of this amounts to participation in the public sphere and their possible emergence as public actors. They are often the ones in the household who mediate in this process. It is likely that some women benefit more than others from these circumstances. Yet, the important dynamic to recover is that precisely in their role as housewives, a non-political subject, they emerge as a type of informal political/civic subject. These are dimensions of citizenship and citizenship practices which do not fit the indicators and categories of mainstream frameworks for understanding citizenship and political life. Women in the condition of housewives and

mothers do not fit the categories and indicators used to capture participation in public life.

Conclusion

It is in this sense that those who lack power, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities, can gain presence in public domains, presence vis-a-vis power and presence vis-a-vis each other. This gaining of presence is enabled in the complex space of cities and assumes international dimensions in the case of global cities. This signals, for me, the possibility of a new type of politics centered in new types of political actors. It is not simply a matter of having or not having power. These are new hybrid bases from which to act.

We are seeing today in the US a whole new wave of claim making. Many of these transformations become legible in cities. In the city, these dynamics easily take concrete forms: the enactment of a large array of particular interests, from protests against police brutality, protests for the rights of immigrants, to sexual preference politics and house squatting by anarchists. I interpret this as a move towards citizenship practices that revolve around claiming rights to the city. These are not exclusively or necessarily urban practices. But it is especially in large cities that we see simultaneously some of the most extreme inequalities as well as conditions enabling these citizenship practices. In global cities, these practices also contain the possibility of directly engaging strategic forms of power, a fact that is significant in a context where power is increasingly privatized, globalized and elusive.

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Notes

1. For more detailed examinations please refer to Sassen (2002a, 2002b).
2. A good illustration of this is the coordinated demonstrations against the war on Iraq that enabled demonstrations on 15 February 2003 in at least 600 cities around the world.
3. In this regard, and on another theme, these cities also make possible people experiencing themselves as part of global non-state networks as they live their daily life. They enact what we have come to call global civil society in the microspaces of daily life rather than on some putative global stage.
4. See for instance the website for the American Civil Liberties Union to get at detailed information on the shrinking civil rights of immigrants and of citizens and the dismantling of several programs aimed at supporting disadvantaged citizens and immigrants.
5. In the US it was national law that 'braided the strands of citizenship' – formal legal status, rights, belonging – into the principle of equal citizenship. This took place through a series of Supreme Court Decisions and acts of Congress beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
6. In many countries around the world, including the US, long-term undocumented residents often can gain legal residence if they can document the fact of this long-term residence and 'good conduct'. US immigration law recognizes such informal participation as grounds for granting legal residency. For instance, prior to the new immigration law passed in 1996, individuals who could prove 7 years of continuous presence, good moral character, and that deportation would be an extreme hardship, were

eligible for suspension of deportation and, thus, US residency. NACARA extended the eligibility of this suspension of deportation to some 300,000 Salvadoreans and Guatemalans who were unauthorized residents in the US.

7. Immigrant women gain greater personal autonomy and independence while immigrant men lose ground compared to what was their condition in cultures of origin. Women gain more control over budgeting and other domestic decisions.

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