City, Culture and Society 1 (2010) 3–11

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

City, Culture and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ccs

The city: Its return as a lens for social theory

Saskia Sassen

Department of Sociology and Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University, 713 Knox Hall, 606 W. 122nd Street, New York, NY 10027, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 25 September 2010

ABSTRACT

The article examines in what ways the sociological study of cities can produce scholarship and analytic tools that help us understand the broader social transformations under way today. Urban sociology had this capacity early in the 20th century, when industrialization generated massive changes in cities. The thesis is that today globalization is similarly generating major changes that become visible in cities, most notably global cities. One critical issue here is whether these larger transformations evince sufficiently complex and multivalent urban instances as to allow us to construct such instances as objects of study that takes us beyond the urban moment of a process or condition. The urban moment of a major process can help the empirical study of that process in ways that other phases of such a process might not. At the same time, this urbanization of major processes repositions the city as an object of study. And this is the second question organizing this article: what is it we are actually naming today when we use the construct city?

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Introduction

The city has long been a strategic site for the exploration of many major subjects confronting society and sociology. But it has not always been a heuristic space – a space capable of producing knowledge about some of the major transformations of an epoch. In the first half of the 20th century, the study of cities was at the heart of sociology. This is evident in the work of Simmel, Weber, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and most prominently the Chicago School, especially Park and Wirth, both deeply influenced by German sociology. These sociologists confronted massive processes – industrialization, urbanization, alienation, a new cultural formation they called "urbanity." Studying the city was not simply studying the urban. It was about studying the major social processes of an era. Since then the study of the city, and with it urban sociology, gradually lost this privileged role as a lens for the discipline and as producer of key analytic categories. There are many reasons for this, most important among which are questions of the particular developments of method and data in sociology generally. Critical was the fact that the city ceased being the fulcrum for epochal transformations and hence a strategic site for research about non-urban processes. Urban sociology became increasingly concerned with what came to be called "social problems."

Today, as we enter a new century, the city is once again emerging as a strategic site for understanding some of the major new trends reconfiguring the social order. The city and the metropolitan region emerge as one of the strategic sites where major macro-social trends materialize and hence can be constituted as an object of study. Among these trends are globalization, the rise of the new information technologies, the intensifying of transnational and translocal dynamics, and the strengthening presence and voice of specific types of socio-cultural diversity. Each one of these trends has its own specific conditionalities, contents and consequences. The urban moment is but one moment in often complex multi-sited trajectories.

Urban sociology can capture some of these features. Other branches of sociology can use the urban moment to construct their object of research even when it is non-urban. Cities are also sites where each of these trends interacts with the others in distinct, often complex manners, in a way they do not in just about any other setting. This resurgence of the city as a site for research on these major contemporary dynamics is also evident in other disciplines. Anthropology, economic geography, cultural studies, and literary criticism, all have developed an extensive urban scholarship; most recently, economists are beginning to address the urban and regional economy in their analyses in ways that differ from an older tradition of urban economics, one that had lost much of its vigor and persuasiveness.

E-mail address: sjs2@columbia.edu

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doi:10.1016/j.ccs.2010.04.003

All of this raises one of the questions organizing the article. Can the sociological study of cities produce scholarship and analytic tools that help us understand the broader social transformations under way today as it once did early in the preceding century? One critical issue here is whether these larger transformations evince sufficiently complex and multivalent urban instantiations as to allow us to construct such instantiations as objects of study. The urban moment of a major process makes the latter susceptible to empirical study in ways that other phases of such a process might not. At the same time, this urbanization, albeit it partial, of major dynamics repositions the city as an object of study: what is it we are actually naming today when we use the construct city? This is the second question organizing this article.

Here I examine these questions of research and theorization by focusing particularly on globalization, the rise of the new information technologies, the intensifying of transnational and translocal dynamics, and the strengthening presence and voice of specific types of socio-cultural diversity. All of these are at a cutting edge of actual change that social theory needs to factor in to a far greater extent than it has. By far the best developed conceptually and empirically is socio-cultural diversity. Thus as regards this subject I will confine my treatment here to those issues of socio-cultural diversity that are bound up with the other major trends I am focusing. There is a strong emerging new literature on the other three trends, but mostly in disciplines other than sociology and, specifically, urban sociology.

These trends do not encompass the majority of social conditions; on the contrary, most social reality probably corresponds to older continuing and familiar trends. That is why much of sociology's traditions and well established subfields will remain important and constitute the heart of the discipline. Further, there are good reasons why most of urban sociology has not quite engaged the characteristics and the consequences of these three trends as they instantiate in the city: current urban data sets are quite inadequate for addressing these major trends at the level of the city. Yet, although these three trends may involve only parts of the urban condition and cannot be confined to the urban, they are strategic in that they mark the urban condition in novel ways and make it, in turn, a key research site for major trends.

Conceptual elements

Among today's dominant forces reconfiguring the social, the economic, the political, and the subjective are globalization and the new information technologies. Globalization and telecommunications have enabled a proliferation of transnational and translocal networks that cut across the boundaries of cities and states – that is to say, across the boundaries of major sociological framings and data sets. The traditional tools of sociology and social theory, let alone urban sociology can accommodate only some aspects of these trends.

The exception is an early generation of sociologists in what is today a still small but rapidly growing scholarship that has explicitly sought to theorize these new conditions and to specify them empirically (among the earlier beginnings of this scholarship see e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1999; Castells, 1989; Chase-Dunn, 1984; Gottdiener, 1985; King, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1994; Rodriguez & Feagin, 1986; Zukin, 1991, to cite but a few). Economic geography (e.g. Knox & Taylor, 1995; Short & Kim, 1999) and cultural studies (e.g. Bridges & Watson, 2010; Palumbo-Liu, 1999) also saw an early generation of key contributions.

A number of social theorists (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Taylor, 1997; Beck, 2005; Brenner, 1998) have examined the "embedded statism" that has marked the social sciences generally and become one obstacle to a full theorization of some of these issues. At the heart of embedded statism is the explicit or implicit assumption that the nation-state is the container of social processes. To this I would add two further features: the implied correspondence of national territory with the national, and the associated implication that the national and the non-national are two mutually exclusive conditions.

These various assumptions work well for many of the subjects studied in the social sciences. But they are not helpful in elucidating a growing number of situations when it comes to globalization and to a whole variety of transnational processes now being studied by social scientists. Nor are those assumptions helpful for developing the requisite research techniques. Further, while they describe conditions that have held for a long time – throughout much of the history of the modern state since WWI and in some cases even earlier – we are now seeing their partial unbundling.[1] For instance, I find (Sassen, 2007, 2008: chaps. 1, 5 and 6) that one of the features of the current phase of globalization is that the fact a process happens within the territory of a sovereign state does not necessarily mean it is a national process. Conversely, the national (e.g. firms, capital, cultures) may increasingly be located outside national territory, for instance, in a foreign country or in digital spaces. This localization of the global, or of the non-national, in national territories, and the localization of the national outside national territories, undermines a key duality running through many of the methods and conceptual frameworks prevalent in the social sciences – that the national and the non-national are mutually exclusive.

This partial unbundling of the national has significant implications for our analysis and theorization of major social transformations such as globalization and the possibility of focusing on the city to get at some of their critical empirical features. And it has significant implications for the city as an object of study. The city has long been a debatable construct, whether in early writings (Castells, 1972; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1974; Timberlake, 1985) or in recent ones (Brenner, 2004; Global Networks, 2010; Lloyd, 2005; Paddison, 2001). The unbundling of national space and of the traditional hierarchies of scale centered on the national, with the city nested somewhere between

[1] There have been many epochs when territories were subject to multiple, or at least more than one, system of rule (Sassen, 2008: Part One). In this regard the current condition we see developing with globalization is probably by far the more common one and the period from World War I – when we saw the gradual institutional tightening of the national state's exclusive authority over its territory – the historical exception. However, the categories for analysis, research techniques and data sets in the social sciences have largely been developed in that particular period. Thus we face the difficult and collective task of developing the theoretical and empirical specifications that allow us to accommodate the fact of multiple relations between territory and institutional encasement, rather than the singular one of national state and sovereign rule.

the local and the region, raises the ante in terms of prior conceptualizations. Major cities have historically been nodes where a variety of processes intersect in particularly pronounced concentrations. In the context of globalization, many of these processes are operating at a global scale cutting across historical borders, with the added complexities that brings with it. Cities emerge as one territorial or scalar moment in a trans-urban dynamic.[2] This is however, not the city as a bounded unit, but the city as a complex structure that can articulate a variety of cross-boundary processes and reconstitute them as a partly urban condition (Sassen, 2001). Further, this type of city cannot be located simply in a scalar hierarchy that puts it beneath the national, regional and global. It is one of the spaces of the global, and it engages the global directly, often by-passing the national. Some cities may have had this capacity long before the current era; but today these conditions have been multiplied and amplified to the point that they can be read as contributing to a qualitatively different urban era. Pivoting theorization and research on the city is one way of cutting across embedded statism and recovering the rescaling of spatial hierarchies under way.

Besides the challenge of overcoming embedded statism, there is the challenge of recovering place in the context of globalization, telecommunications, and the proliferation of transnational and translocal dynamics. It is perhaps one of the ironies at the start of a new century that some of the old questions of the early Chicago School of Urban Sociology should re-surface as promising and strategic to understand certain critical issues today. One might ask if their methods might be of particular use in recovering the category place (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1967; see also Duncan, 1959) at a time when dominant forces such as globalization and telecommunications seem to signal that place and the details of the local no longer matter. Robert Park and the Chicago School conceived of "natural areas" as geographic areas determined by unplanned, subcultural forces. This was an urban sociology that used fieldwork within a framework of human ecology and contributed many rich studies mapping detailed distributions and assuming functional complementarity among the diverse "natural areas" they identified in Chicago.[3]

Yet the old categories are not enough. Some of the major conditions in cities today, including the urban moment of non-urban dynamics, challenge mainstream forms of theorization and urban empirical analysis. Fieldwork is a necessary step in capturing many of the new aspects in the urban condition, including those having to do with the major trends focused on in this chapter. But assuming complementarity or functionalism brings us back to the notion of the city as a bounded space rather than one site, albeit a strategic one, where multiple trans-boundary processes intersect and produce distinct socio-spatial formations. Recovering place can only partly be met through the research techniques of the old Chicago School of Urban Sociology (see e.g. the debate in Cities and Communities vol. 1(1) 2001 and in Urban Geography, 2008). I do think we need to go back to some of the depth of engagement with urban areas that the School represented and the effort towards detailed mappings. The type of ethnographies done by Duneier (1999) or the scholars in Burawoy and et al. (1991), or the type of spatial analysis developed by Harvey (2007) and the authors in Global Networks (2010) are excellent examples, using many of the techniques yet working within a different set of framing assumptions.

But that is only part of the challenge of recovering place. Large cities around the world are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assume concrete, localized forms. These localized forms are, in good part, what globalization is about. Recovering place means recovering the multiplicity of presences in this landscape. The large city of today has emerged as a strategic site for a whole range of new types of operations – political, economic, "cultural," subjective (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Bartlett, 2007; Bridges & Watson, 2010; Bryson & Daniels, 2005; Dawson, 1999; Drainville, 2004; Thrift & Amin, 2002; Valle & Torres, 2000; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2001). It is one of the nexi where the formation of new claims materializes and assumes concrete forms. The loss of power at the national level produces the possibility for new forms of power and politics at the subnational level. Further, insofar as the national as container of social process and power is cracked (e.g. Beck, 2000; Lustiger-Thaler, 2004; Parsa & Keivani, 2002; Taylor, 1995) it opens up possibilities for a geography of politics that links subnational spaces across borders. Cities are foremost in this new geography. One question this engenders is how and whether we are seeing the formation of a new type of transnational politics that localizes in these cities.

Immigration, for instance, is one major process through which a new transnational political economy is being constituted both at the macro level of global labor markets and at the microlevel of translocal household survival strategies. It is one largely embedded in major cities insofar as most immigrants, certainly in the developed world, whether in the US, Japan or Western Europe, are concentrated in major cities (Boyd, 1989; Castles & Miller, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Mahler, 1995). It is, according to some scholars (Castles & Miller, 2003; Chinchilla & Hamilton, 2001; Cordero-Guzman, Smith, & Grosfoguel, 2001; Espinoza, 1999; Farrer, 2007; Sassen, 2007: chap. 6: Part One; Skeldon, 1997), one of the constitutive processes of globalization today, even though not recognized or represented as such in mainstream accounts of the global economy. The city is one of the key sites for the empirical study of these transnational flows and household strategies.

Global capital and the new immigrant workforce are two major instances of transnationalized actors with features that constitute each as a somewhat unitary actor overriding borders while at the same time in contestation with each other inside cities (Bartlett, 2007; Sassen, 1988: chap. 1). Researching and theorizing these issues will require approaches that diverge from the more traditional studies of political elites, local party politics, neighborhood associations, immigrant communities, and others, through which the political landscape of cities and metropolitan regions has been conceptualized in sociology.

[2] I have theorized this in terms of the network of global cities, where the latter are partly a function of that network. For example, the growth of the financial centers in New York or London is fed by what flows through the worldwide network of financial centers given deregulation of national economies. The cities at the top of this global hierarchy concentrate the capacities to maximize their capture of the proceeds so to speak.

[3] We can see this in early works such as The Taxi Dance Hall and The Gold Coast and the Slum and later in e.g. Suttles (1968).

In the next three sections I focus on some of these issues in greater detail.

The city as a site for research about the global information economy

The concept of the city is complex, imprecise, and charged with specific historical meanings (e.g. Castells, 1972; Hall, 1966; Harvey, 1985; Kresl & Ni, 2010; Lloyd, 2005; Park et al., 1967). A more abstract category might be centrality, one of the properties constitutive of cities, and, in turn, one they have historically provided and produced. Historically centrality has largely been embedded in the central city. One of the changes brought about by the new conditions is the reconfiguring of centrality: the central city is today but one form of centrality. Important emerging spaces for the constitution of centrality range from the new transnational networks of cities to electronic space (Castells, 1996; Ernst, 2005; Graham & Marvin, 1996; Parnreiter, 2002).

A focus on centrality does not necessarily address matters such as the boundaries of cities or what cities actually are. These are partly empirical questions (each city is going to have a different configuration of boundaries and contents) and theoretical ones (is a city necessarily a civitas, is any large urban agglomeration a city). The question is, rather, what are the conditions for the continuity of centrality in advanced economic systems in the face of major new organizational forms and technologies that maximize the possibility for geographic dispersal at the regional, national and indeed, global scale, and simultaneous system integration?

A second major issue for thinking about the city as a site for researching non-urban dynamics concerns the narratives we have constructed about the city and its relation to the global economy and to the new technologies.[4] The understandings and the categories that dominate mainstream discussions about the future of advanced economies imply the city has become obsolete for leading economic sectors. We need to subject these notions to critical examination. There are at least two sets of issues that need to be teased out if we are to understand the role if any of cities in a global information economy, and hence the capacity of urban research to produce knowledge about that economy. One of these concerns the extent to which these new types of electronic formations, such as electronic financial markets, are indeed disembedded from social contexts. The second set of issues concerns possible instantiations of the global economy and of the new technologies that have not been recognized as such or are contested representations. I have addressed these issues at greater length elsewhere (2010) and return to them only briefly in the last two sections of this chapter.

Finally, and on a somewhat more theorized level, there are certain properties of power that make cities strategic. Power needs to be historicized to overcome the abstractions of the concept. Power is not simply an attribute or a sort of factor endowment. It is actively produced and reproduced. Many of the studies in urban sociology focused on the local dimensions of power (e.g. Clark & Hoffman-Martinot, 1998; Domhoff, 1991; Logan & Molotch, 1987) have made important contributions in this regard. Beyond this type of approach, one of the aspects today in the production of power structures has to do with new forms of economic power and the re-location of certain forms of power from the state to the market, partly due to deregulation and privatisation. In the case of cities, this brings with it also questions about the built environment and the architectures of centrality that represent different types of power. Cities have long been places for the spatialization of power. More generally, we might ask whether power has spatial correlates, or a spatial moment? In terms of the economy this question could be operationalized more concretely: Can the current economic system, with its strong tendencies towards concentration in ownership and control, have a space economy that lacks points of physical concentration? It is hard to think about a discourse on the future of cities that would not include this dimension of power.

To some extent, it is the major cities in the highly developed world which most clearly display the processes discussed here, or best lend themselves to the heuristics deployed. However, increasingly these processes are present in cities in developing countries as well (Amen, Kevin, & Martin Bosman, 2006; Cohen, Ruble, Tulchin, & Garland, 1996; Gugler, 2004; Knox & Taylor, 1995; Santos, De Souze, & Silveira, 1994). Their lesser visibility is often due to the fact they are submerged in the megacity syndrome. Sheer population size and urban sprawl create their own orders of magnitude (e.g. Dogan & Kasarda, 1988; Gugler, 2004); and while they may not much alter the power equation I describe, they do change the weight, and the legibility, of some of these properties (e.g. Bridges & Watson, 2010; Cohen et al., 1996; Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000).

One way of framing the issue of centrality is by focusing on larger dynamics rather than beginning with the city as such. For instance, we could note that the geography of globalization contains both a dynamic of dispersal and of centralization, the latter a condition that has only recently been recognized in macro-level globalization studies. Most of the latter has focused on dispersal patterns. The massive trends towards the spatial dispersal of economic activities at the metropolitan, national and global level which we associate with globalization have contributed to a demand for new forms of territorial centralization of top-level management and control operations (Sassen, 2001: Parts One and Two). The fact, for instance, that firms worldwide now have well over half a million affiliates outside their home countries signals that the sheer number of dispersed factories and service outlets that are part of a firm's integrated operation creates massive new needs for central coordination and servicing. In brief, the spatial dispersal of economic activity made possible by globalization and telecommunications contributes to an expansion of central functions if this dispersal is to take place under the continuing concentration in control, ownership and profit appropriation that characterizes the current economic system.

It is at this point that the city enters the discourse. Cities regain strategic importance because they are favored sites for the production of these central functions. National and global markets as well as globally integrated organizations

[4] For an explanation of issues concerning narratives in this domain (see, for instance, Holston, 1996; Sandercock 2003).

require central places where the work of globalization gets done. Finance and advanced corporate services are industries producing the organizational commodities necessary for the implementation and management of global economic systems. Cities are preferred sites for the production of these services, particularly the most innovative, speculative, internationalized service sectors.[5] Further, leading firms in information industries require a vast physical infrastructure containing strategic nodes with hyperconcentration of facilities; we need to distinguish between the capacity for global transmission/communication and the material conditions that make this possible. Finally, even the most advanced information industries have a production process that is at least partly place-bound because of the combination of resources it requires even when the outputs are hypermobile; the tendency in the specialized literature has been to study these advanced information industries in terms of their hypermobile outputs rather than the actual work processes which include top level professionals as well as clerical and manual service workers.

When we start by examining the broader dynamics in order to detect their localization patterns, we can begin to observe and conceptualize the formation, at least incipient, of transnational urban systems. The growth of global markets for finance and specialized services, the need for transnational servicing networks due to sharp increases in international investment, the reduced role of the government in the regulation of international economic activity and the corresponding ascendance of other institutional arenas with a strong urban connection – all these point to the existence of a series of transnational networks of cities. These are of many different kinds and types. Business networks are probably the most developed given the growth of a global economy. But we also see a proliferation of social, cultural, professional, and political networks connecting particular sets of cities.

To a large extent the major business centers in the world today draw their importance from these transnational networks. There is no such entity as a single global city – and in this sense there is a sharp contrast with the erstwhile capitals of empires.[6] These networks of major international business centers constitute new geographies of centrality. The most powerful of these new geographies of centrality at the global level binds the major international financial and business centers: New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Sydney, Hong Kong, among others. But this geography now also includes cities such as Bangkok, Seoul, Taipei, Shanghai, Sao Paulo, Mexico City. The intensity of transactions among these cities, particularly through the financial markets, trade in services, and investment has increased sharply, and so have the orders of magnitude involved. There has been a sharpening inequality in the concentration of strategic resources and activities between each of these cities and others in the same country. This has consequences for the role of urban systems in national territorial integration. Although the latter has never quite been what its model signals, the last decade has seen a further acceleration in the fragmentation of national territory. National urban systems are being partly unbundled as their major cities become part of a new or strengthened transnational urban system.

But we can no longer think of centers for international business and finance simply in terms of the corporate towers and corporate culture at their center. The international character of major cities lies not only in their telecommunication infrastructure and foreign firms: it lies also in the many different cultural environments in which these workers and others exist. This is one arena where we have seen the growth of an enormously rich scholarship (Bridges & Watson, 2010; King, 1990; Krause & Petro, 2003; Lloyd, 2005; Sennett, 2008; Zukin, 1991). Today's major cities are in part the spaces of post-colonialism and indeed contain conditions for the formation of a postcolonialist discourse. This is likely to become an integral part of the future of such cities.

A new transnational political geography

The incorporation of cities into a new cross-border geography of centrality also signals the emergence of a parallel political geography. Major cities have emerged as a strategic site not only for global capital, but also for the transnationalization of labor and the formation of translocal communities and identities or subjectivities. In this regard cities are a site for new types of political operations. The centrality of place in a context of global processes makes possible a transnational economic and political opening for the formation of new claims and hence for the constitution of entitlements, notably rights to place. At the limit, this could be an opening for new forms of "citizenship" (e.g. Bartlett, 2007; Holston, 1996; Torres, Miron, & Inda, 1999). The emphasis on the transnational and hypermobile character of capital has contributed to a sense of powerlessness among local actors, a sense of the futility of resistance. But an analysis that emphasizes place suggests that the new global grid of strategic sites is a terrain for politics and engagement (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Bridges & Watson, 2010; King, 1996; Sandercock, 2003).

This is a space that is both place-centered in that it is embedded in particular and strategic locations; and it is transterritorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other through various networks. Is there a transnational politics embedded in the centrality of place and in the new geography of strategic places, such as is for instance the new worldwide grid of global cities? This is a geography that cuts across national borders and the old North–South divide. But it does so along bounded vectors. It is a set of specific and partial rather than all-encompassing dynamics. It is not only the transmigration of capital that takes place in this global grid, but also that of people, both rich, i.e. the new transnational professional workforce, and poor, i.e. most migrant workers; and it is a space for the transmigration of cultural forms, the reterritorialization of "local" subcultures.

[5] For instance, only a small share of Fortune 500 firms, which are mostly large industrial firms, have their headquarters in NYC, but over 40% of firms who earn over half of their revenues from overseas are located in NYC. Furthermore, even large industrial firms tend to have certain specialized headquarter functions in NYC. Thus Detroit-based GM, and many other such firms, has its headquarters for finance and public relations in Manhattan.

[6] The data are still inadequate; one of the most promising data sets at this time is that organized by Taylor and his colleagues (GaWC; Taylor, 2004) and the type of data elaborated by Beckfield and Arthur (2006). But much remains to be done in this field.

If we consider that large cities concentrate both the leading sectors of global capital and a growing share of disadvantaged populations – immigrants, many of the disadvantaged women, people of color generally, and, in the megacities of developing countries, masses of shanty dwellers – then we can see that cities have become a strategic terrain for a whole series of conflicts and contradictions (Allen, Massey, & Pryke, 1999; Fainstein & Judd, 1999; Gugler, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Nashashibi, 2007; Sandercock, 2003). We can then think of cities also as one of the sites for the contradictions of the globalization of capital, even though, heeding Katznelson's (1992) observation, the city cannot be reduced to this dynamic.

One way of thinking about the political implications of this strategic transnational space anchored in cities is in terms of the formation of new claims on that space. The city has indeed emerged as a site for new claims: by global capital which uses the city as an "organizational commodity", but also by disadvantaged sectors of the urban population, frequently as internationalized a presence in large cities as capital. The "de-nationalizing" of urban space and the formation of new claims by transnational actors, raise the question Whose city is it?

Foreign firms and international business people have increasingly been entitled to do business in whatever country and city they chose – entitled by new legal regimes, by the new economic culture, and through progressive deregulation of national economies (Sassen, 1996: chaps. 1 and 2; 2008: chap. 5). They are among the new city users. The new city users have made an often immense claim on the city and have reconstituted strategic spaces of the city in their image. Their claim to the city is rarely contested, even though the costs and benefits to cities have barely been examined. They have profoundly marked the urban landscape. For Martinotti (1993), they contribute to change the social morphology of the city; the new city of these city users is a fragile one, whose survival and successes are centered on an economy of high productivity, advanced technologies, intensified exchanges (Martinotti, 1993). It is a city whose space consists of airports, top level business districts, top of the line hotels and restaurants, in brief, a sort of urban glamour zone.

Perhaps at the other extreme, are those who use urban political violence to make their claims on the city, claims that lack the de facto legitimacy enjoyed by the new "city users." These are claims made by actors struggling for recognition, entitlement, claiming their rights to the city (Body-Gendrot, 1999; Drainville, 2004; Fainstein, 1993; Hagedorn, 2007; Sandercock, 2003; Wacquant, 1997; Wright, 1997). These claims have, of course, a long history; every new epoch brings specific conditions to the manner in which the claims are made. The growing weight of "delinquency" (e.g. smashing cars and shopwindows; robbing and burning stores) in some of these uprisings over the last decade in major cities of the developed world is perhaps an indication of the sharpened socio-economic inequality – the distance, as seen and as lived, between the urban glamour zone and the urban war zone. The extreme visibility of the difference is likely to contribute to further brutalization of the conflict: the indifference and greed of the new elites versus the hopelessness and rage of the poor.

There are two aspects in this formation of new claims that have implications for the transnational politics that are increasingly being played out in major cities. One is the sharp and perhaps sharpening differences in the representation of claims by different sectors, notably international business and the vast population of low income "others" immigrants, women, people of color generally. The second aspect is the increasingly transnational element in both types of claims and claimants. It signals a politics of contestation embedded in specific places but transnational in character. One challenge for urban sociology is how to capture such a cross-border dynamic with existing or new categories and, in doing so, how not to lose the city as a site.

Cities and political subjectivity

This chapter started with a consideration of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and its possible contribution to some of the challenges current developments pose for urban theory. This concluding section of the chapter goes back to Weber's The City in order to examine the production of political subjectivity signaled by the preceding section.

In his effort to specify the ideal-typical features of what constitutes the city, Weber sought out a certain type of city – most prominently the cities of the late middle ages rather than the modern industrial cities of his time. Weber sought a kind of city which combined conditions and dynamics that forced its residents and leaders into creative and innovative responses/adaptations. Further, he posited that these changes produced in the context of the city signaled transformations that went beyond the city and could institute often fundamental transformations. In that regard the city offered the possibility of understanding far reaching changes that could – under certain conditions – eventually encompass society at large.

There are two aspects of Weber's The City that are of particular importance here. Weber helps us understand under what conditions cities can be positive and creative influences on peoples' lives (Isin, 2000; Sassen, 2008: chap. 6). For Weber cities are a set of social structures that encourage individuality and innovation and hence are an instrument of historical change. There is, in this intellectual project a deep sense of the historicity of these conditions. Modern urban life did not correspond to this positive and creative power of cities; Weber saw modern cities as dominated by large factories and office bureaucracies. My own reading of the Fordist city corresponds in many ways to Weber's in the sense that the strategic scale under Fordism is the national scale and cities lose significance. It is the large Fordist factory and the mines which emerge as key sites for the political work of the disadvantaged and those without or with only limited power.

Struggles around political, economic, legal, cultural, issues centered in the realities of cities can become the catalysts for new trans-urban developments in all these institutional domains – markets, participatory governance, rights for members of the urban community regardless of lineage, judicial recourse, cultures of engagement and deliberation. For Weber, it is particularly the cities of the late Middle Ages that combine the conditions that pushed urban residents, merchants, artisans and leaders to address

them and deal with them. These transformations could make for epochal change beyond the city itself: Weber shows us how in many of these cities these struggles led to the creation of the elements of what we could call governance systems and citizenship.

The particular analytic element I want to extricate from this aspect of Weber's understanding and theorization of the city is the historicity of those conditions that make cities strategic sites for the enactment of important transformations in multiple institutional domains. Today a certain type of city – the global city – has emerged as a strategic site for innovations and transformations in multiple institutional domains. Several of the key components of economic globalization and digitization instantiate in this type of city and produce dislocations and destabilizations of existing institutional orders and legal/regulatory/normative frames for handling urban conditions. It is the high level of concentration of these new dynamics in these cities which forces creative responses and innovations. There is, most probably, a threshold effect at work here.

The historicity of this process rests in the fact that under Keynesian policies, particularly the Fordist contract, and the dominance of mass manufacturing as the organizing economic dynamic, cities had lost strategic functions and were not the site for creative institutional innovations. The strategic sites were the large factory at the heart of the larger process of mass manufacturing and mass consumption, and the national government where regulatory frameworks were developed and the Fordist contract instituted. The factory and the government were the strategic sites where the crucial dynamics producing the major institutional innovations of the epoch were located. With globalization and digitization – and all the specific elements they entail – global cities emerge as such strategic sites. While the strategic transformations are sharply concentrated in global cities, many are also enacted (besides being diffused) in cities at lower orders of national urban hierarchies.[7]

A second analytic element I want to extricate from Weber's The City is the particular type of embeddedness of the transformations he describes and renders as ideal-typical features. This is not an embeddedness in what we might think of as deep structures because the latter are precisely the ones that are being dislocated or changed and are creating openings for new fundamental arrangements to emerge. The embeddedness is, rather, in very specific conditions, opportunities, constraints, needs, interactions, contestations, interests. The aspect that matters here is the complexity, detail and social thickness of the particular conditions and the dynamics he identifies as enabling change and innovation. This complexity and thickness also produces ambiguities in the meaning of the changes and innovations. It is not always clear whether they are positive – where we might interpret positive as meaning the creation or strengthening of some element, even if very partial or minor, of participatory democracy in the city – and in what time frame their positiveness would become evident. In those cities of the late Middle Ages he saw as being what the city is about, he finds contradictory and multi-valent innovations. He dissects these innovations to understand what they can produce or launch.

The argument I derive from this particular type of embeddedness of change and innovation is that current conditions in global cities are creating not only new structurations of power but also operational and rhetorical openings for new types of political actors which may have been submerged, invisible or without voice. A key element of the argument here is that the localization of strategic components of globalization in these cities means that the disadvantaged can engage the new forms of globalized corporate power, and secondly that the growing numbers and diversity of the disadvantaged in these cities under these conditions assumes a distinctive "presence." This entails a distinction between powerlessness and invisibility/impotence. The disadvantaged in global cities can gain "presence" in their engagement with power but also vis a vis each other. This is different from the 1950s to 1970s period in the US, for instance, when white flight and the significant departure of major corporate headquarters left cities hollowed out and the disadvantaged in a condition of abandonment. Today, the localization of the global creates a set of objective conditions of engagement, e.g. the struggles against gentrification which encroaches on minority and disadvantaged neighborhoods and led to growing numbers of homeless beginning in the 1980s and the struggles for the rights of the homeless, or demonstrations against police brutalizing minority people. These struggles are different from the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s which were short, intense eruptions confined to the ghettos and causing most of the damage in the neighborhoods of the disadvantaged themselves. In these ghetto uprisings there was no engagement with power.

An important element is Weber's emphasis on certain types of innovation and change: the construction of rules and norms precisely because deeper arrangements on which norms had been conditioned are being destabilized.[8]

Herein also lie openings for new political actors to emerge, as well as changes in the role or locus of older norms, political actors and forms of authority. This is a highly dynamic configuration where older forms of authority may struggle and succeed in reimposing themselves.[9]

The conditions that today mark the possibility of cities as strategic sites are basically two, and both capture major transformations that are destabilizing older systems organizing territory and politics, as briefly discussed in the first half of the chapter. One of these is the re-scaling of what are the strategic territories that articulate the new politico-economic system. The other is the partial unbundling or at least weakening of the national as container of social process due to the variety of dynamics encompassed by

[7] Furthermore, in my reading, particular institutions of the state also are such strategic sites even as there is an overall shrinking of state authority through deregulation and privatisation.

[8] Much of Weber's examination focuses on the gradual emergence and structuring of the force-composition of the city in various areas under different conditions and its gradual stabilization into a distinct form. He traces the changing composition of forces from the ancient kingships through the patrician city to the demos of the ancient world, from the episcopal structures and fortresses through the city of notables, to the guild dominated cities in Europe. He is always trying to lay bare the complex processes accompanying the emergence of urban community which for Weber is akin to what today we might describe in terms of governance and citizenship.

[9] Cf. his examination of how these types of changes and innovations derive from his key concepts, or categories for analysis: social actions, social relations, and social institutions – all critical to his theory of the urban community.

globalization and digitization.[10] The consequences for cities of these two conditions are many: what matters here is that cities emerge as strategic sites for major economic processes and for new types of political actors. More generally one could posit that insofar as citizenship is embedded and in turn marked by its embeddedness (Sassen, 2008: chap. 6), these new conditions may well signal the possibility of new forms of citizenship practices and identities.[11]

What is being engendered today in terms of political practices in the global city is quite different from what it might have been in the medieval city of Weber. In the medieval city we see a set of practices that allowed the burghers to set up systems for owning and protecting property and to implement various immunities against despots of all sorts.[12] Today's political practices, I would argue have to do with the production of "presence" by those without power and with a politics that claims rights to the city rather than protection of property.[13] What the two situations share is the notion that through these practices new forms of political subjectivity, i.e. citizenship, are being constituted and that the city is a key site for this type of political work. The city is, in turn, partly constituted through these dynamics. Far more so than a peaceful and harmonious suburb, the contested city is where the civic is getting built. After the long historical phase that saw the ascendance of the national state and the scaling of key economic dynamics at the national level, the city is once again today a scale for strategic economic and political dynamics.

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[10] The impact of globalization on sovereignty has been significant in creating operational and conceptual openings for other actors and subjects. At the limit this means that the state is no longer the only site for sovereignty and the normativity that comes with it, and further, that the state is no longer the exclusive subject for international law and the only actor in international relations. Other actors, from NGOs and minority populations to supranational organizations, are increasingly emerging as subjects of international law and actors in international relations.

[11] This can also be extended to the transnational level. The ascendance of a large variety of non-state actors in the international arena signals the expansion of an international civil society. This is clearly a contested space, particularly when we consider the logic of the capital market – profitability at all costs – against that of the human rights regime. But it does represent a space where other actors can gain visibility as individuals and as collective actors, and come out of the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign.

[12] This raises a number of questions. For instance, in Russia, where the walled city did not evolve as a centre of urban immunities and liberties, the meaning of citizen might well diverge from concepts of civil society and cities, and belong to the state rather than the city.

[13] I use the term presence to name a particular condition within the overall condition of powerlessness. There is a distinction to be made between powerlessness and being an actor even though lacking power. In the context of a strategic space such as the global city, the types of disadvantaged people described here are not simply marginal; they acquire presence in a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity. This presence signals the possibility of a politics. What this politics will be will depend on the specific projects and practices of various communities. Insofar as the sense of membership of these communities is not subsumed under the national, it may well signal the possibility of a transnational politics centered in concrete localities.

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