

# The middle classes

## An historic actor in today's global world

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**Saskia Sassen** draws lines of shared experience between the protests of the 'modest middle classes' in diverse countries around the world, focusing on a common sense that the modern state is failing its people and a new conception of 'the street' as a space for political action and history-making.

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There is a shared set of claims among the protest movements of the last two years. This in itself is quite remarkable, given the sharp differences in situation between Spain, Egypt, Greece, the US, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, and other countries that have seen their people in the streets. Each of these movements has arrived at protest through its own history and ecology of meanings; each comes out of a specific history of opportunities and oppressions, with a different understanding of what makes for a good society. But today, these diverse histories converge on a couple of pivotal points.

First, it is a protest against the state much more than it is against 'capitalism' or multinational corporations, as was the case in the 1960s. Second, it is mostly the *modest* middle classes, with modest aspirations and modest visions. It is not the wealthy middle classes, who have gotten richer than they ever thought they would be. Nor is it the syndicalists of the late 1800s and early 1900s, or of the struggles that followed the world wars.

This is perhaps the most revealing aspect – that this global epoch, with its vast complexity and brutality on a perhaps unprecedented scale, has found its history-making actor: the modest middle classes.<sup>1</sup>

### WHEN THE STATE FAILS ITS PEOPLE

What exactly has driven these movements? It is a strong conviction that the state has failed the people – not the poorest, nor the rich, nor the top 20 per cent of the wealthy middle class – but that beautiful and ambiguous image of 'the people'. The poor and the rich are rarely invoked by the notion of 'the people' – rather, what is conjured up in our modernity is the vast middle classes and the prosperous working classes.

Today, it is the middle classes who have 'standing' with the state, more so than the rich or the working classes. It is the middle classes that have been the main beneficiaries of the liberal state, the welfare state. They are

1 I develop some of these issues in greater detail in my forthcoming book *Expulsions: Complexity and Brutality in the Global Economy* (Harvard University Press).

protesting against the state because the state is failing them – ‘austerity politics’ is one important manifestation of this failure. Their socioeconomic situation has been eroded by neoliberal economic policies that have seen both wealth and opportunity captured by a narrowing minority. This holds true in a broad array of countries, although it is in liberal democracies where it is clearest.

We could ask why they are not protesting against firms that are paying lower wages, transforming full-time jobs into casual employment, outsourcing work, rolling back pensions. One reason is that many of the young middle class are unemployed – often they have no connection, no ‘standing’ with firms. But more substantively, it is the reorientation of the state towards supporting the top of the system and failing the vast middle sectors that is the issue here.

In a larger historical sense, the deep meaning of this type of movement is to remind us that the state has a contract with its people – a contract that goes beyond the formal fact of citizenship – as in the right to vote, the right to enter the country, the right to reside. More and more of the middle class, it seems, feel betrayed by the state because it has broken the social contract with a hardworking, dutiful section of the population.

Let’s remember that this is not only in liberal societies. Communist Russia was a modern state with a strong welfare function. So was Egypt under military rule, first with Nasser, though less so thereafter. The modern state provides infrastructure, housing, public education, public transport and more. When the new neoliberal logic sets in, the losers are the modest middle classes. After all, the poor didn’t get much from the modern state anyhow.

In countries as diverse as the US, Turkey, Egypt, Chile and Russia the middle classes enjoyed robust growth through much of the 20th century. However, a change began in the 1990s that eventually exploded in the late 2000s, when a new generation reached working age. The new generation – the sons and daughters of the modest middle classes and prosperous working classes – find that they get less and less, no matter how hard they work, how hard they study, however much they try to be good citizens. The distance between them and their states becomes larger and larger, both substantively, in terms of fewer public benefits, and politically, notably in declining trust in governments.

These new types of demonstrations, which start with the modest middle classes, are telling the state: ‘You failed me. I did what I was meant to do – work hard, finish my studies, stay out of jail – and now, there is nothing for me. You have failed me. You have broken the social contract.’ In so doing they are actually invoking a robust meaning of ‘citizenship’ in the state.

## THE GLOBAL STREET

The spaces and modes of these protest movements are also distinct. They are not marches: they are occupations of a space. Even when there is marching, there is a strong sense of the idea of occupying a public space, something that the state has secured for its people.

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The uprisings in the Arab world, the daily neighbourhood protests in China's major cities, Latin America's *piqueteros* and demonstrators with pots and pans – all these are vehicles for making social and political claims. We can add to this set the familiar anti-gentrification struggles and demonstrations against police brutality in US cities during the 1980s and in cities worldwide in the 1990s, which continue today. Most recently, over 100,000 people marched in Tel Aviv, a first for this city, and they did so not to bring down the government but to ask for access to housing and jobs. Part of the demonstration was Tel Aviv's tent city, housing mostly impoverished middle-class citizens. In Spain, *los Indignados* have been demonstrating peacefully throughout the country, most visibly in Madrid and Barcelona, for jobs and social services. Similar claims guided the 600,000 who went to the streets in late August in several cities in Chile. The 'riots' in London in August 2011 and the Occupy movement in the US also responded to social questions, even if the London riots were later overtaken by consumer indignation expressed as looting.

I would say that these demonstrations are about survival. They are engaging real and threatening developments. There is a vast amount of data that shows clearly that the modest middle classes are becoming poorer, even as the top 20 per cent is becoming richer. It is this struggle for socioeconomic survival that marks a change from the demonstrations of the 1960s and '70s – these were also global, but were very much for freedom from older conventions on how one should live one's life. These demonstrations were a marker of the socioeconomic success of the large middle classes, including a new and very prosperous upper-middle class – though this was still nothing like the super-rich top 20 per cent of today, whose source of wealth is not that of the traditional middle class at all but of a very different type of political economy.

Globalisation plays a role here. In at least some respects, these economies and societies share similarities, whether in Egypt, in Argentina, in Spain, in Iran, in Russia, in Brazil. This is partly a function of a globalising economy (even if partial) and access to a common social media. They share the condition of growing disadvantage in the face of increasing wealth at the top. And they share the reality that they will be poorer and more confined in their life projects than their parents were, even their grandparents.

Together, these diverse examples make me think of a concept that reaches beyond the details of each case – the Global Street. It is not new; indeed, the global street is part of many of our histories across time and space, even as its specific forms vary accordingly. In each of the current cases, I would argue that the street – the urban street as public space – is to be differentiated from the classic European notion of the more ritualised spaces for public activity, with the piazza and boulevard being the emblematic instances. Instead, I think of the space of 'the street', which of course includes squares and any available open space, as a more raw and less ritualised space. The street can, thus, be conceived as a space where new forms of the social and the political can be made, rather than a space for enacting ritualised routines. With some conceptual stretching,

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we might say that politically, 'street and square' are marked differently from 'boulevard and piazza' – the first signals action, the second ritual.

Seen this way, there is an epochal quality to the current wave of street protests, despite their enormous differences. The city is a space where the powerless can make history. That is not to say it is the only space, but it is certainly a critical one. Being present and becoming visible to each other can alter the character of powerlessness. There are different types of powerlessness<sup>2</sup> – it is not an absolute condition that can be flattened out as simply the absence of power. Under certain conditions, powerlessness can become complex, by which I mean that it contains the possibility of making the political, or making the civic, or making history. There is a difference between powerlessness and invisibility or impotence. Many of the protest movements we have seen in recent years are a case in point: these protesters may not have gained power but with the modest middle classes at their heart they are making a history and a politics.

**Saskia Sassen is the Robert S Lynd professor of sociology at Columbia University. Her work can be seen at [saskiasassen.com](http://saskiasassen.com).**

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<sup>2</sup> See Sassen S (2008) *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Princeton University Press, chs 6 and 8.