

## LOCAL ACTORS IN GLOBAL POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

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Globalisation and the new ICTS have enabled a variety of local political actors to enter international arenas once exclusive to national states. Multiple types of claim-making and oppositional politics articulate these developments. Going global has been partly facilitated and conditioned by the infrastructure of the global economy, even as the latter is often the object of those oppositional politics. Further, and in my analysis, very importantly, the possibility of global imaginaries has enabled even those who are geographically immobile to become part of global politics. NGOs and indigenous peoples, immigrants and refugees who become subjects of adjudication in human rights decisions, human rights and environmental activists, and many others are increasingly becoming actors in global politics.

That is to say, non-state actors can enter and gain visibility in international fora or global politics as individuals and as collectivities, emerging from the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign. One way of interpreting this is in terms of an incipient unbundling of the exclusive authority over territory and people that 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 denationalised platform for global capital and, at the same time, is emerging as a key site for the coming together of the most astounding mix of people from all over the world. The growing intensity of transactions among major cities is creating a strategic cross-border geography that partly bypasses national states. The new network technologies further strengthen these transactions, whether they are electronic transfers of specialised services among firms or Internet-based communications among the members of globally dispersed diasporas and civil society organizations. These new technologies, especially the public access Internet, have actually strengthened this politics of places, and have expanded the geography for civil society actors beyond the strategic networks of global cities, to include

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peripheralized localities. This has enabled a politics of places on global networks.

A key question organizing this paper concerns the ways in which such localized actors and struggles can be constitutive of new types of global politics and subjectivities. The argument is that local, including geographically immobile and resource-poor, actors can contribute to the formation of global domains or virtual public spheres and thereby to a type of local political subjectivity that needs to be distinguished from what we would usually consider local. The new ICTs are important. But, as I will discuss, they are so under two conditions. One is the pre-existence of social networks, and it is here that the crossborder geographies connecting places, especially global cities, provide a conducive environment. The other qualifier is that it took a lot of organizing and work to develop adequate technical infrastructure and software to make this happen. Civil society organizations and individuals have played crucial roles. The result has been that particular instantiations of the local can actually be constituted at multiple scales and thereby construct global formations that tend towards lateralized and horizontal networks rather than the vertical and hierarchical forms typical of major global actors, such as the IMF and WTO.

I examine these issues through a focus on various political practices and the technologies used, the latter an important part of the analysis partly because they remain understudied and misunderstood in the social sciences. Of particular interest is the possibility that local, often resource-poor organizations and individuals can become part of global networks and struggles. Such a focus also takes the analysis beyond the new geographies of centrality constructed through the network of the forty plus global cities in the world today. It accommodates the possibility that even rather peripheralized locations can become part of global networks.

These developments contribute to distinct kinds of political practices and subjectivities. In what follows I examine two dynamics that come together in producing these. The first section examines the ascendance of sub-national and transnational spaces and actors in a context where the national scale was long dominant and exclusive, and to variable extents remains so. The second and third sections examine how the new ICTs have enabled local actors to become part of global networks. The final concluding section


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examines the implications of these developments for political subjectivity.

## **I. The Ascendance of Sub- and Transnational Spaces and Actors**

Cities and the new strategic geographies that connect them and bypass national states can be seen as constituting part of the infrastructure for global domains, including global imaginaries. They do so from the ground up, through multiple micro-sites and micro-transactions (Hamel et al. 2002). Among the actors in this political landscape are a variety of organisations focused on trans-boundary issues concerning immigration, asylum, international women's agendas, alter-globalisation struggles, and many others. While these are not necessarily urban in their orientation or genesis, they tend to converge in cities. The new network technologies, especially the Internet, ironically have strengthened the urban map of these trans-boundary 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.

Global cities are, then, thick enabling environments for these types of activities, even though the networks themselves are not urban per se. In this regard, these cities help people experience themselves as part of global non-state networks as they live their daily lives. They enact some version of the global in the micro-spaces of daily life rather than on some putative global stage.

A key nexus in this configuration is that the weakening of the exclusive formal authority of states over national territory facilitates the ascendance of sub- and transnational spaces and actors in politico-civic processes. Among these are spaces that tended to be confined to the national domain and can now become part of global networks, and they are spaces that have evolved as novel types in the context of globalisation and the new ICTs. The loss of power at the national level produces the possibility of new forms of power and politics at the sub-national level and at the supra-national level. The national as container of social process and power is cracked (Taylor 2000; Abu-Lughod 2000; Basch et al. 1994)  This cracked casing opens up a geography of politics and civics that links subnational spaces. Cities are foremost in this new geography. The density of political and civic cultures in large cities localises global civil society in peoples' lives. We can think of these as multiple localisations of civil society

that are global in that they are part of global circuits and trans-boundary networks.

The organisational side of the global economy materialises in a worldwide grid of strategic places, uppermost among which are major international business and financial centres. We can think of this global grid as constituting a new economic geography of centrality, one that cuts across national boundaries and increasingly across the old North-South divide. It has emerged as a transnational space for the formation of new claims by global capital but also by other types of actors. The most powerful of these new geographies of centrality at the inter-urban level bind the major international financial and business centres: New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Sydney, Hong Kong, among others. But this geography now also includes cities such as Sao Paulo, Shanghai, Bangkok, Taipei, and Mexico City. The intensity of transactions among these cities, particularly through the financial markets, transactions in services, and investment, has increased sharply, and so have the orders of magnitude involved.

Economic globalisation and telecommunications have contributed to produce a space for the urban that pivots on de-territorialised cross-border networks and territorial locations with massive concentrations of resources. This is not a completely new feature. Over the centuries cities have been at the intersection of processes with supra-urban and even intercontinental scaling. Ancient Athens and Rome, the cities of the Hanseatic League, Genoa, Venice, Bagdad, Cairo, Istanbul, each has been at the crossroads of major dynamics in their time (Audel 1984). What is different today is the coexistence of multiple networks and the intensity, complexity, and global span of these networks (e.g. Garcia 2002; Bonilla et al. 1999). Another marking feature of the contemporary period, especially when it comes to the economy, is the extent to which significant portions of economies are now de-materialised and digitised and hence can travel at great speeds through these networks. Also new is the growing use of digital networks by a broad range of often resource-poor organisations to pursue a variety of cross-border initiatives. All of this has raised the number of cities that are part of cross-border networks operating on often vast geographic scales. Under these conditions, much of what we experience and represent as the local level turns out to be a micro-environment with global span.

The new urban spatiality thus produced is partial in a double sense: it accounts for only part of what happens in cities and what cities are about, and it inhabits only part of what we might think of as the space of the city, whether this be understood in terms as diverse as those of a city's administrative boundaries or in the sense of the public life of a city's people. But it is nonetheless one way in which cities can become part of the live infrastructure of global civil society.<sup>2</sup>

The space constituted by the worldwide grid of global cities, a space with new economic and political potentialities, is perhaps the most strategic, though not the only space for the formation of transnational identities and communities. This is a space that is both place-centred in that it is embedded in particular and strategic cities, and trans-territorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other. 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, for the re-territorialisation of 'local' subcultures (e.g. Smith 1997; Bonilla et al. 1999; Glasius et al. 2002). An important question is whether it is also a space for a new politics, one going beyond the politics of culture and identity while likely to remain at least partly embedded in it. One of the most radical forms assumed today by the linkage of people to territory is the loosening of identities from their traditional sources, such as the nation or the village. This unmooring in the process of identity formation engenders new notions of community of membership and of entitlement.

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<sup>2</sup> But the city and the infrastructure for global networks also enable the operations of militant, criminal, and terrorists organisations. Globalisation, telecommunications, flexible loyalties and identities facilitate the formation of cross-border geographies for an increasing range of activities and communities of membership. The evidence that has come out since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have made it clear that the global financial system also served their purposes and that several major cities in Europe were key bases for the Al-Qaeda network. Many militant organisations set up an international network of bases in various cities. London has been a key base for the Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's international secretariat, and cities in France, Norway, Sweden, Canada, and the US are home to various of their centres of activity. Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation is known to have established a support network in Great Britain, run through an office in London called the 'Advice and Reformation Committee', founded in July 1994, which is likely to have closed by now. (For more details see the description of Al-Qaeda in Glasius et al. 2002: Chapter 1.)

Immigration is one major process through which a new transnational political economy is being constituted, one that is largely embedded in major cities in so far as most immigrants are concentrated in major cities. It is, in my reading, one of the constitutive processes of globalisation today, even though not recognised or represented as such in mainstream accounts of the global economy. It becomes part of a massive demographic transition in more and more cities towards a growing presence of women, native minorities, and immigrants in the population.

Global capital and immigrants are two major instances of transnationalised actors that have cross-border unifying properties internally and find themselves in conflict with each other inside global cities. The leading sectors of corporate capital are now global in their organisation and operations. And many of the disadvantaged workers in global cities are women, immigrants, people of colour—men and women whose sense of membership is not necessarily adequately captured in terms of the national, and indeed often evince cross-border solidarities around issues of substance. Both types of actors find in the global city a strategic site for their economic and political operations. We see here an interesting correspondence between great concentrations of corporate power and large concentrations of ‘others’.

Large cities in both the global South and the global North are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalisation processes assume concrete, localised forms. A focus on cities allows us to capture, further, not only the upper but also the lower circuits of globalisation. These localised forms are, in good part, what globalisation is about. Further, the thickening transactions that bind cities across borders signal the possibility of a new politics of traditionally disadvantaged actors operating in this new transnational economic geography. This is a politics that arises out of actual participation by workers in the global economy, but under conditions of disadvantage and lack of recognition, whether as factory workers in export-processing zones or as cleaners on Wall Street.

## **II. Peoples’ Networks: Micro-Politics for Global Civil Society**

The cross-border network of global cities is a space where we are seeing the formation of

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new types of 'global' politics of place that contest corporate globalisation, environmental and human rights abuses, and so on. The demonstrations by the alter-globalisation movement signal the potential for developing a politics centered on places understood as locations on global networks. This is a place-specific politics with global span. It is a type of political work deeply embedded in people's actions and activities but made possible partly by the existence of global digital linkages. These are mostly organisations operating through networks of cities and involving informal political actors –that is, actors who are not necessarily engaging in politics as citizens narrowly defined, where voting is the most formalized type of citizen politics. Among such informal political actors are women who engage in political struggles in their condition as mothers, anti-globalization activists who go to a foreign country as tourists but to do citizen politics, undocumented immigrants who join protests against police brutality.

These practices are constituting a specific type of global politics, one that runs through localities and is not predicated on the existence of global institutions. The engagement can be with global institutions, such as the IMF or WTO, or with local institutions, such as a particular government or local police force charged with human rights abuses. Theoretically these types of global politics illuminate the distinction between a global network and the actual transactions that constitute it: the global character of a network does not necessarily imply that its transactions are equally global, or that it all has to happen at the global level. It shows the local to be multiscalar. Computer-centered technologies have also here made all the difference; in this case the particular form of these technologies is mostly the public access Internet.<sup>3</sup> The latter

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<sup>3</sup> While the Internet is a crucial medium in these political practices, it is important to emphasize that beginning in the 1990s, particularly since the mid-1990s we have entered a new phase in the history of digital networks, one when powerful corporate actors and high performance networks are strengthening the role of private digital space and altering the structure of public-access digital space (Sassen 2002a). Digital space has emerged not simply as a means for communicating, but as a major new theater for capital accumulation and the operations of global capital. Yet civil society --in all its various incarnations-- is also an increasingly energetic presence in cyberspace. (For a variety of angles, see e.g. Rimmer and Morris-Suzuki 1999; Poster 1997; Frederick 1993; Miller and Slater 2000). The greater the diversity of cultures and groups, the better for this larger political and civic potential of the Internet and the more effective the resistance to the risk that the corporate world might set the standards. (For cases of ICT use by different types of groups, see e.g. APCWNSP 2000; Allison 2002; WomenAction 2000; Yang 2003; Camacho 2001; Esterhuysen 2000).

matters not only because of low-cost connectivity and the possibility of effective use (via e-mail) even with low bandwidth availability, but also and most importantly, because of some of its key features. Simultaneous decentralized access can help local actors have a sense of participation in struggles that are not necessarily global but are, rather, globally distributed in that they recur in locality after locality. In so doing these technologies can also help in the formation of cross-border public spheres for these types of actors, and can do so a) without the necessity of running through global institutions<sup>4</sup>, and b) through forms of recognition that do not depend on much direct interaction and joint action on the ground. Among the implications of these options are the possibility of forming global networks that bypass central authority, and, further, especially significant for resource-poor organizations, that those who may never be able to travel can nonetheless be part of global struggles and global publics.

Such forms of recognition are not historically new. Yet there are two specific matters which signal the need for empirical and theoretical work on their ICT enabled form. One is that much of the conceptualization of the local in the social sciences has assumed physical/geographic proximity and thereby a sharply defined territorial boundedness, with the associated implication of closure. The other, partly a consequence of the first, is a strong tendency to conceive of the local as part of a hierarchy of nested scales, especially once there are national states. To a very large extent these conceptualizations hold for most of the instantiations of the local today, more specifically, for most of the actual practices and formations likely to constitute the local in most of the world. But there are also conditions today that contribute to destabilize these practices and formations and hence invite a reconceptualization of the local that can accommodate a set of instances that diverge from dominant patterns. Key among these current conditions are globalization and/or globality as constitutive not only of cross-border institutional spaces but also of powerful imaginaries enabling aspirations to transboundary political practice even when the actors involved are basically localized.

For instance, women have become increasingly active in this world of cross-border efforts. This has often meant the potential transformation of a whole range of

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in centuries past organized religions had extensive, often global networks of missionaries and clerics. But these partly depended on the existence of a central authority.



‘local’ conditions or domestic institutional domains—such as the household, the community, or the neighbourhood, where women find themselves confined to domestic roles—into political spaces. Women can emerge as political and civic subjects without having to step out of these domestic worlds (e.g. Chinchilla and Hamilton 2001). From being lived or experienced as non-political or domestic, these places are transformed into micro-environments with global span (Sassen 2003a).

What I mean by the term ‘micro-environment with global span’ is that technical connectivity links even resource-poor organizations with other similar local entities in neighbourhoods and cities in other countries. A community of practice can emerge that creates multiple lateral, horizontal communications, collaborations, solidarities, and supports. This can enable local political or non-political actors to enter into cross-border politics.

The city is a far more concrete space for politics than the nation. It becomes a place where non-formal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is more difficult, though not impossible, 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). To do this you need to be a citizen. Non-formal political actors are thereby more easily rendered invisible in the space of national politics. The space of the city accommodates a broad range of political activities -- squatting, demonstrations against police brutality, fighting for the rights of immigrants and the homeless-- and issues, such as 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.

It is in this sense that those who lack power and are “unauthorized” (i.e. unauthorized immigrants, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities, can gain *presence* in global cities, vis-à-vis power and vis-à-vis each other (Sassen 2002b). A good example of this is the Europe-wide demonstrations of largely “Turkish” Kurds in response to the arrest of Ocalan: suddenly they were on the map not only as an oppressed minority but also as a diaspora in their own right, distinct from the

Turks. This signals, for me, the possibility of a new type of politics centred 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. There are a growing number of organisations that are largely focused on a variety of grievances of powerless groups and individuals. Some are global and others national. While powerless, these individuals and groups are acquiring presence in a broader politico-civic stage.<sup>5</sup>

One of the characteristics of the types of organisations discussed here is that they engage in ‘non-cosmopolitan’ forms of global politics. Partly enabled by the Internet, activists can develop global networks for circulating not only information (about environmental, housing, political issues, etc.) but also can engage in actual political work and execute strategies. Yet they remain grounded in very specific issues and are often focused on their localities even as they operate as part of global networks. There are many examples of such a new type of cross-border political work. For instance, SPARC (the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres), started by and centred on women, began as an effort to organise slum dwellers in Bombay to get housing. Now it has a network of such groups throughout Asia and some cities in Latin America and Africa. The focus is local, and so are the participants and those whom they seek to reach, usually local governments. The various organizations making up the broader network do not necessarily gain power or material resources from this global networking, but they gain strength for themselves and vis a vis the agencies to which they make their demands.

This is one of the key forms of critical politics that the Internet can make possible: a politics of the local with a big difference in that these are localities connected with each other across a region, a country, or the world. Although the network is global this does not mean that it all has to happen at the global level.

### III. USING THE NEW ICTs.

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<sup>5</sup> The case of the Federation of Michoacan Clubs in Illinois (USA) illustrates this mix of dynamics. These are associations of often very poor immigrants that are beginning to engage in cross-border development projects and in that process are mobilizing additional resources and political capital in both their countries of origin and of immigration.

Computer centered interactive technologies have played an important role, precisely in the context of globalization, including global imaginaries. These technologies facilitate multi-scalar transactions and simultaneous interconnectivity among those largely confined to a locality. They can be used to further develop old strategies (e.g. Tsaliki 2002; Lannon 2002) and to develop new ways of organizing, notably electronic activism (Denning 2001; Smith 2001; Yang 2002). Internet media are the main type of ICT used. E-m is perhaps the most widely used, partly because organizations in the global south often have little bandwidth and slow connections making the web a far less usable and effective option. To achieve the forms of globality that concern me in this chapter, it is important that there be a recognition of these constraints among major transnational organizations dealing with the global south: for instance, this means making text-only data bases, with no visuals or HTML, no spreadsheets, and none of the other facilities that demand considerable bandwidth and fast connections (e.g. Pace and Panganiban 2000:113).<sup>6</sup>

As has been widely recognized by now, new ICTS do not simply replace existing media techniques. The evidence is far from systematic and the object of study is continuously undergoing change. But we can basically identify two patterns. On the one hand it might mean no genuine need for these particular technologies given the nature of the organizing or it might come down to underutilization. (For studies of particular

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<sup>6</sup> There are several organizations that have taken on the work of adjusting to these constraints or providing adequate software and other facilities to disadvantaged NGOs. For instance, Bellanet (2002), a non-profit set up in 1995, aims at helping such NGOs gain access to online information and at information dissemination to the south. To that end it has set up web-to-email servers that can deliver web pages by e-mail to users confined to low-bandwidth. It has developed multiple service lines. For example, Bellanet's Open Development service line seeks to enable collaboration among NGOs through the use of open source software, open content, and open standards; so it customized the Open Source PhP-Nuke software to set up an online collaborative space for the Medicinal Plants Network. Bellanet has adopted Open Content for all forms of contents on its website, freely available to the public, supports the development of an Open Standard for project information (International Development Markup Language or IDML). The value of such Open Standards is that they enable information sharing.

organizations see e.g. (Tsaliki 2002; Lannon 2002).<sup>7</sup> For instance, a survey of local and grassroots human rights NGOs in several regions of the world found that the Internet makes exchange of information easier and is helpful in developing other kinds of collaboration, but that it did not help launch joint projects (Lannon 2002: 33). On the other hand, there is evidence of highly creative ways of using the new ICTs along with older media recognizing the needs of particular communities. A good example is using the Internet to send audio files that can then be broadcast over loudspeakers to groups who lack access to the Internet or are illiterate. The M. S. Swamintham Research Foundation in Southern India has supported this type of strategy by setting up Village Knowledge Centers catering to populations that although mostly illiterate, knew exactly what types of information they needed or wanted. When we consider mixed uses, it becomes clear that the Internet can often fulfill highly creative functions by being used with other technologies, whether old or new. Thus Amnesty International's International Secretariat has set up an infrastructure to collect electronic news feeds via satellite, which it then processes and redistributes to its staff workstations (Lebert 2002).

But there is also evidence that use of these technologies has led to the formation of new types of organizations and activism. For instance, Yang (2003) found that what were originally exclusively online discussions among groups and individuals in China concerned with the environment evolved into active NGOs. Further, one result of this genesis is that their membership is national, distributed among different parts of the country. The variety of online hacktivisms examined by Denning (1999) involve largely new types of activism. To mention what is perhaps one of the most widely known cases of how the Internet made a strategic difference, the Zapatista movement became two organizational efforts, one a local rebellion in Mexico, the other a transnational civil society movement. The latter saw the participation of multiple NGOs concerned with peace, trade, human rights and other social justice struggles. It functioned both through

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<sup>7</sup> In a study of the websites of international and national environmental NGOs in Finland, UK, Netherlands, Spain and Greece, Tsaliki (2002:15) concludes that the Internet is mainly useful for intra- and inter-organizational collaboration and networking, mostly complementing already existing media techniques for issue promotion and awareness raising.

the Internet and conventional media (Clever 1998; Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001), putting pressure on the Mexican government. Importantly, it shaped a new concept for civil organizing: multiple rhizomatically connected autonomous groups (Clever 1998).

But what is far less known is that the local rebellion of the Zapatistas operated basically without e-m infrastructure (Clever 1995). Comandante Marcos was not on e-m, let alone able to join collaborative workspaces on the web. Messages had to be hand-carried, crossing military lines in order to bring them to others for uploading to the Internet; further, the solidarity networks themselves did not all have e-m, and local communities sympathetic to the struggle often had problems with access (Mills 2002: 83). Yet Internet based media did contribute enormously, in good part because of pre-existing social networks (see in this regard also Garcia 2002). Among the electronic networks involved, LaNeta played a crucial role in globalizing the struggle. LaNeta is a civil society network established with support of a San Francisco based NGO, the Institute for Global Communication (IGC). In 1993 LaNeta became a member of APC and began to function as a key connection between civil society organizations in and outside Mexico. In this regard, it is interesting to note that a local movement made LaNeta into a transnational information hub.

There is little doubt that the gathering, storage and dissemination of information are crucial functions for these kinds of organizations (Meyer 1997; Tuijl and Jordan 1999). Human rights, large development, and environmental organizations are at this point the leaders in the effort to build online databases and archives. (See for example Human Rights Internet at [www.hri.ca](http://www.hri.ca); Greenpeace's website; and Oxfam's website). Oxfam has also set up knowledge centers on its website--specialized collections around particular issues, e.g. the Land Rights in Africa site and its related resource bank (Warkentin 2001: 136). Specialized campaigns such as those against the WTO, for the banning of landmines, or for cancelling the debt of hyper-indebted countries (the Jubilee 2000 campaign), have also been effective at this type of work since it is crucial for their campaigns. Special software can be designed to address the specific needs of organizations or campaigns. For example, the HR Information and Documentation Systems International (HURIDOCS), a transnational network of HR organizations, aims

at improving access to, dissemination, and use of human rights information. It runs a program to develop tools, standards and techniques for documenting violations.

The evidence on NGO use of Internet media also shows the importance of institutional mechanisms and the use of appropriate software. Amnesty International has set up an institutional mechanism to help victims of human rights abuses use the Internet to contact transnational organizations for help: its Urgent Action Alert is a world wide e-m alerting system with 75 networks of letter-writing members who respond to urgent cases by immediate mailings to key and pertinent entities.<sup>8</sup>

#### **IV. The Forging of New Political Subjects :**

##### **THE MULTISCALAR POLITICS OF LOCAL ACTORS.**

All of this facilitates a new type of cross-border politics, one centered in multiple localities yet intensely connected digitally. Adams (1996), among others, shows us how telecommunications create new linkages across space that underline the importance of networks of relations and partly bypass older hierarchies of scale. Activists can develop networks for circulating place-based information (about local environmental, housing, political conditions) that can become part of political work and strategies addressing a global condition --the environment, growing poverty and unemployment worldwide, lack of accountability among multinationals, etc. The issue here is not so much the possibility of such political practices: they have long existed even though with other mediums and with other velocities. The issue is rather one of orders of magnitude, scope and simultaneity: the technologies, the institutions and the imaginaries that mark the current

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<sup>8</sup> Another, very different case is Oxfam America's effort to help its staff in the global south submit information electronically quickly and effectively, no easy aims in countries with unreliable, slow connections, and other obstacles to working online. The aim was to help staff in the global south manage and publish information efficiently. To that end Oxfam adopted a server-side Content Management System and a client-side Article-Builder called Publ-X that allows end users to create or edit local XML articles while offline and submit then to the server when work has been completed; an editor on the server side is then promptly notified ensuring that the information immediately becomes public.

global digital context inscribe local political practice with new meanings and new potentialities.<sup>9</sup>

There are many examples that illustrate the fact of new possibilities and potentials for action. Besides some of the cases already discussed above, there is the vastly expanded repertory of actions that can be taken when electronic activism is also an option. The "New Tactics in Human Rights Project" of the Center for Victims of Torture has compiled a workbook with 120 anti-torture tactics, including exclusively online forms of action. ([www.cvt.org/new\\_tactic/tools/index.html](http://www.cvt.org/new_tactic/tools/index.html)). The website of the NY based Electronic Disturbance Theater, a group of cyberactivists and artists, contains detailed information about electronic repertories for action ([www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/EDTECD.html](http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/EDTECD.html)). The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, officially launched in 1992 by six NGOs from USA, France, the UK and Germany, evolved into a coalition of over 1000 NGOs in 60 countries. It succeeded when 130 countries signed the Land mines Ban Treaty in 1997 (Williams 1998). The campaign used both traditional techniques and ICTs. Internet based media provided mass distribution better and cheaper than telephone and fax (Scott 2001; Rutherford 2002). Jubilee 2000 used the Internet to great effect. Its website brought together all the information on debt and campaign work considered necessary for the effort; and information was distributed via majordomo listserve, database and e-m address books.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking pre-existing online communication networks are important for these types of actions and for e-mail alerts aiming at quick mobilization. Distributed access is crucial: once an alert enters the network from no matter what point of access it spreads very fast through the whole network. Amnesty's Urgent Action Alert described above is such a system. However,

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<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere (2002) I have posited that we can conceptualize these "alternative" networks as countergeographies of globalization because they are deeply implicated with some of the major dynamics and capabilities constitutive of, especially, economic globalization yet are not part of the formal apparatus or of the objectives of this apparatus, such as the formation of global markets. The existence of a global economic system and its associated institutional supports for cross-border flows of money, information and people have enabled the intensifying of transnational and trans-local networks and the development of communication technologies which can escape conventional surveillance practices (For one of the best critical and knowledgeable accounts see e.g. WIO 2002; Nettime). These counter-geographies are dynamic and changing in their locational features. And they include a very broad range of activities, including a proliferation of criminal activities.

<sup>10</sup> But, it must be noted, that even in this campaign, centered as it was on the global south and determined as it was to communicate with global south organizations, the latter were often unable to access the sites (Kuntze, Rottman and Symons 2002).

anonymous websites are definitely part of such communication networks: this was the case with S.11.org, a website that can be used for worldwide mobilizations insofar as it is part of multiple online communication networks. The Melbourne mobilization against the regional Asian meeting of the WEF (Sept 11-13 2000) brought activist groups from around Australia together on this site to coordinate their actions, succeeding in paralyzing a good part of the gathering, a first in the history of the WEF meetings (Redden 2001). There are by now several much studied mobilizations that were organized online, e.g., against the WTO in Seattle in 1999 and against Nike, to mention two of the best known.<sup>11</sup>

An important feature of this type of multi-scalar politics of the local is that it is not confined to moving through a set of nested scales from the local to the national to the international, but can directly access other such local actors whether in the same country or across borders. One Internet based technology that reflects this possibility of escaping nested hierarchies of scale is the online workspace, often used for Internet-based collaboration. Such a space can constitute a community of practice (Sharpe 1997) or knowledge network (Creech and Willard 2001). An example of an online workspace is the Sustainable Development Communications Network, also described as a knowledge space (Kuntze, Rottmann, and Symons 2002) set up by a group of civil society

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<sup>11</sup> There are many other, somewhat less known campaigns. For instance, when Intel announced that it would include a unique personal serial number in its new PentiumIII processing chips, privacy advocacy groups objected to this invasion of privacy. Three groups in different locations set up a joint website called Big Brother Inside to provide an organizational space for advocacy groups operating in two different countries, thereby also enabling them to use the place-specific resources of the different localities (Leizerov 2000). The WashingtonDC based group Public Citizen put an early draft of the MAI agreement (a confidential document being negotiated by the OECD behind closed doors) on its website in 1997 launching a global campaign that brought these negotiations to a halt about eight months later. And these campaigns do not always directly engage questions of power. For instance, Reclaim the Streets started in London as a way to contest the Criminal Justice Act in England that granted the police broad powers to seize sound equipment and otherwise discipline ravers. One tactic was to hold street parties in cities across the world: through internet media participants could exchange notes, tactics with how to deal with the police and create a virtual space for coming together. Finally, perhaps one of the most significant developments is Indymedia, a broad global network of ICT based alternative media groups located all around the world. Other such alternative media groups are MediaChannel.org, Zmag.org, Protest.net, McSpotlight.org



organizations in 1998; it is a virtual, open and collaborative organisation aiming at doing joint communications activities to inform broader audiences about sustainable development and build members' capacities to use ICT effectively. It has a tri-lingual Sustainable Development Gateway to integrate and showcase members' communication efforts. It contains links to thousands of member-contributed documents, a job bank, and mailing lists on sustainable development. It is one of several NGOS whose aim is to promote civil society collaboration through ICTs; others are the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), One World International, and Bellanet.

At the same time, this possibility of exiting or avoiding hierarchies of scale does not preclude the fact that powerful actors can use the existence of different jurisdictional scales to their advantage (Morrill 1999) and the fact that local resistance is constrained by how the state deploys scaling through jurisdictional, administrative and regulatory orders (Judd 1998). On the contrary, it might well be that the conditions analyzed, among others, by Morrill and Judd force the issue, so to speak. Why work through the power relations shaped into state centered hierarchies of scale? Why not jump ship if this is an option. This combination of conditions and options is well illustrated by research showing how the power of the national government can subvert the legal claims of first nation-people (Howitt 1998; Silvern 1999) which has in turn led the latter increasingly to seek direct representation in international fora, bypassing the national state (Sassen 2003b).<sup>12</sup> In this sense, then, my effort here is to recover a particular type of multiscale context, one characterized by direct local-global transactions or by a multiplication of local transactions as part of global networks. Neither type is marked by nested scalings.

There are many examples of such types of cross-border political work. We can distinguish two forms of it, each capturing a specific type of scalar interaction. In one the scale of struggle remains the locality and the object is to engage local actors, e.g. a local housing or environmental agency, but with the knowledge and explicit or tacit invocation of multiple other localities around the world engaged in similar localized struggles with similar local actors. It is this combination of multiplication and self-reflexivity that

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<sup>12</sup> Though with other objectives in mind, a similar mix of conditions can also partly explain the growth of transnational economic and political support networks among immigrants (e.g. Smith 1994; Smith 1997; Cordero et al. 2000; Escudero and Gzsech 2002)

contributes to constitute a global condition out of these localized practices and rhetorics. It means, in a sense, taking Cox's notion of scaled "spaces of engagement" constitutive of local politics and situating it in a specific type of context, not necessarily the one Cox himself might have had in mind. Beyond the fact of relations between scales as crucial to local politics, it is perhaps the social and political construction itself of scale as social action (Howitt 1993; Swyngedouw 1997; Brenner 1998) that needs emphasizing.<sup>13</sup> Finally, and crucial to my analysis, is the actual thick and particularized content of the struggle or dynamic that gets instantiated.

The second form of multi-scalar interaction is one where localized struggles are aiming at engaging global actors, e.g. WTO, IMF, or multinational firms, either at the global scale or in multiple localities. Local initiatives can become part of a global network of activism without losing the focus on specific local struggles. (E.g., Cleaver 1998; Espinoza 1999; Ronfeldt et al. 1998; Mele 1999).<sup>14</sup> This is one of the key forms of critical politics that the Internet can make possible: A politics of the local with a big difference--these are localities that are connected with each other across a region, a country or the world. From struggles around human rights and the environment to workers strikes and Aids campaigns against the large pharmaceutical firms, the Internet has emerged as a powerful medium for non-elites to communicate, support each other's struggles and create the equivalent of insider groups at scales going from the local to the global.<sup>15</sup> The possibility of doing so transnationally at a time when a growing set of issues are seen as escaping the bounds of nation states makes this even more significant

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<sup>13</sup> Some of these issues are well developed in Adam's (1996) study of the Tiananmen Square uprisings of 1989, the popular movement for democracy in the Philippines in the mid-1980s, and the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s. Protest, resistance, autonomy and consent can be constructed at scales that can escape the confines of territorially-bounded jurisdictions.

<sup>14</sup> One might distinguish a third type of political practice along these lines, one which turns a single event into a global media event which then in turn serves to mobilize individuals and organizations around the world either or both in support of that initial action or around similar such occurrences elsewhere. Among the most powerful of these actions, and now emblematic of this type of politics, are the Zapatistas' initial and several subsequent actions. The possibility of a single human rights abuse case becoming a global media event has been a powerful tool for human rights activists.

<sup>15</sup> The Internet may continue to be a space for democratic practices, but it will be so partly as a form of resistance against overarching powers of the economy and of hierarchical power (e.g. Calabrese and Burgelman 1999; see also Warf and Grimes 1997), rather than the space of unlimited freedom that is part of its romantic representation. The images we need to bring into this representation increasingly need to

Yet another key scalar element here is that digital networks can be used by political activists for both global transactions and for strengthening local transactions inside a city. The architecture of digital networks, primed to span the world, can actually serve to intensify transactions among residents of a city or region, it can serve to make them aware of neighboring communities, gain an understanding of local issues that resonate positively or negatively with communities that are right there in the same city rather than with those that are at the other end of the world (Lovink and Riemens 2002). Recovering how the new digital technology can serve to support local initiatives and alliances inside a locality is conceptually important given the almost exclusive emphasis in the representation of these technologies of their global scope and deployment.<sup>16</sup>

Coming back to Howitt's (1993) point about the constructing of the geographical scales at which social action can occur, let me suggest that cyberspace is, like the city, a more concrete space for social struggles than that of the national political system. It becomes a place where non-formal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult in national institutional channels. Cyberspace can accommodate a broad range of social struggles and facilitate the emergence of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system. Individuals and groups that have historically been excluded from formal political systems and whose struggles can be partly enacted outside those systems, can find in cyberspace an enabling environment both for their emergence as non-formal political actors and for their struggles.

The mix of focused activism and local/global networks represented by the organisations described in this paper creates conditions for the emergence of at least partly transnational identities. The possibility of identifying with larger communities of practice or membership can bring about the partial unmooring of identities referred to in

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deal with contestation and resistance to commercial and military interests, rather than simply freedom and interconnectivity (Sassen 2002).

<sup>16</sup> One instance of the need to bring in the local is the issue of what data bases are available to locals. Thus the World Bank's Knowledge Bank, a development gateway aimed at spurring ICT use and applications to build knowledge, is too large according to some (Wilks 2001). A good example of a type and size of data base is Kubatana.net, an NGO in Zimbabwe that provides website content and ICT services to national NGOs. It focuses on national information in Zimbabwe rather than going global.

the first section. While this does not necessarily neutralise attachments to a country or national cause, it does shift this attachment to include trans-local communities of practice and/or membership. This is a crucial building block for a global politics of localized actors, that is to say, a politics that can incorporate the micro-practices and micro-objectives of people's daily lives as well as their political passions. The possibility of transnational identities emerging as a consequence of this thickness of micro-politics is important for strengthening global politics, even as the risk of nationalisms and fundamentalisms is, clearly, present in these dynamics as well.

The types of political practice discussed here are not the cosmopolitan route to the global.<sup>17</sup> They are global through the knowing multiplication of local practices. These are types of sociability and struggle deeply embedded in people's actions and activities. They are also forms of institution-building work with global scope that can come from localities and networks of localities with limited resources and from informal social actors. They do not have to become cosmopolitan in this process, they may well remain domestic and particularistic in their orientation and remain engaged with their households and local community struggles, and yet they are participating in emergent global politics.

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<sup>17</sup> This has become an issue in my current work: the possibility of forms of globality that are not cosmopolitan. It stems partly from my critique of the largely unexamined assumption that forms of politics, thinking, consciousness that are global are ipso facto cosmopolitan (see Sassen 2004).

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