



Edda Manga, Saskia Sassen

The global laissez-passer: a US passport

An interview with Saskia Sassen

When Columbian soldiers were threatening to kill her, Saskia Sassen desperately hung on to her American passport. She acted then as an unquestioning member of a world order she usually criticises, one in which some passports provide freedom of access and others do not. Edda Manga has been talking with Saskia Sassen about "cheap politics" and the deconstruction of patriotism.

Edda Manga: Have you thought through the political implications of speaking of both the USA and the Netherlands as "my country"?

Saskia Sassen: I feel it is crucial to emphasise that I am an American citizen when I state my opinion about US policy, especially given the stage our history is at. The US President has told us that "you're either with us or against us" and, as a consequence, all criticism of the government is becoming seen as unpatriotic. I want to make a point of having a right, as a citizen, to be critical. There is a group of us – intellectuals, artists and academics – who recently signed a joint declaration attacking the government's policies on Iraq and immigration and its denial of civil and human rights to prisoners. Our statement was published in *The New York Times* this past September under the title *Not In Our Name*. We wanted to make it clear that we no longer trust our government to represent us. There are precedents for this, for instance in the stances of French and American intellectuals during the wars in respectively Algeria and Vietnam. This is another highly charged period in history, which makes it doubly important for me to state that I am a citizen and hence free to criticise my country.

Your question also refers to a wider context, of course. I want it to be understood that the USA is my country, but so are the Netherlands and the Argentine. In the Argentine, I am regarded as a native and the people there claim me as an Argentinian. I put enormous store on being able to belong in many places. My life does not allow for exclusive loyalty to one single country or nation state. Instead I want to take apart the overall applicability of statements such as "I'm a patriot" or "I'm a citizen" or "I belong to this place, this country". The majority of the Earth's population has no option but to belong to a given country, but some of us have been offered the opportunity of national multiplicity and of turning this into a political discourse.

EM: How would you describe the vision of the future that follows from these ideas of yours? Speaking about the disappearance of the nation state, as you do, begs the question of what kind of new world order you envisage. Do you still think in terms of separate units of state, but freed from the bonds of national identity? Or of some kind of global government?

SS: I do not believe in a global state – not at all. I always argue that it is quite wrong to wait with developing global policies until we have created a global framework of government. Besides, this would bring with it disproportionate cultural dominance and concentration of power – a potential for hegemony of ideas and ideology. It is true that I do not simply trust nation states, not even after their "de-nationalisation". I believe in a more complex political architecture, with spaces both for institutionalisation of different rights and obligations, and for a logical framework of organisation. The crucial questions concern the norms according to which the whole structure is designed. The guidelines must prioritise human and civil rights, democratic participation and "a voice" for everyone.

I realise that many find the idea of a global state a liberating concept. The problem is that governance entails a variety of non-institutionalised elements of political practice and these must become recognised as part of the constitutional map. A "global state" implies an institutional structure of a kind that allows for or includes only certain forms of political practice. Admitting political processes, which fall outside a formal framework, would tend to become even harder in a global state. I mean for instance actions in protest against police violence or in support of the rights of immigrants – political expressions of street awareness, in other words. Currently, national legislation may or may not outlaw such activities or stigmatise them as civic disobedience. However, such non-institutional, informal variants of political practice remain within the political process.

This is why I prefer a political architecture, which on one hand allows for multiple forms of practice within the governing political process, and on the other, for the inclusion of defined value systems. The latter – human rights, social justice and so on – should be organised and enforced both from the top down and from the bottom up. This structural requirement is my reason for speaking about architecture rather than, for instance, network. We must meet the requirement to be inclusive when it comes to non-formal political activists. To promote social justice and the rights of participation, we should welcome this *multiplicity of political subjects*, if you see what I mean.

EM: Of course, after the declaration of war against terrorism, it is precisely the legitimacy of such activists that has become subject to restrictions. This has created a new political climate, which affects the governance of states and their relationships with other states. What do you think it has meant for the process of globalisation and for non-institutional forms of activism?

SS: The first effect that comes to mind is the restrictions of civil liberties, introduced in the name of the war against terrorism, but affecting increasingly large sectors of the population in "our" countries. This is true of Great Britain and Germany and, especially, of the United States. Economic globalisation has already been used as sufficient cause to cut back on the rights of small-scale entrepreneurs and similar agents in the North and the South alike. To summarise, the war against terrorism and globalisation based on enforcement of neoliberal trading principles have caused subjugation of the rights and opportunities available to informal political and economic players.

It is of course also true – by a kind of counter-dynamic – that new political subjects have been stimulated into action. I observed this myself this past February, when I went to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. The anti-globalisation movement recruits people with very small economic resources, who have so far been politically and socially isolated, but are now

empowered to create their own global networks. Similarly, policies motivated by hostility towards outsiders – aliens – have generated resistance by those, who believe that civil rights belong to everyone. There is a resurgence of the politics of the underprivileged and of criticism targeting the great powers.

EM: You often speak of the "global city" as the platform for the confrontation between the the two main players in the globalisation process: the underprivileged and the agents of global capitalism. What do you think will be the fate of the countryside? I come from Columbia. To people who live in countries like mine, cities are islands isolated from the rural struggle for basic needs: growing enough food, access to land and water ...

SS: The global city is originally a phenomenon of the North, though now emerging elsewhere in the world. There are many countries, which are not dominated by city–based social dynamics. Columbia is one of them. In Columbia, the tensions are generated by the state basing its legitimacy on being seen to manage forces actually beyond its control. The population is torn between opposing camps.

EM: I believe that the disintegration of the Columbian state – and, arguably, the Russian state – is in some way related to what is going on in Europe and northern America. Do you agree that the current fixations on things like valid documents and passport controls are symptomatic?

SS: I remember only too well a dreadful, rather telling event, which involved me personally. It happened in 1978 or maybe 1979. I had flown into Bogotá but missed my connection to Medellín. I have always been a bit adventurous and my reaction was like, why not board a bus and do some sight–seeing? The people I talked to at the airport kept saying: "You can't set out from here to the bus terminal just like that. It's dangerous!" But people like that always say those things, so I just replied "Sure", and did what I had planned in the first place. I went to the bus terminal in Bogotá (laughter). I realised that my handbag might be stolen, so I took out my passport and sat on it. The idea was that they can have my bag, that's one thing, but if they get my passport, well ...

After going along for about half an hour, we turned a corner and found ourselves in the middle of big trouble. Just that night, popular protest erupted in Bogotá because the government had raised the bus fares. Where we stopped, three buses had been set on fire and hundreds of people were shouting and throwing stones. At first I wasn't terrified, just frightened. Fear is different from terror: fear makes you pull yourself together, but being gripped by terror means something different. I looked for protection because I had a window–seat and was scared that a stone would hit me in the head. A stone struck the bus driver ... all the windows were broken already ... the driver lost control and the bus came to a halt and I experienced something stronger than fear ... they kept throwing stones and screaming ... Some were hurt ... I dived for the floor and people jumped on top of me and meanwhile a crowd outside tried to overturn the bus ... I lost all sense of time ... in the end there were three dead. And then everything stopped. The soldiers had turned up – for me, being rescued by the army was particularly ironic! They helped us out of the bus. Everyone went away to homes and families and friends. The soldiers looked after the wounded ... I grabbed my passport. I remember how I saved my passport!

The next stage started when I stood in the empty street, having no idea what to do. The soldiers were still around but getting ready to move away in their

armoured personnel carriers. I shouted at them: "No, no, no, you mustn't leave me here!" They let me ride along in an APC for a few blocks, until they spotted a couple of bus drivers. One of them was asked to escort me to the bus terminal. I took a room in a shabby hotel opposite the terminal. The man in the reception looked strangely at me ... then he led the way to my room. He seemed weird, somehow, he made me feel ill at ease, so I tried to lock the door but the lock didn't work properly. A little later he came back ... I had cuts all over my body, but especially on my knees. The blood was running down my legs. My hair was matted with blood and full of shards of glass. So when that guy came into my room I said: "Look at me! Do you really want me like this?" I pointed to my bleeding wounds, repeating "Like this? Like this?" He suddenly turned and went away – to throw up, I think. But the point of the story is that all the time I was utterly focused on one thing – my passport. Not death, but my passport!

EM: This event crystallises a whole lot of issues, doesn't it? You were in a country where your passport was your only guarantee of human worth, a state that cannot even grant personal safety or other basic human rights to its own citizens. I think that we, who happen to be living in the North, prefer to imagine ourselves safe within the walls of our rightful judicial systems. Our desire for safety is presumably what makes restrictive immigration laws appear to defend our rights and welfare systems. Could the opposite not be true? Could it not be that the trend to re-nationalisation of immigration policies, as you describe the process in *Guests and Aliens*, is a cover-up for dismantling our welfare systems?

SS: I agree entirely. It is an example of what I call "cheap politics". The phrase has a literal meaning, in the sense that it describes approaches to governmental legitimacy that are much less expensive than proper state-funded services for the citizenry. Transferring blame on to immigrants, as if the immigrant communities were the actual cause of diminishing welfare provision, is also "cheap". Cheap politics exist in the context of both economic and political cost.

This is why I am so critical of all politicians who fail to face up to the challenge, in its full severity, of the pending demographic crisis. We often hear the claim that soon there will be demands to immigrate. We are already dependent on immigration, but find the fact hard to deal with – historically, we have excluded and discriminated against outsiders. Serious political work is needed in this area and we had better start now. With time, the many interlocking issues will become increasingly entangled. One aspect is that more and more people will become hostile to "aliens", which in turn creates a climate of tolerance to such views. Currently, there is a marked return of "the national" in the discourse about strangers and the tone can be aggressive. This will be a short phase, though, until about ten years from now, when we enter into the next cycle. It will entail recognition of our growing need for immigration. The politicians still like using simplistic rhetoric, but we are in a very complex situation that requires us to engage with multiplicity. This is as true for our institutions as for us individually.

Still in terms of self-interest rather than of humanitarian considerations, there is another important consequence of overriding the rights of so-called illegal immigrants. It is the risk of tearing apart the existing web of civil rights that holds our own society together. I think that we are cheating ourselves, if we chose to believe that attacking the civil and human rights of non-authorized immigrants has nothing to do with us. It is deluded to persuade yourself that

the dead body of a smuggled migrant – the victim, who has died along your coastline or on the way across your border – means nothing, because that person can be defined as "an illegal". It damages us, like a cancer at an early stage. A small tumour, apparently negligible, can end up invading the whole body.

EM: It has been suggested in the European debate that immigrants willing to join the labour force should be encouraged, but in conjunction with certain limitations of rights. After reading your analysis I have the impression that you would be in favour of a solution along these lines. Is that right?

SS: Considering the current situation – history will be the final arbiter because there are no safe predictions – maybe it is not a bad idea to give the so-called illegal immigrants defined, but limited rights. As they increasingly improve their status, we would see the start of an intriguing historical development. If the context is one of serious hostility against "aliens", it is better to have limited rights than no rights at all. These rights can be used as a material basis for greater social participation.

EM: I understand how you come to think the way you do, given the conditions in the USA. In many countries in Europe, the goal has been to give all citizens the same rights, in so far as is possible. The idea I mentioned will create an intermediate form of citizenship, the status of a "temporary guest", neither a full citizen nor an alien. In other words, we would abandon our old ideals and accept that some people living in our country will not be protected by the welfare state, and are tolerated only because of their preparedness and ability to work.

SS: Yes, I see – but I know of many immigrants, who don't want to stay. Instead, they want to work in, say, the USA or Germany for a short period, maybe just a few months. Such workers prefer the social context of their country of origin.

EM: Sure, but at a kind of micro-level. A solution like the one you outline is advantageous for ambitious, healthy immigrants with sellable skills. He – or she – is welcome to contribute to our society. But his wheelchair-bound relative will not be offered care by our welfare system. What does this mean at the macro-level? How will such divisive solutions affect social conditions in general? How will relations between countries be affected?

SS: You are right to emphasise the difference between macro- and micro-levels. Legally, I believe restricting the rights of immigrants is wrong, because it will make it harder for future generations to handle the conflicts resulting from inequality. As more immigrants are needed, society will find that it has lost its capacity to deal with immigration issues.

But we must also create solutions that suit current patterns of migration, solutions relevant to individuals, who wish to move between countries. Such solutions have already materialised for highly educated people, since they benefit from flexible qualification transfer agreements. Today, despite the dominance of national and local job markets, there are in fact two obvious, large areas of globalised employment: one open to well qualified staff at the top end of the market, and the other to service workers such as assorted care staff and cleaners. We recognise the importance of the skilled elite by creating appropriate rights under WTO and NAFTA regulations, while pretending that the other workforce does not exist. We must make rights available across the

board – promote freedom of movement! But, at the same time, we must see to it that the immigrant becomes integrated into society, so that the native citizens come to regard immigrant communities as a natural components in the social structure.

Published 2003-02-16
Original in Swedish
Translation by Anna Paterson
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