“sociologists of ideas” as well—might remain a good way to proceed.

References


Centering the Edge in the Shift from Inequality to Expulsion

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“What are the spaces of the expelled” (p. 222). Most of you would be prepared to answer this question, but I doubt that any of you, without having read Saskia Sassen’s book, would be prepared to answer it with the same breadth, theoretical ambition, and dystopic challenge as she mobilizes.

The economic sociologist would likely point to the number of people outside the labor force. The environmental sociologist may respond with accounts of toxic dumps. The political sociologist might talk about people without rights, whether because they are displaced or incarcerated. And that is Sassen’s point. We have the tools to analyze each of these sectors, but we lack the conceptual arsenal, or perhaps even the sociological imagination, to conceive of their connection. Sassen is helping us close this gap.

Her concept becomes clear when paired with its predecessor. Most sociologists would argue that inequality is the key concept and problem of our discipline. That is because, Sassen argues, inequality’s centrality is associated with a century and system we are leaving. We could debate measurements, causes, trajectories, and consequences of inequality because we have assumed the systems in which we thought we lived, more or less demarcated by sovereignties and motored by logics of incorporation whether through colonialism, commodification, or democratization. The edges of those processes might have involved genocide, enslavement, and impoverishment, but they also promised the acquisition of human and non-human assets. Expulsion is different, and is the key logic of the system destroying the world as we know it and defining the life, and death, we approach.

Expulsion allows us to view in common a variety of processes typically understood

by specialists within their own knowledge cultures. Among other things, Sassen explores fracking and mountain-top-removals not only for their technological achievements and energy outcomes but for their poisoning of water and damage to the ecosystem. The application of those technologies can lead to the expulsion of the proximate biosphere, and public health, from the system’s logic.

She explores foreign land acquisitions driven to provide industrial and food crops as well as to mine rare earth metals and water. Here, Global South and Global North disappear as obvious categories because agents from South Korea, China, the Persian Gulf and others, alongside more familiar colonial powers, grab land and water most obviously in Africa and southeast Asia, but also in Russia and Ukraine. And as they grab, ways of human and non-human life are expelled from the system, with attendant poverty, death, and environmental destruction.

The financialization of the global economy and the securitization of mostly everything does not logically lead to expulsion, for it could generate the capital needed for virtuous projects. But it hasn’t. That assemblage of experts making financial instruments led to the expulsion of the middle class from their foreclosed homes, municipalities from credit worthy recognition, and sovereignty from states. Greece enjoys extensive attention here, for its financial rebound within the system depended on expelling people from the system, from its labor force and public goods.

Sassen has many more examples, too. No doubt experts could trip her up on particular elements of her argument, or lament that she does not nuance her accounts with a focus on the various degrees of expulsion depending on different intersections of rules, technologies, and contexts. Those experts would, however, miss her point in such critique for they would overlook her distinctive methodology. Those familiar with her 2006 book are better prepared.

Although that 2006 work had its historical moments, she worked hard to evoke a “sociology of the incipient / yet-illegible” as her problematic. Her conceptual arsenal depended on notions like “capabilities,” “organizing logics,” and “tipping points” to explore how new constellations of territory, authority, and rights would form emergent logics of organization in the midst of the old. Some seven years ago, my former students and I (Kennedy et al. 2007) appreciated in those terms how difficult it was to recognize that emergent. This interim has clearly helped in refining her methodology, for Sassen has now moved ahead. She retains those old concepts but has developed new complementary approaches that allow us to see what she calls the “subterranean.”

Sassen approaches various kinds of “facts” without embedding them in familiar knowledge categories. For example, she reveals in the juxtaposition of analogous processes in Global North and Global South or in North America and Russia, to show that formal systems bear little impact on the brutal expulsions that exist on the edge of the system we inhabit but cannot see. She directs our attention to extremes so that the imminent logics buried deep in our knowledge cultures might become apparent from beneath the mounds of expertise that hide those harsh and deadly facts emerging as central but now only visible on the edge. She is most adept at rendering financial expertise, and how things like “Dark Holes” created the possibilities for monstrous failures. Sassen is drawn to environmental expulsions, the dead lands and waters that predatory formations enable.

Introduced before in her scholarship, Sassen nonetheless uses this concept of predatory formations to link “elites and systemic capacities with finance a key enabler, that push toward acute concentration” (p. 13) in the elaboration of conditions enabling expulsions. Although she speaks of expulsions of people and biospheres, one might argue that the key expulsion is a sense of responsibility and morality from the global systems that govern us. That’s the point of complexity: we can admire the brilliance of lawyers, accountants, and physicists in developing those instruments that securitize, even while the system they make enables the expulsion of moral judgment from that world. Nobody is accountable because everyone acts according to laws designed to enable the superrich and powerful only to become more so at the growing expense of others. Looking for
variations in accountability only distracts us from the global logic that moves a system of the professionally accountable toward global destruction.

Coupled with her earlier work, this may be a paradigm breaking/making work, especially if those who engage it could address some issues circling around its edges. Two stand out for me.

On the comparative and historical side of our discipline, expulsions may shake those accustomed to knowledgeable life at the imperial core, but expropriation has been a longstanding theme of those who have been destroyed by colonialism’s spread. Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo’ole Osorio (2002) writes powerfully about what happened in Hawai’i, but his account is not the exception for the indigenous. His account is different, it seems to me, from Sassen’s notion, but the distinction deserves refinement. She finds the system’s organizing logic in “the ways some of the most powerful actors in the economy use people, governments, and the world’s resources to ensure corporate economic growth with an absolute minimum of global restraints and as few local responsibilities as possible” (p. 220). Does the difference with past expropriations rest in the capacities of those who expel? In their motives or identifications? In the overall system of which they are a part? Or all of the above? That comparative inquiry attending historical context is important on its own, but it is also important for the future.

While I appreciate Sassen’s effort to move beyond the limits of context to look for deeper and global systemic tendencies, I cannot escape it because I am as much drawn to questions of resistance and transformation as exploitation and expulsion. Sassen attends magnificently to the oppressive side of the critical theoretical triad with her predatory formations. She invokes the Keynesian model of growth as at least an eutopic norm. But it is harder to see the praxis which her account might inspire.

That might be because, as she reports in her autobiography, she has kept her full time engagements in politics and academics apart (2005:222–23). A decade ago, at least, Sassen would recall that her politics was defined by a struggle “against the abuse of power... more than power per se” (2005:227). Her special interest in the lawful abuse of power is quite clear in this volume on expulsions, but her struggle against that system in this scholarship appears principally in its naming. There is, however, more there for those who wish to follow its implications for praxis and its scholarship. I think it begins with the different notions of causality implicit in this volume.

One might distinguish those causalities that produce, immediately and ultimately, the expulsions at hand and those which, if made sufficiently explicit, might disrupt their reproduction through changes in policy and mobilization by publics. For that latter causality to become apparent, one could return to her earlier (2005b) emphasis on imbrication. Then, she used it to show the variable effects of digital technology in context. This time, we might consider the variable articulation of struggles against expulsion in context.

For example, Sassen mentions that demineralization is illegal in Brazil, and in 2006 that law enabled residents to stop Nestlé from extracting more water (p. 196). It was too little, too late, but it was more optimistic than her other tales of expulsion. Praxis needs hope. It also needs visions that travel.

Thus, I would like to see a companion volume that could identify those local efforts that derailed expulsions from their most extreme expressions. Sassen herself notes variations in the ways states have responded to fracking—France, South Africa and others have banned it (p. 174), but Poland, Ukraine and others now embrace it as a source of energy security, with the eager support of the U.S. government and energy corporations. The logic of expulsion has powerful motors behind it, but its imbrication is variable. There may be different prior conditions, but those variations also could be shaped by mobilizations that follow.

I would then like to see how those notions of resistance and transformation travel, much like Baiocchi and Ganaúza (forthcoming) explain the mutations of participatory budgeting as its practice moves across the world. And by assembling these forms of resistance and transformation in response to the deeper structures of expulsion which Sassen identifies, we might, in the end, have a better chance, if not of emancipation,
then at least at life. We might be especially able to live if we could recognize the logic of the system that emerges, and not only applaud the virtuous resisting the spaces of the expelled.

Sassen focuses on the deep structure generating expulsions across different spheres and places of our world. Her account, like many that get to deep structures, could be powerfully dispiriting, but I do not believe that is a necessary outcome. It is, however, a rallying call to craft a different intellectual and institutional responsibility, one that works across knowledge cultures to find connections in order to develop a praxis dedicated to the extension of survival. And here, we cannot rely on those expelled from the system to save us. Those not yet beyond that system need to find the path back to an incorporation of people and biosphere into our systemic logic. Otherwise the “generalization of extreme conditions” (p. 29) that began on the edge will consume us all.

Beyond the Nation State and the Comparative Method? Decolonizing the Sociological Imagination

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George Steinmetz’ edited volume, Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline, is a massive tome. Six hundred and ten pages with seventeen chapters, it really amounts to three very satisfying books in one, each of which takes on the question of sociology’s imperial “entanglements” in a different way. If the book simply consisted of Parts II and III, Current Sociological Theories of Empire and Historical Studies of Colonialism and Empire, it would be fairly uncontroversial: an insightful addition to a growing list of studies being done under the general umbrella of “sociology of globalization” or “transnational and global sociology.” The book’s contributors aim to go far beyond simply providing additional theoretical accounts of colonial and imperial social formations and processes, however. Their mission is to arrive at something much more profound and potentially destabilizing for the discipline as a whole. The authors’ reflections on the “latent and manifest colonial assumptions and imperial ideologies informing current sociological theory and research” are undertaken with the aim of fundamentally altering sociology’s current theoretical, methodological, and conceptual apparatus (p. xi). Therein lies the immense value of this edited collection.

The stage is set for this in Part I: National Sociological Fields and The Study of Empire.

References


