

# What is our Globalised Urban Future?

Saskia Sassen and Irit Rogoff

**Saskia Sassen:** A city comes with such a charge of meanings, of histories, that when one utters the word 'city' it's almost an invitation not to think. So when I'm working on the city, I need another language: I think of the city as a complex but incomplete system, and in that mix of complexity and incompleteness lies an astounding capacity for continuous reinvention – often successful although sometimes not. This also explains why cities can outlive all kinds of other, far more powerful systems that are centrally managed and led by monarchs and corporate CEOs. It's quite remarkable to think of all the kingdoms, multinationals, financial firms, republics that have fallen. Meanwhile there are cities, outliving all of those other structures and worming themselves into future histories. Somehow we know that a city like Liverpool, with its the extraordinary mixture of histories, will probably be around in a thousand years. Will the United Kingdom still be here, as it exists now? I'm not so sure.

When I think about an immediate future, there are two issues that can frame our propositions. One of them is a question: where is the frontier today? Of course, in our historic, imperial times the frontier was at the edge of the system, but now we're past that kind of edge. I have a tentative answer: I think that the key frontiers today are actually inside our cities. If the city is too neat, there is no frontier, but if the city is complex and incomplete then there is a frontier. And when I think about what a frontier space is, I imagine a zone where actors from different worlds have an encounter, an encounter for which there are no established rules; we do not and cannot know what that encounter would be like. So the frontier is variable: it has some very positive and attractive features and it has some very negative and brutal ones. That is historically how frontiers have been, and I see this in our big, not fully controllable, messy cities: São Paulo, New York, Mumbai and so on. And today very often that encounter is marked by socioeconomic struggles.

My second framing proposition for thinking about cities – today and in an immediate future – is the question of indeterminacy. It seems to me that more and more space, whether that space is rural (with large corporate farms), urban or digital, is over-determined. The city is the space where you can still actually find and experience indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is a variable. It contains the possibility of making, and I think especially of making by those who lack access to formal instruments for making, whether that's the making of a building, the making of an economy, the making of a politics, the making of a history, or beyond.

These three elements – complexity, indeterminacy and the frontier space – help us understand particular features, especially of making, in the current period. For instance, I think of the protest movements that we're seeing, the Occupy movements, as one acute, highly visible example to be explored. I think that Irit and I share the notion that these movements are really about recovery, the work of making citizenship. We, the comfortable middle-classes, have become consumers of our citizenship. These protest movements and their modest claims – this is not the heroic syndicalism of the miners in the early 1900s, for instance – represent an honest claim: 'Hey, I'm a citizen. I did x, y, z. I played it by the rules, and now the state is failing me.' I see in this a project that seeks to recover the condition of a solid, robust citizenship. This is an enormously valuable project, given the current period. Here, the city is critical in rendering these claimants visible, and allowing their claims to circulate in a vast global ideational space. This is one instance of the city as a space for making – making citizenship, claiming the rights that have been taken by states and powerful economic actors.

Ours is a period when in much of the world the economic nexus is no longer constituted via the importance of people as workers and consumers as it was in the Keynesian period: the ascendance of finance and its voracious financialising of everything means that people matter less and less: there are now other instruments that play a greater role in wealth-making than workers and consumers. This is a bit of a complex development, not easy to explain in a few words. I've developed it all in brutal detail in my new book *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*.

In many ways, I think these protest movements are a point in a trajectory, and it's quite possible that

this isn't the first nor the final point in that trajectory. There are older histories and genealogies of protest in some of these cases that then surface and become visible as specific, variable claims, from Cairo, New York and Barcelona to Istanbul and Rio. And I think this particular point in those longer trajectories is about making the social. What they got out of these protests is social capabilities. And that's why an Occupy movement is different from a demonstration. If you're occupying hour after hour, week after week, month after month, and even if it's just six months, you're actually working very hard, continuously, to keep the peace, to keep things going, to adapt to different temperatures, to engage very different people from the ones you're usually with, and so on. It's a collective capability that was developed, and that begins to constitute the more abstract project of making the social.<sup>1</sup> Again, we in the middle classes consume the social; we don't know what the social means. I think that in our current period the social is one of the most elusive conditions, and a deeply unstable meaning.

Our city maps are top-down, those of an omniscient observer, but in reality that perspective doesn't exist; it doesn't represent the city as a lived space. The city is made up of many different points of entry and exit. Each neighbourhood is a distinctive point of entry into the city, and generates knowledge about the city that diverges from the knowledge of the centre and of other neighbourhoods. I have a fantasy that in a near future we could open-source the neighbourhoods, creating an open-access digital space where people can post their knowledge and insights online.<sup>2</sup> It could be organised by the government of the city – as long as it doesn't evolve into a surveillance space. It would begin to collect the knowledge of different neighbourhoods, of the homeless, of children, of older people, of the unemployed, of the super-employed, and it would give us an insight into the material spaces and practices that constitute 'the city', and I include here cultural elements of daily life in the neighbourhood. It would create a new kind of understanding and possibly a new space for making.

I think that one of the major threats we confront in our cities is the rapid growth of over-determined urban space; the privatising of space, the massive, centrally planned projects and mega complexes. All these are replacing what were once mixed settings, killing the particularities and quirks and old cultures of daily life that give a city some of its character. Could a digital space that open-sources the neighbourhood, gathers local knowledges and entices residents into active participation generate indeterminacy? I can imagine a partly sociocultural space that operates to some extent on the digital vector and on the knowledge vector, and in that process unsettles codified knowledge about the city. Could this feed indeterminacy? I think that's where cities are strong, that's where cities mobilise imaginations and making. It's in this mix of conditions and possibilities that indeterminacy becomes a force, feeding or making room for that condition that I described as the frontier in our current period – a space where actors from different worlds have an encounter for which there are no established rules. This both feeds into and depends on indeterminacy.

**Irit Rogoff:** The path into a notion of future city that interests me is the one that considers new modes of occasional and partial inhabitation – presences that claim one thing and affect another, make a demand and enact a solution in another mode. In the wake of these partial, temporary and ephemeral inhabitations, certain fundamental assumptions about the relation between space and public get rewritten.

I come to this through different vectors – an interest in processes of spatialisation, an interest in participation and an interest in what might possibly become a notion of 'public' after the demise of the classical public sphere. For Jürgen Habermas, who long dominated the understanding of a bourgeois public sphere, the eighteenth-century public realm had to do with private people coming together as a public to claim the public sphere that had been regulated from above. They stood against those very public authorities to engage them in a debate via the use of reason.

Fundamental to this ability to engage the more powerful in debate was both reason and an informed and critical body of knowledge, but it was always limited to the welfare of its rightful members. In the twenty-first century in Syntagma, Plaza Mayor, Tahrir, in Wall Street, Rothschild Boulevard, St Paul's

Square, in São Paulo and Bahrain and Tunis, in Sans-Papiers rallies in Paris and Vienna, 'public' is no longer defined by the common welfare of its rightful members. The notions of common welfare and of rightful members are the very issues at stake in these gatherings, whether 'rightful' by its inclusion or exclusion from citizenship or legal inhabitation; whether rightful in terms of its economic enfranchisement through access to markets, or whether rightful in terms of having a share in shaping the terms and values by which they live and are governed. So beyond the demands that these gatherings posed to a regime or to an authority or a dominant belief, it is the very notion of 'rightful members' that is at stake in this revision of 'public'.

In recent years, as the crisis of citizenship and rights has deepened in Europe, Étienne Balibar has been developing an extremely interesting set of contentions, which I'm summarising very briefly and very schematically. One of these has to do with what he calls 'transnational citizenship', which divorces citizenship from a national franchise, and instead of thinking about a complete inclusion within a national identity, people acquire an equal amount of civic rights within a given constituency. This is similar to the arguments of numerous activists within the movements protesting the criminalisation of the status of the 'Sans-Papiers'.

A second contention rightly argues that we live among those who work, pay taxes, take part in communities and provide them with essential services, whose children go to school and play football in the street and sing in clubs and churches, and yet have no rights; that we live among 'citizens without citizenship'.

And finally Etienne Balibar argues in favour of what he calls a model of 'shared citizenship', or co-citizenship, which I think is one that is very valuable for this inhabitation of public space that I think we're both talking about, one that troubles the divisions between those with full rights and those without any rights. Instead, he proposes an ebb and flow as the diminishment and augmentation of rights takes place within given situations, an indeterminacy that moves back and forth on a kind of scale, that is not as solidly grounded as a juridical status.

In this situation we're yoked together, not through identity, belonging, nationality or standing, but by the act of sharing spaces and situations. The sharing of space and the erosion of status that bleed into one another.

In fact Balibar goes further and says that we owe a great debt to the Sans-Papiers, because, and I quote, 'They have recreated citizenship among us, insofar as it is not an institution nor a status but a collective practice.'

So the future city or the present city read through the prism of its unrest as its future promise, which is what I believe in, is the site of this new moment of collective practice. Its gatherings are characterised by what Giorgio Agamben has termed 'the coming community', one that's indifferent to a common property. This common property he describes as 'being red, being French, being Muslim' – being red (communist ideology), being French (national identity), being Muslim (faith and kinship). This community of singularities operates through the new relational mode of subjects, not through a shared essence (identity) or shared beliefs (ideology), or shared affinity (kinship) or a shared set of conditions. What it has in common is a being together in time and space – it's an ontological community.

I make these claims and observations in the footsteps of Jean-Luc Nancy's exceptionally interesting work in 'being singular plural', a body of thought that has done much to enable us to detach singularity from individuality, and the politics of autonomous selves, although Nancy's starting point is quite different from the one being rehearsed here. I think he comes out of a philosophical argument taking up twentieth-century philosophical discussion on being, ontology, through a modern interpretative process of what Plato had called the dialogue of the soul with itself. In his contribution to this on-going debate, Nancy breaks down the 'with' of 'with itself' to another less inward, more plural set of links. He does so in the name of a complex and very contemporary politics of what he calls the places, groups or authorities that

constitute the theatre of bloody conflict among identities. And what follows in the book is a kind of litany of names that are internally fractured and incoherent – names of people who enact a kind of internal contradiction of un-belonging within themselves, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Rwanda, Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Tamil Tigers, Casamance, ETA militia, Roma of Slovenia, Krajina Serbs, Chiapas, Islamic Jihad, Bangladesh, The Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, on and on. And then he says:

These days it is not always possible to say with any assurance whether these identities are intranational, infranational, or transnational; whether they are 'cultural,' 'religious,' 'ethnic,' or 'historical'; whether they are legitimate or not – not to mention the question about which law would provide such legitimation; whether they are real, mythical, or imaginary; whether they are independent or 'instrumentalized' by other groups who wield political, economic, and ideological power.

What Nancy proposes for the bringing together of this gathering of incoherent internally conflicted identities that enact nothing but an un-belonging to the space in which they are operating, is the breaking down of the word compassion – so not compassion as empathy, but compassion as the passion that operates between us. And he proposes a kind of shift from a gathering that's founded on the notion of having something in common with a gathering that's founded on the notion of what he calls 'being in common'. So the shift is from a having in common to a being in common, which I think is one of the ways in which one can think through the urban inhabitation of protest movement.

I recently read an interview with Saskia, who was asked whether the numerous and contiguous protest movements around the world were a manifestation of globalisation, in which everything circulates in an accelerated mode. She said that she thought that, rather, it was the work of citizenship, taking place simultaneously as the enormity of the global crisis of citizenship became apparent, consistent with a shift from subjects to stakeholders, those who have a stake in the modes by which they are governed, and whose gathering is a performance of stake-holding.

At Goldsmiths, where I teach, and which is situated in New Cross in London, some of our students and former students have formed a group called the New Cross Commoners. They reoccupy decommissioned libraries with reading and empty cafés with debate. They read poetry on the common and argue law at the council. They don't assume rightful membership, but produce it on a daily basis. And so the future city for me is the site of a being in common, in which a practice of shared citizenship is an active process, as is shared study and reading and poetry; as might be the shared space of the art gallery and the exhibition hall.

**SS:** Looking at the world beyond the scope of the city, we're currently living through a time when the institutionalised national level is decaying, like an old infrastructure. This disassembling is not visible, because the formal structures, language and laws are there. But there's a new condition taking shape, beneath the familiar alignments and their visible contradictions. I think of these as conceptually subterranean trends – subterranean not because they happen beneath the ground, but because we cannot see them. We lack the concepts. In other words, they cut across divides – China, Russia, economy, polity, rural, urban – but become visible only when dressed in the familiar clothes. We don't have the conceptual instruments to see that these localised presences are the recurrence in site after site across the world of some deeper trends that are marking a new configuration – and that can coexist with the old geopolitical world of the inter-state system. For me, in fact, the new world isn't, for instance, that one billion people are communicating on Facebook – partly because they're largely communicating among homogenous interest fragments – albeit hundreds of thousands of fragments. (I think under its current format and content and purpose, Facebook is a footnote in this story). These conceptually subterranean processes that interest me get filtered through the specifics of each place, and hence we merely see them as something happening in China, and thus it's easily coded as 'Chinese'; if it happens in Egypt it's Egyptian. But it's not that simple. Nor am I saying that these new trends are akin to a smooth space of connectivity.

One of the tasks is to actually make those underlying trends that cut across the familiar boundaries, visible. Artists have their way of making visible elements that are maybe just emergent or vague, and we, of course, use conceptual language and theory to make them visible.

When I think of today's protest movements, I see many different genealogies of meaning and histories of protest. Each is specific. It doesn't make sense to flatten them into one kind of movement. But, at the same time, they're also all making visible some of these (conceptually) subterranean trends that get filtered through the specifics of each of these histories, yet are also underlying, cutting across these older histories. I think this juxtaposition of old and new, and global and specific, is part of our current condition. To some extent it remains insufficiently addressed, or under-studied, under-recognised. At such a juncture, cities are interesting spaces because they have the capacity to make visible this possibility of interpreting, this possibility of seeing a globally multi-sited but partial history that arises from many diverse local histories. This is one way of reading today's protest movements. They're making visible something that goes beyond the particular event – in Cairo, in New York, in Istanbul, in Rio – itself.

Then there's the question of public space. For me, the piazza, the traditional public space, has embedded codes, where people know how to conduct themselves. It's a space for ritualised practices that constitute 'publicness'. It's a very different space from the street, which I think of as marked by indeterminacy. I mean 'the street' in some sort of generic sense. Thus even if today's protest movements may happen in parks, they make it into an indeterminate space, and in that sense I think of this type of space as the global street.

Let me illustrate the notion of codes embedded in urban space. Think of any city, downtown at rush hour. In the rush, we accidentally kick each other, step on each other's feet. But we don't take it personally. If it happened in the neighbourhood, it would be a provocation. In this sense, then, downtown at rush hour is a space-time juncture with embedded codes that we've made collectively and hence recognise them. It's another version of what happens in the piazza – codes we need because otherwise there'd be disaster. But it is a variable – at some point it becomes unattractive. We've all experienced this in terribly well-run countries where everybody stands patiently if the light is red, even if there's no car in sight.

And then the third element: membership in its diverse formats, citizenship, the immigrant, the outsider. In research on immigrants and citizenship, the temporal dimension is critical. If you take a sufficiently long temporal frame, you can see that (along with the racisms, the hatreds and the tragedies), when the outsider succeeds in getting her claims recognised, she expands the formal rights of existing citizens. When we do the opposite, which we're doing today in trying to take away rights from immigrants, we're actually also damaging citizens. One of my hobbies is to count all the rights we're losing. In the last twenty years, we've lost many rights, and now what do we do?

IR: There is a tension, which I don't quite know what to do with, between the expansion of citizens' rights, which make one the rightful member, and Balibar's notion of co-citizenship. Because I think one negotiates a certain amount of loss for one's self as one shares. And so one of the things that really interests me in the way in which movements are making themselves visible across urban spaces and performing certain kinds of dynamics, is that on the one hand one should read it as empowerment, and on the other hand I also read it as that kind of negotiation of loss.

And so it's in the arena of the urban as the site of negotiation between empowerment and concomitant loss that you share your citizenship and you lose a certain amount of rights. And in the art world, in the classical old museum world, which is based on an enlightenment model of endless elasticity in which you can bring in everybody, accumulate more and more histories and stories within histories, minorities' histories, and all of that, there's never a sense of loss.

The classical museum archive or library is an institution of endless stretching and addition, and it's always been really important to me that the art world performs loss, that it recognises this as it brings in other perspectives and other histories. What's happening is an erosion of a kind of hegemonic position



and that that needs to be performed within cultural institutions.

**SS:** This is such a great image and such a necessary feature of any collective effort or condition: the negotiation of loss. It's what finance never does: negotiate for loss! I like what you say – its ambiguity, a sort of downgrading of membership... and yet, when it's across groups, it's probably a necessity at times. Negotiating for loss with the state or the large corporations is a completely different matter. With other social groups it can get shaped as solidarity. It can never do that with the state or corporations.

That's why we need spaces of making. We have to make our citizenship, because we've become very thin subjects. One angle onto this thinness is the vast surveillance systems, more like data-gathering, that many of our governments have – the US is number one, but the UK, Germany, the Netherlands also have data-gathering systems. It invites the question 'Who are we, the citizens?' I totally agree with Irit, and I love the image that the loss has to be part of it. At the same time, I think that if we fight together, if diversities (of beliefs, needs, cultures, oppressions) fight for something that can be shared across those differences, we'll achieve rights that are of a different sort from those involving the state giving us rights. Among such rights there should be rights that don't mark us thickly ('the' citizen, 'the' immigrant, 'the' woman, etc), but that mark us thinly and in that thin marking we can hold on to all kinds of particularities. We don't have to be homogenised into some flattened subject that we call 'the' citizen.

**IR:** I agree with that, and I think it's an interesting notion – the notion of a thinned version of the robust and indelible rights that we've always attributed to citizenship, and that means a huge amount of adjustment on one's own part.

I wanted to add just one more thing related to visibility and determinacy. It has to do with the fact that within a notion of infrastructure, which is both determining and invisible, we find a set of contradictions. There's infrastructure, which has always been the main building block of systems of world governments, the colonial system, capitalism etc. There's a kind of neutrality, a seeming neutral efficiency that's just about delivery. But we also know that we inhabit infrastructure in completely divergent and unequal ways, not in terms of the infrastructures being unequal in terms of delivery to different neighbourhoods and so on, but our approach to it, the way in which we inhabit it, our ambivalence towards it, the way in which it's impossible to connect your subjectivity to infrastructure.

These are, I think, the kind of questions that operate between the terms that Saskia is putting forward, between indeterminacy and visibility. And it seems to me that one of the things that's emerging is a whole process by which another kind of negotiation is taking place, that's not about negotiation with the absolutely visible or graspable, and that's why the occupation of major public spaces is so important. It's not because it's televisual and it's a good photogenic moment. It's because it's negotiation with infrastructure: it's negotiation not just with empowered spaces, but with everything that makes them run. The cleaning operations in places like Tahrir after a movement, most of which are done by the protesters and not by the city, are an extraordinary performance of these negotiations.

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1. Saskia Sassen. "Imminent Domain: Spaces of Occupation", *Art Forum*, January 2012.

2. See: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/teconomy/2013/11/10/open-sourcing-the-neighborhood/>

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Irit Rogoff is a writer, curator and organiser working at the intersection of contemporary art, critical theory and emergent political manifestations. She is Professor of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, London University, where she heads the PhD in Curatorial/Knowledge programme, the MA in Global Arts programme and the new Geo-Cultures Research Centre. Rogoff has written extensively on geography, globalisation and contemporary participatory practices in the expanded field of art.