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Saskia Sassen:

WHO WILL DEFEND THE INTERESTS OF CITIZENS?



Can forces in a city become the ‘vanguards of city resistance’? Can renowned intellectuals lead such an anti-bureaucratic opposition. Yes, they can, and they must get involved. They can be the narrators of the abuses, injustices, and of the greed that can lead firms to destroy the lives of people and of small neighborhood firms. Even if their efforts are to fail, it is still important to have narrators of such injustice.

This has been very important for instance in documenting things like growing poverty, and war crimes, but also for how gentrification in major cities has displaced millions of people and created

RJ brings you an exclusive interview with Saskia Sassen, a well known American social scientist recognized as on of the major experts on urbanistics.

many homeless individuals and homeless families. Right now in the US, the majority of homeless are children, who are often members of entirely homeless families! In what is still a very rich country, America has one of the greatest levels of inequality in the world.

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WHO WILL DEFEND THE INTERESTS OF CITIZENS?

Saskia Sassen

DIXI

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I think that **citizens should organize and demand from their governments that there be recognized, legal channels for citizens to act and voice their opinions.** Otherwise, you can run into a situation where some aggressive neighborhood resident begins to conduct him or herself as the informal neighborhood boss. That is no good. A housewife should have the same rights and channels to make claims as a local small business.

RJ *Do you think the citizens of big cities, megalopolises, can have active participation in their city's administration?*

One extreme on the spectrum of citizen participation is Tokyo. Tokyo is well-organized to allow citizen participation at multiple levels. **The government of Tokyo literally governs citizen participation – it has set up multiple levels of participation.** But citizens are actively involved and they do so as citizens. One of my favorite groups are neighborhood housewives, who insist in being seen as housewives and who stress their apolitical status. In fact, behind this insistence, they are deeply political, but not in the terms set by the formal political system. They know their neighborhoods and they know what is wrong, what is not working, who is an abusive local politician, who is a good politician, and who is corrupt. Most importantly, they understand how to use the formal political system at the neighborhood level.

At the other extreme is a megalopolis like Sao Paulo – as big as Tokyo, but radically different. In the vast favelas of Sao



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Paulo (the poor, informal neighborhoods, with no regulation in terms of housing, sewage, water, or electricity), citizens have had to organize and find ways to make their part of the city livable. What is interesting here are the enormous differences that emerge across the varying favelas. Some have become almost lower-middle class neighborhoods, with paved streets, thriving informal economies, and brick houses (rather than the usual shanties made of metal sheets, cardboard, or whatever else is available). Others remain extremely

elementary, with poor informal economies, where almost nothing can be purchased. Finally, some have come under the control of drug lords, often setting public curfews between 8pm and 10pm.

I think it matters that citizens feel that their actions can make a difference. They are the weaker actor, even if their numbers are much larger than those of the large firms and powerful government agencies. Ultimately, without the citizens, there would be no city.

RJ *What political forces could qualify as a 'vanguard of urban resistance' in situations when business and bureaucracy threaten the welfare of the citizens? Is it possible for recognized representatives of the intellectual class to become the leaders of anti-bureaucratic resistance?*

Ideally, government and business should both respect the larger civic organization and culture of a city. But it is interesting to note how even in a well-organized city, such as Tokyo, when powerful firms or powerful government agencies want something – specifically, to take over land that is now occupied by average citizens, including the middle class and the poor – they tend to get it.

In the case of Tokyo, I have documented in detail how powerful real estate development firms use all kinds of measures to remove residents from areas they want to develop. In many cases, their methods have included criminal means, such as setting old buildings on fire, and threatening citizens. Many neighborhoods in central Tokyo that used to be residential, with lots of small houses, each with its little garden and lots of small shops and factories, have been

destroyed and are now the sites of enormous high rise buildings. And this is a city where the average citizen is well-organized, has multiple channels to make demands, and is basically respected by the government and society at large.

In Sao Paulo, when the powerful actors, mostly driven by profits, want to take over a space in the city, they typically do so without reproach and with little regard for the law.

Indeed, we can see this all over the world: The Chinese government removed 3 million Shanghai residents to rebuild Shanghai in the mid 1990s. Unlike in most megalopolises, it at least provided housing to the displaced residents. But the areas were far less attractive than the old neighborhoods in the center of Shanghai, and residents today now have to take very long commutes by public transport to get to their jobs.

RJ *Does the modern social structure of the megalopolis allow for the emergence from within of radical social groups capable of formulating a radical agenda? What is it that saves the megalopolis from the power of big bucks? In your opinion, what tendency of the contemporary epoch is manifest: is bureaucracy becoming stronger or weaker?*

Yes, definitely: radical social groups, that would form an anti-bureaucratic and anti-corporate agenda in the city can be



born within the social structure of the modern megalopolis. In many ways, **the large complex city is a very powerful space for organizing confrontation and resistance**, especially now with the new communication technologies: it is now possible to stage several actions that are coordinated and launched at the same time all over a city.

But I would argue that ulti-

mately, the space of the city is not a space for armed confrontation. It is a space for communication, for what I like to call ‘making presence.’

In my latest book, I tried to understand whether or not the powerless make history. ■

*Interview by Nikita Kurkin
and Yulia Netesova*

Saskia Sassen is an American sociologist noted for her analysis of globalization and international human migration. Sassen coined the term **global city**, giving it a number of clear definitions.

According to Saskia Sassen, the global city is a strategic space for developing global processes, whose dynamics transcend the capacity of a nation state.

In this model, the global city manifests economic globalization not simply as a state of capital flood, but also as an effort for coordi-

nating, managing, and maintaining itself, as well as servicing the various companies and markets whose activities transcend the borders of more than one state.

According to Sassen, ‘the global city provides an endogenic key to the dynamics and conditions of existence of the global economy’. Methodologically, it means that **globalization can be studied with the aid of thorough sociological and anthropological studies of processes taking place in different cities.**