

LOCAL ACTORS IN GLOBAL POLITICS¹

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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

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 (Mudel 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.²

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.

² 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

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.³ The latter

³ 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).

