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Implications of Global Polarization for Feminist Work

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Professor Sassen presents a chilling picture of the global elite of managers and consultants, located in a small handful of central business districts, concentrating power and income ever more tightly in their own hands. While multiple centers create an illusion of decentralization, even within these few locations the gap widens between those who exercise control and those who support their work. Sassen's influential analytic framework has resonated strongly with experiences reported from many other parts of the global system. Polarization of every sort is rapidly increasing while control centers become harder to identify behind the depersonalized screen of technical advice. This symposium challenges us to find the implications for social action in this changing configuration of the upper circuits of the world economy. Two aspects of Sassen's analysis seem particularly powerful for this purpose--the distinctive labor process of globalized management and control, and the central dynamic of overvaluation and devaluation that sustains it.

Sassen focuses on financial services, the currently dominant global sector, in an exemplary case of what the anthropologist Laura Nader calls "studying up."¹ The specifics of this labor process shed more light on the role of gender and ethnicity than Sassen perhaps claims. She lays out before us the informal sector at the top as well as the bottom of the global city. In loosely structured, face-to-face interactions, members of this elite build the shared high trust and information levels they need to negotiate complex financial deals and produce collaborative services. To sustain these "command functions," downtown business districts require appropriate "professional amenities," like restaurants and health clubs, where these interactions take place. Sassen describes how access to such social locations is crucial to locating and bounding the top global business districts.²

A large part of the work Sassen describes at the highest levels of the global economy consists of making subjective judgments about who is reliable, important, interesting, or has potential for growth. Studies of affirmative

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1. Laura Nader, *Post-interpretive Anthropology*, 61 ANTHROPOLOGICAL Q., 149, 151 (1988).

2. The key processes mentioned in Sassen's paper here are explored in more detail in her recent books. See SASKIA SASSEN, *CITIES IN A WORLD ECONOMY* (1994). See also SASKIA SASSEN, *THE GLOBAL CITY* (1991).

action repeatedly show that personal relationships and opinions, formed in these informal venues and activities, give free rein to gender, racial, and ethnic assumptions in forms difficult to eradicate. It seems significant that the distinction between her “command functions” and the more routine managerial functions that are usually delegated to the suburbs parallels the oft reported “glass ceiling” in corporate advancement for women and minorities.

The task of impressing and bonding with potential collaborators is clearly a highly gendered and cultured performance, whether taking place in the board room, the night club, the golf course, or the squash court. Individual women and minorities can break through to the extent that they can replicate this performative gender and racial identity by decontextualizing themselves, denying or removing their own markers to match the unmarked white male. Individual women and minorities may be unwilling or unable to detach themselves from social context to that extent, while others are persistently restored to it. For example, constant remarks that someone is typical or atypical of their marked category serve to underline their membership in it.

Looking at management and control as a concrete labor process reveals it with surprising force as both an illusion and a work of art. Sassen draws attention to the entire process of cultural, social, and economic production of these unmarked, deterritorialized spaces labelled “global.” Only constant and unremitting effort by the support workers assures the managerial elite of continuing access to the rarified environment they require. By carefully replicating the culture and infrastructure of the Intercontinental Hotel worldwide, these support workers make it possible for the globe-trotting executive to believe himself a culturally neutral technocrat. Would-be elite candidates cannot, in fact, decontextualize themselves, but must rely on the skill and invisibility of these unacknowledged others to accomplish it for them. Cleaners, personal secretaries, security guards, repairers, and deliverers meticulously remove and absorb all traces of the actual physical and cultural location, which can mean solving quite different concrete problems depending on local circumstances. Informally produced goods and services permit and subsidize the continued presence of these support workers.

The mirror image of the unmarked global elite is the strong gender and ethnic marking characteristic of the devalued support occupations just mentioned. Secretaries and waiters, for example, not only disproportionately include individuals of marked gender and racial or ethnic categories, but frequently these individuals also enact exaggerated gender and ethnic roles in dress, voice, or behavior as part of performing and keeping their jobs. Along

with the sex and entertainment workers who contribute an essential aspect to global amenities, secretaries and waiters are an integral part of the successful over-valorization of command functions which, in fact, are equally gender and culture-specific.

This decontextualization process lays the groundwork for two conceptual pillars central to the hegemony necessary for the global command elite to function. The decisions and conditionalities of the global command elite enter the policy arena as technical expertise, rather than as products of a specific cultural and political process. A combination of abstraction and quantification renders these judgments apparently neutral and gives them virtually absolute authority on that basis. The embedded over-valorization of the abstract and numerical appropriates parts of an overlapping but not identical history, through which science itself constructed its status as a neutral authority. The intricate and continuing process of stripping away, denying, and concealing the actual cultural and political roots of science has attracted substantial feminist analysis over the years.³

Equally necessary to continuing elite dominance is establishing some analytic distance between technical expertise and its sometimes unfortunate and contradictory consequences. The teflon quality of abstract technocratic rules perhaps needs explaining as much as their decontextualization needs constructing. The distinction between moral validity based on abstract correctness and moral validity based on relatedness and actual results was presented by Carol Gilligan as male and female moral reasoning.⁴ The extreme of irresponsibility for consequences which she portrays as characteristic of male moral reasoning may, in fact, be specific to the privileged middle- and upper-classes of white men precisely because they alone can count on others to clear away those consequences. Its analytic credibility depends on a cultural process with work and ideological components remarkably parallel to those processes Sassen describes as supporting the global elite. Transnational agents and agencies can avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of their decisions because abstract principles like the free market are privileged over concrete local results.

3. The notable works of Fox Keller and Harding were the foundation of a diverse and wide-ranging discussion until the present. See EVELYN FOX KELLER, *REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND SCIENCE* (1985). See also SANDRA HARDING, *THE SCIENCE QUESTION IN FEMINISM* (1986).

4. CAROL GILLIGAN, *IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT* (1982).

The central importance of decontextualization to devalorization illuminates some devastating implications of a subtle historical shift in the dominant characterization of the devalorized category, to women-minorities-and-immigrants from an earlier formula of women-and-children or, still earlier, women-children-and-the-insane. This new characterization narrows the sphere of elite accountability even farther by moving both biological and sociocultural reproduction beyond the located, if subordinated, margins to a place completely off the map. Children are no longer mentioned, and women, minorities, and immigrants enter this conceptual map as full-fledged workers from the homeland, the slum, or the suburb. The need for biological and social reproduction of families or communities need not enter value calculations at all, remaining unacknowledged even as a negative.

Like the illegal informal sector staffed by immigrants, these reproductive activities do not disappear, but become more effectively devalorized by this conceptualization. Their claims on resources through a living wage or public services like welfare, childcare, or healthcare are delegitimized by their invisibility. Since there is no place for these unacknowledged responsibilities in the logic of value, they also serve to more clearly mark and constrain those who are unable to shed them, with stigmatized identities as women and people of color.

Sassen makes it her central point that the creation of these globalized spaces is not a process of eviction, but of devalorization. Women, minorities, and immigrants are not excluded from the global city, but differently positioned within it. Immigration laws, for example, while notably unsuccessful in keeping immigrants from arriving bodily in the global cities, have been very successful in maintaining their status as illegal aliens and therefore keeping them unprotected by the legal regulation of wages, hours, safety, and labor relations in general. Part-time or temporary work and subcontracting also accomplish this repositioning and devalorization. Sassen's analysis explains why much apparently promising informal sector activity around the world becomes a frustrating dead end in practice. No inherent characteristics of the work or the workers cause this, rather, it is the subordinate relationship to more powerful sectors that insures this.

Sassen emphasizes the elite's hidden vulnerability, a dependence on downtown support workers. I would broaden her analytic principle, applying it to a wider range of social groups whose devalorization sustains the continued overvaluation of the elite. Sassen draws significant parallels between the deterritorialized central urban spaces and the free trade zones and

off-shore banking havens that provide artificially detached spaces in peripheral locations. Their apparent detachment from a local context that would imply recognizing historically established entitlements and responsibilities such as labor regulations, embodies an analogous decontextualization process of cultural, social, and economic construction. Strong state intervention was needed to create these paradoxically international locations, and often it is still needed to maintain them, by a significant investment in vigilance and repression against counter-initiatives such as unions.

For many in the developing world, the policy regime called “structural adjustment” provides the ideological and financial discipline for establishing global space in a country as a whole. Loan conditionalities force national governments to dismantle regulatory controls, restrict subsidies to tax holidays for investors, and build appropriate transport and communications infrastructure. The efforts made to facilitate the movement of capital along global transnational circuits are matched only by less successful efforts to restrain the movement of labor through migration.

These other kinds of global space also are ripe for Sassen’s analytic treatment, having at their core a dynamic of over-valorization linked to devalorization. Economic liberalization measures do not so much reduce the risks and costs of transactions as displace them. Allowing flexibility in hiring and layoffs means less risk for the corporation, but requires that more risk be absorbed by the employees. Currency fluctuations continue to devastate local buying power, but no longer threaten the profits now easily expatriated. This economic regime provides human and natural resources to international actors below their actual cost, because it explicitly discounts or undervalues local costs. Its emphasis on comparative advantage in tradeables likewise undervalues alternative local benefits, for example, by counting local wages negatively as costs.

By absorbing more than their share of human and financial costs, populations much broader than the urban informal sector contribute, however unwillingly, to the overvaluation of these global elites. Openly or tacitly, these diverse populations confirm the unbalanced adjustment responsibility and the legitimacy or inevitability of command by this global elite. They thus participate in the devaluation, not only of themselves, but of other marginal groups who may be differently positioned in terms of gender, nationality, race, or other factors. By broadening the linkage between undervalorization and over-valorization in this manner, a manner which Sassen portrays as the

linchpin of the global city, the implications of her model for successful social action can be explored.

Many contemporary social movements are fueled by direct reactions against this devalorization process. The positive values of grass roots accountability and decentralization have given us inspiring examples. All too often, revalorizing local ideals and controls means only more sharply devalorizing the closest adjacent group. Local resistance with arguably similar origins shows its darker side in ethnic cleansing and neo-Fascism. Many of these movements are simultaneously transnational and nationalistic in practice—the Christian Right and Islamic fundamentalism; eugenics and welfare reform.

In this process of identity politics, women bear a special burden as both insiders and outsiders. The category women-and-immigrants becomes highly charged, for not only inflammatory rhetoric but brutal repression and victimization are highly racialized and sexualized. What women do or wear, and whether they work or stay home, has been made central to the definition of identities in a way that men's actions rarely are. Where the only alternative seems to be complete devalorization of communities and identities they themselves value highly, women often cooperate enthusiastically in their symbolic refiguring. Within more progressive social movements as well, women often want to prioritize other identities and commitments ahead of being women, let alone feminists.

With this analytic centrality of decontextualization and recontextualization, the emergence of multiple and diverse women's movements within other liberation movements becomes an expected and positive development, not a danger to feminist activism. The practical problem is not whether they wish to call themselves feminists, and not even whether they cooperate effectively internationally, but how devastatingly feminism is used to divide and paralyze them. Repeatedly, women who take initiatives and make demands arising from their own cultural traditions or historical experiences of revolution or repression need only be accused of being feminists and they immediately stop dead in their tracks. Paradoxically, then, a Western feminism that often presses for more accountability and shared responsibility in its home countries becomes a prominent icon of universalist irresponsibility abroad. The international media parody of feminism not only erases anyone but the white, middle-class liberal feminist, but also dresses her in the same flashy, sexualized Western fashions she supposedly abhors as politically incorrect. The devalorization associated with feminism seems to

overpower all the diversity of women positioned very differently with respect to the global system.

The challenge is to create clear and convincing alternatives for revalorization, recontextualization and local accountability. How can women from such disparate social, cultural, and economic locations reinforce each others' efforts to regain control of the global economy? Continuing the futile and misdirected efforts at homogenization from left or right only feeds into the devalorizing dynamic of decontextualization that must be weakened or disrupted. Each localized struggle will assist the others indirectly to the extent that its success saps the resources available to the core for use in other locations. Active coordination or coalition work between groups who share only an enemy, not either final or intermediate goals and values, faces fundamental problems. Is it even responsible to propose coalitions between people who may well wish each other dead, or at least contemplate each other's execution or starvation with some equanimity?

Bernice Johnson Reagon puts this dilemma in perspective from her own long experience with coalitions of many kinds.⁵ No one does coalition work because it makes them feel good, but only because they have absolutely no alternative. Only as we begin to understand how essential each of our different contributions will be to the dismantling of this global overvaluation process can we begin to build a realistic commitment to working together. We can start this within our lifetimes, or we can put it off as long as possible, but we must eventually get around to it because nothing else will work for long. And when we do, the insights Sassen has brought us as to how that global process works will help us do it more effectively.

5. See Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Coalition Politics: Turning The Century*, in HOME GIRLS 356 (Barbara Smith, ed., 1983).

