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## Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems

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## Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems

### Description

Initially delivered as the [2017 CARGC Distinguished Lecture in Global Communication](#), CARGC Paper 12 presents an analysis of cities as complex, diverse, and incomplete systems. For Sassen, it is precisely these features of urban forms – their complexity, diversity and incompleteness – that offer the possibility of a new type of politics, centered on new types of political actors. She is particularly interested in two features of global cities: their presence as strategic frontier zones where actors from different worlds can meet without clear rules of engagement and their strategic importance for hacking old orders.

### Keywords

global city, global cities

### Disciplines

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# Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems





It is my great pleasure to introduce CARGC Paper 12, “Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems,” by the eminent scholar of cities and globalization, Saskia Sassen, who initially delivered it as the 2017 CARGC Distinguished Lecture in Global Communication, “Digital Formations of the Powerful and the Powerless.”

Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and a Member of its Committee on Global Thought, which she chaired until 2015. She is a world-renowned scholar of cities, immigration, and states in the world economy. She has authored nine books and edited or co-edited three others. Her work is translated in over twenty languages. She has received countless awards and honors, including multiple doctor honoris causa. In 2013, she received the Principe de Asturias Prize in the Social Sciences, was elected to the Royal Academy of the Sciences of the Netherlands, and made Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres by the French government. All this to say, Sassen is an eminent scholar, whose work is perhaps most associated with the study of globalization. In seminal books such as *The Global City* (1991) and *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2008), she has transformed our understanding of the global economy, urbanization, and networked technologies. Her work focuses on the unexpected or counterintuitive to cut through established “truth,” whilst consistently

foregrounding inequality, gendering, and digitization as key dimensions of globalized forms of power.

In CARGC Paper 12, Sassen makes a case for cities as strategic sites for “making” – the urban, the political, the civic, history. She analyzes cities as complex, diverse, and incomplete systems. Cities need to be distinguished from stretches of high-rise housing or office buildings that can only be described as merely dense built-up terrain. Cities, by contrast, operate as strategic frontier zones where the disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated against communities, and the powerful in the top-level economic sectors rub against each other, meeting without clear rules of engagement. For Sassen, it is precisely these features of urban forms, their complexity, diversity and incompleteness that offer the possibility of a new type of politics, centered on new types of political actors.

In “Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems,” Sassen takes on several key dimensions of cities and the urban capabilities they offer to historically invisible or voiceless urban residents. Cities are strategic for global corporate capital. This makes them the new frontier zones of our de-nationalized domains of power. In the city, then, contestations of power become a kind of “hacking” as urban actors are forced into new solidarities beyond those with whom they share identity markers; they are made to “hack” their essentialisms. As we witness the partial disassembling of empires

and nation-states, cities take on a new strategic role in “making” new orders, as we have seen with sanctuary cities or those that passed local laws to combat climate change that go well beyond national legal provisions. Cities, for Sassen, also create a set of conditions for engagement that engender new political practices. These focus primarily on the production of “presence” by those without power, poor and immigrant communities for instance, in the pursuit of claiming their rights to the city. By pointing us to the urbanity or “city-ness” of power and its contestation today, Sassen offers a resounding call to take seriously the capacity of urban space to “hack” powerful systems and alter what originates as hatred and war, including racisms and anti-immigrant politics.

To do so, she invites us to reposition immigrants and citizens as above all “urban subjects.”

I invite you to read Sassen’s thought-provoking CARGC Paper 12. I also invite you to check out our new website at [cargc.asc.upenn.edu](http://cargc.asc.upenn.edu). It’s been a long time coming, and we are very excited for more ways to engage with you and the world! Please take time to check out our current fellows, events, news, and learn more about our research themes and fellowship programs. If you like what you read, please spread the word about us, and help us fulfill our mission in nurturing emerging scholars worldwide. And, remember to sign up for our mailing list!

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*The fact that powerlessness can become complex in the city is, in itself, a transversal type of hacking.*

# Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems

## INTRODUCTION

Cities are complex systems.<sup>1</sup> But they are incomplete systems. These features take on urbanized formats that vary enormously across time and place. In this mix of complexity and incompleteness lies the capacity of cities to outlive far more powerful but formal and closed systems: many a city has outlived governments, kings, the leading corporations of an epoch. Herein also lies the possibility of making – making the urban, the political, the civic, a history. Thus, much of today’s dense built-up terrain, such as a vast stretch of high-rise housing, or of office buildings, is not a city. It is simply dense built-up terrain. On the other hand, a working slum can have many of the features of a city, and indeed, some are a type of city – poor but deeply urban.

It is also in this mix of incompleteness and complexity that lies the possibility for those who lack power to hack the city – to make interventions that alter some features in order to make them work for them, for their needs. Immigrant neighborhoods are good examples. They are thereby able to make a history, a politics, a culture. This may not bring them power, but it does bring them a kind of agency – e.g. the possibility of making a local economy and a local culture. Thus, current conditions in global cities are creating not only new structurations of power, but also operational and rhetorical openings for new types of actors and their projects, including poor or partly disenfranchised actors.

The fact that powerlessness can become complex in the city is, in itself, a transversal type of hacking. One way of conceiving this is as instances of urban capabilities.<sup>2</sup> The spectrum of such capabilities is vast in a major city – ranging from the advantages that top-level economic sectors can extract to those that the poor neighborhoods can extract. In short, the spectrum ranges from the powerful (e.g. the financial system) to the very modest (e.g. an immigrant neighborhood).

In this CARGC Paper I am particularly interested in two features:

One is that the global city is a strategic frontier zone that can enable, even if modestly, those who lack power; those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, and minorities who face discrimination. But it also undermines the historic middle class, as it breaks it down into two classes: one so rich it barely fits the concept of middle class, and the other, the modest middle class, often so poor that it barely qualifies as middle class. Yet, the disadvantaged

1 I want to thank the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, for inviting me to give this lecture and a masterclass where I debated a range of issues with a group of exceptional students.

2 I develop this argument in “Does the City Have Speech?” *Public Culture* 25, no. 2 (2013): 209-221; see also *Expulsions* (Harvard University Press/Belknap 2014) and “Predatory Formations Dressed in Wall Street Suits and Algorithmic Math,” *Science, Technology & Society* 22, no. 1 (2017): 1-15.

and excluded can gain presence in such cities in a way they cannot in neat, homogenous provincial cities. In the global city, they become present to power and to each other, which may include learning to negotiate their multiple differences. They can hack power and they can hack their differences of origin, religion, and phenotype.

The second feature is the strategic importance of the city today for shaping new orders – or, if you will, hacking old orders. As a complex space, the global city can bring together multiple and diverse struggles and engender a larger, more encompassing push for a new normative order. It enables people with different passions and obsessions to work together – more precisely, to hack power together. In the United States, this is becoming clear in the struggle against President Trump. But there are multiple, less visible, and more specific such struggles at any given time in any major city.

## GLOBAL CITIES ARE TODAY’S FRONTIER ZONES

The large complex city, especially if global, is a new frontier zone. Actors from different worlds meet there, but there are no clear rules of engagement. Where the historic frontier was in the far stretches of colonial empires, today’s frontier zone is in our large, messy global cities.

These cities are strategic for global corporate capital. Much of the work of forcing deregulation, privatization, and new fiscal and monetary policies on governments actually takes place in the corporate sector of global cities, rather than in legislatures and parliaments. The corporates hacked the city as well: that making of new instruments was a way of constructing the equivalent of the old military “fort” of the historic frontier. And corporate actors have been doing this in city after city worldwide to ensure a global operational space of the sort they need. The global city is then also a frontier zone because it is where strategic spaces of power can be hacked.

But they are also strategic for those without power. This signals the possibility of a new type of politics, centered in new types of political actors. That is one instance of what I seek to capture with the concept of urban capabilities. It is not simply a matter of having or not having power: it goes well beyond routinized voting and having to accept corporate utility logics, or the dominance of narratives that strengthen powerful actors. These are new hybrid bases from which to act. One outcome we are seeing in city after city is the making of new kinds of informal politics. For instance, there is a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives and make legible the local and the silenced. Work gets done by making a new kind of contestatory public that uses urban space as a medium, a tool to hack power.

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This work also signals the possibility of making a new type of subject, one abundant in cities across time and place, but always somewhat rare: the urban subject that results from hacking the ethnic, religious, and racialized subject. Old Baghdad and Jerusalem, old industrializing Chicago and New York were such cities. This is not to deny or hide the histories and geographies entailed by such specific, often inherited markers. The urban subject is at home with all, whether in Old Baghdad and Jerusalem or industrializing Chicago and New York.

A city’s sociality can bring out and underline the urbanity of subject and setting, and dilute more essentialist markers. It is often the need for new solidarities (for instance, when cities confront major challenges) that can bring about this shift. Urban space can hack our essentialisms as it forces us into joint responses, and from there can move us onto appreciating an urban subject, rather than the more specific individual identity. The big, messy, slightly anarchic city enables such shifts. The corporatized city or the “office park” does not.

There is yet another type of hacking of long-time orders that is taking place today. It is the hacking of well-established, larger units, notably nation states, which are beginning to lose their grip on domains where they once had considerable control. This is an important even if partial and not always desirable change. In my larger project, I identified a vast proliferation of such partial dis-assemblings and re-assemblings that arise from the remix of bits of territory, authority, and rights, once all ensconced in national institutional frames. In the case of Europe, these novel assemblages include those resulting from the formation and ongoing development of the EU, but also those resulting from a variety of cross-city alliances around protecting the environment, fighting racism, and other important causes. They result from sub-national struggles and the desire to make new regulations for self-governance at the level of the neighborhood and the city.

Against the background of a partial disassembling of empires and nation-states, the city emerges as a strategic site for making elements of new partial orders.<sup>3</sup> Where in the past national law might have been the law, today subsidiarity and the new strategic role of cities, makes it possible for us to imagine a return to urban law. We see a resurgence of urban law making, a subject I discuss in depth elsewhere (see *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chapters 2 and 6).<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the US, a growing number of cities have passed local laws (ordinances) that make their cities sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants, other cities have passed

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3 One synthesizing image we might use to capture these dynamics is the movement from centripetal nation state articulation to a centrifugal multiplication of specialized assemblages, where one of many examples might be the trans-border networks of specific types of struggles, enactments, art, and so on.

4 The emergent landscape I am describing promotes a multiplication of diverse spatiotemporal framings and diverse normative mini-orders. Where once the dominant logic was toward producing grand unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings. See Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapters 8 and 9 and *Cities in a World Economy* (Sage, 2018).

environmental laws that only hold for the particular cities because they go well beyond national law, or they have developed currencies for local transactions that only function in those cities.

These are among the features that make cities a space of great complexity and diversity. Today cities confront major conflicts that can reduce that complexity to mere built-up terrain or cement jungle. The urban way of confronting extreme racisms, governmental wars on terror, the future crises of climate change is to make these challenges occasions to further expand diverse urban capabilities and the meaning of membership. But much government policy and the “needs” of powerful actors go against this mode.

## CITIES AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY: WHEN POWERLESSNESS BECOMES COMPLEX

Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and new identities are made. They have been such sites at various times and in various places, and under very diverse conditions. This role can become strategic in particular times and places, as is the case today in global cities. Current conditions in these cities are enabling operational and rhetorical openings for new types of political actors who may long have been invisible or without voice. A key element of the argument here is that the localization of strategic components of globalization in these cities means that the disadvantaged can engage globalized corporate power – the global is not beyond the local. Further, the growing numbers and diversity of the disadvantaged in these cities takes on a distinctive “presence.”

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Critical in this process is to recover some of the differences between being powerless and being invisible or impotent. The disadvantaged in global cities can gain “presence” in their engagement with power but also vis-à-vis each other. This is different from the 1950s to the 1970s in the US, for instance, when white flight and the significant departure of major corporate headquarters left cities hollowed out and the disadvantaged in a condition of abandonment. Today, the localization of the most powerful global actors in these cities creates a set of objective conditions for engagement. Examples are the struggles against gentrification as it encroached on minority and disadvantaged neighborhoods. In New York City, it led to growing numbers of homeless beginning in the 1980s and struggles for the rights of the homeless, or demonstrations against police brutalizing minority people.

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Elsewhere I have developed the case that while these struggles are highly localized, they actually represent a form of global engagement; their globality is a horizontal, multi-sited recurrence of similar struggles in hundreds of cities worldwide.<sup>5</sup> These struggles are

<sup>5</sup> See *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chapters 6 and 8.

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different, for example, from the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s in several major cities in the US: these were short, intense eruptions confined to the ghettos and causing most of the damage in the neighborhoods of the disadvantaged themselves. In those ghetto uprisings there was no engagement with power, but rather protest against power. In contrast, current conditions in major, especially global, cities are creating operational and rhetorical openings for new types of political actors, including the disadvantaged and those who were once invisible or without voice.

The conditions that today make some cities strategic sites are basically two, and both capture major transformations that are destabilizing older systems organizing territory and politics. One of these is the re-scaling of what are the strategic territories that articulate the new politico-economic system and hence at least some features of power. The other is the partial unbundling or at least weakening of the national as container of social process due to the variety of dynamics encompassed by globalization and digitization. The consequences for cities of these two conditions are many: What matters here is that cities emerge as strategic sites for major economic processes and for new types of political actors. In this sense, this urban shift is a form of hacking the national state and interstate arrangements of the past century.

What is being engendered today in terms of political practices in the global city is quite different from what it might have been in the medieval city of Weber. In the medieval city, we see a set of practices that allowed the burghers to set up systems for owning and protecting property against more powerful actors, such as the king and the church, and to implement various immunities against despots of all sorts. Today's political practices, I would argue, have to do with the production of "presence" by those without power and with a politics that claims rights to the city rather than protection of property. What the two situations share is the notion that through these practices new forms of political subjectivity, i.e. citizenship/membership, are being constituted and that the city is a key site for this type of political work. The city is, in turn, partly constituted through these dynamics. Far more so than a peaceful and harmonious suburb, the contested city is where the civic is being built. After the long historical phase that saw the ascendance of the national state and the scaling of key economic dynamics at the national level, the city is once again today a scale for strategic economic and political dynamics.

But what happens to these urban capabilities when war goes asymmetric, and when racisms fester in cities where growing numbers become poor and have to struggle for survival? Here follows a brief discussion of two cases that illustrate how cities can enable powerlessness to become complex. In this complexity lies the possibility of making the political, making history. If the city is to survive as a space of complexity and diversity – and not become

*If the city is to survive as a space of complexity and diversity – and not become merely a built-up terrain or cement jungle – it needs capabilities to transform conflict.*

merely a built-up terrain or cement jungle – it needs capabilities to transform conflict. It will have to find a way to go beyond the fact of conflicts, whether they result from racisms, from governmental wars on terror, or from the future crises of climate change.<sup>6</sup>

This implies the possibility of making new subjectivities and identities. For instance, often it is the urbanity of the subject and of the setting that mark a city, rather than ethnicity, religion, or phenotype. But that marking urbanity of subject and setting do not simply fall from the sky. It often comes out of hard work and painful trajectories. One question is whether it can also come out of the need for new solidarities in cities confronted by major challenges, such as violent racisms or environmental crises.

The acuteness and overwhelming character of the major challenges cities confront today can serve to create conditions where the challenges are bigger and more threatening than a city’s internal conflicts and hatreds. This might force us into joint responses and from there onto the emphasis of an urban, rather than individual or group, subject and identity – such as an ethnic or religious subject and identity.

One important instance in the making of norms concerns immigration. What must be emphasized here is the hard work of making open cities and repositioning the immigrant and the citizen as urban subjects that inevitably, mostly, transcend this difference of formal membership. In the daily routines of a city, the key factors that rule are work, family, school, public transport, and so on, and this holds for both immigrants and citizens. Perhaps the sharpest marking of difference in a city is between the rich and the poor (rather than citizen versus immigrant), and each of these classes includes both immigrants and citizens. It is when the law and the police enter the picture that the differences of immigrant status versus citizen status become key factors, but most of daily life in the city is not ruled by this differentiation.

## CONCLUSION: WHERE WE STAND NOW

In this CARGC Paper, I explored what we might think of as urban capabilities – mixes of space and people in urban settings. It matters to the argument that these capabilities have often been crafted out of struggles that take participants beyond the conflicts and racisms that mark an epoch. It is out of this type of dialectic that came the open urbanity that historically made European cities spaces for the making of expanded citizenship. One factor feeding these positives was that cities became strategic spaces also for the powerful and their needs for self-representation and projection onto a larger stage. The modest middle classes

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Peter Marcuse, “Urban Form and Globalization after September 11th: The View from New York,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, no. 3 (2002): 596-606.

and the powerful both found in the city a space for their diverse “life projects.” Less familiar to this author are the non-European trajectories of the strategic spaces for the powerful and the powerless, in China or India, for example.

More generally, in this CARGC Paper I argued that the last two decades have seen an increasingly urban articulation of global logics and struggles, and an escalating use of urban space to make political claims. At the national level, we see emerge a landscape marked by a multiplication of diverse spatio-temporal framings and diverse normative mini-orders, where once the dominant logic was toward producing grand unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings.

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It is impossible to do full justice to the diverse aspects of this process in such a short essay; here I have limited myself to the basic building blocks of the argument. I focused on some of the acute challenges facing cities as a way of exploring how urban capabilities can alter what originates as hatred and as war. Among these challenges are two that are very different yet capture this capacity of urban space to hack more powerful systems. One is the spread of asymmetric war and the urbanizing of war it entails. The other is the hard work of making open cities and, secondly, the repositioning of the immigrant and the citizen as above all urban subjects, rather than essentially different subjects as much of the anti-immigrant and racist commentary does. It is this making of urban subjects that is one of the major capabilities of cities.



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The Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania is an institute for advanced study that produces and promotes advanced research on global communication and public life, bringing the very best scholarship to bear on enduring global questions and pressing contemporary issues. As an institute for advanced study, CARGC aims to produce world class, field-defining research, grounded in a vision of “inclusive globalization” that embraces the stunning diversity of global media, politics and culture. This vision is grounded in an unyielding commitment to academic excellence and global engagement. Our core value is the articulation of deep, expert knowledge of key world regions and their histories and languages, to theoretically sophisticated and methodologically rigorous research. We aim to stimulate critical conversations between “area” studies, interdisciplinary fields, and disciplines about entrenched and emerging structures, flows, struggles and outcomes in worldwide communication. We also explore changing dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination, including electronic publication, digital archives, and new ways of understanding and explaining the world, chiefly through CARGC Press. With a commitment to the development of early career scholars, CARGC hosts postdoctoral and visiting fellows who work in research groups, and organizes lectures, symposia and summer institutes.

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