

Social Science Bites

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Saskia Sassen on Before Method

David Edmonds: Saskia Sassen is a sociologist who was brought up in several countries and with several languages. That might be one biographical explanation for how she's been able to bring a critical eye on existing ways of framing social phenomena. She's coined a phrase to describe her approach: 'before method'.

Nigel Warburton: Saskia Sassen, *welcome to Social Science Bites*.

Saskia Sassen: Hi Nigel. I'm very delighted to be part of this nice experiment.

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're going to talk about is 'before method.'* Now I've heard you talking about this concept of before method before and I was really intrigued by exactly what you meant by that.

Saskia Sassen: It really was shaped by two things: one is how I do research, how I wind up wanting to explore a certain subject; and the second part sort of harkens back a bit to Kafka's 'Before the Law': before the law being the space either of fear (because the law is about to come down and chop off your head), or it is the space of epistemic indignation, an indignation that is mental: the mental violence that you experience when authoritative explanation, you know, is wrong, and I have that with a lot of the neo-liberal explanations about where we're at in our world today. So, between those two elements I realize that I'm really in this epistemic indignation, and because I'm in that zone, I need freedom, flexibility, to position myself vis-à-vis my object of study in whatever way I want. So before method is that space before I need to enter the disciplining of method in the conventional social sciences.

Nigel Warburton: *So what you're saying is you've got epistemic indignation – is that a special kind of indignation? - before you start...*

Saskia Sassen: Yes, what is the knowledge vector that organizes an explanation? Let me just give you an example. When the IMF and the European Central Bank in January 2013 declare that Greece's economy is back on track and they used GDP per capita, a well-established measure, what is not said is that they're accounting a shrunken economic space, an economic space that has basically expelled 30% of workers, of households, of small businesses. They're counting right, but what they're counting is only part of the story. and in that sense to call that part of knowledge, to me, does violence. Now that's a very clear, transparent example. There are many cases where it is far more ambiguous and intermediated. Since I was a very junior scholar I have always been on alert vis-à-vis powerful explanations, categories for analysis, that presume to be able to capture the critical elements of a condition. Maybe it's because I grew up in Latin America, then I was raised in Italy and in France, then I came to the United States. I have travelled across all sort of epistemic domains also in terms of how people explain something. It's not a beating your chest kind of violence that you feel, it's really mental, and it becomes a mental project and hence it becomes a knowledge-making project.

Nigel Warburton: *I'm intrigued. In the Greek case you talked about the people who were excluded from the methodological calculation as it were. How do you know they exist before you start with method?*

Saskia Sassen: Well, that is a good point. I developed what I like to think of as analytic tactics, not analytic strategies, analytic *tactics*: in other words, very instrumental, little steps. So one of the issues for me has become when I invoke a powerful explanation I am invoking something that is collectively produced over time that really does explain, that has been subjected to analyses and contestation, and that has survived all of that. It is powerful. So I cannot just throw it out of the window, but what I can do is ask: 'When I invoke this category, what *don't* I see?'

Now, in so far as I'm working in a period that I think of as one where stable meanings are becoming unstable, what does it mean today to say 'the economy' or 'the national economy'? What does it mean to say 'the middle classes'? What does it mean to say 'the national state'? What does it mean to say 'unemployment'? Et cetera, et cetera. I find all of these are right now are slightly unstable if not sharply unstable in some cases, so then it becomes actually I think valid, legitimate if you want, to ask, okay if I invoke these powerful categories, what don't I see? In the most extreme version of all of this I would say that they are so full of meaning, these powerful categories, that they function a bit as an invitation not to think. My first big research project was on dialectic logic in philosophy in Poitiers and I was coming from a very Anglo setting in some senses and I felt that this straightforward logic, positivist logic, that that was problematic but then when I come to the United States, I am an adult, I have my PhD, my first big project was on immigration. What worried me a bit, some straightforward propositions? One of them, we can prevent immigration if we invest abroad, we in the United States. And so I said let me check this out. What if setting up operations, what today we call outsourcing, what if that actually builds a bridge? Since a lot of the products that they're making come back to the United States, what if the workers were making it way over there in the Philippines or wherever or south of Mexico, the *maquillas*, what if they say 'I'm making it here for them, why can't I make it over there and have better work conditions?' So you can see, I published my first book it was called *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* rather than this traditional notion, the mobility of capital which supposedly captures it all.

The second step in all of this was the global city book. So that came out of the question, is it really true that this new system that removing this global era mean space/time compression, place no longer matters, anybody can work wherever they want because of the technologies... always an exaggerated image but still. It was becoming kind of a trope almost. Out of that then comes detecting the extent to which even the most electronic sectors like finance, the ones that are most mobile, actually need place: a place of a certain kind, but place.

Nigel Warburton: *So the method is to look at the categories that exist in a field, question them, see if they're actually doing what they're reported to do, and then see what's missing, a kind of rhetoric of statistics that once a category is fixed you can persuade people of a certain conclusion if you have enough data but the category itself is the thing which should be subjected to a certain degree of critical examination before you get started.*

Saskia Sassen: You know, I never quite thought of it so clearly as you did but I'm going to remember this. See I experience myself as being after the substance of a condition, trying to discover what is it that we need to know about it. So out of that, in between step before method zone, comes my engagement with categories. But it is true that I start out with the dominant category through which a given condition is captured and I guess that is what it needs to do social science, right, rather than 'let me just go digging in the earth and see what I find there.' So it is not innocence. It is knowing too much perhaps: 'I know this category and I know something about that reality and there is something here that does not persuade me.' This is what helps me construct the object of study. My work as a social scientist has not been replication, to test whether something is correct or not, to test on the wrinkles, accepting the foundational elements, but it has been to want to discover what has been left out. It means that eventually, however, for the research that I do, I need to go back to some certainly basic data sets that exist. So I'm not inventing everything. So I need to go back into the disciplining of method, but I use them like what I just said about the GDP in Greece. So I don't say the GDP per capita is totally wrong. No, I'm just saying what we need to understand is what exactly that measures. I do that with a whole bunch of variables.

Nigel Warburton: *If I've understood you correctly, what you're doing is actually moving from what some people might see as quite a subjective interpretation of the state of affairs in terms of the dominant categories being used, and then, having got an angle on those categories, coming back to the more objective methodology of recording data, like you mentioned GDP, but it might be immigration figures having recognized that the notion of immigration is something that can be called into question and challenged in various ways, and so that's a mixture of almost therapeutic interpretation and analytic use of data.*

Saskia Sassen: That's very well put. Can I take notes? No, but in fact my latest book, the expulsions book, I use as an explicated method, the proposition that I want to *de-theorize* very formidable categories, you know, and I want to go back to what one might think of as ground level, stripped of all the theorizations and interpretations - that's never a completely possible project - and then re-theorize. So one example is a very simple example of this. So in this book, I have about 100 or so sites or so that I look at, and so one of them is in Norilsk, Russia, the biggest nickel-producing complex in the world, extremely polluting and destructive and then I look at the gold mines in Montana, extremely polluting, destructive, abusing all the laws. And I stand back and I ask, what is more important, that one comes out of Russian communism, it was first a gulag and it involved 'ah that's the communists... the Russians who are so... and this is America.' Is that more important? Or is it more important what they do at ground level, destroy people, water, air, land, communities? That is a very simple example of what I try to do. The next step then is how do I conceptualize this? If we think of theorizing as theorem, how to see with the conceptual eye, I'm not going to say that communism and capitalism matter here. What I'm going to argue is something else where the mother category is our capacity for environmental destruction.

Nigel Warburton: *How do you determine which category is the essential category that's at stake there?*

Saskia Sassen: I have been described as having conceptual courage. It takes a bit of courage and again, I like to tell this story. My first book which is now considered a classic,

The Mobility of Labor and Capital, it was rejected by 12 publishers. I kept sending it. I violated all the rules of the game. At one point I said seven to seven publishers. I kept going at it. I was running out of publishers, by the way. The thirteenth took it. I believed in that book and I never changed a sentence. But I think in my answer to your question, I really come back to that first point you made. What are the complex meaning or categories through which we narrate, understand, function as researchers, run our hypothesis etcetera. I think there my foreignness has given me a third point of view that fits neither here nor there, literally, and that's my own zone of combat, and now I'm giving it a name 'before method'. When I do research on immigration, I suspend the category. And I tell my students, 'If you're going to do research on immigration, forget the category 'immigration' exists: go see what you see.' Same thing I did with globalization. I had to get rid of it otherwise it just leads you in a different direction. Now most people have done very fine being led by that category. I'm not saying nobody should be doing it because thank you, because that allows me to do what I do. There is a lot of content in that category today.

Nigel Warburton: *Some of what you said sounds a bit like what Thomas Kuhn talks about as 'normal science' which occurs when people are following out the consequences of certain frameworks within which they see the world and then there are paradigm shifts where things will start to be called into question. I wonder whether you think that we're entering in a period when sociology and the social sciences generally have reached a level of self-confidence that will trigger a new kind of approach to research?*

Saskia Sassen: Well in a way, I think postmodernism already brings that in and then, I mean, you have all of these sub disciplines. Look at India. India has generated some extraordinary intellectual capabilities, you know. Or take somebody like Homi Bhabha who functions in the United States but again, a very different way of putting the story together. The Latin Americans have a different way. In fact sometimes when I give a lecture, somewhere in the world, someone will come up to me and say 'You think like a Latin American'. Back to the biographical, I hate to say, but there it is. So I think that we are in a way in that moment that you described, but it has been going on for two decades and in very formalized systems with multiple rewards, with many review committees like, is the United States? Is the UK? There is a high price that people pay when they divvy it up because those committees set themselves up as guardians. Even if there is one dissenting voice - I've been on search committees and I can dissent as much as I want and they love what I say. When the chips are down and they have to deliver their review to the higher authority: very difficult. By the way my doctoral dissertation also got rejected. That's why I went to study philosophy. I really didn't care. I was 23. I didn't care. But I have actually been a victim of my own experimental modes but I was young when all these negatives were happening so I really didn't care but I do ask myself very often, what about those who were not as care free as I am?

Nigel Warburton: Saskia Sassen, *thank you very much.*

Saskia Sassen: Thank you. It was wonderful.

[Ends]