Magnus Wennerhag: Today, there is an obvious difference between the rhetoric of liberalism — that is, liberalism as political ideology — and the actual workings of the state in liberal-democratic polities. From an historical perspective, how should we understand this difference?

Saskia Sassen: I would distinguish two issues. One is that historically, liberalism is deeply grounded in a particular combination of circumstances. Most important is the struggle by merchants and manufacturers to gain liberties vis-à-vis the Crown and the aristocracy, and the use of the market as the institutional setting that both gave force and legitimacy to that claim. Seen this way, why should liberalism not have decayed? What rescued liberalism was Keynesianism, the extension of a socially empowering project to the whole of society. This is the crisis today: Keynesianism has been attacked by new types of actors, including segments of the political elite. What is happening today is on the one hand a decay (objectively speaking) of liberalism even as an ideology — being replaced with neoliberalism, attacks on the welfare state, etc — and, on the other hand, a decay of the structural conditions within which Keynesian liberalism could function. So the struggle today has been renamed: one key term is democratic participation and representation, and those who use this language will rarely invoke liberalism. When we praise liberalism, it is often a situated defense: as against neoliberalism, as against fundamentalisms and despotisms — this is not necessarily invoking historical liberalism, which at its origins was defending the rights of an emerging class of property owners, but the best aspects of a doctrine that had to do with the fight against the despotism of Crown and nobility.

MW: In your new book, you call the development of the US state "illiberal". Is this a more general development that can be seen in other countries as well?

SS: Theoretically speaking, I would say that we will see similar trends in other liberal democratic regimes that are neoliberalizing their social policies, hollowing out their legislatures/parliaments, and augmenting as well as privatizing or protecting the power of their executive or prime ministerial branch of government. That is to say, we will see these trends where we see the conditions I identify for the US, even though they will assume their own specific forms and contents. I would say that Blair's reign in the UK especially since the war on Iraq has clearly moved in this direction. Instead of being guided (and disciplined) by the Cabinet, which is parliament based, Blair set up a parallel "cabinet" at Downing Street from which he got much of his advice and confirmations of the correctness of his decisions. This had the effect of hollowing out the real Cabinet. This may also explain why some of the leading figures of the real Cabinet resigned: Robin Cook, Clare Short. All of this is well known and much commented on in the UK. At the same time, I would argue that even though Berlusconi's regime had some of these features, it was more a consequence of corruption and manipulation of the political apparatus than the type of systemic development I am alluding to. The answer to your question is also empirical: we need research to understand where this systemic trend is emerging and becoming visible/operational.

MW: Many European countries are currently contemplating introducing some type of "citizenship tests". In Sweden, the traditionally social liberal Folkpartiet has pursued this issue and proposed that immigrants have to pass a language test to become Swedish citizens. Generally, the party wants to apply more paternalistic political measures — "bough on crime", more discipline in schools — especially regarding immigrants. The corresponding political party in Denmark has, during its time in office, brought this development even further. Speaking of liberalism as a political ideology, do you see it as being in the midst of a crisis, or is it simply adapting to the conditions of the prevailing (economic, political, legal, etc) order?

SS: I would say traditional liberalism is in crisis, or at least being attacked by the governments themselves as well as by powerful economic actors and certain traditional society sectors, such as fundamentalist evangelical groups in the US. Why should it last forever? Nothing has — except the Catholic Church, I guess. But to do so it has had to reinvent itself regul-
This does not mean that the aspiration of democratic participatory political systems is going under. On the contrary. But its historical liberal form is clearly weakened. This is not the case in the US, where there was even a proposal to make undocumented immigration into a criminal act and status. This is new.

MW: Around the turn of the last century, the discovery of the “social question” (and the rise of the workers’ movement) transformed the liberal notion of citizenship, making space for previously excluded “socially qualified” people. Nowadays, more and more people in their political activism are challenging the liberal notion of citizenship, and in doing so, they are connect- ing “public” with “private” in a new way. How can we interpret this development in the context of today’s liberal democracies?

SS: This brings up a critical dynamic, but one that is often overlooked by scholars of immigration. Some types of struggles for inclusion are more successful than others. For example, in Western societies, we have achieved some success in making immigration policies less exclusionary and more inclusive. But in the US, the introduction of “anti-immigration” legislation has made it harder to achieve these goals. The US has a longer history of anti-immigration policies, so it is more difficult to make progress in this area.

Important to my analysis are two other points. One is the role of space. There are kinds of spaces that are particularly enabling, and I think large messy cities, especially global cities, are such spaces. Second, I argue that today the multinational corporation, which is a private legal persona, also functions as an informal political actor at a time when the globalization of the economy requires that national states change some of their key laws and regulations so that there is a global space for the operations of these firms. They have and continue to put a lot of pressure on governments to do what they want. This is clearly a global problem, given the rise of transnational corporations. In Europe, the situation is different. But in the US, it is clear that the outsider has a lot of political power. You can see this in the make-up of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. There are a lot of people who are pushing for immigration reform, even though it is a difficult issue to handle.

This political work was often the work of recognizing minorities in their struggles for recognition. In my book, I emphasize that these types of struggles for inclusion are more successful than others. For example, in Western societies, we have achieved some success in making immigration policies less exclusionary and more inclusive. But in the US, the introduction of “anti-immigration” legislation has made it harder to achieve these goals. The US has a longer history of anti-immigration policies, so it is more difficult to make progress in this area.

The public work was often the work of recognizing the outsider. When the outsider was a citizen, it was easier to make space for them. But when the outsider was not a citizen, it was harder. This is why it is important to recognize the outsider. They are not just people who are excluded from participation in political life, but they are also people who can make political change happen. In my book, I argue that the outsider is a critical arena for politics, not just for recognition, but also for action. The outsider can be a part of the dominant society, they may not always be a part of the dominant society, they may not always be a part of the dominant society.
I like to emphasize that these struggles contained the work of making rights – in fact, often making new rights. This was not only about asking for recognition of pre-existing rights; it meant “making new” rights, especially civic and social. This is a long history in what was largely a Europe of cities.

Today the landscape is confusing – confusing in the sense that it does not make visible all the elements, and in that sense, hermetic. We need to detect how the systems of liberal democracy work, on the basis of empirical evidence and, in a sense, historical clarity.

I define liberal democracy as a process of privatization of an executive branch. This process is done in several ways: 

1. The executive branch grants rights – really the executive branch of states – are the ones that can materialize the making of new rights.

2. Today, in the interest of fundamental liberal values, regarding the possibilities for democratic values, the decision to privatize an executive branch starts to become institutional. Institutional privatization happens at the heart of the executive branch, which begins to privilege the making of new rights over the making of old rights.

3. A great strengthening of the market sphere, but with an ironic twist: greater autonomy that allows powerful economic actors, notably global firms, to act in the name of market interests.

My question is: what is the logic that underlies today’s changes? It is impossible to do justice to the subject, but here are some elements of my answer. The case for the privatization of the executive branch is based on the privatization of the state, on the privatization of the center, on the privatization of the voting population. In my research for the new book, I found that the voting population is privatized, bans on political parties, privatization of markets, privatization of the state, privatization of the center, privatization of the executive branch of states, privatization of the voting population.

Two outcomes. One is that the central project of the nation-state begins to disintegrate, partly. The center no longer controls the core of power, and the state apparatus is growing distance and asymmetry between the power of the executive/prime minister and the power of the legislatures/parliaments. The second outcome is that the executive branch is privatized.

In the case of the systems you mention in your question, systems from progressive theorists as well as social movements, the cases of private arbitration (private arbitration courts, etc.), and private creation of institutions of liberal democracy – a kind of liberal democracy with an extreme privatization of the executive branch. One typical example is Sweden. In Sweden, the executive branch privatized the power of the judiciary. The executive branch has privatized the justice system, and in that sense, privatized its own ability to control the judiciary. It is a project of denationalization, partial and specialized, of the power of the judiciary.

What is different, or specific to the current transformation? At the deepest level, I argue, it has to do with a changing logic of the division of powers. The division of powers in the history of the nation-state is a reflection of a changing logic of the division of powers. The division of powers in the history of the nation-state is a reflection of a changing logic of the division of powers.

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cism of the global justice movement, of institutions like the WTO and the IMF, and of their demands for more global institutions, can play a positive role in this?

SS: Yes, definitely. I think one critical element is the notion of repossessing the state apparatus for genuine liberal democracy. The liberal state has been hijacked by the globalization processes, by the new despotisms. By this I mean despotisms that are less heavy-handed, more intermediated through propaganda machineries, etc.

My preferred version is a denationalized state. I am not keen on nationalisms. Another critical element is the notion I talked about earlier: that the formal political apparatus accommodates less and less of the political and hence the growing importance of informal political actors and political struggles. I see a lot of this emerging.

Besides what I said earlier, these politics also include a sort of denationalizing of the claim to the right to have rights. And, at the other end, a politics of the enforcement of denationalizing politics – this is about a denationalized state, not keen on nationalizations.

MW: The title of your new book indicates that the concept of "assemblages" is central to your analysis. What role does this concept have for the description of the hierarchies of power in today's world? And how does it relate to your earlier research on the global city?

SS: A key yet much overlooked feature of the current period is the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialized, cross-border systems for governing a variety of processes both inside and across nation-states. These systems include at one end of the spectrum private systems such as the lex constructio – a private "law" developed by the major engineering companies in the world to establish a common mode of dealing with the strengthening of the countries where they build. At the other end of the spectrum, they include the International Criminal Court, which is not part of the supranational system and has universal jurisdiction. Beyond the diversity of signatory countries, there is the International Criminal Court, which is not part of the supranational system and has universal jurisdiction over all countries. The proliferation of these systems does not represent the end of national states, but it does constitute a new kind of international relations.

Emphasizing this multiplication of partial systems contrasts with much of the globalization literature that has focused on what are at best bridging events, such as the creation of the WTO. Rather, the change is about the transformation of the existing hierarchies, making what are at best bridging events, such as the creation of the WTO, into new, more radical, and powerful entities.

MW: Sovereign authority can be seen as state sovereignty, but also as popular sovereignty – the collective self-realization of the people, in contrast to mere assemblage. Is there any difference in how "de-nationalization" exerts an influence on these different kinds of sovereignty?

SS: This clause is revolutionary in that it goes beyond, indeed contests, the major achievements of the French and American revolutions, which was to posit that the sovereignty of the people is the sovereign interest of the people as a whole. This achievement of the French and American revolutions was to establish a new order of sovereignty.

But this also begins to eat away at some of the foundational architectures of liberal participatory democracies. Clearly these processes are more and more disenchanted with the sovereignty of the people and a sort of sovereignty at the national level. In other words, these global systems include negative networks from the inside out, and in a way, the different kinds of sovereignty and sovereignty in the sense of the nation-state.

MW: The title of your new book indicates that the concept of "assemblages" is central to your analysis. What role does this concept have for the description of the hierarchies of power in today's world? And how does it relate to your earlier research on the global city?
some of the new global formations that emerged in the 1980s but was not itself the beginning of the new order as is often asserted.

These cross-border systems amount to particularized assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights that used to be part of more diffuse institutional domains within the nation-state or, at times, the supranational system. I see in this proliferation of specialized assemblages a tendency toward a mixing of constitutive rules once solidly lodged in the national-state project. These novel assemblages are partial and often highly specialized, centered in particular utilities and purposes. Their emergence and proliferation bring several significant consequences even though this is a partial, not an all-encompassing development. They are potentially profoundly unsettling for what are still the prevalent institutional arrangements — nation-states and the supranational system. They promote a multiplication of diverse spatio-temporal framings and diverse normative orders where once the dominant logic was toward producing unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings.

This proliferation of specialized orders extends even inside the state apparatus. I argue that we can no longer speak of "the" state, and hence of "the" national state versus "the" global order. We see a novel type of segmentation inside the state apparatus, with a growing and increasingly privatized executive branch of government aligned with specific global actors, notwithstanding nationalist speeches, and we see a hollowing out of legislatures which increasingly become confined to fewer and more domestic matters. This realignment weakens the capacity of citizens to demand accountability from the executive and it partly erodes the privacy rights of citizens — a historic shift of the private-public division at the heart of the liberal state, albeit always an imperfect division.

MW: Lately, several "grand narratives" of globalization have been formulated by theorists such as Manuel Castells, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. In what ways does your own theory resemble, or differ from, these?

SS: I share much with them, and I know them all. There is much political trust among us. But since you ask about possible theoretical differences, let me answer. One way of starting is to say that their effort has been to map the emergent global. And I agree with what they see and the importance they give to this global. But that is not what I am doing.

Very briefly, my struggle over the last twenty years has been to go beyond the self-evident global scale, and detect the global at sub-national levels. From there comes my concept of the global city, for instance. One way of putting it is that I like to go digging in the penumbra of master categories. The global has become a master category, and is so blindly clear that it puts a lot of places, actors, and dynamics in a deep shadow. My current work on the denationalized state — no matter how intense the renationalizing also is — is yet another instance of the global that is not self-evidently global. I am interested in the ways in which the global might be endogenous to the national. For example, much global capital is actually denationalized national capital. Strictly speaking, there is no legal persona for the global firm. But there is a global space for their operations, a global space that is the result of states denationalizing bits and pieces of their national systems — it took a lot of work by over a hundred states to do this. The human rights regime offers another type of example. When a judge or a plaintifff uses human rights in a national court for a national court case, it partly, and in very specialized ways, denationalizes a national law system.

By the way, this, again, points to the multivalence of many of the key categories I have developed to do my type of research. The denationalizing that happens through the demands of global firms is not so good, whereas the denationalizing that happens through the use of human rights in national courts is very interesting, and mostly positive.

These are just two examples of how I work. It is, thus, quite different from just focusing on the global per se. Focusing on the global firm or the human rights regime as global entities is critical. But it needs to be distinguished from the making of that possibility. I am interested in the making. I think this approach also has consequences for politics: we can perform global politics through national state institutions — and in so doing, will, of course, partly denationalize our state, which is fine with me as it begins to build a multi-sited infrastructure for global politics — a global politics that runs through localized sites rather than a world state.

Notes

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