

TRANSNATIONALISM AND THE REALIGNMENT OF STATE POWER: TWO SIDES OF ONE COIN

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The transnational turn in American Studies has focused almost exclusively on the emergence of new identities and solidarities that reach across national borders. Although a common description of transnational American Studies claims to examine the flows of ideas, goods, capital, and people(s) across states and national cultures, it is really 'the people(s)' that gets the largest share of attention. In this regard American Studies is related to similar trends in other disciplines. Yet in those disciplines the focus is generally more specific: An increasing amount of the literature on globalization in fields such as political philosophy, law, political science, and sociology approaches the issue of transnational identities and solidarities from the perspective of postnational *citizenship*. Because it is seldom addressed explicitly in American Studies, it is this question of citizenship in its institutional centrality for democracy on which I want to point my finger in these brief remarks.

There are many good reasons for this attention to newly emergent forms of political and personal subjectivities, the most convincing being the simple fact that these developments are now more prevalent than ever before. And if cultural formations such as the 'Black Atlantic' today catch our eye, surely it makes sense to investigate their histories. There is, however, a problem with this approach of historicization. By constructing a continuous lineage of subaltern positions, the specific context in which today's post- and transnational identities—and the interest to study them—have taken shape is lost. The overlooked context I have in mind here concerns the relation between today's transnational formations and the changing constellation of state power.

The ruling paradigm of transnational American Studies assumes that it makes sense to focus our work on transnational formations not only because these movements—and thus, by proxy, the scholars who study them—are oppositional, but also because the arena of the transnational has recently gained so much importance. In other words, the attention paid to the transnational is legitimated by the alleged fact that globalization has weakened the nation-state, and thus made it a less important object of study. Today's nation-state is often perceived as challenged by external pressures ranging from climate change to the reduction of tax revenue and to global terrorism. Since these are problems the individual state cannot handle, the argument goes, it is only a matter of time until many vital decisions will be transferred to regimes of global governance.



In fact, however, I take it to be a mistake to portray the state as weakened by globalization. While it is true that international interdependencies (regarding environment, crime, etc.) have increased, states have been able to reconfigure their power (in this the US is the paradigmatic case) by a range of measures that threaten to undermine liberal democracy. While I do not want to claim that transnational American Studies is somehow *complicit* with the realignment of the state, I want to highlight an uncomfortable link: In so far as American Studies celebrates transnational identity formations across national boundaries (motivated by the felt necessity of opposing nationalist ideology), it tends to valorize these transnational formations as non-formalized kinds of political citizenship. Seen in this light, transnational American Studies does take part in a larger development of which a less democratic exercise of state power is but one facet. This larger development crystallizes with the onset of the 'global age,' understood here in the narrower sense, which I locate it in the early 1980s with the Reagan administration and its deregulation policies, and it is marked by a wide range of ways in which politics become increasingly deformed. This includes the concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch, the privatization and outsourcing of government oversight, the stripping of citizens' rights—and it also has come to encompass the shift of political engagement away from established polities towards 'oppositional' movements across national boundaries. All of these changes are connected in a larger global logic (and global here does not mean the superseding of the state), although they do not necessarily support the same goal (indeed, they oppose each other in their intentions). My point is that the increase in non-formalized political subjectivities and the increase in non-formalized governance techniques by the state are two sides of the same coin. From this perspective, describing transnational American Studies as oppositional dangerously neglects the way in which the development in the field is itself part of this larger process.

My analysis is largely informed by Saskia Sassen's recent book *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2006). Sassen looks at non-formalized ways of political engagement and new types of citizenship with great sympathy—according to her understanding, the 'multiplying of informal political subjects points to the possibility that the excluded . . . also can make history' (321)—but she also underlines the link I have been trying to make here, though not with American Studies in mind:

If there is one theme that brings together today's many different citizenship dynamics it is the lengthening distance between the citizen and the state [...] Among the more familiar transformations is the shrinking welfare state that is part of the neoliberalizing of liberal states: in eliminating a range of citizens' entitlements, it reduces the number of relations/interdependencies between citizens and their states. (319)

To put it succinctly: Where transnational American Studies has looked away from the state in order to focus on the oppositional transnational sphere, it has itself been symptomatic of the lengthening distance between the state and its citizens.

¹ While deregulation began under the Carter administration, the Reagan administration's policies shifted the role of the state as an economic agent. Had it prior to Reagan aimed to build and sustain an international economic system favorable to its own national economy (for instance, by optimizing the conditions for US export), the state now shifted its activities to the international financial system. Thus, Reagan's steep increase of US debt 'emerged as a key input for the financial markets of the mid-1980s with the development of multiple new instruments centered on debt' (Sassen, 2006: 162).

This does not at all mean that the project of American Studies with a transnational perspective is to be abandoned. However, transnational American Studies must find ways to examine the wide range of developments of de-formalization, scrutinize how they interact, and how American Studies itself is involved in this interaction. In other words, conducting scholarship on transnationalism that is seriously political must confront the lengthening distance between state and citizen that Sassen points to. In light of current tendencies among liberal democratic states, to strip citizenship rights and approach what many in our field call, somewhat apocalyptically perhaps, a state-of-exception, the relation of the state to the citizen remains the prevalent concern for democracy in our global era, even if we endorse the emergence of non-formalized subjectivities.

By way of conclusion I want to raise the issue of public intellectuals. One way in which the increasing distance between state and citizen might be countered is by reinvigorating the public sphere. Today, most Americanists—at least those who identify themselves as belonging to the left—seem to have given up the hope of working effectively as public intellectuals. Instead, they have explained at length that the idea of ‘the public sphere’ has been instrumental in excluding minorities and women. I share some of these concerns, and I agree that the public sphere is not accurately described as an interest-free space in which a consensus is found rationally. And yet, I maintain that the public sphere—even if we conceive of it as an antagonistic meeting ground of a plurality of diverse publics—is essential for keeping the executive in reign. It is a mistake to underestimate how much power the public still can wield, and it is ironic that in recent years the right, which has been less skeptical about mobilizing the public, has been much more successful in this regard than the left. Of course, their claims on the public have largely been in the service of neutralizing that public from within.

Needless to say, the issue of the public intellectual must itself take the global age into account. While we cannot speak of an existing global public sphere at this point (even in the European Union a common public sphere is no more than rudimentary), national public spheres are capable of opening into each other, and thus of making audible and open to discussion what Amartya Sen calls ‘global voices.’² Fostering a public sphere in which the transnational becomes legible as a force inside the national might be the most necessary work of a politicized transnational American Studies in the face of radical de-democratization.

WORKS CITED

- Sassen, Saskia. *Territory, Authority, Rights*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.
- Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence*. New York: Norton, 2006.

² Sen has in mind a global civil society in which ‘global voices—from far and near—can help globalization, including global markets, to have better companions. There is a world out there to be won on behalf of humanity, and global voices can help us to achieve this’ (Sen, 2006: 141). I am skeptical about the assumption that globalization can be controlled from an as of yet non-existent global public sphere, but I do concur with the importance of global voices—like Sen’s –, because they can help open publics into each other.