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# Global transformations and “Cosmopolitical” Social Science

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# *Global Transformations and "Cosmopolitical" Social Science*

*By Michael D. Kennedy, Camilo Leslie, Allison Nau, Atef Said, and Hiro Saito*

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In 2001 Siobán Harlow and Kennedy developed a graduate seminar through the International Institute around "Global Transformations." While some had used the term before, its greatest advantage was its inclusivity: globalization, twenty-first century empires, international terrorism, the spread of infectious disease, migrations, climate change, and other themes all fit within that rubric. During a recent sociology seminar, we sought to discipline that discussion with the identification of three principal areas to guide "cosmopolitical" social science.

## *Emergent Transformations*

We began by asking how one might study emergent transformations rather than already well established global trajectories. Saskia Sassen's latest book [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#) represents this quest best, as she proposes a methodology around the identification of "capabilities," "organizing logics," and "tipping points" to explore how new constellations of territory, authority, and rights are forming emergent logics of organization in the midst of the old. Her arguments concerning the gradual denationalization of once-national institutions, spaces, and structures are compelling, and move us beyond flaccid accounts of globalization to consider the importance of place and not just flow, of power and not just exchange, and of trajectory but without obvious teleology.

Most works in this area focus on how global futures operate within a developmentalist paradigm, asking how observable trends will play out, but Sassen's focus on tipping points draws us to a more historical sociology, like that associated with Bill Sewell. [\[2\]\[#N2\]](#) Ironically, for a course engaged with the future, Sewell's analysis of the 1789 storming of the Bastille provided the most helpful methodology. Our approach to global transformations developed by thinking historically, not in the sense of what has gone before, but around the importance of sequence, and the possibility that events themselves could transform the logics of causality and the meaning of trends.

Communism's collapse could be assimilated readily in globalization's trajectory, but the effects of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center defy globalization's anticipation of open borders and minds. It instead stimulated a securitization of everyday life and increased tolerance for violence in the address of global challenges.

[\[3\]\[#N3\]](#)

## *Locations of Agency and Responsibility*

On the one hand, 9/11 and its aftermath invites cosmopolitical social science into a more extensive engagement of violence, as Michael Mann undertook in his analysis of American power. [4][#N4] However, given new technologies and reorganizations of authority and rights, new networks of actors also can realize influence in ways that we don't yet understand sufficiently. It's vital to consider how non-governmental organizations might help constitute a global civil society, but it's also critical to consider how terrorist networks produce consequential events with insubstantial resources. That even leads us to ask why there isn't more terrorist violence given its repetition on global media and relative ease of execution on small scales.

It's clear that the answer to the last question rests not only in the powers of surveillance and state power, but also in the dynamics of subject formation. While some have paid extraordinary attention to "cosmic warriors," [5][#N5] we ought to know better how similarly aggrieved people choose alternative pathways to change. Everyday lives, and not just global trajectories, are thus central to understanding tipping points emergent in global change. And that's especially important for understanding the place of the cosmopolitan in global transformations.

## *Being Cosmopolitan about Risk*

Cosmopolitanism is not just an alternative philosophy to the fundamentalist, [6][#N6] but it also stimulates sociological questions about what in everyday life moves people to recognize things that threaten our world at large and on whose terms that recognition develops. [7][#N7]

It also can move us to analyze the risks themselves. How do they vary in their degrees of politicization and distribution, their systematization and measure of publicity, their ability to be managed within existing constraints, the degree of scientific and popular consensus on their causes and remedies, and the measure of uncertainty over the risks themselves?

Finally, we should also consider audience. While it's important to engage these emergent transformations and their risks on academic terms, through its broad articulation such cosmopolitans could even help to constitute those global publics that could address them. That's cosmopolitical and what the challenge of these emergent global transformations demands.

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1. Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. ♣ [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. William J. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. ♣ [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Michael D. Kennedy, "Evolution and Event in History and Social Change: Gerhard Lenski's Critical Theory," *Sociological Theory* 22(2):315-27, 2004. ♣ [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire*. London: Verso, 2003. ♣ [\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. ♣ [\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
6. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2007. ♣ [\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
7. Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider, "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda," *British Journal of Sociology* 57(1):2, 2006. ♣ [\[#N7-pt1\]](#)

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