



Deliberation or Struggle? Civil Society Traditions Behind the Social Forums

Marlies Glasius

Why Call it Civil Society?

Many names are given to the transnational activism that has emerged in the last decade: global social movements (Cohen and Rai, 2000); advocacy networks in international politics (Keck and Sikkink, 1998); the Third Force or transnational civil society (Florini, 2000); global citizen action (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001); 'globalization-from-below' (Falk, 1999; Brecher et al. 2000). Using the term 'civil society', rather than the more neutral 'networks' or 'movements', may seem at first sight like a recipe for trouble. There appear to be as many definitions of civil society, and global civil society, as there are authors – or perhaps even more: Lewis extracts four definitions of civil society from the literature on Africa alone, Howell and Pearce juxtapose two versions, and Kaldor gives no less than five versions of global civil society (Lewis, 2002; Howell and Pearce, 2001: 13-37; Kaldor, 2003: 6-12).

My own definition is a very brief one: 'people organizing to influence their world'. It involves some sort of deliberate getting-together, and it is a political definition, excluding people who organize to play darts or make money. It is normative to the extent that it may be considered a good thing that people should be organizing to influence their world, but not prescriptive in the sense that it includes those who attempt to influence their world in (to this author) undesirable directions, or by unpalatable means (for instance violence or extortion). But, this fairly minimal definition apart, I believe the term 'civil society' is fertile precisely because of its rich intellectual history. I will argue that the idea of the World Social Forum and subsequent other social forums is based on two different, and in fact conflicting, theories of civil society. Although the two traditions do come into conflict with each other not just in theory but in practice, it is precisely the creative tension between the two that make social forums such an exciting new phenomenon in global politics.

In the next section, I will briefly describe and analyse the spread of social forums. In the third section I will discuss two major traditions of civil society theory. The fourth and

fifth sections will show how these continue to inform, and inform us about, what is happening in social forums today.

The Spread of Social Forums

Beyond the battles of Seattle and Genoa, one of the most eye-catching ways in which activists have responded to globalization in recent years is through the organization of social forums. It could be argued that the social forums represent a new infrastructure for a new generation of social movements more concerned with social justice than were the movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

Parallel conferences of civil society to official summits have occurred since the 1970s, and grown in number and importance during the 1990s (Pianta, 2001), but the Porto Alegre summit was a symbolic step forward. In a way, this was the first truly parallel, rather than subordinate, summit of global civil society, deliberately held in a different place, with a different name, from the elitist Davos forum. The message of Porto Alegre was 'we have an alternative'. Instead of scaling the walls at Davos (which others were still doing as well), global civil society actors held their own alternative debates, proposing alternative policies, in the South, under the slogan 'Another world is possible'. While some may have been sceptical about the utility of having a meeting in a different place, where power-holders could not be directly confronted, the formula was clearly a success in terms of empowering civil society groups. Participants called it a fertile and inspiring experience. The first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre had 11,000 participants, the next, in February 2002, saw more than 50,000 visitors, and the third and fourth approximately 100,000.

At the second World Social Forum, the decision was taken to disperse the idea of the social forum, organizing regional and thematic forums, the ideas and conclusions of which would feed back into the WSF. Even before this decision was taken, there had been a first regional Social Forum in Africa (<http://www.50years.org/cms/ejn/story/106>) and a national Social Forum in Costa Rica (no website), and an angry counter-meeting of Durban citizens during the World Conference Against Racism decided to call itself Durban Social Forum (Desai, 2002). But, especially in Italy, the social forum phenomenon has taken off like nowhere else. When the first WSF decided to postpone regional social forums (national or local social forums do not appear to have been considered), the large group of Italians present, which met frequently as a delegation, decided nevertheless to frame their planned counter-summit to the Genoa G8 meeting as a 'social forum', a format capable of unifying the Italian left (Cannavo, 2001; Sullo, 2001a; 2001b). More than 200,000 people, mainly Italians, united in Genoa, and many carried away the idea of a social forum. There are now at least 183 local social forums in Italy (<http://www.sconfini.net/fori.php>), but probably many more.

Since the second World Social Forum, Social Forums have mushroomed elsewhere too (Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius, 2003: 20-23; Glasius and Timms, forthcoming 2005). While most simply adopt the format of the WSF, organizing a one to three day event with workshops, panels, and plenary discussions on a wide number of topics, other

organizational forms are also being experimented with: the Brisbane SF operates on an 'open space' principle, which means the agenda is determined by participants on the day of the meeting (<http://www.brisbanesocialforum.org/>); the Ottawa SF (May 2003, possibly to be revived May 2005, (<http://ns.artengine.ca/pipermail/artlist/2004-October/000615.html>) emphasized that 'this is not a conference' but rather a 'community carnival for change', and the Tarnet (France) SF tries to make its web site function as an interactive virtual social forum (http://www.forum-social-tarnais.org/article.php3?id_article=151). Some social forums, including those of Madrid (<http://www.forosocialmadrid.org/>) and Limousin (France) (<http://fslimousin.free.fr/>), have become permanent organizations, while others, such as Tübingen (Germany) (<http://www.social-forum.de/index.php>) and Toronto (<http://www.torontosocialforum.ca/what.html>), have regular events they refer to as 'social forums'. Many of the social forums in Europe are organized to coincide with EU summits of heads of state and government. The European Social Forum in Florence (<http://www2.fse-esf.org/florence/scriba/index.php>) and Paris (<http://www2.fse-esf.org/>) have been the biggest, with tens of thousands of participants in the workshops, and even more in the final marches; the Philadelphia SF (<http://robinsbooks.tripod.com/philsocforum.html>) (apparently defunct), must have been one of the smallest, meeting in a bookshop once a month.

The explosion of social forums can be seen as a new stage in the development of what was initially termed the 'anti-globalization movement', what Desai and Said (2001; Said and Desai, 2003) refer to as the 'anti-capitalist movement', but what is now increasingly referred to as the '*altermondialiste*' or the 'global social justice' movement. The initial phase was one of protest, in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, Quebec, and many other cities. Some of this protest involved direct action, a small proportion of it was violent. There is no doubt that the media's focus on violence, along with the sense that the protesters were expressing a more widely felt sense of unease, helped to put the movement on the map. Apart from the violence, the main criticism levelled at the movement was that it was just 'anti', that it protested but proposed no alternatives. The social forum phenomenon is precisely a response to this criticism.

Social forums combine the advantages associated with person-to-person interactions, as with community building and leadership, with the efficiency of web-based organizing in terms of information dissemination and management. It is perhaps too early to say whether social forums are the characteristic form of civil society organizing in the first decade of this century, just as sit-ins and occupations were in the 1960s, demonstrations in the 1970s, and the NGO proliferation in the 1980s and early 1990s. Yet much speaks in favour of this assumption, in particular also the low cost of organizing and the flexibility and mobility this form allows. At present, social forums are a complementary form of global civil society to the vast and highly institutionalised network of international NGOs.

One of the most noteworthy features of the move to social forums is that, while there still are marches and protest actions, they avoid the violence that has sparked both media attention and much controversy within the movement. Again, this shift is most evident in Italy, where, after the black bloc activities in Genoa in July 2001, the Berlusconi-controlled media had been warning Florentine shopkeepers to board up their

shops and flee the city. Instead, the European Social Forum in Florence was entirely peaceful; most shops stayed open, did good business, and cheered the march on the last day of the Forum (Longhi, 2002).

The absence of violent action from the social forums might be attributable to three related causes: while initially the non-violent majority would not condemn the violent minority, there was a mounting sense of frustration which culminated in Genoa, where the possibly police-infiltrated black blocs (see Caldiron, 2001) formed the excuse to crack down on peaceful activists. Second, while violence may seem appropriate in direct confrontation with the power-holders, the G8, the World Bank, or the WTO, it has no similar logic in a civil society-only forum, where internal debate is the main item on the menu. Third, many anti-capitalist protestors have focused in the last three years on anti-war activities. While there may be a logic to using violence in protest against capitalist exploitation, it appears to be generally understood that using violence in protest against war undermines the message.

So, what are social forums for? Why have they spread so quickly, attracting so many? I would argue that the answer lies in the intriguing attempt to bring together to very different conceptions of civil society.

Two Civil Society Traditions in Political Theory

The first theoretical root of the civil society idea lies in enlightenment theory, and focuses on humankind's capacity for non-violent, rational debate. In its initial exposition by John Locke, human reason was seen as God-given, and in a providential world, this capacity for reason allowed human beings to see that "no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions" (1690/1988: 271). Civil society is a society in which the citizens recognize such Natural Laws. A century later, Adam Ferguson in his famous *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767/1995), based a similar belief in at least the potentially positive impact of human reason on quasi-anthropological observations, rather than theology:

If it be true, that men are united by instinct, that they act in society from affections of kindness and friendship . . . if even in the case of those to whom we do not habitually wish any positive good, we are still averse to be the instruments of harm, it should seem, that in these various appearances of an amicable disposition, the foundations of a moral apprehension are sufficiently laid, and the sense of a right which we maintain for ourselves, is by a movement of humanity and candour extended to our fellow creatures. (Ferguson, 1767/1995: 38)

In this passage, Ferguson emerges as a theorist of human solidarity.

Kant takes the notion that the use of human reason can be for the public good a step further by emphasizing the notion of a public debate: "But I hear on all sides the cry: Don't argue! The officer says: Don't argue, get on parade! The tax official: Don't argue, pay! The clergyman: Don't argue, believe! . . . All this means restrictions on freedom everywhere. But which sort of restriction prevents enlightenment, and which instead of hindering it, can actually promote it? I reply: The *public* use of man's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment amongst men" (Kant,

1784/1991a: 55). Kant was no revolutionary, his thrust was not that the authorities should be disobeyed, but rather that the best rules, in everyone's interest, would come about through public reasoning. His circle of potential participants in the debate was extremely narrow: "[B]y the public use of one's own reason I mean that use which anyone may make of it *as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*" (Kant, *ibid.*). While this now sounds unacceptably elitist and sexist, the value of a reasoned public debate for humanity has continued to inform ideas of global civil society, as will be seen below.

The other contribution by Kant was to put forward the idea of a universal, rather than a nation-bound civil society, which in his version is a society governed by just rules. While we might read a universal intent into some of Ferguson's passages, in Kant it is explicit: "The greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally (...) The problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution is subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states, and cannot be solved unless the latter is also solved" (Kant, 1784/1991b: 45; 47). In his own day, many 'men of learning' would have ridiculed this position, but in today's interdependent world the idea that there can be no secure rule of law unless it is extended universally is widely accepted, and informs the thinking of actors in global civil society.

Habermas, although still sometimes classed as a 'neo-Marxist', famously took inspiration from Kant's idea of the public use of reason (but not, strangely, from his cosmopolitan aspirations), and elaborated it as the much more democratic idea of the public sphere. He shows how every conversation, spoken or written, in a public space, has the potential of becoming a wider debate:

Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space. This space stands open, in principle, for potential dialogue partners who are present as bystanders or could come on the scene and join those present (...) [It] can be expanded and rendered more permanent in an abstract form for a large public of present persons. For the public infrastructure of such *assemblies*, performances, presentations, and so on, architectural metaphors of structured spaces recommend themselves: we speak of forums, stages, arenas, and the like. (Habermas, 1996: 361)

The role of civil society he sees as follows:

Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. (Habermas, 1996: 367)

The deliberative ideal may appear rather naively harmonious, privileging reason and solidarity over self-interest and power dynamics. Neither Kant nor Habermas are naive thinkers: rather, they are imbued with a 'desperate optimism'. They saw this model as the only possible alternative to what Kant already presciently called "the vast graveyard of the human race" (Kant, 1795/1991c: 96). Thus far the deliberative strand of civil

society thinking, which is based on the idea that human beings, who share some sense of solidarity and connectedness, can solve their problems by reasoning them through in public, and that they do so through the medium of civil society.

A very different, but equally influential, line of thinking about civil society originates with Antonio Gramsci, who is in fact much more deserving of the label 'neo-Marxist'. He rejected the view (which he attacks in Rosa Luxemburg, but which is equally apparent in some of Marx's own writings) that revolution would one day take place spontaneously and immediately as the capitalist system collapsed as "iron economic determinism (...) out and out historical mysticism, the awaiting of a sort of miraculous illumination" (Gramsci, 1971: 233). Unlike Marx, he conceptualised civil society as a separate realm from that of economic interaction. (Bobbio, 1988: 82-83, is emphatic on this distinction in Gramsci). While in Russia all that had been needed was to overthrow the state, in Western Europe civil society was a formidable obstacle to revolution, that would still stand even if either state or economy were crumbling: "[C]ivil society' has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)" (Gramsci, 1971: 234) and "when the State trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed" (1971: 238). Thus, civil society is the sphere, somewhat independent from economy and state (although Gramsci contradicts himself in this regard), where the consent of the masses to the capitalist system is produced. In many places, he uses the terms 'civil society' and 'hegemony' interchangeably. While Gramsci explains how a slow 'war of position' must be fought against civil society, and gives us some clues as to how this might be done, he never explicitly says what has been read into him by subsequent generations of activists and academics: that civil society itself is also the sphere where hegemony can be contested. Cohen and Arato have constructed the following argument:

This [the bourgeois] version of civil society must therefore be destroyed and replaced by alternative forms of association (...) intellectual and cultural life (...) and values that would help to create a proletarian counterhegemony that might eventually replace the existing bourgeois forms (...) The alternative, conflict-theoretical view of hegemony-building in civil society implies (even if Gramsci never explicitly draws such a conclusion) a *positive normative attitude* to the existing version of civil society or, rather, to some of its institutional dimensions. Clearly a principled version of radical *reformism* could be based on such an attitude. (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 151; 150)

According to Howell and Pearce, this was just the route that many activists took:

The Gramscian contribution to the alternative genealogy [of civil society] was to give permission to the left and radical activists to reconsider the concept of civil society, which many then used to extricate themselves from Marxism yet justify remaining active in politics (...) Many felt they could abandon or shelve the issue of revolutionary teleology, and use instead the terrain offered by civil society for a radical project of reform through which dominant ideas and structures of power could be contested without recourse through the discredited, vanguardist political party. (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 34)

Thus, although Antonio Gramsci may well be turning in his grave at the thought of it, civil society has acquired associations, quite distinct from the 'reasoned public debate' associations of the lineage from Locke to Habermas, with 'contesting hegemony through alternative associations, cultural institutions and values'.

The World Social Forum and the Double Heritage of Civil Society

The Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum shows just how much the social forum idea owes to both these traditions. This is immediately apparent from the first article:

The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth. (WSF, 2001)

The first part of the article uses almost exactly the language of Habermas, providing a space for communication that is 'open', 'democratic' and 'free'. The second part, which defines what the groups coming together in the Forum have to be against, is neo-Gramscian: here is the idea – quite against Marx – that groups and movements of civil society can be fighting 'domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism'. The third part is again more reminiscent of Kantian cosmopolitanism, with some environmentalism thrown in which is not in Kant. Article 11 of the Charter is a similar mix of Habermasian debate and reflection and Gramscian struggle to 'resist and overcome domination', while the final article 14 again reflects Kantian cosmopolitanism. While the WSF's broad aim of opposing neo-liberalism and corporate domination could be seen as neo-Gramscian, some of its most unique features, its prohibition on party representation and on voting and taking positions as an organization, owe more to the deliberation than to the struggle tradition.

There is, of course, tension between the 'deliberation' and the 'struggle' functions that social forums seek to combine. While deliberation values plurality and diversity, and debate for its own sake, effective action against the domination of capital requires a certain level of unity. On the other hand, a debate that is a priori against something is never an entirely open debate. The Zapatista movement, an important intellectual forerunner of the social forums, sought to resolve this dilemma with its formula of 'One big no and many yesses' (Kingsnorth, 2003; Klein, 2001).

The practice of the World Social Forum is, of course, not as high-minded as its principles (see Waterman, 2003; Klein, 2003; various contributions to Sen, 2004). But one of the main areas of tension, in practice as in principle, remains that between deliberation and struggle, or as Patomaki and Teivainen (2004) have put it between being a space and being a movement. One senses this tension as soon as one enters the site of the WSF. The first impression, with South Korean socialists singing 'ciao bella ciao' and middle-aged Latin-American men making histrionic speeches on solidarity with Cuba and Venezuela, is of a struggle, a global but time-warped one. But as soon as one enters the – mostly unbearably hot – smaller rooms or tents, one finds people going great lengths to overcome climatic, language and cultural barriers in order to share experiences, communicate, debate and strategise, and the deliberative element takes over.

For years, the tension between space and movement, deliberation and struggle, had been fairly subterranean because of the large size of the forum, and because of the device of having a separate ‘assembly of social movements’ that could adopt positions. In 2005, however, it came to a head when a group of 19 launched what it called ‘the Porto Alegre Consensus’ as ‘a synthesis of what the WSF is proposing globally’. The group included WSF co-founder Bernard Cassen, two Nobel Prize winners, and other anti-globalisation stars such as Aminata Traoré (the only woman in the group), Samir Amin, and Walden Bello. However, another founder of the WSF, Chico Whitaker, said that it should only be seen as one of ‘dozens, maybe hundreds of other proposals’ (Anthony and Silva, 2005), and another member of the Brazilian organisation committee, Candido Grzybowski, felt that, while he had nothing against the contents of the manifesto, ‘it goes against the very spirit of the Forum. Here, all proposals are equally important and not only that of a group of intellectuals, even when they are very significant persons’ (Anthony and Silva, 2005).

The 150,000 or so other participants in the fifth WSF took relatively little notice of the manifesto, and it would not appear to have become the latter-day heir to the Communist Manifesto that the authors may have hoped it would be. Indeed it takes some effort to find the Manifesto on the Internet (an English version can be found at OD Today, 2005). On this basis, it might be argued that, at the WSF, the deliberation vs. struggle controversy seems at the moment to be veering towards the former. But equally, there are indications that point into the opposite direction, such as the adulation of Hugo Chavez, who was cheered by a twenty-thousand strong crowd at the same WSF.

The Practices of Local Social Forums

The same dilemma rears its head in local social forums. Some tend much more to one direction than another. The Madrid Social Forum, for instance, while much more anti-militarist than anti-capitalist, is clearly in struggle or movement mode. Its founding manifesto declares that its aims are ‘the defence of peace, solidarity, human rights and democratic liberties,’ and that in order to do so, it must form an ‘action unit’ launching a ‘great offensive’ with a ‘single vocation,’ and in a peculiar piece of double-speak, be a “space of tolerance and necessary consensus” of the left in Madrid (http://www.nodo50.org/estudiantesdeizquierdas/article.php3?id_article=29; translation MG). A mark of social forums with a struggle conception is that they often fail to take seriously the WSF Charter’s prohibition on adopting political positions. Thus, the Senegal SF has adopted a petition to halt privatisation of the national lottery (‘Senegalese NGOs’, 2005), the Kenya SF has addressed itself to a WTO meeting (‘Don’t Trade Away’, 2005) and the Hamburg South SF has adopted a declaration of solidarity with the striking workers at a local Opel car factory (Solidaritätserklärung, 2004).

An increasing number of recent local and national social forums, on the other hand, emphasise open space, plurality and debate. Thus, the Ivry (France) SF identifies itself as a ‘simple meeting space for those organizations and individuals who share the objections and aspirations of the ‘altermondialiste’ movement. One comes to be

mutually informed, to debate, to deepen knowledge on questions of common interest and to propose initiatives. These are then carried out by whoever is interested' (<http://www.fsivry.free.fr/>; translation MG). The Melbourne SF is 'an annual open space event, and a network, for facilitating debate, self-expression and imagination in addressing global issues. In particular for seeking out, articulating and helping to establish more sustainable and just versions of globalisation' (<http://www.melbournesocialforum.org>). The Netherlands SF, finally, is "an open meeting place for the exchange of ideas, the creation and the strengthening of networks and a breeding ground for action" (<http://www.sociaalforum.nl>; translation MG). Social forums which emphasise the 'open space' or 'debate' function often refer to the 2003 article by Chico Whitaker (English version, 2004), 'the WSF as an Open Space', which has been translated into many languages. Such forums are less likely to breach the charter, but it is questionable to what extent they can keep alive the counter-hegemonic aspect of the forums, and avoid lapsing into NGO or academic workshops.

Other local forums continue to debate whether to emphasize deliberation or struggle, or try to reconcile the two. Thus, a web debate and evaluation of the second Austrian social forum has one participant arguing that "social forums are the widest possible amalgamation of critical forces in society. Their success or failure depends on their ability to be an 'axis of struggle'. Otherwise they will stagnate, turn into debating clubs, lose their explosive potential and become integrated into bourgeois society. I consider the occasional debate about whether we are an 'open space' as idle". Another counters that "here of all places we need a public space, in which alternatives in all fields can be discussed." ('Rückblick und Ausblick', translation MG). Meanwhile, without resolving this issue, the third Austrian Social Forum is being organised for October 2005. In Berlin, the dilemma is resolved in a different way. The Berlin Social Forum emphatically chooses the 'space' over the 'movement' model in a number of 'self-understanding' documents, and insists that we 'represent nothing, really nothing whatsoever' (Impulsreferat, translation MG). But there are no big annual social forum events. Instead, it organises smaller workshops on specific themes but also has a struggle-oriented function, publicising and mobilising for the campaigns, demonstrations, direct action and reports of others, without ever explicitly associating the forum with these groups and activities (<http://www.sozialforum-berlin.de/>).

Conclusion

The tension between the two will probably continue to characterize the social forum movement. In fact, it is to be hoped that it will not be resolved in one way or another. The conscious emphasis on debate as a value in itself is important in the post-September 11 world, where Al-Qaeda, other terrorists, and the Bush Administration are successfully promoting violent confrontation instead of debate. Nonetheless a social forum movement that would focus only on debate would become a tame and stagnant affair, with little to offer those who have a passion to change, and not just discuss, the world, and not much of a challenge to any governmental or corporate power-holders. The other extreme is a worse nightmare: a social forum movement purely based on counterhegemonic struggle would soon return to dogmatic vanguardism, and in the

unlikely event that it would gain governmental power somewhere, to the totalitarian dystopias of the twentieth century. It is precisely the attempt of the social forums to have it both ways, to be both a locus of open deliberation and a meeting place for real-world counter-hegemonic campaigns, that makes it such an interesting experiment, that has managed to attract so many.

On the basis of the discourses in the plenaries of the last European Social Forum in London (<http://www.ukesf.net/>), a third scenario can also be discerned: an atrophied social forum that does not encourage serious debate between different perspectives, but does not concretely organise to advance specific causes either, instead holding forth to the converted in stale revolutionary jargon (Glasius and Timms, 2005). This would be the death of the social forum.

Against this scenario, which spells institutionalisation and marginalisation at the same time, there are two counter-trends. First, there is the increasing contestation within the forums, manifested in autonomous spaces and spontaneous take-overs. Autonomous spaces are now a standard feature of the largest forums, and they have received a certain level of tacit recognition from the organising committees. 'Allied events, fringe events, and autonomous spaces' were, for instance, listed in the official programme for the first time by the ESF 2004 in London. The other trend is the still increasing number of and coordination between local social forums, some of which include an agenda of democratising the ESF and WSF from below.

If social forums can tear themselves away from any form of vanguardism, and foster genuine debate and collaboration between those who have real differences of opinion, approach and priority within a variety of counter hegemonic frameworks, they can make a vital contribution to the strategic and discursive infrastructure of global civil society.

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the author

Marlies Glasius is a Lecturer in Management of Non-Governmental Organisations at the Centre for Civil Society and a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economic and Political Science. She was managing editor of the *Global Civil Society Yearbook*, 2000-2003, and is still one of the editors. Other publications include *Exploring Civil Society: Political and*

Cultural Contexts (Routledge, 2004), co-edited with David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin, and *The International Criminal Court: A Global Civil Society Achievement* (Aug. 2005). Her present research interests include global civil society, human security, and economic and social rights.

Address: Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE.

E-mail: M.Glasius@lse.ac.uk