

Transnational Activism

Mac Sheoin, Tomás

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mac Sheoin, T. (2007). Transnational Activism. *Global Social Policy*, 7(1), 105-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018107073913>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu> Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu> This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft



Transnational Activism

TOMÁS MAC SHEOIN
Independent Researcher, Ireland

HELMUT ANHEIER, MARLIES GLASIUS AND MARY KALDOR (eds), *Global Civil Society 2004/5*. London: Sage, 2004. 392pp. ISBN: 1-41290-307-6, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/yearbook04chapters.htm>

MARLIES GLASIUS, MARY KALDOR AND HELMUT ANHEIER (eds), *Global Civil Society 2005/6*. London: Sage, 2005. xii + 487 pp. ISBN: 1-41291-193-1.

SIDNEY TARROW, *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xv + 258 pp. ISBN: 0-52161-677-8.

CLIFFORD BOB, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiv + 237 pp. ISBN: 0-52160-786-8.

BRUCE PODOBNIK AND THOMAS REIFER (eds), *Transforming Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities in the Post 9/11 Era*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005. 203 pp. ISBN: 9-00414-583-4.

RAY KIELY, *The Clash of Globalisations: Neo-Liberalism, the Third Way and Anti-Globalisation*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005. xi + 322 pp. ISBN: 9-00414-318-1.

AMORY STARR, *Global Revolt*. London: Zed Books, 2005. 264 pp. ISBN: 1-84277-483-2.

JAI SEN, ANITA ANAND, ARTURO ESCOBAR AND PETER WATERMAN (eds), *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. New Delhi: Viveka Foundation, 2004. xxviii + 402 pp. ISBN: 8-18825-117-8, http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html

DAVID HARVIE, KEIR MILBURN, BEN TROTT AND DAVID WATTS (eds), *Shut them Down! The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements*. Leeds/New York: Dissent!/Autonomea, 2005. 368 pp. ISBN: 0-95520-650-2, <http://www.shutthemdown.org>

The last two decades have seen a huge growth in international and transnational political mobilization by non-state actors. Whether through involvement in international fora and policy discussions, lobbying and publication of

position and research papers, or direct action, both legal and illegal, these global policy actors have contributed to the development of global social policy. The growth of this activism, whether termed global civil society (GCS), transnational social movements (TSMs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) or transnational advocacy networks, has prompted the appearance of a large social sciences literature, much of it enthusiastically celebrating the arrival of this 'new' actor on the global stage. Just as some social scientists welcomed the arrival of the new social movements (NSMs) as the new revolutionary subject in place of the working class, so now GCS, 'globalization from below' or 'counterhegemonic globalization' have become the repository of hopes for social, political and economic change.

There has been much (justified) concern, confusion and criticism at the lack of precision in the terminology in this literature. What precisely is civil society, even without the global adjective? How do transnational advocacy networks differ from traditional international solidarity campaigns? The confusion in this area mirrors the confusion inherent in much of the globalization literature. Much of the first wave of commentary involved wide claims unsubstantiated by anything like convincing evidence. The second wave (including that under review) is revising first-wave claims by paying close attention to the evidential basis for claims of the growth, impact and role in global social governance of transnational activism and GCS.

The nine books under review provide a useful indication of the range of issues and debates currently being highlighted in the literature. The first two volumes (Anheier et al. and Glasius et al.) focus on GCS, the next two volumes by Tarrow and Bob examine transnational activism and responses to globalization, while the final subsequent volumes (Podobnik and Reifer, Kiely, Starr and Sen et al., and Harvie et al.) are concerned with the anti-globalization movement (AGM).

The *Global Civil Society* yearbooks are well on their way to becoming an essential reference work on the subject. The editors define GCS as 'the realm of non-coercive collective action around shared interests and values that operates beyond the boundaries of nation states'. Recognizing the controversy over the concept, the editors see 'the terminological tangle that envelops the concept as an opportunity' for debate and analysis.

The two volumes of *Global Civil Society* under review provide much material for analysis and debate. Structured around four headings (concepts, issues, infrastructure and records), the subjects covered include gender, migration, climate change, reform of international organizations, international foundations and social fora. Constraints of space prohibit a detailed review, but the usefulness of *Global Civil Society* can be appreciated from two articles in the 2005/6 volume, both of which contain material that will discomfit GCS boosters. In the article by Glasius and Timms on the World Social Forum (WSF), the list of financial supporters of the 2005 WSF (p. 230) include the Ford and Rockefeller foundations (who also financially support the production of *Global Civil Society*); the authors also note that many NGO sponsors of the previous two years' fora

are themselves funded by private corporations. Given such funding sources, some doubt the WSF's claim to provide an alternative. It is also hard to avoid the conclusion that the failure of WSF organizers to provide detailed information on the size and conditionalities of funding contradicts the transparency that many of its proponents would demand from MNCs and states. Katz and Anheier's article, meanwhile, finds a pronounced centre-periphery structure in transnational NGO networks with the result that, in the words of *Global Civil Society's* editors, 'the network reproduces rather than counteracts the amplification of Northern over Southern voices' (p. 27).

The most significant limitations of the *Global Civil Society* volumes relate to the global reach of its authors, which hardly extends beyond the London School of Economics and University of California (Los Angeles), tokenistically supplemented by Third World authors (two Egyptians in 2004/5 and Chico Whitaker of Brazil in 2005/6). A further limitation of the volume is its missed opportunity: what could be the most useful section of the Yearbook, the records of GCS section, is underdeveloped. In the 2004/5 edition, the data section (which reprints data available elsewhere) occupies 113 pages (nearly one-third of the volume). Compared to this the chronology of GCS, a resource unique to the volume and potentially of great value, occupies a mere 10 pages. For the 2005/6 edition, the respective figures are 162 pages for the data reprint section, and 9 pages for the chronology. We can only wonder why, having drawn together what appears to be a useful network of correspondents throughout the world, so little use is made of them.

Both Tarrow and Bob cast critical eyes on some of the grander claims made for the new transnational activism, though from different perspectives. Tarrow belongs to the political process tradition of social movement studies. His close attention to process leads to a concentration on the micro-level in which each analysis is presented with detailed case studies; what is lost in the failure to address fundamental macro questions is more than compensated for by the way his grounded analysis of the nuts and bolts difficulties involved in forming and sustaining TSMs provides an illuminating and detailed view of the variety, operation and limitations of transnational activism. On the last of these, his conclusion that 'Transnational intervention fails more often than it succeeds' (p. 200) is worth noting.

Clifford Bob's is the one academic book under review here that could be unhesitatingly recommended to a local activist searching for transnational allies, as he analyses why certain local movements are taken up by large INGOs. While his presentation of the international competition for support from INGOs and IGOs as a market may offend some sensibilities, it provides an excellent method of analysis: only a fool could deny the inequalities in power and resources that underlie relations between INGOs and their local allies. Looking in detail at the attempts by the Zapatistas and Ogoni to obtain transnational allies, Bob notes how the groups successfully altered their tactical, ethical and organizational features to match the requirements of their

NGO supporters (p. 180). Bob's concluding words present a harsh but not unrealistic picture of GCS:

'Global civil society' is an arena of sharp competition where myriad weak groups fight for recognition and aid. It is a sphere in which hard-nosed calculation of costs and benefits constantly competes with sympathy and emotion. And it is a place where the real needs of local people are one factor, not necessarily the most important, in sparking international activism. (p. 195)

Podobnik and Reifer's edited volume is the best academic collection on the AGM to appear so far. The articles by Podobnik and Wood provide empirical data on AGM protests and make this collection an essential addition to any library collection on transnational activism. Podobnik's article in particular debunks many myths about the AGM, showing that the most important participants in protests have been workers (p. 64), who, with farmers, formed the backbone of the protests in the early 1990s, to be joined by a rainbow of NSMs in the late 1990s. This article also shows that the largest number of protests and the largest mobilizations of people have taken place in the global south, and that the 9/11 attacks on military and financial targets in the USA led to only a brief pause in the AGM's activities. Useful also is Podobnik's summary of the AGM's impact:

at least eight governments have been overthrown due entirely or in part to pressures exerted by grassroots campaigns. In 70 other instances, moderate to severe political crisis have been created by these protests – and many government officials have been forced to resign their office. Meanwhile, in over 50 cases IMF austerity programmes and World Bank projects have been cancelled, delayed, or revised because of mobilizations. And at least 24 global summits/trade meetings have been significantly disrupted. (p. 66)

This useful source is supplemented by Wood's analysis of 5 Global Days of Action between 1998 and 2001, articles on student, labour union and environmentalist involvement in the US AGM, indigenous resistance and an insightful article on the connections between the WSF and the Workers' Party in Brazil. Smith's analysis of the growth of TSMOs reports how the rate of growth in TSMO formation has slowed dramatically in the late 1990s, many more groups are now organizing around multiple rather than single-issues, over a fifth of TSMOs now have their headquarters in the global South (compared to 12% in 1973) and coalitions make up more than half of TSMOs in 2000, up from a quarter of all groups in the 1970s.

If the price makes purchase impossible, earlier versions of most of the articles in the Podobnik and Reifer volume were published in a special edition of the *Journal of World Systems Research* (available online at <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/archive/vol10/number1/index.php>). What is ironic, for a theory that highlights systemic global inequalities, is the lack of even one contribution from a peripheral country. Also missing is any consideration of the position of

women in the movement, or the movement's effects and positions on the position of women globally.

The two volumes by Kiely and Starr present contrasting yet in many ways complementary accounts of the AGM. Presenting a Marxist analysis, Ray Kiely devotes half his volume to the global context and the second half to the rise of the AGM, doing a fine job of presenting the growth of the AGM in the global context of neo-liberal restructuring. Amory Starr is, like many commentators on the movement, both an activist and an academic. Her experience in teaching undergraduates stands her in good stead in her latest book, which clearly and concisely summarizes the history of the movement, its manifestos and tactics, yet never flinches from examining the controversies that divide the movement. Each section is short and to the point, and accompanied by useful notes and lists of resources. Perhaps most useful is the fact that, as she puts it in her introduction, the book is 'a distillation of the perspectives and positions of actual and active social movements. Commentary by non-activists has been assiduously disregarded' (p. 10). Thus, the voices we hear here are those of the activists themselves: this makes this an ideal introductory text for undergraduates and professors alike.

For those searching for alternative sites of global social policy formation, the World Social Forum and its associated regional and national fora seem promising locations for policy dialogue. The volume edited by Jai Sen et al. is the most comprehensive volume of documents and discussion on the WSF so far, and is particularly welcome, not only for the geographical spread of its contributors, but also for its inclusion of critical voices – anarchists, feminists, revolutionists – along with those who initiated and support the Forum's current operation. Authors in the volume come from North America (13), South America (7), Asia (7), Europe (5) and Africa (4), effectively dividing the volume equally between core and periphery. The volume begins by examining the WSF's background and antecedents, continues with considerations on the WSF experience by both protagonists and critics, presents a useful array of views of the Mumbai 2004 WSF and the organization thereof, and finishes with prospects for the future. Each section is accompanied by WSF and movement documents and these alone make the volume an essential reference.

The last volume under review is a report from the AGM's frontlines. *Shut them Down!*, which is exceptionally well illustrated, is essentially a collection of reflections on and accounts of the Gleneagles G8 2005 mobilization by British activists: it includes useful accounts of specific issues such as the organization of camps, food, toilet and information provision, the experience of children, clowning tactics, community gardening and dealing with the media; unfortunately it lacks a chapter on funding. The anthology combines analysis by movement intellectuals, such as John Holloway, George Caffentzis and Werner Bonefeld, with a variety of anonymous and pseudonymous activists. Particularly useful is the extended article by Alex Trocchi et al., which traces the history of organization against Gleneagles.

The Gleneagles mobilization is criticized on two grounds: first its failure to refer to the national and local impacts of neo-liberalism over the last two decades (p. 216), and second its failure to confront the coalition between development NGOs and their funders in the British government. Here the volume illuminates the divisions in civil society: Paul Hewson considers the role played by the Make Poverty History (MPH) coalition in co-opting much of the concern over global poverty into spectacular and consumerist activities, and notes how 'the major civil society mobilisation for the G8 – MPH – comprising the major trade unions, development NGOs and faith groups with "political celebrities" shamelessly organised *in favour* of the summit' (p. 138). He concludes that 'MPH succeeded in simultaneously mobilising hundreds of thousands of people to Scotland but away from the G8' (p. 144). The book also shows a progression in the ways in which activists interpret mobilizations. In the words of Ben Trott 'Summit mobilisations, then, should begin to be recognised (by both their proponents and their critics) not as an attempt to strike a blow to the very heart of capitalism, but as an opportunity to catch a glimpse of, experience and help build possible future worlds' (p. 227).

What are the implications of these volumes for global social policy? Of the volumes under review, only the *Global Civil Society* yearbooks explicitly engage with policy issues and impacts. Despite this, some conclusions on the relevance of GCS for social policy can be drawn. On the most general level, these books suggest that grand claims for the importance and policy impacts of GCS should be treated with some scepticism, if not suspicion. They also confirm that the national arena continues to be of prime importance in political activism generally, including for those transnational activists who wish to change global policies. Finally, the volumes clearly demonstrate, both through their analyses and (with the exception of Sen et al.) author composition, that the space that GCS and its proponents occupy reproduces the very global inequalities they claim to question.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

TOMÁS MAC SHEOIN is an independent scholar. His most recent book is *Asphyxiating Asia* (2003) Mapusa, Gao: The Other India Press. [email: tomas.x@ireland.com]