

A weak reed

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John Keane

CIVIL SOCIETY

Old images, new visions

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Superficially, this new book by John Keane makes several important points of great concern to political theory and social philosophy. However, Keane does not conceal his much broader agenda: to rain on the civil-society parade. Keane points out that the idea of civil society, developed between 1750 and 1850 and long since ignored, has grown exceedingly popular during the last decade. Both academicians and public leaders have made civility "vogue" worldwide. In recent years, the Havel of Eastern Europe has employed the concept to fight totalitarianism. Asian and Islamic intellectuals and public leaders (Keane's favourite is Mahathir bin Muhammad of Malaysia) "speak warmly" the language of civil society, as do the leaders of many thousands of new NGOs.

As Keane notes, civil society is also held to provide a foundation for post-industrial societies. Their complex and computerized production, it is said, will benefit from the "lively and flexible . . . norm based exchanges and informal, decentralized, and flat organizations" that characterize civil society.

Keane fears that a backlash will arise against excessive investment in the concept and its muddled usage. He warns against those who view civil society as a new "ism", a substitute for nationalism, socialism and economism. In short, Keane rises to defend the civil society against all friends, foreign and domestic.

To proceed, Keane draws on his previous works *Democracy and Civil Society* and *Civil Society and the State*, which he cites numerous times. His writing is erudite, drawing on many sources (including some in Japanese), clear and confident. Modesty is not his strongest suit; Keane believes that his books have helped to engender the renaissance of civil society.

Specifically, Keane argues that civil society is not found as a state of nature, as an expression of

our basic rights, or as the product of our respect for some common good. In this, he not merely parts ways with Locke, Ronald Dworkin and Michael Sandel, but also attempts to cool the civil-society rhetoric. Keane scoffs at the notion that an emergent civil society can serve as a guarantor of liberty. The reduction of statism provides "freedom to despots and democrats alike" and a place in which "foxes enjoy the freedom to hunt down the chicken". Anyone who has been to Russia recently has a vivid picture of Keane's concerns.

Civil society according to Keane is highly fragile. Far from serving as a replacement for the State, as some of its strongest advocates believe, it must partner with a stable State, to be able to contain conflicts that inevitably arise within its pluralistic confines. Here, Keane rejects the view that a civil society is an "incarnation of social virtue in opposition to political vice". Keane's treatment of the media is illuminated by this perspective. He celebrates the concept of the Public Broadcasting Corporation as one nourished by the State, yet independent from the government and the market place, a gem of a civic society. It is also one that is typically constantly challenged

by technological and economic developments.

Moreover, drawing on the work of the sociologists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, Keane warns that while civil society, a forum in which citizens learn to speak and interact freely, is one precondition for democracy, many other factors are necessary if a democracy is to develop. These include a respect for the rule of law and for the formation of an array of political, rather than societal, institutions, such as political parties and legislatures. Furthermore, the rise of civil societies ends up with mixed results. Comparisons of India, Mexico, Romania and the Czech Republic confirm this keen observation.

Keane provides an intricate study of the relationship between nationalism and civility, in which he observes that in earlier eras the rise of national identity through self-determination supported both democracy and civil society. However, more recently, nationalism, the sense of superiority over others, has been drafted in the service of despots to undermine civility. And Keane envisions future civil societies that are not nation-bound, arising on a supranational level (for instance, a European civil society), nourished by international voluntary associations, as well as subnational bodies forming civic links of their own.

Above all, according to Keane, there is no one kind of civil society, but many different types, all historically and culturally contingent. He stresses that "the multiplicity of often incommensurable normative codes and forms of contemporary social life" is the signature of civil societies. He urges us to break out of a "bad monistic habit" of drawing on one substantive principle, and

embrace instead a "higher amorality" that rests merely on one notion, that of tolerance. Note that this principle is a procedural precept, as it defines no content as to how far tolerance is to reach: gay marriages? hate speech? spousal abuse?

Ultimately, Keane misses the greatest weakness of the civil society. In the long tradition of classical liberalism, he sees civil society as one that avoids "the Myth of Collective Harmony, with its dangerous belief in the possibility of a world without division and conflict". A "modern civil society is a restless battlefield where interest meets interest". His civil society needs no socially shared definition of the good or republican virtues. In the same vein, sociologists have celebrated the conflict over the consensus model.

If our options are indeed limited to State-enforced values (as in Iran), overpowering communities (like witch-hunting Salem), or unfettered pluralism (or multiculturalism), we might well choose civil society. Democratic societies, however, have shown that they are able to provide a normative framework of shared purposes and consensus, within which conflict can both thrive and be contained. Such societies in turn, require the formulation of some social virtues, and face the challenge of determining what comprises a good, not merely a civil, society. For instance, democratic societies now share a moral commitment to the environment and to the protection of their vulnerable members.

The first half of the twentieth century left us fearful of states that espouse causes; now we are surrounded by societies whose members starve for higher moral grounds than amorality. The rise of religious fundamentalism and right-wing ideologues points to the need for a more substantive response than civility, but one that is profoundly democratic. Civility is indeed a weak reed; but depriving a society of republican virtues weakens it further.