Violence and Democracy

In this provocative book, John Keane calls for a fresh understanding of the vexed relationship between democracy and violence. Taking issue with the common-sense view that ‘human nature’ is violent, Keane shows why mature democracies do not wage war upon each other, and why they are unusually sensitive to violence. He argues that we need to think more discriminatively about the origins of violence, its consequences, its uses and remedies. He probes the disputed meanings of the term violence, and asks why violence is the greatest enemy of democracy, and why today’s global ‘triangle of violence’ is tempting politicians to invoke undemocratic emergency powers. Throughout, Keane gives prominence to ethical questions, such as the circumstances in which violence can be justified, and argues that violent behaviour and means of violence can and should be ‘democratised’ – made publicly accountable to others, so encouraging efforts to erase surplus violence from the world.

John Keane is Professor of Politics at the University of Westminster. Born in Australia and educated at the universities of Adelaide, Toronto and Cambridge, he is a frequent contributor to radio programmes and newspapers and magazines around the world. Among his books are The Media and Democracy (1991), which has been translated into more than twenty languages; the prize-winning biography Tom Paine: A Political Life (1995); Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions (1998); a biography of power, Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts (1999); and Global Civil Society? (2003). He was recently Karl Deutsch Professor of Political Science at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin and a Fellow of the influential London based think-tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research. He is currently writing a full-scale history of democracy – the first for over a century.
As the twenty-first century begins, major new political challenges have arisen at the same time as some of the most enduring dilemmas of political association remain unresolved. The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War reflect a victory for democratic and liberal values, yet in many of the Western countries that nurtured those values there are severe problems of urban decay, class and racial conflict, and failing political legitimacy. Enduring global injustice and inequality seem compounded by environmental problems, disease, the oppression of women, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and the relentless growth of the world's population. In such circumstances, the need for creative thinking about the fundamentals of human political association is manifest. This new series in contemporary political theory is needed to foster such systematic normative reflection.

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JOHN KEANE
For Bhikhu Parekh
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