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## Global Civil Society?

John Keane, a leading political thinker, tracks the recent development of a powerful big idea – global civil society. Keane explores the jumble of contradictory forces currently nurturing or threatening its growth, and shows how talk of global civil society implies a political vision of a less violent world founded on legally sanctioned power-sharing arrangements among many different and intermingling forms of socio-economic life. Keane's reflections are pitted against the widespread feeling that the world is both too complex or too violent and crazy to deserve serious reflection. His account borrows from various scholarly disciplines, including political science and international relations, to challenge the normative silence and confusion within much of the contemporary literature on globalisation and global governance. Against fears of terrorism, rising tides of xenophobia, and loose talk of 'anti-globalisation', the defence of global civil society mounted here implies the need for new democratic ways of living – and for brand-new democratic thinking about such planetary matters as global markets, uncivil war, university life, and government with a global reach.

JOHN KEANE is founder of the Centre for the Study of Democracy and 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-five languages; the prize-winning biography *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (1995); *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*, (1998); and a biography of power, *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* (1999). 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.

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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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For Jürgen Kocka

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Nimmt die Welt wie sie ist, nicht wie sie sein sollte  
(Take the world as it is, not as it ought to be)  
(Old German proverb)

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## Preface

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Big ideas, attempts at grasping the whole world in thought, are renowned for breeding discontent and raising future expectations. Big ideas are also well-known sources of fear and contempt among their opponents, who accuse them of oversimplified descriptions of the world, often suspecting them as well of serving as ideological alibis for power groups bent on dominating others. So controversy and opposition have been the fate of all modern versions of the big idea: the recent claim that history has ended in undisputed victory for liberal democracy and free markets, for instance, has fared no better in this respect than the earlier presumptions that socialism would win world victory, or that fascist dictatorship would purify nations and make them capable of super-human achievement.

Given this jumbled history of humbled big ideas, eyebrows may well cock at the large claim made in this slim book. Concerned with globalisation and its discontents, it puts forward the thesis that a big but modest idea with fresh potency – global civil society – is today on the rise. The book explores the historical origins of this planetary vision and analyses its present-day meanings and usages and future political potential. Not only does the argument suppose that periodic fascination with big ideas is a necessary condition of politically imagining a social order. The book also notes the unusual promiscuousness of the idea of global civil society – its remarkable ability to attract a wide variety of supporters in all four corners of the earth. It sees this promiscuity as a symptom of contemporary struggles to make sense of the growth spurt of globalisation now unfolding before our eyes. So attention is paid to the forces – turbocapitalism, global media, social movements, publicly funded universities and other governmental agencies – that are currently nurturing its growth. Violence, xenophobia, hunger, fatalism and other forces presently thwarting this new global vision are also foregrounded. Political distinctions and theoretical qualifications are made, including the point that global civil society – a neologism of the 1990s – is a big idea with a radical difference. When used by its friends as an ethical standard, I argue, it champions the political vision of a world founded

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on non-violent, legally sanctioned power-sharing arrangements among many different and interconnected forms of socio-economic life that are distinct from governmental institutions. The pluralist ideal of a global civil society openly challenges previous big ideas, all of which were held together by monistic presumptions of one sort or another. The whole image of a global civil society finds monism distasteful. To speak of a global civil society in empirical terms is to emphasise the fact that most people's lives today dangle on ten thousand different global strings. To speak of a global civil society in normative terms is to dismiss the big ideas of the past as wooden horses used by certain power groups to build unaccountable institutions wrapped in ideological deception – in the extreme case, by pushing victims down the dark alleyways of terror, cruelty and organised murder.

These reflections on global civil society may be seen as an experiment conducted in the laboratories of contemporary democratic thinking. Their findings are neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but they are definitely pitted against the widespread feeling that the world is going to the dogs: that it is both too complex or too violent and crazy to deserve serious reflection. The experiment draws upon a variety of scholarly disciplines, including political science, modern history, geography, anthropology, economics and international relations. The work is intended as a contribution to the field of applied political philosophy, as a small gift to those who are interested in the practical importance of ideas. The vision of a global civil society is presented as a challenge to the normative silence or confusion within much of the contemporary literature on globalisation and global governance. In opposition to mounting fears of terrorism, rising tides of bigotry and nationalism and loose talk of 'anti-globalisation', the defence of global civil society mounted here implies the need for a defence of democratic ways of life – and for brand-new democratic thinking about such matters as violence, global markets, and government with a global reach. The claims made in support of a global civil society try hard to be hard-nosed. They are not simple-minded defences of 'the West', or of 'liberalism', or of 'cosmopolitanism' or empire: they are something different, something new.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that the case presented here challenges those who are enamoured of the idea of a 'civil society', especially those purists (as I call them) who set aside the muck of markets, conflict and violence and treat this society as a pleasant and peaceful form of voluntary cooperation – as something of a recipe for heaven on earth. This book calls on these purists to move on in their thinking. It reminds them and others that the resurgence of the concept of civil society is among the most significant developments within the contemporary

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human sciences. This originally eighteenth-century ideal continues to gain ground both inside and outside of academia; and it now seems probable that it will dominate the intellectual agenda in the years to come. That is why this book sides with efforts to radicalise the language of civil society. Against the forces of parochialism and social injustice, hubris and cruelty, it tries to breathe new life into this old language by pushing for answers to the following types of questions: supposing that the 'real-world' relationship between civil societies and territorial state forms is not necessary but contingent, does it make sense to say that a borderless 'global civil society' is today emerging? If so, what does the term mean? What are its origins? Is it important to distinguish among its different – descriptive, strategic, normative – uses? Can radically different understandings of the term 'civil society' in regions with different histories – in the Indian sub-continent, no less than in Muslim societies and in China – be represented within the idea of a global civil society? Given that such a society is fundamentally important in providing 'nests' and livelihoods for millions of people, and in constraining the unaccountable and bellicose governmental and corporate powers that currently shadow the world, how can a global civil society – a basic precondition of the democratisation of the emerging global order – be politically and legally secured? From 'below', through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social action alone? Through the influence and war-fighting capacity of the world's dominant power, the United States? Via the United Nations, or perhaps through a variety of context-dependent social and political strategies? What roles can global civil society play in the process of global governance? Can this society perhaps help to redefine the *universal* entitlements and duties of the peoples of the world, across borders?

Hannah Arendt once observed that giving a stray dog a name greatly increases its chances of staying alive. So might it be that a clearly articulated vision of global civil society – calling upon its friends to unite against misery and unfreedom – is a significant first step in the political task of re-naming our world, of offering it hope by freshly defining its future?

*London 1 August 2002*

JOHN KEANE