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**Civility's Unfinished Revolution: Comments on John Keane, "Hopes for Civil Society,"
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Every political theorist dreams of writing the poetry of revolutions. Hardly any actually do. John Keane, whose work has chronicled, analyzed, and inspired political change for more than three decades, is a striking exception. I can hardly pretend to be a member of Keane's august league, which counts towering names like Paine, Arendt, and Habermas. Instead, I aim to offer some reflections that help to underscore the significance of Keane's perspective and highlight some areas for further discussion.

For reasons I will explain, Keane's conception of civil society is more nuanced and more attractive than leading contenders. But Keane's conception also leaves certain questions for reexamination. Keane says little about what role, if any, his vision of civil society allows for formal political institutions. Many may struggle to share Keane's optimism about the role of digital technology in helping to realize that vision. And one might also question how well the attitude of political hope that Keane urges ultimately serves us.

"Civil society" functions as a near-universal rallying cry, as its warm connotations and fuzzy definition offer something to nearly every school of thought. For earlier writers, it simply meant a community bound by law and distinguished from a state of nature (e.g., Locke 1988). Society was civil when positive law tempered the chaos and insecurity of life outside political order. Twentieth century opponents of authoritarianism exiled the state from the term's meaning. A despot that breaks the social contract cannot be a bona fide member of a civil society. As a result of this influence, civil society came to mean the realm of associative activity between the household and the state (e.g., Taylor 1990). It served as a site of voluntary action in support of the common good and contestation against authoritarian predations. More recently, right-leaning scholars have tended to emphasize the commercial components of voluntary association, regarding market relationships as central to the term's meaning (Scalet and Schmidtz 2002). Meanwhile, left-leaning scholars have tended to treat civil society as distinctively noncommercial, offering a site of deliberation and cooperation that is separate from, and elevated above, the sordid practices of production and exchange (Young 2000).

Keane's patent rejection of neoliberalism and criticism of corporate power could easily suggest a view of civil society in this last vein as separate from the market. But in fact, Keane is equally unpersuaded by conceptions of civil society that break it off from commercial life. Reducing civil society to the nonprofit sector amounts to a retreat from the challenges of contemporary politics and a capitulation to the forces of tyranny and exploitation. Instead, civil society for Keane principally represents part of a normative ideal. This ideal is one of peaceful coexistence through mutual toleration as equals—what other theorists might simply call liberal democracy. But for Keane civil society is not just liberal democracy by another name. Keane believes that the liberal-democratic ideal necessarily requires an institutional architecture of various voluntary practices, movements, and organizations. Thus, for Keane civil society itself becomes part of, and indistinguishable from, a healthy liberal democracy.

Here is one part of Keane's account that raises questions. Keane's conception of civil society has two faces: an empirical dimension and a normative one. Empirically, civil society refers to the realm of voluntary practices, movements, and organizations that take place between the household and the state. Normatively, civil society is an ideal of peaceful coexistence through mutual toleration as equals. But one may naturally wonder how these two faces or dimensions fit together. Many have pointed out that the empirical definition of civil society does not necessarily lead to the practical realization of the normative ideal. A generation ago, revisionists challenged the reigning optimism about civil society's innate progressivism by demonstrating the destructive possibilities of strong civil society institutions (Berman 1997; Chambers and Kopstein 2001). The example of Weimar Germany, where strong civil society institutions became handy vehicles for fascism, cautions that civil society is hardly sufficient to maintain or generate liberal-democratic conditions.

One potential implication of these observations is that civil society institutions are necessary but not sufficient for the survival and flourishing of a liberal democracy. Keane's account has little to say about other supporting factors. Notably missing from Keane's discussion is a sustained treatment of the role of the state. What does civil society need from the state? How might political institutions better support the liberal-democratic ideal? Silence on these questions gives the impression that Keane understands the responsibility for realizing the liberal-democratic ideal as lying predominantly with self-organizing associations of private individuals. This view is controversial, not least because it puts tremendous faith in the ability of dispersed and often antagonistic individuals to converge on the ideal of mutual toleration and peacefully pursue their common interests. This possibility seems increasingly remote in a world of runaway political polarization and dissensus about basic facts.

Even if we share this rosy picture of what is reasonable to expect of voluntary action, however, there also lie normative problems with this vision. What makes the state necessary, according to one reading of Kant, is not to restrain natural human tendencies toward evil or avarice (Kant 1999). It is equally to ensure that our good intentions are effectively coordinated and that the benefits and burdens we share are fairly distributed. These conditions cannot be fully achieved without certain kinds of coordination and collective decision-making. The limits of voluntarism become apparent when reflecting on the successes and limitations of recent social movements. The Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements sought to be egalitarian in their aims and tactics, and in many ways they were. But even they were unable to combat background inequalities that privileged some views and voices at the expense of others. For the least advantaged, including those in precarious employment situations, care-givers, and the physically disabled, an indefinite commitment to outdoor physical assemblage is prohibitively costly.

This is not to say that any state we know has been a reliable guarantor of social justice. But it is something that states are uniquely capable of and responsible for. The job of civil society, according to this alternative perspective, is both to hold the state to account and also to supplement the state on matters of disagreement over the common good. The state cannot be expected to self-monitor and self-correct; nor should it be expected to monopolize controversial cultural goods like religion and art. But civil society cannot successfully carry out these functions without the state's assistance. Civil society needs legal protections, affirmative subsidies, and regulations against inequities and externalities. Reviving liberal democracy is as much a project for governments as it is a project for private citizens.

Keane sees several rays of hope for a revival of the liberal-democratic ideal. One of these is the development of digital technology, which provides new opportunities for civic association,

communication, and political participation. Keane acknowledges the pitfalls of the digital revolution, which confronts us with scourges of incivility, misinformation, and omnipotent surveillance, to name just a few. Yet Keane sees reasons for encouragement in the mass-based “digital mutinies” against arbitrary power, exemplified by online activism against authoritarian regimes. In my own view, whether liberal democracy can withstand the threats that digital technology makes possible is a more open question than Keane seems to allow. Over the last few years, the scourges that Keane acknowledges have not improved—they have worsened dramatically. And authoritarian regimes seem to have taken their own lessons from the Arab Spring, moving to centralize control over digital infrastructure and dominate the flow of information. The internet may have begun as a radical democratic commons, but it is swiftly becoming enclosed by powerful firms and states.

Keane ends with a call for hope. It is hope for the revival of civil society, and an endorsement of the virtue of hope more generally. I share Keane’s desire for civil society’s revival. I believe the ideal is realistically achievable and that we all have obligations to contribute to its achievement. But I am not yet persuaded that we should call these propositions “hope”—or replace them with hopeful attitudes.

Keane is not alone among recent theorists in extolling the potential virtues of a hopeful disposition (e.g., Snow 2018; Milona 2020). The emotion can obviously have some beneficial effects on cognitive biases. When a series of dispiriting events habituates us to despair, a call to hope can shock us into reassessing whether that reflexive disposition is still warranted. But the mechanics of hope are a lot like the mechanics of faith, and partisans of public reason may fear the damaging potential of both.

Rationally, I ought to contribute to collective action when, other things equal, I have sufficient reason to believe that enough others will contribute to make our efforts succeed. Similarly, I ought to believe that some event will occur when there are good reasons to suggest that it will in fact occur. If the reasons are positive in either case, rationality demands that I act or believe. There is no additional need for something like hope. And to react to these situations with hope risks falling into the trap of self-deception: believing something to be true because one wants it to be true, not because there is actual evidence for its truth.

A self-deceiving hope can have real practical consequences. If I am hopeful that some event will occur, I may then believe that I no longer need to make any effort to help bring it about. I may be content to sit back and let things play out. At best, I then freeride on the efforts of others. At worst, everyone reasons this way, and the outcome for which we hope never comes to pass. Hope thus becomes the handmaiden of quietism.

In short, either hope is simply a synonym for justified belief in some valuable future occurrence or it is akin to wishful thinking. If it is the former, a call to hope is merely a call to think rationally about our judgments of ideals and probability. And in times of rampant animosity and conspiracy theorizing, we could certainly do with more encouragement for rational thought. But so understood, the concept of hope itself adds more to our rhetoric than it does to our mental toolbox. If hope is an invitation to wishful thinking, then it comes with all the drawbacks that that term implies.

Civil society as Keane understands it offers a thoroughly compelling ideal. Resurrecting that ideal in practice is far from impossible. But civility’s revolution remains unfinished, and we still need Keane’s help to write its poetry.

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