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AMITAI ETZIONI

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 "voguish" worldwide. In recent years, the Havels of Eastern Europe have 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.

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