

PREFACE to the Farsi language edition of *Civil Society: old Images, New Visions*  
(Tehran 2001)

This book, a small gift to the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran, reflects critically on the current global revival and transformation of the early modern language of civil society. This global renaissance has been helped, in recent years, by the brave efforts of students, journalists, women, the poor and other groups - including political reformers like President Khatami - in cities like Tehran and Isfahan. During my visits to Iran I have been greatly impressed by this process and have learned much from its trend-setting dynamics. So too have many others around the world. It is therefore fitting, and a personal honour for me, to publish this book in the language of a country to which my own intellectual development is indebted.

These new reflections on the subject of civil society have several aims. A new framework is proposed for understanding how and why the eighteenth-century distinction between the state and civil society is today enjoying a remarkable renaissance. The need carefully to distinguish its different, potentially conflicting, meanings is emphasised. Attention is paid to the strong criticisms of the idea and ideal of a civil society. Examining subjects like incivility, violence, nationalism and computer-mediated capitalism, the book also attempts, unusually, an honest appraisal of the dark side - the self-contradictory, self-paralysing dynamics - of civil societies, past and present. Some reviewers of my work, including the American communitarian thinker, Amitai Etzioni, have recently claimed that my preoccupation with the limitations of civil society reveals my loss of theoretical affection for the political project of defending, nurturing and 'globalising' civil society institutions. In fact, my intention is the opposite. In previous works, such as *After Full Employment* (1986), *The Media and Democracy* (1991), and *Reflections on Violence* (1996), and

again in this volume, I criticise the bad habit, evident in Ernest Gellner's work, of blindly eulogising 'Civil Society', praising it as a paradise of freedom, equal opportunity and mutuality among citizens. Actually existing civil societies are certainly not like that, and there are good reasons, detailed below, why future civil societies will not be paradise on earth either.

The purpose of saying this is not to deliver the theory of civil society into the hands of its enemies. It is rather to develop a toughly realist account of the dynamics of civil society so as to highlight its unfulfilled potentials, and the obstacles in the way of its democratic consolidation and development. Such emphasis on the negative dialectics of civil society serves another purpose to clarify the normative reasons why civil society is a vital condition of democracy, understood as the non-violent rule of nobody in particular. Past justifications of civil society were mainly metaphysical. By contrast, the novel reasons given here for why civil society is a precious ideal are post-foundationalist, or 'ironic', as Professor Rorty would say. Principal among these normative justifications is the argument, familiar to Muslim scholars and inspired in the Atlantic region by figures as diverse as Montesquieu, Paine, and de Tocqueville, that power undivided by social or political pluralism or that a complex, dynamic, self-reflexive civil society can check hubris by ensuring that nobody exercises power over others unaccountably. For their support for my work on civil society, and for help in preparing this volume, I should especially like to thank Ali Paya, Mohammed Razavian [and the translator].

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London

December 2000