

Scene: Room 3030, Sidney Smith Hall.

Enter: JOHN KEANE [followed by the gloomy assistants of the IR department]

I remember thinking, do we have to tell *professors* to turn their cell phones off? No surely not, they're professionals, and this is an intimate seminar with an eminent and esteemed scholar... Well, I was wrong. (Rather than a simple ring, their global network-connected cell-phones were emitting some sort of unholy new age rock.) Even Keane though never entirely losing his composure asked where the strange music was coming from. Acknowledging their uncomfortable laughter, he rejoined, "you're smiling. I hope to wipe the smile off your faces." The man has style.

John Keane, currently at the University of Westminster, but having studied at the U of T once upon a time (which he claims impressed on him the indelible marks of socialism and idealism) has risen to great acclaim for his recent work which shares the title of his talk. Keane proceeded, in the course of a couple of hours, to attempt to arrive at a coherent and critical understanding of the term "Global Civil Society" [hereafter GCS] understood as a Weberian *ideal type*. The term, he says, has become "protean and promiscuous", I think rather like the confused conflation of the terms "nation", "state", and "nation-state". Coupled with a profound lack of written histories of globalising phenomenon, bring clarity to the subject is an essential task for today's scholars. Whether they are up to the challenge remains to be seen. He contended that the problem has been traditionally assessed from three major perspectives 1) an *analytical/empirical perspective* (this he rejects because the data -i.e. an absolute number of how many NGO's exist- is static, it fails to capture the complex webs of group interaction) 2) as a *strategic category* (useful only for campaigning political agendas and the World Bank) or 3) in a *normative sense* (this approach helps in the process of conceiving a political-legal structure for global civil society, but is in itself not enough).

Now hold on a minute. This sounds so boring- but it wasn't, I assure you. Keane interspersed his arguments with the cognitive stylings of the likes of Umberto Eco, with Wittgensteinian "blurred edges", "syncretic architecture" and social orders dancing around Durkheimian maypoles... he was dropping all kinds of names and metaphors (at times psychedelic and allegorical) occasionally lapsing into German when words in English could not adequately express his genius. Perhaps all of this was a smokescreen to obscure a lack of new material... To be succinct, Keane elaborated on five major aspects of GCS that bear repeating:

1) NGO'S

*Non-governmental organisations, over vast geographic distances and transversing time, conduct their business outside government structures, but are not the simple altar ego of the state.*

2) SOCIETAL FORMS

*A dynamic ensemble of tightly linked social forces- the largest ever in the history of the species which can be understood in two ways (the latter being preferred) :*

*Lennin-Hobbesian (Lenin saw an organic, holistic relationship between the household and the state, Hobbes saw an array of institutions regulated by law) vs. Augustinian (essentially sociable interaction at a distance from the law and the state) That is, a sprawling, non-*

*governmental constellation of individual and group adventures in which actors are interrelated and interdependent, full of written and unwritten rules that allow actors to act on a global scale.*

3) COMPLEX MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SPACE OF NON-VIOLENCE WITH POCKETS OF INSTABILITY

*One of Keane's most interesting contentions, that GCS tends to avoid violence, yet inevitably produces spaces that allow for criminal and violent activity such as the global sex trade. He says that GCS is marked by a tendency to "repair the torn fabric" wrought by wars and violence, to admire the peaceful.*

4) STRONG PLURALISM

*This Keane sees as a strong conflict potential especially in cultural interaction across borders. He is thinking of the MacDonald's in Mecca- the world is richly conflicted. So he asks, what metaphors do we have to describe this condition? :*

5) BIOSPHERIC SIMILE

*Keane sees GCS as a vast dynamic biosphere: not organic entirely, because it is socially constructed, but containing many habitats and species- and some areas being more hospitable than others. (Likening American culture to an invasive species is as inevitable as it is obvious)*

The last point is interesting academically, as a conceptual representation of GCS, but I found the rest of his talk to be a recapitulation of tiresome old themes. At one point he made bold attempts to de-naturalise human violence. I sympathise with this view. I wondered whether the marketplace could be similarly de-naturalised. All of this talk of supra-structures and political legal orders and global frameworks rest upon not only whether we can conceive of a global polity, but how this structure will co-habitate with global markets. After all, I found myself reflecting on how Ariel Sharon could be indicted by a Belgian court for war crimes, but so-called "multi-national" corporations run heinous criminal operations in the developing world seemingly with impunity. In a more fruitful post-Keanian discussion with Professor Amir Hassanpour who also attended the seminar, we conferred on the nature of universal human rights vs. universal property rights and which was a more authentic description of our current global *utopia*. So I ask, is it not even more bold to question the teleological supremacy of the marketplace? To de-naturalise the global capital markets of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as much as the violence embedded in humanity's hollow core? What would stand in its place?

As Keane fielded questions from the Poli-Sci department's best and brightest, I was overwhelmed by a distinct feeling that I was witnessing the slow, painful death of imagination. One professor rambled on about global civil society as a "parasite on the national legal order." Far from understanding her argument the monotone soliloquy of officious criticism however was appreciable (and it sounded like *hubris*). Another zombified participant challenged Keane by making the outrageous claim that the anti-globalisation movement and war protest against the United States was endemically violent and intent only on property destruction. I wondered, was it worth it? Had the Munk Centre learned anything today?

One of the only fascinating dialogues to originate out of this seminar was between Hassanpour and Keane when they fleshed out two major centres of power that resist GCS; first the centrality of the modern state, and then what Keane described as the "titan of surveillance." Had the discussion begun with this dialectic, then I believe it would have been more fruitful.

After all, somewhere near the end, Keane predicted that in ten years we will see a global army- something he believes is imperative. These are the questions that we here at the university should be taking up.

Oh, and professors; please, *please* turn off your cell-phones.

John Hayden, *University of Toronto*