

EDITED BY

MICHAEL

EDWARDS

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
**CIVIL
SOCIETY**

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
CIVIL SOCIETY

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE GEOMETRY OF HUMAN RELATIONS

MICHAEL EDWARDS

CIVIL society is one of the most enduring and confusing concepts in social science, and for that reason it is an excellent candidate for the analytic explorations that an Oxford handbook can provide. The concept is enduring because it offers a malleable framework through which to examine the “geometry of human relations,” as John Ehrenberg puts it in chapter 2—the patterns of collective action and interaction that provide societies with at least partial answers to questions of structure and authority, meaning and belonging, citizenship and self-direction. From the time of classical Greece, thinkers have returned to civil society as one way of generating new energy and ideas around old and familiar questions as the world has changed around them. But civil society is also a confusing and contested concept because so many different definitions and understandings exist (often poorly connected to and articulated with the others), and because the claims that are sometimes made for its explanatory power never quite match up to the complexities and contingencies of real cultures and societies, especially when interpretations fashioned at one time or in one part of the world are transported to another.

Hence, if civil society does shed light on the changing geometry of human relations, it does so not by substantiating any universal patterns, formulae, or equations, but by providing frames and spaces in which the agency and imagination of individuals can be combined to address the key issues of the day. In this respect, and