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Review of 'The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State'

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The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State by Steven Klein. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020. 250 pp. \$97.98.

There is a certain view of welfare institutions and policies (e.g. unemployment insurance, health insurance, paid family leave etc.) that has the rare distinction of being held by critics across the whole political spectrum. On this view, welfare institutions and policies act as anonymous and overly bureaucratic structures that turn citizens into passive welfare recipients, thereby decreasing their sense of agency and autonomy. Accompanying the rise of welfare institutions like a steady drumbeat, this view has fueled anxieties about a loss of individuality and personal responsibility (on the right), as well as (on the left) anxieties about a technocratic take-over of social concerns that forecloses possibilities for radical social change.

In his new book, Steven Klein sets out to refute this image of the welfare state. Based on historical evidence as well as on theoretical considerations, Klein shows how welfare institutions, far from blunting the force of political and democratic agency, can present a *site* for such agency and have, in fact, done so in the past. By, for example, codifying implicit social norms into explicit regulations, by supplying a categorial language for social phenomena, as well as – at the most basic level – by providing institutional and physical places to which organizers can address their demands, welfare institutions offer important crystallization points for collective action. It is precisely for this reason, as Klein demonstrates with great clarity, that welfare institutions have indeed often galvanized political movements – even if they were implicitly intended to do the opposite (e.g. in Bismarckian Germany).

Klein places this insightful core analysis into an ornate setting of theoretical discussions, bringing together Weber, Heidegger, Arendt, Habermas and modern theories of domination.

Klein's explanations here are unfailingly impressive and instructive, making it so that some of the chapters could also easily be read as self-standing essays. Chapter 1, for example, presents – even though Klein does not quite put it in these words – a dialectical analysis of modern theories of domination: Klein presents charitable overviews over Neo-republican, Neo-Kantian and post-structuralist conceptions of domination, showing their respective insufficiencies and strengths. His suggestion, certainly worth considering, is to understand these accounts less as mutually exclusive conceptions of the same phenomenon, but instead as compatible accounts of different forms of domination, corresponding to different facets of the modern social world.

Occasionally, the reader wishes that the balance between the elaboration of Klein's core theory of the welfare state and its theoretical 'embedding' had been shifted more decisively towards the core: in some instances, Klein's elaborate conceptual genealogies take up space that could have been used to tackle some philosophical questions that Klein's interesting account itself raises. Given, for example, that Klein admits that some welfare institutions engender political agency *more effectively than others*, one would have expected a somewhat more extensive account of the institutional qualities that bring about such efficacy. But Klein only turns to this question briefly and at the very end of the book (p. 178), thereby passing up a chance to draw, from his philosophically rich account, the prescriptive implications for institutional design that this account could yield. Nevertheless, *The Work of Politics* should be required reading for anyone interested in welfare politics from either a practical or theoretical perspective.

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