

***The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State*, by Steven Klein.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2020. 204 pp.**

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Published in *Political Theory*

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108778398>

Steven Klein's *The Work of Politics* seeks to change the way we think about the welfare state. We are accustomed to seeing welfare institutions such as unemployment insurance, healthcare and job guarantees through a protective lens as instruments to safeguard human life. Rather than viewing them as bureaucratic apparatuses forming docile and passive subjects, Klein theorises them as 'mechanisms for collective democratic empowerment and participation' (2). Based on an idea of the welfare state as a contested political terrain, he argues that it is the role of social democratic movements to transform structures and practices of social domination. The book aspires to rejuvenate the social democratic project around the ideals of citizen empowerment and participation. It succeeds in reorienting political theory around a new set of important concerns about welfare institutions, while leaving certain questions unanswered about how its ideals could be achieved in practice.

The book is a historical reconstruction of political thought and practices that seeks to provide useful resources for further democratizing our welfare system. Through reflections on three main theorists – Max Weber, Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas – and historical sections on the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Swedish feminist movement, the book shows how welfare institutions can become sites of political mobilization and objects of political judgment and critique.

The starting point of the book's intervention into political theory is the diagnosis of a wrong turn made by Max Weber leading to an unfortunate legacy inherited by democratic theorists that conceives of welfare institutions as routine, technical and completely absent of democracy and politics (22). The problem with this characterization of welfare institutions for Klein is that it leads democratic theorists on a quest towards experiences that seem to escape this realm of necessity. Rather than turning to extraordinary moments outside of the social reproduction of everyday life, the book asks whether the seemingly ordinary and mundane has been for too long overlooked as a meaningful field of political action.

The central political argument of the book has both a pragmatic and utopian dimension to it. On the one hand, it points to the importance of political struggles over core social policies that have a profound effect on many people's lives. On the other hand, it calls on us to rethink and reimagine how we could collectivize social risk and organize forms of social security in new and empowering ways. Most importantly, though, it envisions this as a site of collective political struggle for social movements, elected officials and civil servants.

The first chapter of the book analyses theories of domination and attempts to integrate insights from neo-republicans, critical theorists and post-structuralist theorists. Klein argues that “domination exists in three worlds – the objective, the intersubjective, and the subjective – each corresponding to a different ‘face’ of power” (26). His engagement with each of these theories is an attempt to show how each ‘produces a different picture of the welfare state’ which is necessarily limited and hence debilitating for understanding how domination operates and how it can be challenged. The three different dimensions analyzed are: direct forms of inter-personal domination, structural domination of certain groups over others through their power to shape social norms, and finally abstract domination – how individuals are constituted as responsible subjects. After this first chapter, the real question of the book is how can welfare institutions be opened up to democratic intervention, or more precisely, what strategies could social movements adopt to use welfare institutions to transform structures of domination in society (4).

One of the two main historical studies, which is prefigured in the opening vignette of the book, is the SPD’s response to Otto von Bismarck’s passing of social insurance laws in 1883, which, among other things, provided workers with financial support if they were sick (119). It’s an interesting example because for Bismarck these reforms had absolutely nothing to do with guaranteeing social welfare. They were simply a political tool to win people away from support for the socialists. Nevertheless, once it was passed it was the first national system in the world and we could see this as one of the first steps towards the European welfare state.

What matters for the book is not Bismarck’s intention to win workers over to monarchism through small concessions but the response of the socialist party. The socialists aimed to use these new welfare institutions as instruments for further agitation and organization. The book shows that this occurred on two levels: first in terms of a starting point for more radical demands, and secondly as new institutional positions for practical organizing and mobilizing. First, at the level of political discourse, the SPD advocated a radical reformism: accept the material gains provided by the new laws, while continuing to push for more radical demands and attempting to reframe the new institutions in the public’s mind not as instruments of insurance for individuals but as collective forms of social power and solidarity. Second, the appointment of workers to the various boards established to administer these schemes also provided a beachhead for the development of workers’ power within the state. On a practical level, there were thousands of positions within these institutions that became important associations and sources of power and legitimacy from which to organize further action.

The book also prompts us to consider the role of history in political theorizing. The historical analysis in the book of the SPD and the Swedish feminist movement offers an exemplary case of historically-grounded political theory that “moves between concrete historical examples and reflection on the conceptual categories through which political theorists interpret democratic politics in the welfare state” (3). On Klein’s account the historical sections of the book provide both raw material for theory building and case studies that can be used to ascertain how effective a certain theory is as a guide for action.

This methodology raises questions about the relationship between the historical

examples and the broader theoretical framework of the book. Take for example, the section on the SPD's reaction to Bismarck, which appears in the third chapter on Hannah Arendt. The argument in this chapter is that Arendt's theory enables us to see welfare institutions as "worldly mediators," which is to say occasions for people to come together and make political judgments about socio-economic matters (97). The lessons that the book hopes we will draw from the example of the SPD are Arendtian in nature. It emphasizes the socialists' creation of new, worldly sites of public appearance and judgment, and the opening up of unforeseen horizons of democratic action (127). What seems to fade into the background in this account is the explicit goal of the workers' movement at the time which was to bring about a socialist society through the abolition of wage labour and all forms of exploitation. The tension between the Arendtian and socialist political projects is resolved in favour of the former, meaning that in this particular instance the history can appear to have been moulded to fit the theory. The SPD are called upon by the book to demonstrate a point about democratic politics which could be seen as slightly at odds with their own professed goals.

This leads to further questions about the overarching political framework of the text. It can be easy for a reader to see an idealized form of Scandinavian social democracy implicitly put forward as a political goal we should be striving for. At one point, the book cites Sweden as "what a universal social-democratic welfare state can and ought to look like" (150). But I don't think it would be fair to say that the book therefore succumbs to a form of nostalgia for the historical moment of the European post-war settlement – a period with strong unions, Keynesian economic policies, high growth and lower levels of inequality. Klein makes clear that a return to the past is neither possible nor desirable. As the book shows, the institutions of the welfare state were the result of a compromise between social classes and one that historically excluded many groups. It acknowledges the ambivalent role of the welfare state in a capitalist society as one that can constrain movements for radical transformation as much as enable them and one which has also reinforced racialised and gendered hierarchies.

The political slogan of the book could be 'putting the democracy back into social democracy'. It identifies capitalist relations of production as a potential source of domination, but the goal of democratic collectives seems to be one of taming rather than overcoming capitalism. Given the enormity of the challenge and the intransience of capitalist relations of production, the radical participatory democracy at the core of the book seems to ask for a step further. Namely, to include a form of economic democracy in which the tyranny of bosses in private firms is replaced by a democratic structure of governance and for greater democratic controls to be placed over investment and banking. But the question of democratic controls over workplaces and the economy is left ambiguously open in favour of a more abstract framework of contestation within the welfare state.

The conclusion outlines the author's political vision for how this intervention into welfare institutions relates to politics today. Here, the book presents the case for how democratic groups should build a more genuinely democratic and inclusive set of welfare policies. It starts with the observation that these movements should be led by marginalised groups excluded from the post-war settlement (176). It calls for an expansion of welfare institutions to include nationalised health insurance in the US, rent caps, universal childcare and the organisation of precarious workers. The

recommendations mirror recent calls for ‘universal basic services’, essential services such as food, housing and transport free at the point of need. How far one should push on these demands depends on the balance of social forces, but it enables for an expansive political imaginary without necessarily sacrificing any of the pragmatism of working towards immediate demands.

In addition to the idea of expanding existing welfare services, the book also proposes what it describes as “more fundamentally transformative policies” often group together under the term “pre-distribution”. This is defined as an intervention to radically alter the distribution of capital such that every individual is guaranteed a greater share of productive resources. The book throws open the possibility of sovereign wealth funds, universal basic income and capital grants to individuals. Ultimately it errs on the side of services over cash grants because of the perceived greater possibility of their politicisation and being used as sites of collective politics.

As democratic theorists increasingly turn towards the minutiae of deliberative mechanisms in democratic society, this book opens up a new terrain of thinking about what really matters in our democracy. It provides a powerful argument for renewed attention to the sphere of welfare policies and for a struggle for a more democratic and participatory welfare state.