

The Work of Politics

The Work of Politics advances a new understanding of how democratic social movements work with welfare institutions to challenge structures of domination. Steven Klein develops a novel theory that depicts welfare institutions as “worldly mediators,” or sites of democratic world-making, fostering political empowerment and participation within the context of capitalist economic forces. Drawing on the writings of Weber, Arendt, and Habermas, and historical episodes that range from the workers’ movement in Bismarck’s Germany to postwar Swedish feminism, this book challenges us to rethink the distribution of power in society, as well as the fundamental concerns of democratic theory. Ranging across political theory and intellectual history, *The Work of Politics* provides a vital contribution to contemporary thinking about the future of the welfare state.

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The Work of Politics

Making a Democratic Welfare State

STEVEN KLEIN



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To Renée

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Preface

I wrote this book in the decade after the 2008 financial crisis – a decade of economic stagnation, rising inequality, and, for many, brutal austerity. It was also a period of burgeoning social movements, many reclaiming the banner of socialism, beginning with the Occupy Wall Street movement and then gaining mainstream political prominence with the surprise success of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK Labour Party leadership election and the strong showing of Bernie Sanders in the US Democratic Party primary. These movements have been pushing social welfare concerns back to the center of democratic politics. Bernie Sanders ran on a platform of expanding Medicare to include all Americans, and “Medicare for All” has since become a major policy issue within the Democratic Party. Corbyn’s leadership, while marred by indecision over the UK referendum to leave the European Union, has nonetheless incubated a remarkable range of ideas for the democratization of the welfare state and the economy. Both Sanders and Corbyn have also pioneered “insider–outsider” strategies, where grassroots social movements seek to pressure political institutions and political parties from the outside, while also taking them over from within.

While this book is a work of political theory, often of “high” political theory, it is oriented to these new political currents. It is an effort to think about such insider–outsider strategies and about how democratic social movements can use welfare institutions to advance their claims. One of its overarching goals is to show how social welfare concerns – the mundane concerns of ordinary people’s day-to-day existence – can become the crucial occasion for broader forms of democratic action that can have genuinely transformative outcomes. Today, social movements face genuine opportunities to create a new vision of the welfare state – one that would be inclusive, democratic, diverse, and sensitive to the democratic sensibilities of such movements.

The history of democratic struggles in the welfare state is a potential source of inspiration for such contemporary movements. It is simply not the case that, in the past, welfare politics was a matter of “reformism,” dissipating the radical energies of democratic social movements. We should also reject the idea that such politics exclusively relied on trade unionism focused on the male breadwinner such that the decline of the industrial working class marks the end of ambitious welfare politics. Rather, as my historical investigations show, the politics of the welfare state has provided opportunities for democratic social movements to advance their claims and has always required diverse forms of bottom-up democratic mobilization that go beyond formal organizations like labor unions. No doubt, those concerned with democracy should look for ways to rebuild labor organizations in the face of changing economic forces. Yet the success of labor unions in advancing the welfare state depends on extra-union forms of democratic mobilization.

My field of academic research, political theory, has had a tortured relationship with the welfare state. This book has also been born out of the feeling that too much democratic theory, especially so-called radical democratic theory, has dismissed the importance of welfare institutions to democratic politics. As a result, most defenses of the welfare state in political theory are framed in terms of liberal rights and entitlements. Political theory thus provides few resources for the sort of social-movement-based, democratic political action with which I am concerned. It also provides few resources for thinking about democracy in the context of political economy and capitalism. Political theorists “black box” the economy, preferring to think about how to protect fragile spheres of political activity from the encroachment of economic forces and imperatives. But this has been a mistake, one that has left political theory unable to grasp, let alone respond to, the resurgence of interest in democratic socialism and similar projects.

The financial crisis and its reverberations strained, even if it did not displace, the political consensus, formed in response to the crises of the early 1970s and fully ascendant with the end of the Cold War, that the welfare state model forged after World War II was too “rigid” and that the state must become “smarter.” For advocates of that framework, the welfare state was a historical curiosity whose time had come and gone. But struggles for democracy are never smooth, straight lines. The crisis and transformation of the welfare state since the 1970s is just one moment in these struggles. Today, as the long aftermath of the financial crisis continues to work its way through politics, there are new openings for transformative democratic politics, and at the center of such politics could be an ambitious, radical vision of the possibilities created by democratic mobilization for and within the welfare state.

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I could not have asked for a better place to pursue political theory than the University of Chicago. My committee nurtured this project from its initial inchoate form to a finished dissertation. Bob Gooding-Williams and Patchen Markell provided crucial feedback and advice. Lisa Wedeen constantly pushed me to think outside the box about what political theory should be and to strive for the utmost clarity and precision in my arguments. Finally, I was immensely lucky to have John McCormick as my dissertation supervisor. More than just steering the project intellectually and helping me navigate the seas of academia, he made graduate school genuinely enjoyable.

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