The politics of welfare

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Abstract

Steven Klein’s excellent new book *The Work of Politics* is an innovative, insightful and original argument about the valuable role that welfare institutions may play in democratic movements for change. In place of a one-sided Weberian view of welfare institutions as bureaucratic instruments of social control, Klein recasts them in Arendtian terms as ‘worldly mediators’ or participatory mechanisms that act as channels for a radical politics of democratic world making. Although Klein is careful to modulate this utopian vision through a developed account of power and domination, I question the relevance of this largely historical model of world-building activism for the contemporary world of welfare. I point to the way that decades of neoliberal social policy have arguably eroded many of the social conditions and relations of solidarity that are vital prerequisites for collective activism around welfare.

Keywords

Activism, domination, neoliberalism, welfare, worldbuilding

The aim of Steven Klein’s thought-provoking new book is to dislodge a commonly held, but limited, view of welfare institutions as bureaucratized instruments of social control and to reconstrue them instead in dynamic terms as catalysts of progressive social change. By recalling how welfare institutions have been important sites of democratic conflict at various points in the 20th century, he seeks to remind thinkers nowadays of their latent but forgotten potential for galvanizing...
collective political mobilization and empowerment. The reason why the democratic potentiality of welfare institutions is often overlooked is because of the dominance of a Weberian account of the modern bureaucratic state in the social sciences. For Weber, welfare institutions form part of a regulatory apparatus the aim of which is to standardize human behaviour and engineer ever greater degrees of social uniformity, regularity and efficiency. This instrumentalizing drive flattens out social diversity and creates the homogeneous and calculable conditions necessary for capitalist accumulation and the limitless supply of acquiescent, productive labour power that it demands. Famously, Weber's pessimism about rationalized mass society meant that he believed ordinary individuals lacked the moral strength to resist such bureaucratic manipulation and that their lives were consequently reduced to unthinking mundanity and passive rule following – modernity as an iron cage. Authentic meaning-giving activity cannot arise from the ordinary world but only from the realm of the extraordinary, that is, in the heroic actions of exceptional, charismatic individuals. This bleak Weberian vision of the tyranny of bureaucratic control resurfaces in different guises throughout 20th-century thought, finding one of its most striking restatements in Foucault's account of disciplinary biopower that, through insidious practices of normalization, reduces individuals to little more than docile bodies. It is this powerful but one-sided narrative of the development of modernity as a process of ever-intensifying manipulation and surveillance that persists in contemporary accounts of welfare and associated theories of dependency and clientelism that it is held to foster in its recipients. It is this kind of view that Klein challenges and supplements with an alternative, modulated account of welfare institutions as not just instruments of control but as participatory mechanisms that may act as channels for a radical politics of democratic world making.

Klein draws the theoretical resources for his reworked account of welfare institutions from an impressive range of sources but relies in the main on the work of Arendt and Habermas. Rebutting standard readings of Arendt as a thinker hostile to 'the social question', Klein takes from her thought the idea of welfare institutions as 'worldly mediators', that is, as dual-purpose institutions that deal with functional, economic aspects of collective existence as well as its ethical aspects. As functional problem solvers, welfare institutions respond to socio-economic issues of coordination, market failure and so on, by organizing human relations in ever more rational and efficient ways such that social risk and disruption are minimized. On the other hand, as worldly public institutions, they also embody collective meanings and value judgements about our common world, about social well-being and, more generally, about freedom and equality. This latent evaluative rationale – expressed in what Arendt calls the shared space of appearances and world disclosure – is ignored by one-sided Weberian depictions but is an ever-present potential that, when reactivated in struggles around welfare, may serve as the anchor for new democratic visions of the common world.

For a dyed-in-the-wool Weberian or Foucauldian, Klein's description of welfare institutions as rallying points for democratic struggle might seem quixotic, an
example of very wishful thinking even. Mindful of this pitfall, Klein attempts to forestall criticisms by anchoring his account of welfare institutions firmly within a developed understanding of domination, the claim being that emancipation and domination are inextricably interwoven. To this end, he finds valuable resources in Habermas’s early critical social theory and especially in the interrelated notions of the causality of fate and dialectic of morality. The causality of fate denotes a notion akin to that of path dependency, namely, the ways in which collective action comes to be objectified in institutions and social structures and takes on the appearance of inevitability, standing over and dominating individuals. The dialectic of morality refers to the converse process by which, in coming to recognize the ways in which action is reified and therefore reproduces domination, individuals are empowered to transform social structures. Together, these dialectical Habermasian notions provide an account of the ways in which struggles against domination are unavoidably ‘non-linear, provisional political projects, always fragile and subject to reversal’ (p. 131). Habermas’s ability to perceive the essential contingency of democratic struggle is undercut, however, by his adherence to an overly linear, irenic narrative of societal progress. Departing from the latter’s dualist and teleological architectonics, Klein develops a complex, non-synchronous account of the evolution of modern power which he takes forward in a tripartite typology of domination. Direct domination is the uncontrolled power that one group or individual exerts over another in the sense captured by neo-republican theorists such as Pettit. Structural domination refers to distortions in intersubjective social norms that manifest themselves in entrenched inequalities of class, sex, race and so on. Abstract domination is also an impersonal rather than direct mode of power, but is expressed in diffuse, long-term tendencies such as unchecked commodification, atomizing individualism and other types of social pathology that, when internalized, may have distorting, injurious effects on individual self-realization. In any given situation, these different vectors of power are interwoven with each other in complex and discontinuous ways. Indeed, struggles that succeed in challenging domination along one dimension may often do little to tackle domination in other dimensions, and in fact may end up inadvertently compounding them.

This typology enables Klein to conceptualize social domination in its complexity and to highlight the ambivalent ways in which welfare institutions, as worldly mediators, reproduce oppressive social hierarchies even as they create opportunities to resist and undermine them. Put differently, democratic struggles against power are always unpredictable, provisional and unfinished. Klein’s animating premise is that it is precisely through analysis of domination that it becomes possible to identify potential sites of struggle and to articulate emancipatory responses to social wrong. In this regard, then, he echoes Adorno’s (1998: 288) negativist approach to normativity expressed in the dictum that ‘the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better’. Klein’s main historical example of this driving dialectic of moral life are the struggles between feminists and policy makers over gender equality and welfare policy.
that took place in Sweden starting in the 1930s and moving onwards to the 1960s and 1970s. His analysis is detailed and sophisticated, but the central claim is that these struggles represent a complex cycle of politicization and conflict displacement. So, for example, against the backdrop of labour shortages in the 1960s, feminist demands for gender equality centred largely on the expansion of opportunities for women in employment. The demand for work challenged the maternalist model of family welfare that had hitherto prevailed in Sweden and that, despite its seeming progressivism, had deeply patriarchal elements. However, the ways in which the demand for equality in work was subsequently operationalized by state policy actors meant that in fact structures of male privilege were left unchallenged. Swedish women certainly entered employment in greater numbers but did so as part of a gender-segregated labour market where, inevitably, their work was subject to lower wages than men. Historical male privilege was further protected by the failure of policy makers to tackle the gender division of the labour in the domestic sphere by promoting more egalitarian arrangements centred on the idea of ‘universal care giver’ (Fraser, 1997). The cycle of politicization and co-optation encapsulated in the Swedish case illustrates Klein’s general point about the ambiguous ways in which welfare institutions simultaneously sustain and constrain the transformative aspirations of democratic movements; how they are, in his words, ‘necessary, if ambiguous, instruments for challenging structures of domination’ (p. 169).

This is a rich book, full of thought-provoking ideas, and it does an excellent job of shaking up received notions about welfare institutions in the social sciences. In contrast to the abstractedness of much contemporary normative thought, it is also an impressive example of an alternative, ‘historically informed’ way of doing theory, one that deploys abstract philosophical ideas to illuminate historical moments of democratic activism in a non-reductive manner and sensitive to contextual detail. I certainly cannot do justice to the many important issues – both thematic and methodological – raised in this bravura work, so instead will limit myself to pushing a bit further on Klein’s central idea of the world-making potential of welfare institutions and the kind of challenges that must be confronted today for it to become a political reality.

I begin with a general methodological point. Evidently, given Habermas’s prominent intellectual influence, Klein’s overall approach to normative theorizing owes much to the Frankfurt School’s idea of immanent critique. Instead of positing ideals in advance and downwardly applying these to social reality, immanent critique finds the values and principles that guide emancipatory change latent, in an incomplete form, in existing practices and struggles. In fact, although Klein does not mention him, his understanding of the normative source of democratic inspiration seems quite close to Axel Honneth’s thought on the matter. Specifically, the idea that welfare structures bear the traces of collective judgements about our common world that, when reactivated through struggle, might inspire future progressive change has affinities with Honneth’s idea of the surplus normativity embedded in social institutions and practices. On the German theorist’s view,
it is the task of critique to reconstruct the ‘moral surplus’ imperfectly embodied in
the institutions and practices of the lifeworld in order to use it as the normative
perspective from which to measure the shortcomings of the existing social order
and to press for emancipatory change. Likewise, Klein recasts welfare institutions
to ‘illuminate the traces of past transformative and utopian movements, p-3’
embedded therein. The comparison with Honneth is instructive here because,
despite the undoubted strengths of this reconstructive approach to normative the-
orizing, it must nonetheless perpetually skirt the danger of over-ethicizing, even
romanticizing social institutions. For instance, Honneth’s Hegelian critical theory
has often been criticized for its rather rosy reconstruction of intimate relations in
the family as the seedbed of crucial democratic virtues such as care and reciprocal,
freely assumed duty. The problem for feminists with this depiction of the family as
a bastion of ethical mutuality is that it mystifies women’s domestic labour as ‘care’
and too readily overlooks entrenched asymmetries of power that undergird inti-
mate relations between men and women and bolster ‘soft’ masculine domination.
The propensity to ignore power and over-ethicize reality cannot, of course, be
entirely avoided if one is committed to a method of immanent normative recon-
struction. It can, however, be guarded against by rendering theory as open as
possible to its social context and testing and retesting the relevance of ideas with
reference to empirical reality. Yet although he declares the ‘dialogical and diag-
nostic’ nature of his method, there is nonetheless a significant respect in which
Klein fails to enact this, leaving his argument vulnerable to the charge of being
overly optimistic about contemporary prospects for democratic activism in and
through welfare institutions.

This optimism is symptomatically expressed in the reliance of Klein’s argument
on a select few instances of welfare activism epitomized in the Swedish feminist
case. While they may well represent pivotal instances of democratic world-building
in the past, arguably they have a more tenuous bearing on the contemporary world
given the very different social conditions that now prevail. The issue, put bluntly,
is: how much can these historical moments of democratic world-building continue
to be relevant political exemplars for us today after 40 years and more of neoliberal
capitalism? Although these issues of change and exemplarity are briefly acknowl-
edged by Klein, in my view he still does not push hard enough on the ways in
which opportunities for the type of activism he celebrates may have been consid-
erably altered by the far-reaching impact of marketizing forces on social life, wel-
fare institutions included. Emphasizing the contingency of world-building
struggles, their always changing and provisional nature, is not enough to allay
doubts about the continuing relevance that struggles from 1960s Sweden can
have as a model for collective political movements nowadays. What lessons can
be usefully drawn from struggles that took place not only in what might seem, in
comparison with today, a ‘golden era’ of welfare provision but also in a regime
whose progressiveness is hardly typical of other welfare regimes in Europe and
North America even at the time? Policy experts have long cautioned against
extrapolating too freely from the stronger social democratic models of welfare
that prevailed in Scandinavian countries to the neoliberal welfare models of countries such as the UK and the US at the risk of indulging in wishful thinking about the ‘Nordic nirvana’ (Lister, 2009). Recently, of course, some of the differences between social democratic and neoliberal models of welfare have diminished as neoliberal ideologies have gained traction in Scandinavian policy-making circles. But nonetheless the load-bearing role that the Swedish case plays in supporting Klein’s argument about welfare-centred world making fails to reckon sufficiently with the profoundly altered conditions and attitudes towards welfare provision that shape the context of democratic activism nowadays. This is not to say that we cannot draw valuable lessons from the history but is to caution against a lionization of past utopian movements as political models for today.

The changes to the societal fabric of ‘advanced’ democracies after more than four decades of neo-liberal governance are evidently too extensive to document here. One difference perhaps worth noting, however, between the contemporary era and those key instances to which Klein harks back – socialist struggle in Bismarck’s Germany and community activism in 1960s USA, in addition to the Swedish case – is the way in which marketized ideas of individual self-reliance have not only profoundly changed the way welfare is delivered but have persisted as the default setting of policy-making elites even after the financial crisis of 2007/2008 has made only too apparent the dysfunctional effects that these ideas have had on collective social well-being. A question often asked by policy analysts is why marketized approaches remain in the ascendancy in guiding policy even though, on several key indicators (child poverty index, family income and wealth levels), they do not appear to have been particularly effective in solving problems of hardship and poverty? In the UK, for instance, overall levels of poverty have remained unchanged at 22% or one in five of the adult population for the last 15 years. Even before the catastrophic effects of the pandemic, there were, according to the Joseph Rowntree Trust (2021), rising levels of child and in-work poverty, increasing occurrences of destitution (50% increase since 2007) and falling levels of income especially amongst the lowest paid sectors of the workforce. The growth in absolute levels of wealth brought about by neoliberal capitalism has been directed, in other words, more towards augmenting profits than to enhancing wages and incomes. Likewise, welfare policy since the 1990s, in countries like the US and the UK, has arguably been oriented less to alleviating poverty and social inequality and more towards enacting the ideological goal of minimizing ‘dependency’ on the state even though this might mean keeping individuals in poverty.

Welfare policy has of course always been connected to labour markets, but the zero-sum assumption that drives neoliberal policy – that it must always be better for the individual to be in work than ‘dependent’ on the state – is misleading because it overlooks the complex causes of social vulnerability. The drive to push people back into work almost regardless of circumstances has in fact seen poverty levels rise, not fall, amongst certain groups. Stigmatizing and punitive regimes of benefit administration have pressurized many of those it is meant to help into taking on poorly paid jobs instead. Policy analysts have shown that this
has had adverse effects on low-income families – particularly single-parent families, 90% of which are headed by women. Single mothers who choose to no longer rely on benefits and take on low-paid work may well be spared the humiliation of being labelled feckless and irresponsible but often have a more difficult time managing financially than those who receive state support (Piven, 1999). As well as experiencing greater financial hardship, the ability of poorly paid working mothers to care effectively for their children is also undermined. Unable to afford costly professional child-care, they are often compelled to make alternative arrangements which, because they are often ad hoc and precarious, may have further negative consequences on family life. For example, in the US, a disproportionately high number of children are taken into care for neglect from black families headed by a single working mother (Threadcraft, 2016: 125–128).

In the UK, research shows that the restructuring of welfare as Universal Credit that is intended to deliver support in a way that is reflective of working life is ill suited to the conditions in which many low-income people live and often exacerbates poverty instead of alleviating it. Jane Millar and Fran Bennett (2016) have shown, for instance, how the payment of Universal Credit on a monthly basis – following the wage pattern of stable jobs – does not conform to the budgeting practices of many low-income families who find it easier to manage with more frequent weekly payments. Moreover, the monthly recalculation of benefit, in arrears, based on the circumstances that prevail on the particular day of assessment, means that payment levels frequently do not correspond to the real circumstances of many recipients whose lives are often subject to heightened levels of flux and change. A gap, which Millar and Bennett describe as more of a ‘chasm’, exists between actual patterns of money management and the ideas that shape welfare policy. Neoliberal welfare provision has worsened economic conditions not only for many of those in need of state support but also for people who do have jobs. In the context of a low-paid workforce and precarious gig economy, driving people off state support results in a glutted labour market which, in the absence of strong legal protections (e.g. zero-hours contracts), helps to drive wages down even further (Piven, 1999) The effects of this downward pressure on wages are evident in the rising numbers of working families estimated to be living in poverty and seeking help from agencies such as foodbanks.

What has all this to do with Klein’s book, which, after all, is not intended as a detailed analysis of welfare policy but as disclosive theory that alerts us to the complex character of welfare institutions and forgotten possibilities for world-building? These epochal shifts in welfare practices do have a bearing on Klein’s work not just because it explicitly declares itself to be historically informed theory but also because of their implications for the feasibility of his model of populist social change. First, the kind of solidaristic social relations which form the background conditions that enabled Klein’s past instances of world-building cannot perhaps be so readily taken for granted nowadays, since, as Habermas describes it, they have been non-renewably dismantled by marketizing forces. To the extent
that relations of social solidarity have been eroded by the atomizing and disempowering effects of neoliberal social policy, so correspondingly possibilities for collective activism around welfare may have declined. It is difficult to envisage the type of political struggles over welfare described by Klein taking place today in the economically adverse, morally stigmatizing and disempowering conditions under which many people today struggle to survive. For instance, the conditions that face single mothers in receipt of welfare now are arguably far more challenging and hostile to the type of activist political intervention undertaken by Swedish feminists around family policy some decades ago. Basic assumptions about care and family welfare around which the latter’s political demands were structured no longer hold sway in the current adult worker model of benefit that favours ideas of individual self-reliance over those of collective well-being. This is not to say that political efforts are not being made to challenge current welfare arrangements, but these are often taken forward not by disadvantaged groups themselves, in the world-building manner envisaged by Klein, but by NGOs, advice agencies and other bodies such as the Courts that intervene on their behalf. In short, opportunities for collective activism around welfare seem to have become an ever more unlikely prospect in the measure that prior, enabling bonds of social solidarity have been worn away by neoliberal governance and superseded by what Norman Geras (1999) has memorably described as a ‘contract of mutual indifference’.

Second, I think that the collective judgements about our common world, which Klein maintains are embedded in welfare institutions, could bear further scrutiny in the light of the political divisiveness that seems so widespread today. The dialectic of morality implies that within welfare institutions lies a utopian potential, buried but intact, that when unearthed and utilized by a particular struggle for its own ends serves also to re-energize a wider sense of common democratic purpose, even if only momentarily. The question this dynamic of retrieval and renewal raises is whether nowadays such unifying collective judgements do indeed exist and are capable of forming a democratic rallying point or whether in fact they have a far more fissiparous reality as an amalgam of divergent and often deeply conflicting interpretations of our common world. Clearly, the neoliberal restructuring of welfare is not just a technical functional exercise in governance but is also an ideological and moralizing project, one that is driven by the shibboleth of minimizing dependency. In order to acquire legitimacy, this ideological project has drawn upon and exacerbated insidious distinctions between the deserving and non-deserving poor and engaged in a moral scapegoating of those in receipt of welfare support that Piven has described in the US context as ‘ritual degradation’. This ideological agenda has instrumentalized wider social disagreement about which groups are worthy recipients of welfare support and which are not, disagreement that, over the last decade, has been filtered through the rising tide of right-wing populism and racist nationalism that has surged across Europe and North America. Amongst sections of the UK public, there is a well-documented hostility to ideas of extending welfare support to certain vulnerable groups whether they be economic migrants, refugees, the homeless, teenage mothers, the non-working
poor or any number of other socially demonized substitute constituencies for groups. In other words, the collective judgements about our common world that purportedly inspire popular struggles over welfare are, in today’s hostile and inward-looking political climate, more divisive and polarized than Klein’s optimistic irenic model of emancipatory retrieval acknowledges.

I finish with a remark on Klein’s overarching theoretical framework and on a tension that it seems to display between, on the one side, his argument that democratic world-building is always a provisional and precarious process of struggle, and, on the other, the abstract Hegelian devices through which he conceptualizes these contingent dynamics. An ever-present danger in using terms such as the causality of fate and dialectic of morality to capture social transformation is that the unpredictable, unruly and uncertain dynamics of change are somehow airbrushed out of the picture and retrospectively replaced by the frictionless logic of dialectics and historical inevitability. This retroactive sanitization of historical struggle is something that hampers Habermas’s thought – as well as that of other Frankfurt School theorists such as Honneth and Jaeggi – where existentially fraught issues of suffering and agency, oppression and empowerment are rendered invisible by being displaced upwards into the abstract, unifying dialectics of progress. Even though, in general, Klein does an admirable job of moving productively between high theory and historical context, the trace of such a problematic abstraction lingers in his work in so far as the recuperative, even teleological, connotations of the idea of the dialectic of morality seem at odds with the open-ended political reality that he aims to capture. There is no doubting Klein’s intention of revealing how collective ideals and judgements about our common world have galvanizing political force and may inspire the shaping and remodelling of social reality in accordance with their own content. But this transformative power can only ever be realized unevenly and sporadically in concrete struggles whereas the explanatory logic of dialectics too easily gives the impression that real-world actors are little more than puppets of a supervening and inexorable historical dynamic. Discernible in Klein’s theoretical model then are the vestiges of an idealist inversion of causality that, against his expressed intention, obscures the upheaval and uncertainty of real-world conflict by sublating it onto the ethereal plane of reason. This is not to say that these Hegelian concepts of causality of fate and dialectic of morality are devoid of explanatory force. Rather, it is to call for more mediating theoretical work between concept and context, for a sustained exploration of power, agency and the other social conditions that need to be in place in order to render world-building activism a genuine possibility in our present, rather unpromising political moment.

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