

The Labor of Politics: A Review of Steven Klein's *The Work of Politics*

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Steven Klein. *The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 204 pp. \$99.99 (hc). ISBN: 9781108478625.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the inadequacies of residual welfare arrangements to counter injustices. When Uber drivers lack trip requests in lockdown, the gig economy shows new highs of underemployment; when poorly paid cleaners of city buses or hospitals lack adequate personal protective equipment, exposure to health risks becomes even more uneven; and when disadvantaged children lack the safe haven of a classroom, lasting harm to their life chances results. Examples abound. But the pandemic also inspires a newfound collective resolve to refurbish the welfare states upon which democratic societies rely, from relatively gratuitous gestures such as #ClapForOurCarers to newfound support for bold ideas like the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection.¹ While it may be too early to tell what the future of the welfare state will look like after COVID-19, reading Steven Klein's *The Work of Politics* will help you to hope for the best but also to expect the worst. In this magnificent book, he presents an original theory of the welfare state, arguing that it functions simultaneously as a site of lasting democratic empowerment, and as a vehicle for the reproduction of domination in a capitalist social order.

A particularly insightful part of his account is to look at welfare institutions as "worldly mediators" between calculable, material needs and non-technical, political judgments. In constructing this theoretical building block from Arendt's writings, Klein engages in what may be called a hermeneutics of depurification. He shows that Arendt does not empty or cleanse the political of its socio-economic dimensions, but instead offers the vocabulary (with her notions of "class," "interest," "property," etc.) with which they can become part of an enduring common world. Klein takes his cue for this depurified (and hence also socio-economically relevant) reading of Arendt from Markell, who proposes a work- rather than action-centric reading of Arendt's *The Human Condition*.² The activity of work and its lasting, worldly objects function as mediating or bridging concepts between the futility of labor's economic needs and the fragility of political action. Klein praises the transfigurative and reifying potential of *homo faber's* work, and points to Arendt's phenomenological insistence on connecting instrumentality to appearance. "Everything that is," writes Arendt, "must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen."³

By depicting democratic social movements and the welfare institutions which they help construct as not only stories of action but also as instantiations of work and its objects, Klein offers an attractive, non-reductive theory.

Things like pensions, social housing projects, classrooms, or hospital beds are never merely commendable out of life's dire necessity or instrumental usefulness—although they deserve praise for this as well. Instead, these objects are always also part of an infrastructure that generates a meaningful and enduring world. So understood, welfare arrangements provide the scene and occasion for democratic action, but they also turn those episodes into some of the lasting institutions that Arendt's politics requires. Klein's book thus renders vivid and concrete Arendt's insistence that the intersubjective disclosure of words and deeds is always "about an objective worldly reality" yet spoken among agents "to one another."⁴ This unorthodox, depurified reading is particularly forceful to invalidate the endlessly recurring trope of Arendt's alleged aestheticism. Yet I think it would be a mistake to abandon orthodox, purified readings altogether. What interesting puzzles arise from pairing both hermeneutic strategies?

One obvious, remaining puzzle is that while depurified readings hinge on Arendt's claim that "everything that is, must appear," one cannot easily discard her insistence that "the most elementary meaning [of the public-private distinction] indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all."⁵ Confronted with this puzzle, it seems important to qualify and limit work's role as a bridging concept in general, and welfare institutions as "worldly mediators" in particular. As Arendt explains, certain things—like love, goodness, or the education of children—cannot and should not appear publicly lest they become corrupted. Take the example of education, which must remain hidden. She does not mean, of course, that educational engagements do not raise crucial political questions, which properly belong on the agenda of welfare state politics. But although questions as to how these engagements should be undertaken are the stuff of politics, the engagements themselves must remain secluded from wider public visibility in the interest of pupils and teachers.

Another advantage of pairing both readings is to focus on the exacting principles of action, rather than the reifications of work, to inform a morally appropriate take on social politics. For Arendt, to assess the worldliness of the welfare state it is decisive whether various groups and classes act on a (re)generative principle of solidarity to establish a lasting "community of interest," rather than on a perverted principle or sentiment like pity. Unlike solidarity, which "comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor," she forcefully objects to pity, which "does not look upon both fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak, with an equal eye."⁶ In prolonging our readings of Arendt in a politically austere and purified register as well, which emphasizes the distinction rather than connection between phenomena, we can see how Klein's account of the work of politics may not, on its own, suffice to articulate the potential worldliness of the welfare state. While it opens up the *possibility* for the worldly appearance of socio-economic needs, it does not tell us much about its *desirability*—the political ethos or attitudinal stance Arendt thinks their display requires.

But there is a further puzzle in Klein's luminous account of "worldly mediators." His depurified reading of Arendt helps him to approach the welfare state with a "both ... and," rather than "either ... or" mindset: welfare institutions are both structures of instrumental, calculative control, and the

scenes and objects around which democratic agency is exercised and strengthened. But this perspective may contain its own reductive bias. For by associating the technical, administrative dimensions of welfare institutions with world alienation, while aligning their democratic potential with world building and world expansion,⁷ readers are confronted with a false dilemma. On Arendt's account, good government requires both politics and administration, and administration need by no means degenerate into bureaucratic domination and spur world alienation, as real as these dangers are. Moreover, administration not only exemplifies work's technical and instrumental world building. For the gardeners of city parks and cleaners of hospital beds or street-level bureaucrats, it also entails what she calls labor's function of world-keeping, as distinguished from national housekeeping. So understood, the repetitions and cycles of administrative labor form a condition of possibility for worldliness. "The protection and preservation of the world against natural processes," writes Arendt, "are among the toils which need the monotonous performance of daily repeated chores. This laboring fight, as distinguished from the essentially peaceful fulfillment in which labor obeys the orders of immediate bodily needs, has a much closer connection with the world, which it defends against nature."⁸

Labor's own contribution to worldliness thus offers another qualification to rely on work as a worldly mediator. This, I believe, is not of mere exegetical interest to Arendt studies but also has crucial political implications. It cautions us against decrying employees of the public sector as bureaucratic or technocratic dominators if they are not subject to democratic transformation from without by social movements, and points to the importance of respecting them as civil servants. This would help to push back against lingering caricatures of the administrative state as that coldest monster of modern differentiated societies. And it would also be part of an attractive and feasible institutional picture that responds to the call for freedom from politics on which Arendt was keen to insist.⁹

In effect, Klein's account of the relation between democracy, domination, and the welfare state raises some concerns that point in the opposite direction of Arendt's capacious usages of the ideas of solidarity and worldliness. For instead of conceiving the welfare state with Arendt as a solidaristic community of interest between "the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor," Klein depicts the construction of the welfare state as an essentially partisan political project of subordinate groups against structures and agents of domination: it is the project of social democracy. This, of course, is true enough, but perhaps one of its virtues is that the welfare state has always fitted into a manifold of ideological discourses and served a variety of partisan interests. For instance, on the European continent welfare institutions are at least equally, if not more, the achievement of those inspired by Christian democratic ideology. Moreover, as Klein himself points out, welfare policies have also served, or at least not opposed, the strategic interests of business.

A related concern here is that while Klein defines democratic agency as "the ability of groups of individuals to deliberately and collectively determine the rules governing their social cooperation such as to realize an egalitarian set of relationships,"¹⁰ it is not clear how his focus on domination leaves sufficient room for the possibility of democratically legitimate rule and good gov-

ernment. Klein's account would do well to distinguish more clearly between legitimate rule and domination, instead of adopting muddled expressions like "legitimate domination."¹¹ The irony here is that while Klein's definition of democratic agency points to the possibility of welfare institutions as the scenes and instruments of legitimate rule, and his account stresses the contingent, provisional character of democratic empowerment, the reader is left with the slightly fatalistic impression that the politics of the welfare state always and inevitably remains caught in a struggle against domination. There are, of course, good reasons for critical theorists to accept that such a politics can never wholly avoid operating "through the force of the negative,"¹² and thus to focus on struggles for the abolition of domination. Yet we also need to ponder the question further what the absence of domination would look like, as both a normative and conceptual possibility in democratic theory. In contrast to persisting anti-statist sympathies among critical theorists, however, Klein's impressive book helps us to look for exactly this possibility within the welfare state and the wider institutional infrastructure to which it belongs.

Notes

1. See e.g. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-global-fund-for-social-protection-an-idea-whose-time-has-come>
2. Patchen Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of the Human Condition," *College Literature* 38 (2011): 15–44; this hermeneutic strategy is also deployed in Bonnie Honig *Public Things. Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)
3. Cited in Steven Klein, *The Work of Politics. Making a Democratic Welfare State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 112; see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 172.
4. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183, emphasis in the original.
5. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 73.
6. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 79.
7. Klein, *The Work of Politics*, 99 note 6; 128; see also Steven Klein, "'Fit to Enter the World': Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics, and the Welfare State," *American Political Science Review* 108 (2014): 868.
8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 100–101; see also Michelle Rodriguez, "The Challenges of Keeping a World: Hannah Arendt on Administration," *Polity* 40 (2008): 488–508; and Patchen Markell, "Anonymous Glory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2017): 91.
9. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 270.
10. Klein, *The Work of Politics*, 8.
11. E.g. Klein, *The Work of Politics*, 90.
12. Klein, *The Work of Politics*, 173.