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Reflexive Democracy: Political Equality and the Welfare State (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)

Kevin Olson

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Since the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions of the 1980s, there has been little consensus on what welfare ought to do or how it ought to function. At the same time, post-Wall continental Europe searches for a "third way" between state-planned socialism and laissez-faire capitalism. In Reflexive Democracy, Kevin Olson takes on this contemporary conceptual crisis. He calls for a "political turn" in considerations of the welfare state, arguing that it should no longer be understood in primarily economic terms--as a redistributive and regulatory mechanism--but in political terms, as a means of living up to deep-seated values of political equality. Drawing on arguments by T. H. Marshall and Jürgen Habermas, Olson proposes a conception of political equality as the normative basis of the welfare state. He argues that there are inextricable connections between democracy and welfare: the welfare state both promotes political equality and depends on it for its own political legitimacy. The paradox of political equality as a precondition for political equality is best solved, Olson argues, by guaranteeing citizens the means for equal participation. This is a reflexive conception of democracy, in which democratic politics circles back to sustain the conditions of equality that make it possible.This view, Olson writes, is meant not to replace traditional economic concerns but to reveal deep interconnections between democratic equality and economic justice. It counters paternalistic ideas of welfare reform by focusing on citizen participation. This conception moves beyond simple equality in the possession of goods and resources to propose a rich, materially grounded conception of democratic equality.

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