

Book Review: The Return of the State: Restructuring Britain for the Common Good edited by Patrick Allen, Suzanne J. Konzelmann and Jan Toporowski

In The Return of the State: Restructuring Britain for the Common Good, editors Patrick Allen, Suzanne J. Konzelmann and Jan Toporowski bring together contributors to offer a roadmap for reforming the British welfare state in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. This important and timely book has lessons for those inside and outside of the UK, finds Anupama Kumar, encouraging readers to think more carefully about the role of the state in providing fundamental protections for citizens in different jurisdictions.

The Return of the State: Restructuring Britain for the Common Good. Patrick Allen, Suzanne J. Konzelmann and Jan Toporowski (eds). Agenda Publishing. 2021.

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[The Return of the State](#), a collection of essays by members of the [Progressive Economy Forum](#), is a roadmap for reforming the British welfare state in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. The authors, a set of prominent academics at British universities, argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inability of neoliberal policies to protect against poverty and job losses. Through this book, they argue that there is a need for a more interventionist state, policies for full employment and a more equitable distribution of public resources. While this book is written with contemporary British politics in mind, it is a useful and thought-provoking read for those in other nations as well.

Several essays in the book call for a rethink on globalisation and the place of financial capital. Robert Skidelsky's essay, 'Rentier Capitalism', makes a case for a return to Keynesian theories of employment. He argues that the British state must invest in less industrialised regions (namely, the north) and that the state must be responsible for any procurement policy that affects the health of society as a whole. On a similar note, Ann Pettifor argues that governments have thus far failed to seriously engage with globalisation and to limit the public resources devoted to propping up the international financial system.

Closely linked with this is the idea that corporations should cease to simply maximise shareholder value, but instead provide a wider range of social benefits. One strategy for this is a public stake in companies – Stewart Lansley suggests a citizens' wealth fund, which is collectively owned by citizens and can be used to pay a citizens' dividend or basic income. Lansley also suggests a guaranteed income floor, where all citizens are paid a basic income, to replace the present system of means-tested benefits. Lansley argues that such a basic income is most valuable to those performing unpaid work, such as care work, as it does not depend on a person's status as a job seeker. Other essays in the book propose the collectivisation of pension funds and allowing debt relief to over-indebted households struggling to repay their loans.

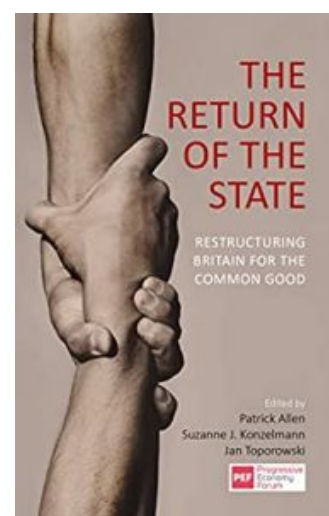




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The book also addresses inequality and privatisation as impediments to economic growth. Guy Standing's essay, 'Revive the Commons', calls for a reversal of the gradual privatisation of public resources, and greater investment in lands, education and facilities that the public can enjoy. Standing reasons that privatising the commons is directly linked to the infusion of foreign financial capital and neglect of resources for the British public. This is problematic, he argues, because the commons are of the greatest value to those with low incomes. This argument provides an important complement to Lansley's essay on a guaranteed income floor – Lansley reasons that a universal income floor can help families meet basic living standards. Many of these 'living standards', such as access to libraries, the opportunity to exercise in a clean park or the ability to move around the city with cheap public transport, are best provided by expanding investment in the 'commons'.

The most compelling essays in the collection pertain to healthcare and care services. Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson's essay on 'Post Pandemic Health', and Allyson M. Pollock and Louisa Harding-Edgar's contribution, 'Post-Covid National Health and Care Policies to Ensure Universal Services', makes the link between inequality and poorer health outcomes – those at the bottom of the income distribution are more likely to suffer from mental illness and poor nutrition.

To address this, Pickett and Wilkinson suggest that well-being, rather than just economic growth, be a priority for development, while Pollock and Harding-Edgar argue for greater investment in public health and a return to 'shoe-leather' epidemiology, or epidemiology grounded in field research methods, such as case monitoring and community surveillance, rather than in mathematical models. This would be led by local community workers. Susan Himmelweit supports this view with her argument that Britain needs a universal care service on the lines of the NHS. Crucially, these essays argue that greater privatisation of care work and public health services have not met their promise of greater choice for consumers – instead, they have weakened existing state services.

I read this book as an outside observer to British politics, and I found its arguments on the need for governments to address inequality and look beyond GDP growth alone to be very persuasive. In particular, I found Pickett and Wilkinson's argument that it is essential to prioritise well-being and decent work over simple growth due to the implications for public health and several other sectors of the economy especially convincing, as it sets out the links between different, seemingly unrelated, aspects of policy. This provides a strong backing to the book's argument that governments' focus on just economic growth has not benefited most of their citizens.

However, I was surprised that the book does not contain an essay on jobs and job quality. While Geoff Tily's contribution, 'A Second Internationalism of Labour', argues that there is a need to increase domestic employment and locate labour at the centre of development, and Will Hutton's essay, 'An Ownership Revolution', calls for more equitable ownership of companies, neither addresses the changes in the labour market that have already begun to take place. But how can future governments provide full employment, when automation has begun to threaten jobs and more and more workers are in precarious, poorly paying employment? What types of jobs do we imagine citizens doing? Skidelsky's essay recommends a public sector job guarantee, and Pollock and Harding-Edgar recommend creating jobs in public service. These references are, however, only made in passing, and it is curious that this collection of essays, which refers time and again to Keynesian ideas of full employment, does not expressly address the issue of jobs head on.

It would also have been interesting to explore the links between a guaranteed income floor in Lansley's essay, and living standards best provided by public services in the chapters by Standing and Pickett and Wilkinson, in much greater detail. While the book refers to poverty in several chapters, it does not provide a working definition of poverty, or what basic living standards every household should have – in other words, [should poverty be measured purely in terms of inequality, or is there a basic minimum set of standards all households should have?](#) A reconsideration of this question in a post-pandemic world would have been very enlightening.

Apart from these quibbles, this is an important and timely book with lessons for those both inside and outside the United Kingdom. Over the past year and a half, [governments have responded to the economic fallout of the pandemic with cash transfers, new social assistance programmes and short-term labour market policies](#). These responses are necessary, but are still only viable in the short term. We are also likely to face new challenges, such as more frequent extreme weather events, in the near future. In the long term, there is a need to think more carefully about the role of the state in providing fundamental protections for citizens in different jurisdictions.

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