

# Book Review: Major Thinkers in Welfare: Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective by Vic George

by Blog Admin

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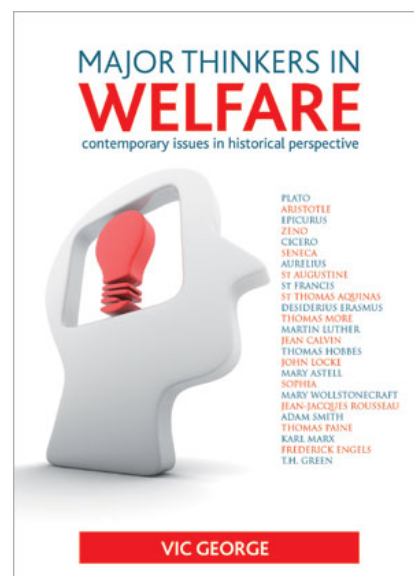
**Vic George** examines the views of welfare theorists from ancient times to the 19th century, considering a range of welfare issues including wealth, poverty and inequality, slavery, and gender issues through the eyes of Aristotle, Locke, and Mary Wollstonecraft amongst others. Covering a wealth of theory, the disappointment of **Major Thinkers in Welfare** lies in its lack of a concluding chapter, writes **Jacob Lesniewski**, but there remains great value in George's approach.



**Major Thinkers in Welfare: Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective.** Vic George. The Policy Press. 2012.

## Find this book:

Standard histories of social welfare in the United States tend to focus on the politics, policies and programs of the welfare state. The ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the particular historical moments under examination are usually leveraged as context and background. Vic George's *Major Thinkers in Welfare* approaches the study of social welfare and the welfare state in an opposite fashion. Instead of centring his analysis on policies and programs, George takes ideas and their historical development as the centre of his analysis. Starting from ancient Greece and moving through Western European history to T.H. Green, George's examination of the ideas of various thinkers in radically different economic and political environments is a testament to the enduring historical dilemmas of welfare provision.



George rightly focuses on some fundamental questions in his presentation of the ideas of the various thinkers in this volume. Each chapter focuses on “thinker’s views on wealth, poverty, and the satisfaction of basic needs” (viii) and the importance of various sources of welfare, from the state to the market and intermediary institutions (church, family) in between. Importantly, George pays particular attention to how each thinker approaches “different social groups in society” (viii). His insistence on discussing each thinker’s approach to women and slaves is helpful for understanding the implications of the ideas of each thinker. It also allows for the inclusion of early feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Given the gendered nature of modern welfare provision and the debates surrounding them, this is an important contribution. Finally, George focuses on education and the historical context in which the ideas under discussion developed.

George’s discussion reveals that two important dilemmas have occupied the minds of thinkers since Plato: determining the deserving and undeserving poor, and the social control role of welfare provision. Plato was troubled by inequality in ancient Athens because he felt that it was a “disturbing influence on government,” one that could potentially undermine the stability of the Guardian class’s rule over “inherently unequal and hierarchically organized classes” (p12). Aristotle was critical of Plato’s idea proposal that one small class of Guardians should rule, but shared Plato’s fear of unbridled personal freedom and the concentration of wealth. For both Plato and Aristotle, social stability was the main concern and the goal of social welfare provision was the achievement of a stable, and hierarchical society.

Classical liberalism, represented by John Locke, brings forward the issue of social control to another



period of economic and political upheaval, that of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Thomas Hobbes is often put forward as the champion of harsh social control during this same period, but Locke's classical liberalism emphasizes the need to manage the poor. Hobbes claimed that civil authority existed to maintain social order, Locke believed that the preservation of private property through the actions of civil authority "provides security and liberty to the individual" (p95). Locke saw poverty not as the result of structural failings in the economy, but as "the result of individual character and behavioural failings" (p98). Locke's championing of liberty did not extend to the undeserving poor ('idle vagabonds' (p99)), for whom he proposed a set of travel restrictions as well as parish-based monitoring and behaviour adjustment programs that were deemed too harsh for English poor law (p100). The threat that undeserving working age male poor posed to private property was sufficient for Locke to propose draconian solutions that emphasized the need for social control over these sectors of the population. The Lockean view of the poor and the role of welfare provision is most iconically represented by the institution of the poorhouse.

The importance of a structural analysis of poverty is evident in the work of Rousseau and Thomas Paine, who both move away from expansive definitions of the undeserving poor and minimize the social control aspects of welfare. Rousseau sees the establishment of private property " signalling the arrival of both wealth and poverty in society" (p134) and sees a role for the state in "preventing and reducing poverty" (p135). Rousseau condemns idleness and dependency, but does not exhibit the same programmatic concern with it as Locke. Paine locates the causes for poverty in the relationship between economic restructuring and a state apparatus that perpetuates and exacerbates the effects of economic change (p189). Paine is the first to sketch out a universal welfare state and the idea of the right to welfare. Both come in response to his disgust with English poor law of the time and its effects on free citizens. Paine does see a "culture of poverty" as contributing to the disorder in poor communities and the anti-social behaviour of some elements of the poor, but locates it squarely within economic and political causal stories. His discussion prefigures some of the debate that stirred up by William Julius Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

No philosophy of welfare or system of social welfare provision can avoid aspects of social control. Paine notion of a universal right to welfare is important for pushing back against a modern ideology and system of social welfare that has taken an ideology social control over undeserving elements to an intensely punitive extreme through expansion of the carceral state at the expense of the welfare state. George's discussion of Paine, Marx, and TH Green's structural understandings of poverty and inequality that (eventually) points to the failure of unbridled capitalism to provide universal welfare is a useful one that can potentially push back against the ideological underpinnings of these arrangements.

Where George disappoints is in his uncritical emphasis on the role of education in his selected thinkers understanding of welfare and welfare provision. He is correct to note that theories of education have long been important to thinking about welfare, but he leaves out any generalized discussion of why and to what end. This points to the major weakness of the book, the lack of a concluding chapter that pulls some of the threads that are obvious to a critical reader in the book together in some coherent way.

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**Jacob Lesniewski** is a doctoral candidate at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. His research broadly focuses on low-wage labour markets and the attempts of communities and workers to change working conditions in low-wage labour markets. His dissertation is an ethnographic study of a workers center in Chicago, focusing on the implications of the center's approach to community organizing practice, radical social work practice, urban social movements and labour market regulation.

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