

Book review: David Etherington, austerity, welfare and work: exploring politics, geographies and inequalities

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Published version

REDMAN, Jamie (2022). Book review: David Etherington, austerity, welfare and work: exploring politics, geographies and inequalities. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36 (1), 192-193.

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Book Review

Work, Employment and Society
2022, Vol. 36(1) 1–2
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David Etherington

Austerity, Welfare and Work: Exploring Politics, Geographies and Inequalities

Bristol: Policy Press, 2020, £75.00 hbk, (ISBN: 9781447350088), 213 pp.

Reviewed by Jamie Redman , *Sheffield Hallam University, UK*

Etherington's *Austerity, Welfare and Work* provides a significant contribution to critical understandings of contemporary economic restructuring and the changing role of the state in Britain. This is achieved in a number of steps. First, Etherington designs a unique conceptual framework to demonstrate how Britain's respective industrial relations and welfare systems are inter-related and have been re-designed together as part of a wider 'class strategy' aimed at restoring/preserving capitalist profitability and 'redistributing income and power away from the working class' (p. xi). Second, and this is the book's primary appeal, Etherington shows how the damaging effects of industrial relations/welfare reforms have not just been passively accepted but are routinely resisted and managed by networks of local-level actors. Finally, Etherington draws international comparisons with Danish political economy to identify ways of reducing inequalities and building more inclusive industrial relations/welfare systems.

After outlining the objectives and structure of the book in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2, Etherington weaves together an assortment of Marxist concepts into a framework for understanding the relationship between Britain's respective welfare and industrial relations systems. Drawing on theories of class and power resources, Etherington's framework asserts that industrial relations and welfare are shaped by organised labour's degree of power and influence over the state and wider society. Etherington also suggests that out-of-work welfare provisions (e.g. Universal Credit) are primarily geared towards disciplining the working class by reproducing and expanding the 'reserve army of labour' (RAL) – a mechanism which undermines wages and working conditions by increasing competition for jobs.

Etherington then embarks on an analysis of political–economic restructuring in Britain. It is argued that Britain has endured periods of economic crisis and a falling rate of profit following the post-war boom. This has encouraged UK governments to restore/preserve capitalist profitability by undermining the power of organised labour and developing ways of increasing the rate at which capital directly exploits and/or extracts value from the working class. Etherington begins to deepen his analysis in Chapter 3 by documenting a range of industrial relations and welfare reforms over a period spanning

approximately 20 years. He demonstrates how these reforms can be interpreted as a strategy to shift power and wealth away from working class populations. For example, it can be seen how reforms to key policy tools, such as the intensification of punitive benefit sanctions and behavioural conditionality in the delivery of out-of-work welfare provisions, can reduce cash-benefit expenditure and expand the RAL by prohibiting work refusals.

Etherington proceeds to establish a powerful thread through Chapters 4 to 6, demonstrating how the implementation of industrial relations/welfare reforms has not been passively accepted on the ground. Rather, various actors (trade unions, local authorities, activist groups) work with scarce resources to manage and push back against the daily effects of reforms. Highlights include important ‘grass roots struggles’ and ‘innovations strategies’ seeking to organise/build solidarities with out-of-work claimants and workers in precarious employment (pp. 83–84; pp. 125–126). One notable example is the struggles of the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers’ Centre (DUWC). Despite facing severe budget cuts, Etherington describes how the DUWC continues to represent hundreds of people at benefit appeal tribunals each year. The DUWC additionally runs regular media campaigns lobbying against punitive welfare reforms and raising awareness of trade union activity, and its benefits, among populations frequently overlooked by organised labour.

Chapters 7 and 8 are primarily devoted to identifying practical ways in which Britain could build a more socially equitable political economy. Etherington suggests that ‘much can be learned from the Danish model of welfare and industrial relations’ (p. 136). Contrary to Britain, in Denmark, organised labour is strong and policy-making/implementation is facilitated collectively through ‘social dialogue’ between trade unions, employers’ associations and government representatives. Etherington shows how a ‘coordinated’ method of policy-making/implementation can facilitate outcomes that better meet the needs of various – often conflicting – interest groups (employers, workers, unemployed people, politicians).

There are ways Etherington could have strengthened his key arguments. For example, it would have been useful if discussion of the two-child limit and the benefit cap were included in Chapter 3. Not only have these policies been landmark developments in welfare reform, but the benefit cap has been found to (marginally) increase work activity among benefit claimants and thus appears to complement assertions made earlier in the conceptual framework that welfare reforms have been geared towards expanding the RAL.

Nevertheless, this minor criticism does not undermine the overall importance and cogency of Etherington’s ideas or the lucid way he communicates them. On the contrary, the core message is clear: comprehensive industrial relations/welfare systems can reduce social inequalities and are intimately connected to the relative power of organised labour. If we are to work towards a more prosperous future for working class populations in Britain, then organised class struggles via ‘strengthening the role of trade unions in terms of rights to recognition and representation’ (p. 165) can serve as an indispensable vehicle for achieving this.

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