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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 40
Issue 1 March

Article 12

2013

Review of *To Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government*. Steven Conn (Ed.). Reviewed by Sheila D. Collins

Sheila D. Collins
William Paterson College

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Sheila D. (2013) "Review of *To Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government*. Steven Conn (Ed.). Reviewed by Sheila D. Collins," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40: Iss. 1, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3722>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss1/12>

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empathic portrayal of real lives to the political economy of global inequality, this superb ethnography would have had more analytical power and even greater impact.

*Edward U. Murphy, Department of Global Studies and
International Affairs, Northeastern University*

Steven Conn, (Ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government*. Oxford University Press (2012). \$19.95. (paperback).

During an era when “big government” is vilified as the root of all evil by Right Wing pundits and politicians, and when even the anemic attempts of a Democratic president to use the power of the federal government to reform the health care system or to keep our air clean are denounced as “socialism,” it comes as a welcome antidote to read a book like Steven Conn’s edited collection, *To Promote the General Welfare*. Conn’s book is not the only recent challenge to anti-government rhetoric. Recently, a few books—Jeff Madrick’s *The Case for Big Government* and Paul Krugman’s *End This Depression Now*—and many blogs, articles and institutes, like the Roosevelt Institute, have made the case that government can be a source for good. But rather than present an ideological argument for big government, this book takes a more nuanced approach. The question, Conn argues in the book’s Preface, is not whether the federal government should intervene in the market as liberals advocate, or rely solely on the private market to meet our needs, as conservatives argue. Rather, because the federal government has always been involved in creating the kind of society Americans have wanted, the appropriate question is, “how, on what terms, and for whose benefit?” (p. xi)

Conn has assembled a distinguished group of scholars—most of them historians—to answer this question through a series of essays focused around a variety of policy arenas, including transportation, education, banking, national security, housing, health care, arts and culture, and communications. Absent, however, are arguably three of the most important policy arenas today: employment, old age security, and the environment. These are stunning omissions when we consider

that the first two of these are at the top of our current political agenda and the third could have the most far-reaching consequences. Those omissions aside, this book provides a useful analysis for understanding the role the federal government has played in American life as well as providing helpful arguments to use against libertarians.

In an opening chapter Brian Balogh argues that both conservatives and progressives misread history: conservatives who wish to return to a golden age of minimalist government and progressives who celebrate America's liberation from it.

Neither ideological perspective...takes seriously the possibility that Americans turned regularly to government throughout their history or that the public sector played a crucial role in shaping what Americans regard as the "natural" market.... Our failure to recognize the *ways* in which Americans have governed has distorted our understanding of the *extent* to which Americans have governed. (p. 2)

This observation corroborates Jacob Hacker's analysis in *The Divided Welfare State*, that the American welfare state, which progressives find too limited and conservatives consider overbearing, is far more extensive than either group assumes. Much of it is hidden because it is carried out through the private and voluntary sectors, but is shaped by government rules, subsidies and mandates. "Once we have recognized the ways in which we have governed ourselves we can move past the big government/small government stalemate" (p. 3) Balogh asserts, while recognizing that this will not be easy.

Balogh next lays out five patterns of governance that have dominated American history. The first might be called "governing out of sight"—the practice of providing subsidies, as well as rules and mandates—to private and voluntary entities to carry out a public agenda. The Affordable Care Act is a good example of this. A second pattern occurred when Americans turned to big government when they felt their security was threatened. A third pattern has been "the tendency to endorse unmediated national power when it was geographically removed from the locus of established authority" (p. 8).

Translation: Americans' support of coercive military activities abroad that would not be tolerated at home. A fourth pattern was resistance to visible forms of taxation, yet tolerance of invisible forms, such as tariffs. And finally, the use of law promulgated by the judiciary to shape the political economy.

Each of the chapters provides rich historical evidence for patterns within each policy arena covered. Showing the steady rise of federal and state government intervention in Americans' lives, they also demonstrate the consistent opposition to this. While federal intervention was often necessary to redistribute national assets to those excluded by the market or victims of racial or gender discrimination, they also show that federal intervention has not always worked perfectly, often benefitting the middle class or the wealthy over lower income Americans (e.g., home mortgage deductions). Beyond these well-known programs, however, the authors also bring to light little known or forgotten examples of federal largesse, such as Conn's chapter on New Deal arts and culture programs, which supported some of the nation's most talented cultural workers during a time of deep unemployment, and also brought arts and culture to many for whom quality cultural activity had been beyond reach. These are important lessons at a time when our leaders appear either wary (or weary) of tackling large problems or refuse to admit that the federal government is even needed to solve the nation's problems. The book should be read by everyone interested in a government that works.

*Sheila D. Collins, Professor Emerita, Political Science,
William Paterson College*

Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*. Princeton University Press (2012). \$35 (paperback); \$80 (hardcover).

Cybelle Fox, a UC Berkeley sociologist, has written a masterful history that chronicles the interweaving of assistance and public works policies with immigration policies in the 1920s and 30s in three distinct regions of the U.S.: the urban, industrial sections of the Northeast and middle America, the