

Keane, John. *Public Life and Late Capitalism: Toward a Socialist Theory of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. vii + 340. \$39.50 (cloth).

The last decade has seen a large number of books attacking liberal democracy, often on the ground that the concept amounts to a self-contradiction. Liberalism, it is said, promotes the pursuit of private self-interest and leaves too little space or opportunity for public life. Keane's book—a series of connected essays dedicated to attacking “passive democracy” and explaining how an autonomous public life might be brought about—is a valuable and distinctive addition to this literature.

The book spans a wide range. Among the topics Keane covers are the modern increase in bureaucratization and bureaucratic rationality in both public and private spheres and its contingent character; the distinction, of which Keane is quite critical, between *techne* and *praxis*; cultural and civic norms under capitalism; and the crisis tendencies of modern welfare states, which, in Keane's view, are in part a product of diminishing “public space” and which generate powerful demands for a more accessible political sphere. Of particular interest is a penetrating and lucid exposition and critique of Habermas's attempt to describe a reinvigorated public life with the metaphor of an “ideal speech situation.”

The book closes with a highly suggestive discussion of possible “autonomous publics,” representing institutional forms that use Rousseau's critique of liberalism as a point of departure. With its sophisticated and unusually analytic approach to the problem of creating a viable public life under contemporary conditions, Keane's book takes a place as one of the more useful modern treatments of its well-worn but still vital subject.

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