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With the so-called refugee crisis, immigration has increasingly become a source of controversy in many Western countries. Politicians and citizens seem to be clearly divided on whether migrants should be accepted in the countries of destination, as well as on the rights and responsibilities to which migrants should have access, once admitted. In particular, access to social services and benefits has been heatedly debated. Upon the arrival of refugees, the sustainability of welfare systems across different European countries has been called into question by several government leaders, who have pointed to the reduction of newcomers’ social entitlements as the main solution. It is against this backdrop that Edward Anthony Konning investigates the politics of immigrant welfare exclusion, paying special attention to the changing dynamics of migrant exclusion across time and space. Drawing on the cases of Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden, Konning explains why and how much the politics of immigrants’ social rights vary across different political settings.

The book is structured into six chapters. After a concise, accessible, and well-structured introduction, Chapter 1 starts with a comprehensive literature review on the relationship between migration and the welfare state. Konning introduces the theoretical framework for understanding immigrant-excluding welfare reforms (IEWRs), and presents the analytical tools later used to understand the ways in which welfare states distinguish between native-born and immigrant populations. The chapter’s premise is that for IEWRs to be enacted, politicians need to propose them (e.g., by criticizing the arrival of migrants and its consequences), convince people to support them, and then overcome any existing legal obstacle. Chapter 2 introduces the empirical investigation, suggesting that economic facts are rather irrelevant to the politics of IEWRs. After providing a general overview of 12 Western welfare states, the chapter zooms in the Swedish, Canadian, and Dutch cases, showing that the patterns of immigrant welfare dependence are not that crucial for the politics of immigrant social rights.
Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on the three specific case studies. Each chapter starts with a thorough overview of recent policy developments in immigrant access to social programs and in benefits in the case-study country since the early 1990s, and continues with an analysis and discussion. In the case of Sweden (Chapter 3), with its universalist welfare regime and egalitarian culture, economic factors around migrant use of benefits are of little importance. In fact, and despite increasing anti-immigrant voices in Sweden, the issue of immigrant welfare dependency is often discussed in terms of whether the Swedish welfare state is actually doing enough to support newcomers.

In the case of Canada (Chapter 4), the author shows how immigration’s longstanding historical importance in Canada and to its national identity has worked against proposals for immigrant exclusion. Although political debates often address immigration’s costs and immigrants’ reliance on welfare programs, they do not feature prominently in Canadian political agendas. In fact, such reliance is often discussed as the result of a defective admission policy.

The Netherlands, by contrast, has witnessed increasing immigrant exclusion in recent years, introducing several IEWRs, as Chapter 5 discusses. Immigrant reliance on social benefits, in fact, has become a priority in the Dutch political agenda, which frames this reliance as the fault of migrants themselves. Despite a generous Dutch welfare state and a seemingly open and tolerant national identity, Konning shows, anti-immigrant political discourses have managed to spread the idea throughout the Netherlands that exclusionary welfare reforms are a necessary strategy to preserve the welfare state in an era of migration.

Through the analysis of these three cases, Konning demonstrates the importance of the political translation of economic facts and the way in which politicians respond to the success of anti-immigrant voices. An important finding of the study is that the politics of immigrant welfare exclusion are not so much about migration’s economic impact on the current welfare states, which is often exaggerated, but more about overall opposition to migration and multiculturalism. In this regard, particular welfare systems’ structure and a country’s national identity play crucial roles in shaping the politics of immigrant social rights.

This book is an important contribution to the literature on migrant social rights. By looking at IEWRs, Konning takes an original approach to the unfathomable topic of “welfare migration.” His analysis makes a very convincing argument and offers findings that invite future research on welfare and migration to move beyond purely economic aspects and investigate the politics of migrants’ social rights. As Konning very convincingly shows, when migration becomes a clear political divide, it has the potential to affect policy-making in indirectly related areas, such as the welfare state. Although his arguments might be inaccessible to the general public, this book is a definite read for practitioners and policy-makers in the field of welfare and migration. While many lessons can be learned from it, at least one should remain for those of us interested in this not-so-controversial-as-it-seems topic—namely, that when addressing the politics of immigrant social rights, we should question politicians’ discourses, especially when they are based on economic claims.