

“The Peculiarities of the Welfare State”¹

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It’s a pleasure to participate, however remotely, in this conference. I know I speak for all of us when I thank Warwick, Wellcome, and the Centre for the History of Medicine for making this meeting possible. I’m particularly grateful to Ed DeVane, who has wound up running a very different event from the one he initially conceived, but who has nevertheless succeeded in fostering this forum on new directions in the historiography of the welfare state. Thank you, Ed.

It’s a special pleasure to deliver this lecture through (if not, alas, at) Warwick. Though I know it’s not the custom – and surely crassly American – I am going to exact a fee for doing so. I would ask that, so long as the next 40 minutes are not too disastrous, Ed please persuade Roberta Bivins and Mathew Thomson to have me visit the university in the future. Warwick, after all, combines three of my favorite subjects: urban reconstruction, 1960s universities, and, from 1965 to 1970, E. P. Thompson.

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More than any other single text, I continually return to Thompson’s classic polemic, “The Peculiarities of the English.” Published in the *Socialist Register* in 1965, “Peculiarities” was Thompson’s rejoinder to the account of English history being developed by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn in the *New Left Review*. More than fifty pages in length, the piece does many things. It offers an account of British political history since the civil war, and a reading of British

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intellectual history since Francis Bacon; it ventures an argument about Marxist theory, and an analysis of the postwar British state.

It is also very, very funny. In the third sentence, Thompson – referring to the recent report recommending the slashing of unprofitable rail services – brands Perry Anderson “a veritable Dr. Beeching of the socialist intelligentsia.” He explains, “All the uneconomic branch-lines and socio-cultural sidings of the New Left . . . were abruptly closed down” – and, as one of those uneconomic branch-lines himself, he adds: “Finding ourselves redundant[,] we submitted to dissolution.” He compares Nairn’s silence on the role of communism on British labourism as “*Wuthering Heights* without Heathcliff.” He salutes Charles Darwin’s tact by comparison with Thomas Huxley: “Huxley could storm Heaven. Darwin, wiser than him, took evasive action and offered a comment on the fertilization of orchids.” And, on the thorny question of the relationship between England’s bourgeois and scientific revolutions, Thompson deems the matter as yet “undecided. But they were clearly a good deal more than just good friends.”

While its arguments about Marxism and the New Left now figure as historical subjects in their own right, as a primer on historical thinking “Peculiarities” remains completely fresh. Thompson rejects accounts that judge developments by comparison to a model, insisting upon the primacy of what actually happened to any model that would purport to explain it. “Every historical experience,” he writes, “is of course in a certain sense unique. Too much protestation about this calls into question, not the experience (which remains there to be explained) but the relevance of the model against which it is judged.” “A model,” he explains, “disposes one to look only at *certain* phenomena, to examine history for *conformities*, whereas it may be that the discarded evidence conceals new significances.” In “Peculiarities,” he locates the model that Anderson prioritizes in “Other Countries” (read: France), whose history, according to his reading of

Anderson, represents the norm from which England unfortunately diverged. Yet divergence, Thompson counters, is the very stuff of history. “Minds which thirst for a tidy platonism,” he cautions, “will very soon become impatient with actual history.” It is actual history, rather than its validation of a model, that warrants the historian’s attention. Threaded throughout the text’s arguments about Marxist analysis and English history, this emphasis upon what actually happened – as opposed to what should have happened – recurs repeatedly. “An historian cannot bother with this kind of objection,” he insists at one point. “It is more important to note the consequences of what actually happened.” Later, plainly: “It happened one way in France, and another way here.” And later still, in his signature ironic mode: “It should not have happened this way. Heaven should have been stormed, *molto con brio*, and the fruits of knowledge should have been wrested from the clutches of priests. But happen this way it did.”

To be sure, Thompson knew that the historian must identify patterns, risk generalizations, and look up from bits of evidence to develop arguments. But those patterns, generalizations, and arguments take their shape not from the model with which the historian begins, but rather from the particularities – the *peculiarities* – of the evidence at hand.

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I want to suggest that, despite the obvious gaps in decades and in topics, our histories of the welfare state stand to benefit from heeding Thompson’s strictures. There are two ways that welfare state historiography exhibits versions of the problems that “Peculiarities” identifies. The first would implicitly compare Britain’s provisions in housing, health, and welfare against those of unnamed other places. Historical comparison, of course, is a powerful methodology – as, for example, in Simon Gunn and Susan Townsend’s recent book, *Automobility and the City in Twentieth-Century Britain and Japan* (2019). Implicit comparison, by contrast, serves to lament

the failings of what Britain did by comparison with what Thompson called “Other Countries.” In welfare state scholarship, those “Other Countries” lie, as in Gøsta Esping-Anderson’s canonical *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), in social democratic Scandinavia. But the “Other Places” implicitly structuring an account might reside less in other sites than other *times* – whether the promise of the 1940s, or the longings of the present. In his 2006 excavation of the notion that Britain possesses a uniquely anti-intellectual culture, Stefan Collini concludes that there is “no [such] elsewhere.” That is, there is no ultimate place – again, usually France – from which to apprehend the true history of intellectuals, by comparison with which the British instance pathetically diverges. There is, rather – returning now to Thompson – only the “real historical situation . . . which actual history provides in such profusion.” In order to recover that “actual history,” we struggle to depart those “other places” – whether Scandinavia, the 1940s, or the present – by comparison with which the welfare state’s actual history, with all of its inevitable imperfections, can only be found wanting.

If the first interpretive problem follows from the presumption of an idealized comparator elsewhere, the second – and more common – follows from the adoption of meta-narratives that predetermine what we see and write. (I am using the term “narrative” instead of model, which better captures the ways that an implicit, even unacknowledged interpretation insinuates itself into the act of interpretation. In fact, in response to Anderson’s forceful rejoinder to “Peculiarities,” Thompson retracted his earlier use of the term “model” to characterize the mode of thought that he opposed.) In welfare state historiography, the dominant meta-narrative is the classic “rise and fall,” often running from Aneurin Bevan’s 1940s to Margaret Thatcher’s 1980s. Closely related to this tale of the welfare state’s demise is that of market liberalism’s rise, and together these twinned narratives determine what counts as evidence and how we read it. In work inspired by James

Vernon's important essay on "the brief life" of Britain's social democracy (2010), historians' emphases tend to fall not on social democracy's life, but rather on its brevity. Beginning with a "rise and fall" model, historians seek to fit their evidence to it – so that, for example, consumer demand in housing becomes evidence not of developing social democratic expectations and capacities, but rather of the inevitability of market liberalism's eventual turn towards private ownership. The "rise and fall" interpretation of the welfare state becomes supercharged when we combine it with the quest for the origins of market liberalism. In this work, references to entirely routine elements of modern life – such as home ownership, consumption, and individualism – are announced as revelatory discoveries, and neatly slotted into a drama that only has two acts: social democracy's demise and market liberalism's rise.

So what is the alternative? What is today's best, freshest, most illuminating welfare state historiography doing instead? Rather than writing the welfare state's history as a disappointing approximation of something somewhere else, it endeavors to write about how it worked and what it did. And rather than entering the archive already knowing the "rise and fall" that's coming, it instead struggles treat postwar developments not as departures towards a new regime, but as developments within an existing one. Let me indicate more concretely what I mean by considering each focus of this conference in turn: planning, architecture, and community – three of the six chapter titles in my recent book about the building of Milton Keynes.

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First, a few words about new towns and welfare state historiography. The new towns represent what I call the *spatial dimension of the welfare state*, itself recast as an audacious effort to redistribute not only family incomes and health outcomes, but the nation's population. Though not nearly as extensive as council housing, in terms of residents housed, the new towns program

attests to the British welfare state's policy ambition and even psychic depth – as well as to its global significance, as the thirty-two new towns Britain designated in twenty-four years became a model for developing states from Thailand to Oman, from Venezuela to Algeria. The last and largest of these projects was also the most notorious, Milton Keynes. Established in 1967 and dissolved in 1992, Milton Keynes Development Corporation's quarter-century existence was bifurcated by Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1979. It is this fortuitous fact, rather than any dubious claims about the place's "typicality" or "representativeness," that makes Milton Keynes an ideal site for examining the impact of shifting ideological priorities upon the built environment. Ultimately, rather than the exhaustion of a moribund social democracy during the 1970s, I am continually struck by the myriad ways that public sector actors developed and adapted their approaches in response to changing times. While the ideological landscape did change from the 1980s, that transformation was neither inevitable, nor unnavigable, nor – in light of this evidence of the state's substantial role in providing housing in the not-too-distant past – forever fixed.

Consider, first, the case of urban planning. The historiography of urban modernism generally conforms to "rise and fall" histories of the welfare state. Historians track the fate of postwar reconstruction through its climax in 1960s urban renewal, into mounting crises during the 1970s, and ultimately into full-blown retreat by the 1980s. "Town planning today is in disrepute," Alison Ravetz remarked in 1986, adding that it was "even at the risk of being brought to a close altogether." In broad terms, something like this story may be true, but accounts that hasten towards planning's repudiation erase a parallel history of its experiments and departures. By contrast, for example in Divya Subramanian's dissertation on Gordon Cullen and Townscape, in Otto Saumarez Smith's work on the role of architect-planners in rethinking their own practices, and in Alistair Fair's paper on 1970s Scottish urbanism earlier today, historians are increasingly

attending to the role of welfare state architects and planners – rather than simply their critics or successors – in developing and transforming their priorities and strategies.

Milton Keynes offers a striking illustration of these trends. A public sector project, funded by the state, rehousing working-class north Londoners, and led by a team of socialists, the planners of Milton Keynes also assumed near-universal car ownership, rising owner occupation, and the fusion of civic life with shopping. The city's form departed dramatically from the norms of the 1940s, even as its very existence attested to values and mechanisms at odds with those associated with the 1980s. In this way, the planning of Milton Keynes requires and enables a significant shift in emphasis: from lamenting planning's failures (as in the view from "elsewhere," in this case Hudson Street in Greenwich Village), or presuming planning's collapse (as in "rise and fall" accounts), to instead recovering not only planning's challenges, but also its vitality and development.

Let me now turn to the example of architecture. More than any other history, our accounts of architecture are overdetermined by "rise and fall" narratives – often literally so, in histories that illustrate modernism's comeuppance in the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe or the collapse of Ronan Point. (Ronan Point came up earlier, in discussion of Alex Scott's paper on the traffic between New York and Liverpool – a vital widening of our spatial frames.) This interpretation, in which modernism begat post-modernism on or about 15 July 1972, has not advanced much beyond the novelist Tom Wolfe's anti-modernist screed in *Harper's* in 1981. Wolfe depicted modern movement architects as inhumane and mad, impervious to the overwhelming evidence of their failings – the sorts of people who might, as in Monty Python's "Architect Sketch," misread their briefs and build abattoirs instead of housing. The sequential nature of this history – I call it a "ding-dong" approach to history – has found its able critics, as scholars including Miles

Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, Annemarie Sammartino, and Florian Urban have all explored the ways that modernist mass housing met various fates in various places.

Milton Keynes points to another way in which this monolithic, undifferentiated architectural history must be revised. The architects and buildings in MK attested to variety of approaches and commitments throughout the 1970s. The development corporation's chief architect, Derek Walker, certainly reveled in a public corporation's freedom from the market, facilitating high-modernist work including Norman Foster's flat-roofed bungalows at Bean Hill and Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones's "towers on their sides" at Netherfield. At the same time, however, these projects developed alongside more vernacular housing in Neath Hill and Eaglestone. And Walker understood all of these estates - from Netherfield to Neath Hill - as adaptive responses to the lessons of prior decades. Carefully landscaped outside, generously laid-out inside, housing across Milton Keynes amounted not to the last gasp of a moribund modernism, but rather to buildings and a style that were diverse, dynamic, and responsive to changing times.

Finally, our third subject this week: community. Ideas about "community" might seem to pose the chief challenge to my position, since the residents of Milton Keynes organized themselves in furious opposition to the public sector agency managing their housing. In response, the corporation's leadership privately reevaluated their commitment to community, contemplating - just two weeks after Thatcher's victory in May 1979 - a shift in policy from fostering communities to satisfying individuals. "Indeed," the assistant general manager provocatively announced at a retreat, "is there such a thing as 'people'?" Rather than an abstract, singular "people" who must be satisfied, Ritson suggested that a city consisted of "thousands of individuals," each distinct from the next in their preferences and tastes. The job of a housing authority, he continued, lay not in forging social bonds, but in facilitating the satisfaction of individual wants. *There is no such thing*

as “*people*,” a Prime Minister might have said, *only thousands of individuals*. Ritson’s uncanny statement reads as if scripted by an unscrupulous historian, bent on demonstrating the triumph of neoliberal individualism. And the popular turn against the corporation – their meetings, demands, and marches – suggests that the community itself had turned against the agents of the welfare state.

Let’s take each thread in turn. First, with regard to rising individualism, as Jon Lawrence, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, Camilla Schofield, and Emily Robinson have all argued, it is a mistake to conflate expressions of individualism with any single brand of politics. Individualism can flourish in a social democratic culture, just as communal bonds persist in market liberalism – the error lies not in denying one or the other, but in allowing individualism and community to become associated with any single form of politics. And second, with respect to the community, let us think more carefully about the politics we’re seeing. Rather than rejecting municipal housing, these residents were organizing to repair it; rather than opposing the corporation, they were demanding that it deliver on its promises; and rather than repudiating social democracy, they were acting collectively as social democratic subjects. I realize that I’m delivering this story far too quickly, its twists tangled with its turns, but perhaps that makes my point. Rather than a narrative of individualism’s rise delivering social democracy’s fall, what emerges instead is a tangled history of their coexistence and persistence.

In each of these three cases, from planning to architecture to housing, I have been rejecting the application of a “rise and fall” model of explanation. But I am decidedly not simply recommending that we reject explanatory narratives in favor of hewing closely the evidence. Though I am criticizing a model, I am recommending a principle: namely, that historical actors are dynamic and creative in response to changing times. From pre-colonial India to early modern England, our colleagues in other fields routinely assert that the societies they study were more

differentiated and dynamic than once supposed. We believe them, and yet – when we turn our attention to 1970s Britain – our historiography too often suggests that public sector actors were exhausted, even paralyzed, as history overcame them. When I look at this period, what I find instead is variousness at every turn: in planning that developed, architecture that diversified, and community that deepened. Social democracy, though not immortal, was dynamic.

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In this final section of my talk, let me try to anticipate three criticisms of my position. (With thanks to Andrew Seaton, whose Ph.D. thesis has helped to me think about these problems.) First, it might be objected that I am romanticizing the pre-lapsarian world before 3 May 1979 – that, for all of the attention I lavish on social democratic dynamism, I am ultimately guilty of neglecting the welfare state’s inherent structures of exclusion. Yet the approach that I’m recommending – focusing not upon what should have happened (by comparison with, say, Sweden), but rather upon what actually happened, how, and why – is entirely consistent with that critical project. I am thinking, for example, of Susan Pedersen’s landmark work on gender and the welfare state in *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State* (1993), and of Kennetta Hammond Perry’s more recent analysis of racialized exclusions to the rights of citizenship in *London is the Place for Me* (2015). These accounts, and many others like them, reveal the grammar that structured the welfare state, itself a complex and contradictory language of exclusions and inclusions.

It might further be objected that my account, despite all the waving of my arms, ultimately reinforces a “rise and fall” account. In the case of Britain’s new towns, it is indeed the case that a public sector program launched in 1946 was terminated after fifty years. Yet I am mindful, especially speaking to an audience at Warwick, that the story would look different if we attended

not to housing but to medicine. I would make two points. (1) My book aims to improve upon the overdetermined “rise and fall” account with a tale of unintended and open consequences – an ironic story not of succession but of *development*, in which social democratic adaptations became, in ways that I attempt to convey, unwittingly co-opted by a rival political program. History, in other words, may have ended in the same place, but its route was more circuitous – and, for the passengers, the route surely matters as much as the destination. (2) Second, and more importantly, it might be useful to distinguish between the *welfare state* and *social democracy* – that is, between policy arrangements and a political culture. That distinction allows for – and even might help explain – the simultaneous termination of the new towns program, assault upon council housing, and persistence of socialized medicine, despite the eclipse of the broader political culture that initially nurtured all three.

Third, it might be objected that my account, by detaching the postwar decades from the market liberal order that defines our world today, is inward-looking, even antiquarian, and thus politically disabling. I am reminded of a parallel objection, raised by Tony Claydon on *Reviews in History*, in early modern historiography. While appreciating the learning and historicity of revisionist historiography, Claydon wonders whether a generation of early modern historians who have insisted that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries be studied on their own terms haven’t led historians to lose sight of the broader themes that connect that world to ours. What is the point, in other words, of detaching past times from the questions that preoccupy our own – whether about the origins of modernity in the seventeenth century, or about the rise of market liberalism in the twentieth?

Yet cultural historians have long maintained that the identification of alterity – of other available arrangements, not as utopia but as precedent, in the not-too-distant past – can be

politically enabling. Shortly after the election of Donald Trump, Zadie Smith delivered a speech that conveys something like view of history: “Things have changed, but history is not erased by change, and the examples of the past still hold out new possibilities for all us, opportunities to remake, for a new generation, the conditions from which we ourselves have benefitted.” Remaking the conditions of the past, as Smith suggests, means neither denying nor replicating its many flaws. Indeed, the very notion of a “dynamic” social democracy that I’m recommending acknowledges that its work was imperfect and remains unfinished. Nevertheless, as the housing crisis all around us seems so intractable, it is neither antiquarian nor disabling to recall that, within the very recent past, the British state played an active role in providing housing and managing development.

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I realize that, at a conference on “New Approaches” to welfare state historiography, I am pushing on an open door. I am not purporting to tell anyone how to do their work, so much as trying to characterize the best work that’s being done. Taking my cue from Thompson’s account of historical thinking in “The Peculiarities of the English,” I began by identifying two kinds of error in welfare state historiography. The first would lament Britain’s history through an implicit comparison with what supposedly happened in other places; the second would adopt a “rise and fall” model of explanation and then fit the evidence to it. I offered three examples of an alternative way of thinking about this history, focusing in particular upon planning, architecture, and community. In each of these domains, I suggested, what we see is less “decline” than *development* – even if those developments were forced to accommodate a hostile ideological shift in the century’s closing decades. Those eclipsed developments, however, might yet offer hope, as evidence of alternative forms of social democratic statecraft that flourished in the not-too-distant past.

“The real history,” Thompson wrote, “will only disclose itself after much hard research.”

So now, after this splendid conference, we close our Zoom windows, crack our backs, and carry on with that hard research. As we do, we might heed Thompson once again: “[L]et us look at history *as* history - [people] placed in actual contexts which they have not chosen, and confronted by indivertible forces, with an overwhelming immediacy of relations and duties and with only a scanty opportunity for inserting their own agency - and not as text for hectoring might-have-beens.”

Deprived of the comfort of our models and might-have-beens, what remains is variousness. We struggle to convey it. But if we succeed, our historiography might prove as supple, as creative, and as vibrant - if also, inevitably, as flawed, blinkered, and in need of continual improvement - as the welfare state we study.