

GUY ORTOLANO. *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town.*

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For the historian to write about Milton Keynes, observes Guy Ortolano in this important and highly erudite book, is “to turn an object of scorn into an object of study” (24). Founded in 1967 under the New Towns Act of 1965, this was one of the last “Mark III” new towns, distinct from their earlier postwar predecessors, when the zeal for expert-led planning and architectural modernism was fresher and less exposed to attack. By the 1970s, to its critics, Milton Keynes epitomized the doomed attempt at physical and social engineering, with its soulless, unadorned modernist houses and their flat, leaky roofs; its car-focused Los Angeles-style gridded road system; and endless roundabouts and concrete cows. Neatly, it also appeared emblematic of the late consensus era social democracy inspiring many of the town’s originators, which was fatally weakened by its overcentralized statism amid national economic decline.

In *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*, Ortolano offers in

place of this declinist chronology a more complex one in which “welfare state modernism” exhibited significant self-critical awareness and adaptive imagination (113). In Milton Keynes, dispersed, self-contained residential areas, with ready access to the intricate road grid, were designed to avoid the old problem of overreliance on a congested town center. There was conscious awareness, too, of the established problems of tower block flats, and no building was to be permitted to rise higher than the tallest of the numerous newly planted trees. Mindful of the charge that earlier planning had focused more on the buildings than their inhabitants, the town devoted particular energy to the fostering of community. Its social development department, the largest such initiative in any of the new towns, nurtured mothers’ and toddlers’ clubs, afternoon coffees, football teams, and senior citizens’ clubs. It also, ironically, gave residents the confidence, notably in the town’s troubled Netherfield estate, to organize against the inadequacies of the town’s own housing provision.

Here planners were both forward- and outward-looking, seeking to future-proof the town’s layout by leaving loose ends, embracing newly emerging service sector employment, and cultivating transnational networks. Milton Keynes thus testified to a late welfare-state modernism that was ambitious in scope, its conception of welfare extending to the built environment and, indeed, by encouraging community, to psychology. Above all, it showed it vibrant in creative energy, “a dynamic social democracy,” even at its moment of apparent exhaustion (17).

The book makes an original and largely persuasive case, one less about Milton Keynes alone than about how later twentieth-century British political and intellectual history is too one-dimensionally periodized, as is the enduring vitality of progressive ideas. In so doing, it is one of the more significant and systematic exemplars of a growing

but still nascent and more often article-length revisionist historiography of the past decade. This revisionism challenges, or at the very least complicates, the well-established linear narrative that social democracy was built in the 1940s, peaked in the 1960s, and terminated—its inadequacy laid bare—in the 1970s. Questioned, too, is the totality of the break marked by Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, as if the Right replaced the Left in all the cultural and intellectual corners of the land overnight (257). This accumulating body of insightful work is generating a more pluralist historical understanding in which the catchall term “neoliberalism” seems increasingly inadequate as a sole descriptor of the post-1979 political scene.

Thatcher's Progress feels a particularly valuable staging post within this still-evolving literature. This is partly because of its sheer range, which impressively synthesizes political, intellectual, urban, and architectural history. Amply illustrating how the historical micro illuminates the macro, the book's virtue also lies in its detailed use of the town's Development Corporation archive. Above all, the author deftly conveys the importance of replacing a purely declinist narrative of this period with something different, recognizing the unresolved uncertainties of this approach. Like the driving tour of Milton Keynes, which the corporation organized for the newly elected Thatcher in September 1979, around which the book is structured, it provides a revealing freeze-frame of current progress, not the final destination.

That being the case, the book has its false turns. It both undersells and oversells Milton Keynes. Stylistically, the very multiplicity of the disciplinary contexts into which the author places the town, allied to his sharp distinction between being “not evaluative, but rather historical” (24), means that the central analytical issue of the book, the intellectual drivers behind, and actually existing character of Milton Keynes itself is sometimes lost behind the

scene-setting and occasionally excessive historiographical nods. The book has no interest “in persuading readers to want to live in Milton Keynes” (24). One sees the point, but the reader should emerge with a little of that feeling for the author’s case for the existence of a dynamic social democracy to have been fully made.

If in that regard the book might have pushed its own argument further, in another it required greater qualification. There were more shortcomings to both modernism and social democracy by this decade than the book allows. The critique of a too prescriptively top-down, uniform yet also sometimes too modishly experimental approach to politics, planning, and building is not without its validity. As Ortolano points out, the majority of the people in Milton Keynes always expressed a preference for vernacular housing, with its sloping roofs, bricks, and historical references (135). This appetite for rootedness, individuality, and choice, with which social democrats have increasingly had to wrestle since, was not, as the book sometimes claims, simply “engineered” by malign traditionalists or marketeers (142). There is room, then, in the newly emerging pluralist historiography for a picture of 1970s social democracy both intellectually fatigued and yet surprisingly dynamic—a mix that would continue to play out after 1979. This book, though, does much to move that historiography forward.

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