



## Thatcher's progress: from social democracy to market liberalism through an English new town

by Guy Ortolano, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xvi + 301 pp., £29.99 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-108-48266-0

Freddie Meade

To cite this article: Freddie Meade (2020): Thatcher's progress: from social democracy to market liberalism through an English new town, Contemporary British History, DOI: [10.1080/13619462.2020.1715214](https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2020.1715214)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2020.1715214>



Published online: 26 Jan 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 14



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Thatcher's progress: from social democracy to market liberalism through an English new town**, by Guy Ortolano, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xvi + 301 pp., £29.99 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-108-48266-0

In September 1979, recently elected Prime **Minister** Margaret Thatcher made an official visit to the third generation new town of Milton Keynes. The agency responsible for building the town, the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC), relished the opportunity to showcase their work to the British Prime Minister. Within a few years, however, Britain's pioneering, world-renowned new towns programme was terminated. Guy Ortolano's *Thatcher's Progress* uses the then-prime minister's whistle-stop tour of Britain's most well known new town, and the MKDC's archival records of the visit, as a springboard through which to tell both a history of Milton Keynes' development as well as a broader history of post-war urban planning, tracing social democracy throughout its transition to what the author terms 'market liberalism.' The result is a genuinely interesting, creatively written and lucidly structured re-examination of social democracy during its decade of crisis.

Ortolano mobilises the history and experience of the MKDC as a lens through which to examine post-war British statecraft in economic transition, and in turn brings the British new towns programme into sharp political and economic focus. As a public sector infrastructure project that lasted from 1967 to 1992, the state-directed construction of Milton Keynes fell evenly either side of 1979, making this public agency a particularly insightful case study for examining the messy transition from social democracy to market liberalism—and providing an array of historical evidence for the author to make his core thesis: that social democracy 'proved dynamic in its response to the economic, social and political challenges of the 1970s' (p. 29).

In situating his intervention, Ortolano demarcates two dominant approaches to explaining the shift from social democracy to market liberalism in Britain, both of which—he suggests—carry the risk of 'flattening' the history of the former. The first of these is the tendency to exaggerate social democracy's rigidity in the face of global events and forced structural transformations in the economy throughout the 1970s, portraying its historic actors and institutions as static and moribund, bereft of energy and ideas, 'exhausted', and incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. According to this explanation, historical agency passes from the left to the right—the latter surging fourth with ideas, vision, and solutions that the former are alleged to have lacked. A second approach, Ortolano suggests, 'chronicles the long rise of market liberalism', emphasising emergent trends *within* social democracy and pointing to evidence of rising individualism, consumerism, home ownership, etc., prior to 1979 in order to portray a fragile, tenuous political economic settlement that undermined itself by 'nurturing the forces that would eventually displace it' (p. 19). For the author, this approach—whilst advancing and enriching British post-war history—is susceptible to emphasising social democracy's brevity, limitations and weaknesses 'at the expense of its life' (p. 19).

For Ortolano, both of these aforementioned approaches introduce 'fallacies' that have the tendency to 'obscure the capacity of actors on the losing sides of history', downplaying or outright denying the ability of social democratic actors and institutions to 'adapt and respond' to emerging challenges (p. 21). In light of this, *Thatcher's Progress*, in the author's own words, 'integrates both dynamism and contingency into a non-deterministic account of ideological change' (p. 28). From this starting point, Ortolano takes the reader through well organised

chapters on urban planning, community development, modernist architecture, housing, and the MKDC's brief involvement in international consultancy, moving between local, national and international focus to teeter out evidence of dynamism, agency, adaptability (receptiveness to change), and forward-thinking within this particular social democratic organisation.

In the spirit of the book's series (it is the first of the new *Modern British Histories* series, which pays heed to modern British history's transnational and international dimensions), Ortolano emphasises how British planners continually located themselves within global networks. On top of regularly scaling back to highlight the transnational nature of the new towns movement, Ortolano also identifies the surprisingly international character of the MKDC, drawing valuable attention to its role in international consultation with countries such as Algeria, Oman and Venezuela. He also provides biography around key individuals within the upper echelons of the MKDC, shining light on the types of individuals involved in implementing Britain's new towns. His focus on the MKDC's first Chairman, Jock Campbell, who prior to this had managed his family's sugar business in British Guinea from the 1940s to 1960s, furthers our understanding of the uneasy relationship between Britain's colonial past and post-war new towns programme (a disconcerting number of planners had served in colonial administration). Perhaps most interestingly though, Ortolano examines the social democratic project's relationship to home ownership, coining the notion of a 'property-owning social democracy' to describe a 'dual tenurial system' of home ownership and social renting, 'motivated by the vision of social, economic and spatial balance', providing a solid, conceptual corrective to the myth that social democracy was a political economy of universal public-rented accommodation (p. 251).

Despite its flaws and limitations, Britain's history of post-war planning appears increasingly, in retrospect, to have represented a genuine, idealistic attempt to cure the ills of urban society and raise living conditions for millions of people. The new towns—which constitute for Ortolano the 'spatial dimension' of the welfare state—represent the most ambitious component of this exercise. In an era as mean-spirited and cynical as the present, scholarship looking back upon this historical moment not just without the condescension of posterity, but with added empathy and even generosity, is likely to increase. Rectifying decades of denigration, *Thatcher's Progress* is a story of unintended consequences, unrealised futures, and historical change from the perspective of history's losers, charting the complex relationship between the two rival ideological formations that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. It will be of particular interest to historians of urban planning, new towns, housing and community development, and of general interest to those concerned with both the nature of social democracy and nature of the transition to what—eventually—supplanted it.

Freddie Meade  
University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK  
 [f.meade@uea.ac.uk](mailto:f.meade@uea.ac.uk)

© 2020 Freddie Meade  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2020.1715214>

