

BOOK REVIEW

Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town, by Guy Ortolano (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2019; pp. 316. £29.99).

Milton Keynes is often the subject of derision, criticised as stifling and ugly, a place fit for planners, but not for people. Guy Ortolano's history of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation shows that the story of the Buckinghamshire town was, in fact, one of adaptation and ambiguity, a planned city whose advocates understood that plans often change. Moreover, Milton Keynes, as it exists today, was not just the product of fixed ideas, but of contingencies also. Through writing in these complexities, Ortolano not only gives us a strikingly rich account of a key state investment, but also contributes to a wider discussion about how we frame post-war British history, particularly the fate of its 'social democracy'.

Ortolano is surely right when he says that New Towns were a central, although often neglected, feature of post-war British history, a central component of what he calls 'the spatial dimension of the welfare state'—the efforts of the British state, from council housing to hospital building, to transform the built environment. As Ortolano explains, from the mid-1940s into the 1970s, Britain built more New Towns than any other European country, and by the early twenty-first century, they would house 2.5 million people. Yet, it is crucial to recognise that this book is about more than filling in an important empirical gap, more than a neat way to investigate what Britain's 'social democracy' sought to achieve in a particular time and place.

Ortolano develops the idea of a 'dynamic social democracy', a significant reinforcement of the historiographical claim that social democratic thinking was not exhausted during the 1970s but responded and adapted to new environments and new problems, and that such responses could co-exist with an emphasis upon individualism, without leading to Thatcherism. As the book shows, Milton Keynes was in part a critique of centralised, statist urban planning, a demonstration of the creativity of social democrats, who were searching to combine egalitarianism with an appreciation of individual desire. Those behind *The Plan for Milton Keynes* (1970) saw themselves as engaged in something novel in their effort to marry design from above and agency from below. Similarly, the architects who worked on Milton Keynes initially sought to adapt and renew 'welfare state modernism'—a prominent architectural style in the post-war decades that used the built environment to erase social distinctions. As Ortolano argues, Milton Keynes was a modernism rejuvenated, a place of architectural diversity and risk that brought together standard modernist features with a new emphasis on incorporating landscape.

Significantly, the Milton Keynes Development Corporation was a state-led initiative that had committed social democrats in key positions of influence. Jock Campbell, its chairman between 1967 and 1983, forged his career as a sugar magnate in British Guiana. As a young man, he was horrified by the conditions on his family's sugar estates and sought to end this exploitation

through a business philosophy that cared for employees and community as well as for profit, a politics that preferred small causes over grand schemes. During the 1960s, he would become a Labour peer and well known as a socialist businessman. Campbell saw Milton Keynes as a way to realise his people-centred politics. Richard Llewelyn-Davies was a key planner behind Milton Keynes. Like Campbell, he was another elite figure with socialist commitments. Llewelyn-Davies stressed the importance of humility in planning, advocating an open-endedness. He was a critic of the centralised city, arguing for the importance of dispersal. Los Angeles served as an important inspiration. Llewelyn-Davies saw the automobile as a vehicle of liberation due to the mobility it offered. The car could, in his vision, be harmonised with a social democratic future.

But Milton Keynes, like Britain itself, would adapt to another political order altogether, when market liberalism replaced its 'social democracy' during the 1980s: a shift away from state power and equality towards a politics of individual freedom and the market. In fact, Milton Keynes made the transition *avant la lettre*. As Ortolano shows, the seeds of this market revolution were already evident in Milton Keynes before Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, as the social democrats of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation had already started to speak the language of market liberalism. Yet, for many, this was the politics of necessity, not a sincere embrace. After the IMF loan of 1976, the Labour government cut the budgets of the development corporations. In this context, the Milton Keynes Development Corporation placed more emphasis on private housing and the attraction of private investment. They had to conform more to the designs that the mortgage lenders thought would sell, and thus 'welfare state modernism' was rejected. When Thatcher came to power, Milton Keynes sold itself, and successfully so, as a market-driven endeavour.

This book is a key text within the 'New Urban Political History', one of many recent works to bring our attention to the towns and cities, both real and planned, of post-war British history. But it also should be read as providing a helpful framework for thinking about the politics of post-war Britain, not only in giving a clear summary of the key debates about its shifting ideologies, but also as a crucial part of those conversations. Indeed, Ortolano defines 'social democracy' in a usefully specific manner, as the use of state power to reduce inequality. He also shows both the inventiveness and the fragility of such politics, how it could renew itself and how contested it was.

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