Review Essay

Governing by Analogy: Ideas and Institutions in Urban Political History

Richardson Dilworth and Timothy P. R. Weaver, eds. (2020). *How Ideas Shape Urban Political Development*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 32 + xiii pp., illustrations, notes, index, $65.00 (cloth).

Guy Ortolano (2019). *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 301 + xvi pp., illustrations, notes, maps, bibliography, index, $39.99 (cloth).

Reviewed by: Daniel London, *New York University, New York, NY, USA*
DOI: 10.1177/0096144220981105

Keywords

ideas, institutions, politics, urban, neoliberalism

The influence of ideas upon politics has been traced and theorized by urban historians since the beginning of our field. Urbanists have unpacked and contextualized concepts, metaphors, and other systems of meaning. They have examined how well-articulated ideologies and unconscious beliefs constrain and produce political change. They have detailed how culture, subjectivity, and power relations structure the production, reception, and efficacy of ideas.[1] By focusing on the ideas of individuals and social groups upon political institutions, however, urban historians have occasionally overlooked the power of state institutions *themselves* to channel and establish politically salient ideas.

Richardson Dilworth and Timothy Weaver's *How Ideas Shape Urban Political Development* and Guy Ortolano's *Thatcher's Progress* self-consciously foreground the overlapping role of ideas and institutions in shaping urban life in the twentieth century. They begin, however, from different disciplinary standpoints. The authors assembled by Dilworth and Weaver are institutionally inclined political scientists who move into the realm of ideas, tracing why, when, and under what conditions concepts and other systems of meaning have transformed urban politics. Ortolano, by contrast, is an intellectual historian who enters the bureaucracy by examining how local officials navigated the internal tensions and external pressures facing social democracy in one postwar city.

The "Political Development" featured in Weaver and Dilworth's title refers to a specific framework of historically attuned political analysis developed in the 1980s: American Political Development (APD).[2] According to this perspective, formal and informal rules inherited by political organizations have the capacity to shape the preferences and interests of those within and without their jurisdictions. That capacity, however, depends upon their influence as structured by prior governing arrangements ("path dependency") and as established within an already crowded political terrain ("political order") populated with preexisting policies ("intercurrence"). As the relative power and legitimacy of institutions within this terrain shifts over time, opportunities emerge for new constellations of institutions representing different actors and interests to arise and displace them ("political development"). How, why, and with what consequences these shifts in governing authority take place are the chief subjects of inquiry for APD scholars.

Where, however, do interests come from? Why do historical actors adopt one policy rather than another to achieve them? Scholars cannot deduce the answer to these questions, Weaver and Dilworth argue, based on their subjects' social position, identity, or institutional affiliations alone. Rather, they must be hermeneutically inferred from the normative, categorical, and causal beliefs held by these actors—that is, ideas. Ideas provide guides on what to value, blueprints for which institutions and policies are best situated to pursue them, and schemas for identifying friends and foes upon the political terrain. During uncertain times, moreover, creative political actors can use ideas to suggest alternative approaches to pressing governance challenges, delegitimizing existing political orders while valorizing new or hypothetical ones in the process. Their capacity to generate and act upon such ideas, however, is contingent upon the resources, institutions, and ideational "scripts" to which they already have access.

Having established this schema, the remaining articles provide a range of case-studies on how ideas and institutions have interacted to produce political development across the twentieth century, echoing different paradigms of intellectual history while doing so. Several, for example, focus on how communities used ideas as tools and instruments when addressing public concerns—a common approach in the so-called "wingspread" school of intellectual history.[3] Marcus Anthony Hunter, for example, traces how Black activists in Philadelphia deployed a "metaphorical" arsenal against highway construction through their communities between the 1950s and the 1970s. By framing these developments as northern "Mason-Dixon lines" threatening Black neighborhoods' civil rights *and* quality of life, activists like Alice Lipscomb successfully mobilized their community's voices and votes against the projects. Along similar lines, Eleonora Pasotti traces how a neighborhood association in Chile contested a state-driven urban redevelopment scheme by establishing an "imagined community" within their barrio. By defining this community in terms of its heterogeneous residents and historic architecture, and by casting both as being threatened by displacement at the hands of outsiders, the Vecinos por la Defensa del Barrio Yungay established political power while doing justice to the racial and class diversity of their neighborhood.

In other articles, by contrast, ideas and concepts themselves seem to take on an agency of their own by shaping modes of perception, knowledge, and subjectivity in ways that historical actors found difficult to undue or even perceive.[4] Sally Ford Lawton's "Idea of Blight in Baltimore," for example, traces how this concept "gesture(d) towards a specific set of policy decisions" (p. 36) by casting unsanitary neighborhoods as biologically contaminated. Such an analogy encouraged local governments to perform dramatic acts of urban surgery such as slum clearance while delegitimating the opinions of the "diseased" residents who lived there. Similarly, Amy Widestrom's article traces how the "ideational order" that underwrote the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 "allowed little space for anything other than incremental change" (p. 128) in the law since its ratification. Because the initial debates over this legislation were structured by established paradigms of free-enterprise, devolution, and the constitutional separation of powers, she argues, it was difficult for subsequent activists to amend the law in ways that even appeared to contest these principles. Debjani Bhattacharyya takes a Foucauldian tack by examining how liberal discourses of rights and political representation cast slum-dwellers in Kolkata as "deviant." Both these sets of essays should encourage historians to reflect upon how—or even whether—different terms and concepts can be appropriated, and to what degree their usage reflects, constrains, or produces agency.

Another venerable approach represented here is that of the genealogy—that is, to trace variations, evolutions, and tensions within one or more concepts.[5] Examining the concept of "urban renewal" between 1930 and 1980 in Chicago, Joel Rast disaggregates the conflicting goals read into state-sponsored redevelopment by different interest groups—"highest and best" use of land for real-estate interests, enhanced tax revenue for municipal administrations, better low-income housing for social reformers, and others. By promising to achieve such a

range of contradictory goals, he argues, urban renewal rose on account of its attractiveness to a wide range of interest groups, and fell on account of its failure to fully satisfy the needs of any one of them. Thomas Ogarzalek's essay performs similar work around the political valence of pluralism in the early twentieth century. Ogarzalek is prompted by a paradox: why were the same cities where local officials erected barriers to racial equality simultaneously represented in Congress by some of the country's staunchest political advocates of civil rights? Ogarzalek argues that the divergent institutional settings of local and national governments encouraged congressional liberals and local bosses to adopt different strategies toward addressing similar challenges of urban diversity and group conflict. Whereas the latter maintained their political hierarchies by strategically recognizing or suppressing group demands, the former achieved political capital by framing Dixiecrat defenses of lynching and Jim Crow as threats to social harmony within cities. Although some historians might question whether this bifurcation was sustainable in the long run or quibble with his chronology, it is nonetheless a model for how to generatively blend ideational and institutional analyses to make an innovative and significant argument.[6]

The themes Ogarzalek examines regarding conflicting urban and national institutional settings are further explored in other articles. Douglas S. Reed's chapter examines how local primacy in establishing and administering educational policies has constrained national reform objectives within the United States for more than a century. Federal officials faced with the already-difficult task of improving country-wide standards around desegregation, for example, have also had to navigate hostile political coalitions on the local level responsible for implementing their proposals. Mara Sidney's article notes that whereas the national Canadian government actively promotes immigrants as productive and valuable citizens, this role is assumed primarily by local governments in the United States. While the latter formula provides a more varied and potentially empowering political landscape for immigrants, this is countered by the consistent rhetoric of criminalization adopted by the federal government. William Hurst's article on the Communist Party's power to dictate patterns and rates of urbanization across twentieth-century China should similarly spark comparative insights (and perhaps a measure of jealousy) among historians of less unitary nations.

All the above approaches are enlisted by a set of essays examining a topic of intense interest to urban historians: how neoliberal principles of low taxes, welfare austerity, and economic deregulation emerged from or displaced earlier Keynesian paradigms of political economy during the late twentieth century. Lester K. Spence's article traces how elites used ideas of race to shape white civic identities, perceptions of material interests, and institutional alignments in the postwar era. By stigmatizing Black recipients of welfare as undeserving, for example, these figures shifted the preferences of white citizens for paying taxes more generally. Timothy Weaver, by contrast, stresses the role of ideologically motivated policy entrepreneurs rather than self-interested elites as key architects and advocates of urban neoliberalism. While businesses certainly had profit-making interests, Weaver argues, they were divided and unsure of the best policies by which to achieve those profits during the tumult of the early 1970s. Instead, Weaver traces how individuals like planner Peter Hall and think tanks like the Heritage Foundation took advantage of this uncertainty to promote tax-and-regulation-lite "enterprise zones" as potential solutions to the concurrent fiscal and economic crises facing urban areas. Jason Hacksworth's article notes that although such policies were equally unsuccessful in resolving these crises, they suffered no legitimation crisis comparable to that of their Keynesian predecessors. Hacksworth ascribes this less to a lack of "compelling policy alternatives" than to the marginalization of urban liberals within the geography of state politics, as well as to a lack of ideational opposition from within their ranks. While some historians might disagree with the causal sequence and periodization of these accounts, redressing them will still require attending to the confluence of institutions and ideas identified by these authors.[7]

Inevitably, certain strains and methods of intellectual history are underrepresented in this volume. Some historians might want more attention paid to how patterns of reception and interpretation shape the efficacy of ideas within an institutional environment, along with the deeper frameworks of rationally and epistemology which undergird those patterns.[8] Other historians might prefer greater attention to nontextual or culturally grounded systems of meaning. While this is not the place to demarcate the relation between cultural and intellectual history, it seems noncontroversial to state that a wide array of sources—art, architecture, songs, fashion—can be as politically significant as policy briefs.[9] Vanessa Watson deploys this kind of analysis in her chapter, which employs glossy renderings of new modernist skyscrapers to interpret how officials in African cities value and engage with global real estate investment trends. This kind of work, however, has few parallels elsewhere in the volume. Of course, linking such sources to specifically *institutional* dynamics is easier said than done. I would be curious how one might study the effects of pragmatist ontology on changing party structures, or relate changing patterns of federalism to shifts in musical tastes. That this book should prompt such further probing into the relation of ideas and institutions, however, reveals its success. To fill a research gap is human, to open one divine.

If Dilworth and Weaver provide a range of compelling but occasionally discordant policy briefs, Guy Ortolano's *Thatcher's Progress* traces how urban planners, modernist architects, and other public officials navigated similar uncertainties within the British "New Town" of Milton Keynes. Such dynamism, Ortolano argues, has been overlooked by most accounts of postwar social-democratic politics. Whereas one school sees social democracy (and its New Deal counterpart) as a unitary but fragile political order unable to withstand the confluence of market fundamentalism and cultural conservativism after 1970, the other sees it as having already compromised its integrity by promoting individualism and capital-friendly policies well before the usual culprits of stagflation and the presidency of Ronald Reagan.[10] In both cases, the decline of this political order appears preordained. For Ortolano, however, both interpretations underplay a key strength of social democracy at its height—its capacity to creatively adapt to changing times and challenges while holding true to egalitarian principles. To make this intervention, Ortolano investigates how local bureaucrats negotiated ideological and policy shifts within a paradigmatic expression of what be called High Social Democracy: the New Town of Milton Keynes.

As one of 32 publicly designed, built, and managed communities constructed in the United Kingdom after World War II, Milton Keynes (MK) is a particularly apt site in which to examine these negotiations. All the constitutive currents of this political order—Keynesian concerns with state-directed economic growth, social reform impulses for improved housing standards, a faith in modernist architects and meritocratic administrators to design and carry out the scheme—were represented here in brick and mortar. That Thatcher's election in 1979 falls almost precisely halfway between MK's construction in 1967 and dissolution in 1992 adds to its utility as a social-democratic Rorschach. While MK might be unrepresentative of the generally muddled and complex rollout of social democratic policies within older communities, in Ortolano's hands those very "tabula-rasa" qualities throw into stark relief tensions and complexities *within* the social democratic order that might otherwise be obscured.

Ortolano's early chapters on urban planning and housing demonstrate this well. In Milton Keynes, public housing co-existed with Europe's largest shopping center, a bureaucratic development corporation offered endlessly customizable (and affordable) housing for residents, and modernist planners made allowances for both public transit and private automobiles in their designs. Such flexibility appealed to a variety of outside observers: Ortolano charts how postcolonial regimes in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere acquired expertise in designing and managing new towns through consultancies and planning courses in partnership with MK. May a thousand dissertations arise!

Rather than reify this balance or "moderation," however, Ortolano is careful to examine its constant and difficult renegotiation across different policy domains. His recounting of the town's

ill-fated Department of Community Development is a case in point. Formed in the late 1960s, the Department encouraged residents to establish local newspapers and build civic organizations to address shared problems communally. In practice, however, many residents used the Department simply as an additional outlet for demands upon the Whitehall-based Development Corporation. Ultimately, the Corporation shifted away from recognizing (and fostering) communal wants through the Department, preferring instead to address individual needs as they came. No easy villains are revealed in this account, only fissures and compromises obscured when a golden age of "solidarity" is counterposed to one of "individualism."

The Department's shift, however, was a sign of more disruptive ones to come. Ortolano describes how administrators at Milton Keynes initially pursued a vision of "property-owning social democracy" in which the needs of homeowners, the construction of affordable rental housing, and ensuring class diversity within all forms of housing were equal priorities. As finances for the New Towns were slashed in the wake of budget deficits, however, the Development Corporation began emphasizing increased housing sales as a means of raising revenue. Ortolano masterfully uses debates over the unlikely topic of flat roofs to reveal the narrowing ideological and fiscal path for social democracy in the 1970s. The Corporation could not sell houses if consumers could not purchase mortgages from private lenders. Private lenders, however, resisted providing mortgages to the modern structures that made up the Corporation's housing stock, convinced of their undesirability on the part of consumers. The Corporation's decision to shift from constructing flat to pitched roof houses in the face of this architectural "red-lining" was simultaneously a matter of changing aesthetics, changing principles (of valorizing "salability" and consumer "taste"), and of the changing institutional balance of power between the public and private sectors—and no single element here can be explained without taking into account the others.

Ortolano ends on a dour note. Only a Blairite could see a social-democratic polity that sells off its rental housing at 30 to 50 percent below market rate in the late 1970s and dissolves twenty years later as a triumph of pragmatic adjustment. The author is somewhat less clear, however, as to whether this dissolution was due to pragmatism's excesses or its restriction. On one hand, Ortolano sees the Corporation's willingness to raise revenue through any means necessary as a betrayal of earlier commitments. As he puts it, "market liberalism succeeded not when its partisans forced any single policy through, but when even its opponents came to accommodate the market's priorities" (28). On the other hand, Ortolano argues that it was the delegitimization and divestment of profitable public enterprises at the hands of conservatives—and not the public-sector's eagerness to raise revenue in the first place—which spelled the end of a robust social democratic order. Had MK been empowered to "pragmatically" develop publicly run profitable enterprises, it might have weathered the fiscal and ideological storms of the 1970s. Nonetheless, Ortolano succeeds in his mission: by revealing the real and potential dynamism of social-democratic politics, architecture, and ideology in one community, he suggests and provides a way for scholars to rethink the features and fortunes of other political orders, such as New Deal liberalism, at every scale.

That MK was *not* provided the freedom to be pragmatic touches on one relatively underdeveloped dimension of Ortolano's story. While Ortolano's granular focus (public officials) and locus (a single New Town) enables him to recover social democracy's dynamism within a narrowing political environment, it also prevents him from fully contextualizing and identifying who is doing the narrowing. The dynamism of conservative think tanks, institutional inertia within higher tiers of Labour government, the public sector's dependence upon private capital and investment as represented in the flat-roofs controversy, the shifting desires of the electorate—all these and more channeled and constrained the imagination of MK's well-intentioned bureaucrats in ways that are not always fully developed in Ortolano's narrative. While these factors do not necessarily render their "pragmatism" opportunistic or fruitless, a full account of postwar social democracy will require specifying the full set of parameters in which that pragmatism could operate.

The difference between pragmatism and opportunism, of course, is as difficult to define as it is to navigate. Ortolano provides a model for how to study such navigations by viewing political orders like social democracy as permeable composites of multiple values and principles, rather than as unitary and closed systems excluding certain concepts entirely. *Every* state is a "mixed state." Historians should take inspiration from this approach, examining how and with what consequences actors and institutions of every political tendency have creativity addressed seemingly irreconcilable tensions across multiple policy domains—solidarity and pluralism, egalitarianism and individualism, de-commodification and economic growth, civility and "necessary trouble.[11] Such an approach, however, clarifies but does not evade the task of judgment. When is pursuing policy "balance" a source of dynamism rather than self-defeat? When does "civility" aid or hinder progressive transformation? To attempt such categorical and evaluative questions has its dangers, but so too does absconding from them. Ortolano, to his credit, does not: he inveighs against New Labour invocations of "moderation" as its own kind of ideological device designed to delegitimate its predecessor. Future work might consider distinguishing between different paradigms of institutional and policy "balancing" and reform (such as the categories of ruptural, symbiotic, and interstitial reform as suggested by the sociologist Erik Olin Wright) when tracing the political valence of "pragmatic" policies.[12]

New concepts do not upset historiographies; only new questions do. By destabilizing our categories and positing new relations between them, however—such as between the production of urban space and capital accumulation, or between racial slavery and financialization—novel concepts can furnish the means toward displacing and supplanting established historiographies. Weaver, Dilworth, and Ortolano provide us with two fundamental concepts; just as ideas are freighted with internalized directives inherited by our governing institutions, so even the most vapid of public documents are freighted with and constituted by ideas of every sort.[13] That alone should spur us to visit the groaning archives of our local governments with a greater sense of anticipation. Whether what we find will complacently overlap or productively clash with our dominant narratives, however, remains to be seen.

Notes

1. For two paradigmatic examples of works that meld intellectual and urban history, see Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012); Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Knopf: 1979).
2. For a classic account of this framework, see Karren Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a volume applying this approach toward cities, see Richardson Dilworth ed., *The City in American Political Development* (Routledge, 2009).
3. For an overview of this approach, see Thomas Bender, "Forty Years from Wingspread: The Transformation of American Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 16 (2019), 633-51.
4. For an excellent collection of essays which grapple with ideational agency, see Darrin M McMahon and Samuel Moyn, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
5. There is a long and varied series of debates between and combinations of "internalist" and "contextualist" approaches toward the history of ideas. For an excellent overview, see Kari Palonen, "Rhetorical and Temporal Perspectives on Conceptual Change. Theses on Quentin Skinner and Reinhart Koselleck," *Redescriptions* 3 (1999), 41-59.
6. For more works examining the politics of pluralism in American cities, see Phillip Ethington, The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco 1850-1900 (University of California Press, 1994), Mary Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (University of California Press, 1997), Shelton Stromquist, Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, The Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

7. For an excellent work re-examining the relationship of the New Deal to postwar patterns of inequality, see Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, Shaped by the State: Towards a New Political History of the Twentieth Century (University of Chicago, 2019). For a work investigating similar parallels between the late nineteenth and early twentieth-first century, see Daniel Wortel-London, Daniel, and Boyd Cothran, eds. "A Second Gilded Age?" Special Issue, Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 19, no. 2 (April 2020).

8. See Martyn P. Thompson, "Reception Theory and the Interpretation of Historical Meaning," *History and Theory* 32 (1993), 248-72.

9. See Joan Shelley Rubin, "Nixon's Grin and Other Keys to the Future of Cultural and Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (2012), 217-31.

10. For an example of the former school, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Picador, 2018). For an example of the latter school, see Greta Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, 2011).

11. See Peter Baldwin, "Beyond Weak and Strong: Rethinking the State in Comparative Policy History," *Journal of Policy History*, 17 (2005), 12-33; William J. Novak, "The Myth of the Weak American State," *The American Historical Review* 113 (June 2008), 752-72.

12. Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias (Verso, 2012).

13. Similar claims can be made around public policies, as well as public institutions. See John Offer, *An Intellectual History of British Social Policy: Idealism versus Non-Idealism* (Bristol University Press, 2006); Julian E Zelizer, *New Directions in Policy History*. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Robert F. Durant, *Building the Compensatory State: An Intellectual History and Theory of American Administrative Reform* (New York, Routledge, 2020). For an excellent volume examining "pragmatism" and governance, see Ido de Haan and Matthijs Lok, The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Author Biography

Daniel Wortel-London received his PhD in history from New York University in 2020. His research addresses the intellectual origins and political consequences of urban economic theory in the United States between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. His most recent publication is "A Second Gilded Age? The Promises and Perils of an Analogy," co-written with Boyd Cothran in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.*