

## Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town

**Review Number:** 2373

**Publish date:** Thursday, 13 February, 2020

**Author:** Guy Ortolano

**ISBN:** 9781108697262

**Date of Publication:** 2019

**Price:** £29.99

**Pages:** 316pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/thatchers-progress/97ECB54C1E68BCDAD44B13C79500192B#fndtn-contents>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Otto Saumarez Smith

In 1979 Pete Wrong of the art collective and Punk band Crass was being interviewed by *New Society* about his graffiti operation on the London Underground: 'We don't just rip the posters down or spray them. We use stencils, neatly, to qualify them. Especially sexist posters, war posters and the sort of posters for sterile things like *Milton Keynes*.' He spits those two words out. 'But what have you got against Milton Keynes? What is wrong with it?' the interviewer asked. 'I was actually working on the plans for the place. I started discovering what a complete shithole it is. Cardboard houses, no facilities. Its just a work camp, totally sterile, offers nothing.'

Guy Ortolano is wryly aware that the subject of his new history can provoke bemusement or even derision. He quotes Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett: ‘Milton Keynes was built to be modern, efficient, healthy, and, all in all, a pleasant place to live. Many Britons find this amusing.’ Ortolano largely sidesteps the New Town’s later reputation (which is the focus of Lauren Pikó’s admirable new monograph *Milton Keynes in British Culture, Imagining England*). The main aim of *Thatcher’s Progress* is historical rather than evaluative, distinguishing it from earlier histories of Milton Keynes such as Mark Clapson’s *Milton Keynes: Middle England/ Edge City* (2004), or John Platt and Terence Bendixson’s *Milton Keynes: Image and Reality* (1992). *Thatcher’s Progress* uses a close, intensively archival study of Milton Keynes to make important arguments about the ideological switch from a social democratic to a market dominated polity. Histories of market liberalism—more commonly labelled neoliberalism—tend to either be concerned with tracing its genesis in intellectual history, or to treat it and its effects in highly abstracted terms. It is therefore hugely valuable to read an account that grounds a history of ideological change within the specificities of a particular time and place. This is a book in which concepts like social democracy or market liberalism are not just waves that wash over society, but things that are actively lived through and grappled with by people. It is a wide-ranging, elegantly written, deeply serious, forcefully argued book, with an impressive command of multiple historiographies. Ortolano demonstrates how a locally situated case study, grounded in the minutiae of an archive, needn’t be provincial, and one of the most remarkable things to emerge from his book is how much the history of Milton Keynes happened within globally transnational networks. An important argument emerges that Britain did not become less global through becoming post-imperial.

*Thatcher’s Progress* is ingeniously structured around a driving tour Margaret Thatcher made of Milton Keynes shortly after becoming Prime Minister, in which the Development Corporation failed to convince the new Prime Minister that their project might chime with her agenda. Each chapter takes in a different aspect of the remarkably ambitious New Town—as it is seen through the window of a Prime Ministerial car. The book covers histories of planning, architecture, community development, international consultancy, and housing. The successive chapters work both individually and cumulatively. It includes a number of humane and insightful pen portraits, from the planner Richard Llewellyn-Davies to the artist behind *those* concrete cows, Liz Leyh. In a way that urban history, especially planning history, rarely is, this is a history with characters to the forefront. Throughout, the book is an advertisement for the richness of the Milton Keynes archive, and it ought to stimulate further work in other New Town archives, which tend, in my experience, to be fuller than those of local authorities.

The first chapter is about an earlier, aborted, iteration of a plan for a new city in North Bucks, this one based around a futuristic monorail. It is a masterclass in how to use a plan, even one as ostensibly wacky as this—which only remained on paper—as a source for understanding the ambitions and fears of an entire culture (an earlier iteration in the *Historical Journal* has been hugely influential for my own work.) The second chapter is about the actual Milton Keynes plan, and three men who helped create it: the Chairman of the Development Corporation, Jock Campbell; the planner Richard Llewellyn-Davies; and the urban visionary Melvin Webber. It demonstrates the remarkably international—especially post-colonial and transatlantic—economy of ideas within which the planning of this period operated. It also shows planning culture evolving in the face of new challenges, contradicting Jane Jacobs’s influential account of planners merely enacting a set of ideas fixed and ossified from the inter-war period. In doing so it joins a number of recent accounts in providing a more nuanced and evolutionary picture of post-war planning culture, notably Elizabeth Cohen’s *Saving America’s Cities*, Ed Logue and the *Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*.

Chapter three is about architectural modernism, and balances a highly localised story of a lawsuit concerning structural failure of flat roofs in the Norman Foster-designed estate at Beanhill, with a much larger story of the rejection of urban modernism, which Ortolano links with an active project of unravelling of the welfare state more generally. The fourth chapter is about how attempts at community development in Netherfield ran into trouble when the Development Corporation were unable to meet residents’ demands. Ortolano presents this process not so much as the triumph of neoliberal subjectivity, but as individual aspirations working

collectively within a social democratic framework. The chapter includes amusing and affectionate portraits of two artists-in-residence caught up in this *maelstrom*; the concrete sculptor Liz Leyh, and the novelist Jack Trevor Story. The fifth chapter tells the extraordinary story of the emergence of Milton Keynes Development Corporation as a consultant on global urban planning, which Ortolano argues belies a conception of the British state in the 1970s as being sclerotic and provincial. Instead he presents the consultancy as an example of an entrepreneurial state, marketing its expertise to a remarkably global range of clients—before this consultancy was cut short by the Thatcher government. The last chapter is about housing; with an unusual forensic focus on forms of tenure, it shows how the Development Corporation initially needed to stimulate demand for owner occupation.

These chapters are rich in detail, and intervene provocatively across a range of debates, but at the book's backbone are several interlinked arguments about the transition from social democracy to market liberalism. Ortolano summarises these core arguments as follows: 'First, as the spatial dimension of the welfare state, the new towns program attested to the ambition and the depth of the social democratic project. Second, rather than an exhausted and discredited force, social democracy proved dynamic in response to the economic, social, and political challenges of the 1970s. And third, in light of this vitality, market liberalism succeeded when indifferent—even hostile—actors internalized its priorities.' I would add a fourth, and perhaps even a fifth argument. The fourth is that, in Ortolano's account, the election of 1979 truly does emerge from the evidence, at least from the perspective of Milton Keynes, as a profoundly transformative tipping point—and the New Towns are shown to have experienced Thatcherism at its purist, not least as a testbed of Right to Buy.

The fifth argument is one Ortolano might deny he is making. He writes that his approach to Milton Keynes is historical rather than evaluative, that it is 'no more invested in persuading readers to want to live in Milton Keynes than a history of the French Revolution would seek to persuade them to want to join the Committee of Public Safety.' I don't totally buy this. Like the resident novelist he tells the story of, who was criticised for giving the New Town lots of publicity, 'all of it bad', but ended up settling in Milton Keynes, Ortolano (a Professor at NYU) has gone native. *Thatcher's Progress* is so much more than a defence of the much-maligned new town, but the sheer affection this cosmopolitan New Yorker has for his subject is an endearing aspect of a book which succeeds in the *recovery* or *re-enchantment* of a subject that has received much condescension. This aspect of the book is linked with a compelling strand of the book, about the continuing 'dynamism' of social democracy in the 1970s. This is not so much an argument about political philosophy, but about how individuals navigated historical change, developing their ideas in response to changing times. It is an inspirational approach for those looking to provide more sophisticated accounts of Britain in the 1970s, that go beyond hackneyed images of crisis.

*Thatcher's Progress* comes at the crest of a wave of notable historical work which explores historical change in Britain through the lens of the built environment. Much of what might be termed this 'new urban political history' of later 20th-century Britain emerges from a common emotional and political background. Ortolano paraphrases Owen Hatherley, about seeing in the post-war built environment ruins of a lost future, and a testament that alternative ways of thinking are therefore possible in the neo-liberal present. Hatherley's popular writing on Modernism, starting with *Militant Modernism* (2009), have been highly influential. Another reason that post-war politics is coming to be told so often through urban modernism, is that Thatcher herself was so adept at allying modernism and the welfare state. As Ortolano quotes, she wanted to extinguish 'the block mentality: tower blocks, trade-union block votes, block schools.' Rather than trying to untangle these spatial and political phenomena, modernism and social democracy, Ortolano binds them together through the useful, if somewhat broad-brush and fairly neo-Ruskinian, concept of 'welfare state modernism'. Architectural modernism, in all its staggeringly diverse forms, was often a vehicle for the welfare state, but the histories of these two 20th-century phenomena, though they often mirror one another, also have subtly different trajectories, and deserve to be distinguished even whilst their stories are revealingly told in tandem.

Ebenezer Howard's original proposal for Garden Cities had intended that they would have the knock-on-

effect of improving existing cities. This didn't happen, but inner cities and new towns remained symbiotically linked. It was fears about an emerging inner city crisis that first seriously dented confidence in New Towns—and the tools of modernist planning more generally—well before Thatcher's election. That one of the most striking tools of Thatcherite urbanism in dealing with inner city problems—the Urban Development Corporations—were openly modelled on New Town mechanisms also suggests that history looks different in the verdant pastures of a New Town than it does in a slum-cleared inner city area. The break from social democracy to market liberalism is less clear cut here, suggesting that post-war change takes on a different aspect depending on where you view it from. But this is an argument for, rather than against, the kind of forensically-tight, focused social and political history so brilliantly offered by *Thatcher's Progress*. It should become a model for writing histories that provide inventive answers to intellectually ambitious questions, whilst being locally situated, without being in any way provincial.

---

**Source URL:**

[https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2373?utm\\_source=Reviews%20in%20History&utm\\_campaign=f19451c75f-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_02\\_23\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_f24f670b90-f19451c75f-516743245](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2373?utm_source=Reviews%20in%20History&utm_campaign=f19451c75f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_02_23_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f24f670b90-f19451c75f-516743245)

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/309647>