On urbanism and optimism

Guy Ortolano interviewed by Alex Campsie

Guy Ortolano's latest book turns Milton Keynes from 'an object of scorn into an object of study', examining how social democracy was planned, built, and partially displaced in Britain's most notorious new town. We ask him what the book tells us about social democracy past and present.

I n the quarter-century after the Second World War, the British state designated thirty-two new towns across all four nations of the United Kingdom. In his new book, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019), NYU historian Guy Ortolano analyses these new towns as the 'spatial dimension' of the welfare state. He argues that Britain's new towns attest to the ambition and depth of the social-democratic project, which in turn explains Thatcher's determination to shutter the world's leading new towns programme upon taking office in 1979.

The heart of the book unfolds during the 1970s, when the oil crisis, recessions and political pressures tested the social-democratic project. But rather than treating social democracy as brittle, doomed to collapse amid the rise of neoliberalism, Ortolano emphasises the efforts of public sector actors to adapt and respond to these various challenges. Social democracy, he argues, was not a fixed project, forged in the 1940s and moribund by the 1970s. Rather, social democrats responded creatively to challenging times – even if those times, and in some ways these accommodations, ultimately ushered in the ideological world we know today. The book nevertheless ends hopefully, noting that today's ideological context is no more fixed than the one it displaced – and that the new towns, despite their faults, attest to the possibility of very different priorities and practices.

Alex Campsie (AC): Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first thing I wanted to ask you about the book was its concern to reconstruct what you call a 'dynamic' social

democracy.[1] The first two chapters are particularly striking, in that they explore how this ideological formation operated in response to a series of social changes (automation, demographic transformation, divisions between the 'affluent' and 'the left-behinds', changing consumer patterns) that feel very familiar, and were successfully addressed. I wondered whether you could speak more about what makes this variant of social democracy 'dynamic' – do/did static versions exist to be overcome? And how we might approach similar issues in a 'dynamic' manner today?

Guy Ortolano (GO): I wanted to challenge essentialist conceptions of social democracy. Rather than treating social democrats as clinging to a fixed set of principles, from which any deviation means retreat or betrayal, I treat them as creative and adaptable in responding to new contexts. In this respect, I'm not actually insisting upon any special social-democratic virtues. I'm merely suggesting that we treat social democracy as we would any other subject: a living tradition, grounded in history but not therefore bound by it, capable of developing in novel ways. This interpretation cuts against two familiar ways of thinking about this history. The first treats social democracy as exhausted by the 1970s; the second treats social democracy's development as secondary to the rise of neoliberalism. By centring the ways that social democrats responded to new times, the book offers a model for thinking about social democracy in terms of its development rather than its decline.

AC: Relatedly, chapter four analyses the vibrant attempts to support ideas of 'community' in Milton Keynes, focusing on the new town's social development department and its individual agents. At its best, community in Milton Keynes in the 1970s was 'at once individualist and social', but towards the end of the decade and into the 1980s it saw itself almost torn apart by rising expectations: 'if given gardens', you write, the residents 'complained about their size'.[2] I wondered if you could talk more about this tension between collectivism and individualism – can the two durably co-exist under social democracy?

GO: Well, that remark about gardens was the exasperated lament of the city's planners. They responded by contemplating changes in their approach to social development, emphasising less communities than individuals. But we needn't follow their example. In fact, as Jon Lawrence's new book shows, imagining these aspects of social life sequentially – first collectivism, then individualism – is itself the problem.[3] Individualism and collectivism inevitably coexist. Social democracy's opponents have triumphed to the extent that they claim proprietorship over individualism. In actual life, people act individually sometimes, and collectively at other times – for instance, when community groups complain about garden plots. The problem, in other words, is not with individualism, any more than it is with people wanting gardens. The problem is with the notion that individual wants cannot exist – indeed, don't coexist all the time – alongside collective values and behaviours.

AC: Thatcher's emphasis on home-ownership and attempt to create a 'property-owning democracy' is well-known. You excavate a related, but very different, concept in this book, that of the 'property-owning social democracy'. Can you explain what this vision was about, and why you think it is important for us to know about it today?

GO: We know about the 'property-owning democracy', the Conservative ideal of a nation of home-owners. The purported alternative – sometimes explicit, but always implied – is a nation of public sector renters, dependent upon the state. Yet around the world, as Nathan Connolly, Bryan McCann and others have shown, activists have long recognised the value of property ownership – from African-Americans in the US to the favelas of Brazil.[4] This association between progressives and property was evident in Britain as well. Aneurin Bevan, as minister of housing as well as (more famously) health, wanted municipal housing to shed its association with the working class. But he also acknowledged the appeal of owner-occupation and assumed it would persist. Home ownership rose under Britain's post-war welfare state, abetted by national Labour policies and local Labour councils.

By enabling home ownership, Labour was not surrendering to the 'property-owning democracy', but rather offering something different. They championed a dual-tenurial housing ecology, including private home-owners alongside public sector renters. I call this programme the 'property-owning social democracy', one that facilitated home-ownership, while guarding against the polarisation that market forces, if left on their own, inevitably produce.

This history matters because, in the wake of the 2007-2008 crisis, housing comprises one of the most urgent issues of our times. As that crash revealed, and has been borne out in London and among under-30s ever since, the market is incapable of meeting Britain's housing needs alone. The 'property-owning social democracy' offers evidence of a workable alternative approach, one that includes a robust public housing sector alongside support for owner-occupation.

AC: In chapter one you introduce the concept of the social-democratic 'horizon' – arguing that whilst your protagonists (planners, architects, community workers, etc) drew on 'market liberal' ideas, they did so in order to extend and deepen the aims (and 'horizon') of social democracy.[5] In the conclusion you argue that New Labour dealt a 'particularly cruel blow' to this vision, as their rhetoric presented the state and the market as historically opposed.[6] Nonetheless you end on an optimistic note, arguing that the possibility of revitalising the version of social democracy explored by the book remains open. What gives you cause for such optimism, and where might we identify starting points?

GO: Optimism is hard to come by in the aftermath of the 2019 general election, not to mention nearly everything that has happened ever since, but that's why we must try to find it wherever we can. I think we can find it, among other places, in a history brimming with social-democratic ideas, initiatives and real achievements.

But in order to know that history, we need to peel back the misinterpretations – political and historiographical – that still obscure it. As we do so, we must also attend to the racism and sexism that structured too much of the post-war welfare state. These histories, too, must be recovered, if we are to understand not only past failings but also future priorities.

By the social-democratic 'horizon', I mean the ways that social democracy could seem inevitable and forever. The horizon is constantly churning, but there is never a moment when it passes you by: it is always there, up ahead, the foreseeable and imaginable future. This metaphor offers an alternative to the tendency to read the accommodation of new priorities, such as individualism or home-ownership, as concessions towards neoliberalism, rather than as developments within social democracy. Social democracy was, and is, a living tradition – full of failings and defeats, of course, but also of demonstrable achievements.

AC: I'm really interested in what you say about the horizon constantly churning. I've always wanted to believe this; but in the days after 12 December 2019 it was hard to console myself with this intellectual point. I'm intrigued, though, by what you say about the power which an acknowledgement of history can hold. You cite E.P. Thompson's words on engaging with the past and how it enables us to 'understand more clearly what was lost, what was driven "underground", what is still unre-solved'.[7] Did proponents of social democracy in Milton Keynes use history in this way? If so, how can we learn from them?

GO: I agree that these intellectual points are sorry consolation; they're even worse at enacting change. History does not enact change, people do, though in the wake of defeat that reminder is cold comfort. At such times, though, we might find courage in the example of a not-too-distant history. History offers no blueprint, but it does attest to alternatives to a present that can otherwise seem overwhelming and fixed. I like that Thompson quotation for the way that it serves as a reminder of these connections between past achievements, present struggles, and future possibilities.

AC: There has been a lot of thought-provoking post-election discussion about how the dissipation of community institutions – places where people could gather together to imagine better futures – enabled the Conservatives to successfully fight and win a brazenly anti-political campaign.[8] There is an acknowledgement that the left must find strategies to build such grassroots institutions in order to regain a majoritarian appeal. And yet much of the book focuses on the actions of the kinds of professionals, planners and experts that are seemingly actively derided or materi-ally attacked by the Conservatives (and who themselves faced similar attacks in the 1960s!) So I wondered whether you could say anything about the role of grassroots institutions in the book. Might they ever be rebuilt – or do they have to be?

GO: The story of community development in the 1970s is one of the more tricky parts of the book. You're right that most chapters focus on public-sector profession-

als, showing how they adapted their tactics amid economic and political challenges – most importantly in their efforts to forestall the social polarisation they knew would result from Thatcher's sales of municipal housing.

But in the case of community development, the story looks rather different. The city invested heavily in community development, nurturing an astonishing variety of civic associations. But as residents organised to protest faulty housing and shoddy maintenance, these community workers found themselves besieged, rather than welcomed, by furious tenants. In response to this opposition, some figures within the city's authority began to rethink their commitment to community development.

So what is the lesson? In one sense, the episode induces humility about top-down, expert-led efforts at building community. But at the same time, it also reveals the power of grassroots organisations to enact change – after all, through collective action, these residents won redress of every grievance. I think this episode ultimately attests not to a failure of community, but rather to its vibrancy. Here we see evidence of a vibrant social-democratic polity, mindful of its rights and collectively claiming them. The episode attests not to the shattering of social democracy, but rather to the triumphant internalisation of its promise.

AC: One of the interesting things about the book is how it places Milton Keynes in global context. Milton Keynes Development Corporation became a 'prized consultant on global urban planning', securing 'lucrative global contracts' with governments in Nigeria, Egypt, Thailand, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and Oman, amongst others, and running a money-spinning professional development course at Cranfield Institute of Technology.[9] By contrast one of the key problems with housing in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been local councils signing 'redevelopment' contracts with international firms which end up making living and working in the community impossible for existing residents, and arguably fuelling a turn against globalisation and towards nativism. I wondered whether you had anything to say about this tension between the national and the global, both in terms of how it played out in Milton Keynes and contemporaneously.

GO: The *Guardian* published an article last year asking, 'Why is Britain so bad at planning cities?'[10] And few people in Britain need reminding of the dubious reputation of the post-war new towns. But other dimensions of British urban planning become clear if we adopt a wider perspective.

Throughout the twentieth century, Britain occupied a towering place in the world of urban planning, and its social housing sector was the largest in non-communist Europe. Developing out of England's garden city tradition, launched by Ebenezer Howard in 1898, Britain's new towns attest to the state's capacity to manage housing and development. So in addition to the very real problems that you raise, I want to call attention to this tradition, too: one in which British urban planning served as a model to governments around the world, as they sought to manage

population growth, economic distress, social dislocation, and, especially, their own housing crises.

AC: Some observers have argued that progressives must seriously consider working in coalition against the particularly aggressive form of Conservativism which appears to have triumphed.[11] Similar electoralist arguments were made after the 2016 EU referendum, whilst from a philosophical perspective David Marquand and others wished to highlight the commonalities between social democracy and liberalism with a view to ousting Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.[12] Historians are beginning to explore the varying cross-party origins of liberalism and neoliberalism, and also, to an extent, of the welfare state, whilst in the book you explicitly wish to offer us a more nuanced story about the evolution – and persistence – of social-democratic values in the post-war period.[13] Can or should the possibility of a better future be an exclusively Labour story to tell? Or could it be one that is shared, either tactically or in genuinely philosophical form?

GO: I believe that, in a first-past-the-post system, social-democratic hopes lie with Labour; but I also think that, in a multi-national state, Labour must work fraternally with like-minded parties. The goal, as you say, is to advance social-democratic aims, and the book shows how – as Thatcher recognised – victory lies in defining the terms within which all parties, whether they like it or not, must operate. I know this state of affairs seems a long way off but, when it comes to housing – a perennial public concern – the ability of social democrats to define the policy discourse might be closer than we think.

AC: Finally, although you wish to stress possibility and optimism in the conclusion of the book, 1979 functions as a particularly stark turning point in your telling – part of a number of 'foreclosures' that eventually led to the erosion of post-1945 social democracy. As I mentioned above, it is hard to feel differently forty years later. I felt it might be good to end with some of your thoughts for the future, and whether you can sum up what the book has to say about why we should cling to hope.

GO: I'll close with a confession: I set out, as you did, Alex, in your excellent special issue of *Contemporary British History* on 'New Times', to dislodge 1979 as such a stark turning point.[14] My evidence, unfortunately, had other plans. So not in all ways, but in significant ways, things did change in 1979.

But we also know that, unless you think Boris Johnson represents the end of history, things will change again. This certainty offers a final source of optimism. My favourite illustration of how seemingly permanent ideas can rapidly shift relates to our certainties about post-war architecture. It recently seemed obvious that mid-century modernism's tower blocks and flat roofs represented an affront to popular taste. And yet today, high modernist habitats such as Park Hill in Sheffield and Balfron Tower in London are being eagerly purchased by affluent professionals. The aberration in this history of taste increasingly consists not of the moment of

modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, but rather the moment of its repudiation in the 1980s and 1990s. Ideascapes can change rapidly.

Like those estates, unfashionable ideas about the role of the state can be repopulated again – though, like those estates, they will require serious refurbishing. As Kennetta Hammond Perry, Susan Pedersen, and others have shown, the welfare state was shot through with assumptions and restrictions along lines of race, gender, and class.[15] But social democracy, like life, is never static: it is, as it was, a dynamic, evolving, and ultimately – even in these most harrowing of times – hopeful project.

Guy Ortolano teaches at New York University. For more on his work, visit guy. ortolano.com.

Alex Campsie teaches at the University of Aberdeen and is a contributing editor for *Renewal*.

Notes

1   G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*, Cambridge University Press 2019, p17.

2   Ibid, p181.

3   J. Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: Individualism and the Search for Community in Post-war England*, Oxford University Press 2019.

4   N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*, University of Chicago Press 2014; B. McCann, *Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro*, Duke University Press, 2014.

5   *Thatcher's Progress*, pp32-34.

6   Ibid, p261.

7   E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz 1963, p229.

8   A. Chakrabortty, 'This Labour meltdown has been building for decades', *Guardian*, 14 December 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/14/labour-meltdown-decades-govern-votes; E. Gibbs, 'The Unmaking of the British Working Class: A Highly Provisional Thesis', *New Socialist*, 19 December 2019: https://newsocialist.org.uk/unmaking-of-the-british-working-class/; A. Niven, 'The north has changed. To win it back, Labour must recognise that', *Guardian*, 22 December 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/22/north-changed-labour-grassroots-activism-devolving-power; A. Ramsay, 'Boris Johnson made politics awful, then asked people to vote it away', openDemocracy, 22 December 2019: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/boris-johnson-made-politics-awful-then-asked-people-vote-it-away/.

9   *Thatcher's Progress*, p186.

10 D. Rudlin, 'Why is Britain so bad at planning cities?', *Guardian*, 11 April 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/apr/11/why-are-we-so-bad-at-planning-cities.

11 J. Gilbert, 'The only way Labour can win is by ditching "Labourism"', *Guardian*, 31 December 2019: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/31/only-way-labour-win-ditch-labourism-corbyn; C. Lewis, 'Labour can't change society on its own. We have to work with other parties', *Guardian*, 12 January 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/12/labour-cant-change-society-on-its-own-clive-lewis.

12 J. Gilbert, *The Progressive Alliance: Why Labour Needs It*, Compass 2017; D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Kinnock*, Heinemann 1991.

13 For example: B. Jackson, 'Currents of Neo-Liberalism: British Political Ideologies and the New Right, c.1955–1979', *English Historical Review*, 131 551, 2016; E.H.H. Green and D. Tanner (eds), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate*, Cambridge University Press 2007.

14 *New Times Revisited: Britain in the 1980s, Contemporary British History*, 31 2, 2017.

15 K.H. Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race*, Oxford University Press 2015; S. Pedersen, 'One-Man Ministry', *London Review of Books*, 40 3, 2018. On 'redlining' in British housing, in addition to *Thatcher's Progress* pp112, 137-138, see S. Wetherell, '"Redlining" the British City', *Renewal* 28 2, 2020.