If Eric Hobsbawm (1994) is right and the twentieth century effectively ended in 1991, then the new millennium was considerably less new by the time we were popping the corks, the balloons and, most importantly, the aspirin. And if he is also correct to portray the last century as the ‘age of extremes’, then where does this leave us? Have we become wise enough to avoid the mistakes of the past or have we simply been experiencing the interregnum before the emergence of new forms of extremism? Tony Giddens (1994) had the foresight to recognise that these alternatives are not necessarily exclusive, that reflexivity and fundamentalism are both coherent responses to the risks of our ‘second modernity’ (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994). This ambivalence has characterised the post-communist years, with the globalisation of deregulated markets, consumer values and western power being accompanied, first, by the mobilisation of social movements opposing corporate capitalism and then by the globalisation of insecurity, fear and revenge (Mouzelis, 2001).

Yet is Giddens (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) also correct to suppose that the NSD is the best means of charting a way through this landscape of confusion and ambiguity? Possibly, if we accept the following reasoning. All attempts to construct ideal societies have failed. The state utopias of the Left have led either to totalitarianism or to a crippling backlash of taxpayers, consumers and capital markets; the market utopias of the Right have led to social exclusion and civic decline. Therefore, we should not only attach ourselves to the political Centre, but also seek to radicalise that Centre by evading the conceptual barriers between Left and Right, public and private, state and market, justice and efficiency, security and flexibility, equality and freedom. It is this radicalisation that Giddens refers to as the NSD.1 By transcending these dichotomies – rather than simply trading off between them – we provide ourselves with an alternative not only to the ‘Old Left’ and ‘New Right’, but also to the siren
calls of nationalist, ethnic and religious fundamentalists. For if we can find a way to negotiate the risks and hazards of this second modernity, through the emotional and cultural empowerment of reflexive citizens, then we can better resist the nihilistic certainties of the ‘new extremisms’.

This is a powerful and compelling narrative but does it stand up to scrutiny? The purpose of this book is to engage with key features of the NSD in order to answer that question and to suggest why and how more radical alternatives can be developed. The aim of Part I is to criticise those key features in order to help us towards an outline of an alternative social philosophy in Part II, one that I shall term ‘ecosocial welfare’ or ‘ecowelfare’ for short. We begin in this first chapter by reviewing the main principles, justifications of and main objections to the NSD. Some of the following objections are then pursued at greater length in Chapters 2–4 as a means of setting us up for the arguments in Part II.

**New Labour**

A political ideology is a constellation of ‘nodes’ (ideas, principles and concepts) which establish a set of relations between one another that are constantly evolving, due to the theoretical developments of that ideology’s supporters and its critics, and to changing circumstances both in society and in other ideological formations. The NSD undoubtedly constitutes such an ideology. It contains (a) a critique of existing society, (b) an impression of a better one and (c) an explanation of how to get from (a) to (b) (Ball and Dagger, 1991). Yet the core components of the NSD are by no means unique to itself. Instead, it borrows its primary values and principles from established ideologies but rearranges them in such a way that a distinctive ideological position emerges nevertheless. This not only makes the NSD what Freeden (1996) calls a ‘thin’ ideology, in that its nodes are not peculiar to itself, but means that the relational network linking its core components is in an accelerated state of flux, given the nature of the NSD’s intervention into our social conjuncture. Indeed, some have argued that pragmatism and populism are the key features of the NSD (Powell, 2000) and that it is little more than a practice in search of a few philosophical trimmings that hardly constitute an ideology. While agreeing that the NSD lacks the focus and robustness of liberalism, socialism, feminism, etc., its possession of (a), (b) and (c) means that pragmatism is not its only feature.

And yet this pragmatism is perhaps the main problem with which we have to wrestle. How do we distil what new social democrats say and do into a coherent series of ideas? Do we treat the NSD merely as a political programme? Is the NSD merely a rhetorical device that governments have
employed in trying to square various circles? How do we name something as NSD in the first place? All of these questions are relevant, but my solution is to take the line of least resistance and examine the NSD in what arguably remains its purest form, that of Tony Blair’s post-1994 Labour Party and the ideas which have been deployed to both motivate and justify its approach. For whereas other ideologies cannot be reduced to the actions and pronouncements of political parties, it is the very thinness of the NSD which allows us to organise our analysis around the actions and discourse of political parties. And although there are certainly other recent governments which may qualify for the label – principally in the USA, Netherlands and Germany, as well as several countries in the Southern Hemisphere (Gledhill, 2001), especially New Zealand – it is in the UK that the NSD, and associated terms such as the ‘Third Way’, have been applied most often and most consistently.2,3 Of course, this solution is not ideal, as it might be said that, as with any ideology, the NSD has no pure form, for even within New Labour the influence of old social democracy has still been visible.

So for our purposes the first question we need to ask, ‘what is the NSD?’, can be reformulated as ‘what is new about “New Labour”?’, a question that requires to plot the party on the political graph. Once we have addressed this question we should be in a position to outline the NSD’s key principles and features (cf. Buckler, 2000).

First, let us dispense with two claims. The first claim is that there is no such thing as New Labour, i.e. that the party under Blair has been just as socialist/conservative (delete according to taste) as the Labour Parties of Attlee, Wilson, etc.; the second is that New Labour bears absolutely no relation to what preceded it. Both of these claims ignore the nature of ideology and the fact that the networks which relate nodes together are constantly evolving, as are the principles and concepts themselves. The first claim underestimates the scale of that evolution, whereas the second claim overestimates it by neglecting the continuities between present and past. Once we reject these claims we are left with the following six interpretations:

1 The party has frequently described itself as applying traditional values in a new context. What has changed are not the basic beliefs and ideals, but the social and economic environment within which they have to be realised, necessitating radically new policy instruments, practices and institutions. New Labour is new because the times are new and not the goals to be achieved (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996; Blair, 1998; cf. Blair and Schroder, 1999; Hombach, 2000).

2 Some academic commentators agree and go on to regard the continuities as outweighing the discontinuities (Rubinstein, 2000; Larkin,
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2001; Allender, 2001). However, contrary to its self-image, the Labour Party has never been particularly radical (except when out of power) because it has always had to appeal to middle-class voters and ensure that international capital is not scared away by the prospects of a Labour Government. Social democracy has always been a politics of ‘catch up’, of adaptation to economic and social developments, and so New Labour is not really that new, despite the undoubted weaknesses of traditional social democracy.

3 However, these views have been disputed by those such as Driver and Martell (1998, 2000, 2001; cf. Coates, 2001) who insist that what has changed is not simply the means that the party employs, but the ends that it attempts to achieve. What is new about New Labour are underlying values and principles that are substantially different from those held prior to Blair’s ascendancy. As such, New Labour is neither a social democratic party, as this has been traditionally conceived, but nor does it represent Thatcherism Mark II, since it retains an anti-Thatcherite emphasis. Instead, its politics are the politics of post-Thatcherism, i.e. an adaptation to the society and economy which Thatcherism engineered, and which involves a substantial leap to the Right, though with some tilting back towards the Left, albeit a Left that rejects socialism and embraces the market economy.

4 Others go further and insist that New Labour is effectively a kind of ‘Left Thatcherism’ in that it has accepted almost all of the radical Right agenda and has merely used the vocabulary of the Centre-Left to justify this surrender (Marxism Today, 1998; Mouffe, 2000; Heffernan, 2000; Callinicos, 2001).

5 Others have wondered whether New Labour is forming a Left version of Christian Democracy (Marquand, 1998). Having flourished across Europe, Christian Democracy is broadly on the Centre-Right, embodying the idea of a social market where everyone is able to participate in the market economy regardless of social background. Capitalism can be humanised through welfare institutions, strong families and strong communities without the need for large-scale upheaval. Although never really taking hold in Britain (though the paternalistic conservatism that Thatcher swept away might be construed in similar terms), New Labour could be thought of as a compromise between social and Christian Democracy (cf. Huntington and Bale, 2002).

6 Another interpretation suggests that New Labour is a reinvention of ‘new liberalism’ (Beer, 2001; cf. Freeden, 1999; Stears and White, 2001). New Liberalism flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and represented a shift away from classic liberalism in its recognition that individuals are socially interdependent. But because this interdepen-
dency is undermined by economic injustice, state action is required to rectify the flaws of capitalism, though a state which is still limited in scope and ambition lest the spaces of individual liberty be undermined. New liberalism had all but vanished by the First World War, after which British politics was dominated by a damaging stand-off between conservatism and socialism. But with the eventual discrediting of socialism, the way was open for a rejuvenation of new liberal ideas in the form of a social democratic politics that has divested itself of socialist myths. This is an interpretation which appeals to many within New Labour, convinced by David Marquand’s (1991) contention that conservatism has dominated British politics because progressives of the Centre and the Left allowed themselves to be divided throughout the twentieth century, as the latter yearned for a post-capitalist society that the former always knew to be illusory.

Which of these interpretations should we prefer? In fact, I do not think we can identify any of them as exclusively right or wrong, as each helps to temper the potential excesses of the others. The attempt to weave the above interpretations together looks something like this. New Labour has reconfigured rather than abandoned many of its previous beliefs and values (1), i.e. it has altered the relational network between principles rather than jettisoning old principles for new ones. This means that we should not lose sight of the historical continuities (2) and acknowledge that the Labour Party has usually been forced to play catch-up. However, whereas from the 1950s to the 1980s the party was always readapting to a consensus that it had initially shaped between 1945 and 1950, by the 1990s the Keynesian agenda had been dispelled by the Right and so the politics of catch-up led to the most substantial Rightward revision in the party’s history (Bara and Budge, 2001). Therefore, its reconfiguration was one of ends and not just means (3), so that its relational network came to resemble many aspects of Thatcherism (4) though this accommodation has been moderated by a paternalistic belief in the common good (5). So the party has abandoned all but the most harmless and general references to socialism, meaning that aspects of late nineteenth-century liberalism have been reinvented (6).

If this narrative is convincing then what does it tell us not just about New Labour, but about the NSD? First, it tells us that three conditions seem to be required for the NSD to have emerged:

- The Right must have adopted significant elements of both free market liberalism and social authoritarianism in its political programme (a combination which I will now refer to throughout this book as ‘conservatism’).4
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- The Right must be in the ascendancy, constituting an actual or potential threat to the existing political settlement.
- The Centre-Left movement must lack confidence in itself, be divided and/or social democracy must lack any real social and institutional roots to the point where it is unable or unwilling to resist the hegemonic formation of a new settlement, a settlement to which it eventually adapts its traditions and values.

Obviously, this is no more than an hypothesis which extrapolates from the UK’s experience and considerable research would be needed to assess the extent to which it applies to other examples of the NSD around the world. Nevertheless, the hypothesis suggests a second point. The ascendancy of a conservative agenda is only a necessary condition for a shift in the ideological spectrum. Even where this ascendancy is visible, it may nevertheless fail to alter the existing settlement if the Centre-Left holds firm and does not feel the need to dilute social democratic politics. I will return to this argument in Chapter 4, but the final point is this. The NSD is not merely an accommodation to conservatism, but a means by which the radical Right’s agenda is socially and economically embedded to a degree that the Right could not manage on its own. As Heffernan (2000: 175) puts it, ‘...the conservative agenda underpinning the politics of Thatcherism may even be strengthened by Labour in office: a “Nixon goes to China” syndrome, one which marks the abnegation of the social democratic project’.

Therefore, the principles of New Labour and the NSD are not just a reconfiguration of the relational network of social democratic principles, but a means by which conservative concepts and values are embedded across the ideological spectrum, further colonising the repertoires and domains of the social field. What continue to be recognisable Centre-Left concepts are given a conservative content that inhabits and converts the space long populated by what, as a signature of this colonisation, comes to be designated as ‘old social democracy’ (and ‘Old Labour’). The NSD is not equivalent to conservatism, but it is a conduit for conservatism: ‘social democracy, even when it is neoliberalized, is not neoliberal’ (Moschonas, 2002: 173). So, NSD principles are unremarkable in themselves. What is remarkable is the process to which they are being subject, due to the adaptive strategies of social democrats within a conservative context, a process which not only reconfigures those principles, but further embeds the radical Right hegemony that first impelled it. In short, what is new about the NSD is not so much the Rightward lurch of social democracy, but the ‘social democratisation’ of conservatism, i.e. the way in which, with the Centre ground having been dragged towards
The Right, market liberalism and social authoritarianism have been given a Centre-Left voice. What we will need to decide by the end of this chapter is whether this social democratisation represents a new politics or whether it is little more than a sophisticated surrender to the Right’s hegemony.

However, this account is to anticipate the critique that is pursued later on in this chapter and throughout Part I. Before examining it in more detail we obviously have to appreciate the NSD’s basic principles, again using New Labour as our exemplar.

Principles and justifications

The NSD is based upon five key principles: community, meritocracy, reciprocity, inclusion, pragmatism. Note that this section and the next – which presents the main objections to the NSD – are only intended to outline the main arguments that have emerged from the debate. The aim is simply to establish a framework that will be elaborated upon over the course of the next three chapters.

Community

Many commentators have noted the attachment of New Labour to community (Lund, 1999; Heron, 2001). At its crudest New Labour represents community as a third way between the attachments of the Old Left to collectivism and of the New Right to individualism, with the former being criticised for ignoring civil society and the latter for reducing civil society to the blind interactions of economic exchange (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998: 78–89). Community is offered as a virtue in obvious opposition to Thatcher’s proclamation that ‘there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families’, but avoids treating ‘the social’ as an abstract quality that abandons reference to the local and the private. Community therefore emphasises both the lived relations of family, neighbourhood and civic attachment, but also the broader social relations that make individuals interdependent and through which we express a need for ontological solidarity and belonging.

Because community is a notoriously vague, contested and all-purpose concept, there was an initial interest shown by New Labour in communitarianism, the political philosophy arguing that communal relations (Gemeinschaft) are constitutive of who we are and what we do, rather than being the contingent, ephemeral properties imagined by liberalism (Etzioni, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2001a: 81–4). The attraction of communitarian-
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ism was that it enabled New Labour to define community as distinguishable from the state and the market, while allowing it to develop an economics that utilises both the public and private spheres. Subsequently, New Labour has made more reference to ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 2000) and ‘stakeholding’, each term signifying the interactive, associative networks through which we participate in society and contribute to the enhancement of ‘human capital’ (skills, qualifications, employability), trust and bonds of cooperation. The essential intention though is to reconcile social cohesion with individual effort, traditional values with modern circumstances, local needs with global imperatives.

Meritocracy

As a reaction against what it sees as state collectivism, New Labour has also rejected the egalitarianism of the Old Left, regarding this as an inhibition on economic prosperity and individual creativity that smothers social and cultural diversity (Commission on Social Justice, 1994; Gray, 1996). However, the solution is not to stumble towards either the market libertarianism of the 1980s or the moral libertarianism of the 1960’s counter-culture. Instead, the emphasis should be on opportunity. This implies not only the removal of restrictions on aspiration and mobility, but also an attempt to embody the equal worth of individuals by providing everyone with an equal chance in life, i.e. real opportunities. This requires that everyone has an equal start regardless of social background, but not an equality of outcome since, by reducing the rewards for success and the penalties for failure, this would deter people from developing and applying their talents. Therefore, equal opportunities plus freedom of choice leads to a meritocratic system where inequalities are just, since they derive from individual efforts of will rather than brute luck or inheritance.

Equality therefore needs redefining in terms of life-chances and capabilities (or capacities) rather than simple redistribution from rich to poor. What matters is less what people possess than the use to which they can put their possessions. Because most deprivation is temporary (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999), what people need are non-material rather than simply material resources, such as income. Society consists of strata that are in a dynamic state of flux, with considerable individual mobility both up and down, rather than the rigid class hierarchies imagined by socialists and traditional social science. This necessitates an emphasis upon education, skills, training and retraining. The welfare state should be based upon ‘active welfare’, or provision that emphasises insertion into the labour market, rather than a ‘passive welfare’ that pays people to be idle.
Reciprocity

Similarly, whereas the Old Left based its ideas upon the social rights of citizenship and interpreted entitlements to welfare as unconditional (Plant, 1998), the NSD regards obligations as equally important. This does not mean abandoning the category of social rights, as the New Right advocated (Plant, 1993), but it does mean being clearer and firmer about attaching rights to responsibilities (Roche, 1992). This reciprocity mirrors the social interdependency that is expressed in the principle of community, since those who derive the benefits of belonging to a community have an obligation to contribute to the production of those benefits (White, 1999). Those who refuse to do so are ‘free-riders’, i.e. they accept the benefits but do not shoulder the corresponding burdens. Social membership therefore implies a combination of benefits and burdens and so a reciprocity of rights and responsibilities. It is a third way between a society consisting entirely of rights-holders or one consisting entirely of duty-holders, neither of which offers an adequate basis for social justice and progress.

This principle also provides support for active welfare. Benefits should be provided conditionally rather than unconditionally, based upon a willingness to work, train, job search, learn or perform some other valuable social contribution. Indeed, Tony Blair has referred to community as the product of opportunity in combination with responsibility (Levitas, 2000: 191). New Labour has gone as far as claiming that rights do not exist outside of the reciprocal relationships that are said to give them meaning: no rights without responsibilities (Giddens, 1998: 65). However, this reciprocity must consistently apply to all sectors of society, not only those at the bottom but those at the top. And responsible citizenship implies not only ‘negative’ actions (e.g. not dropping litter) and legalistic actions (e.g. paying your taxes), but also ‘positive’, civic actions (helpful interventions). Hence, New Labour’s encouragement of civic virtues such as civility, neighbourliness, charity and volunteering.

Inclusion

The Left has tended to treat exclusion from the social mainstream as a threshold of income: those below a given income line being defined as excluded. This is taken to be too simplistic, as there may well be some above the line who are excluded (pensioners and disabled people) and some below it who are not (students and academics). In short, whereas ‘poverty’ refers to the static measurements of income distribution, exclusion is a far more qualitative term, capturing the dynamic, subjective and life-chances aspect of social membership (Oppenheim, 1998). It enables us
to recognise the fracturing of public space and social norms due both to exclusion at the top, manifested most obviously in gated communities, and at the bottom as a result of welfare dependency. It follows that policies of social inclusion must involve much more than a redistribution of income, since this may only exacerbate the voluntary exclusion of both the affluent and the workshy. The objective should not be equality per se, but the inclusion of all in a new public space, through which common endeavours can be pursued and shared citizenship expressed (Dahrendorf, 1995; Giddens, 1998: 101–11).

To create this space we need to reconnect people to each other through a series of investment strategies (Mulgan, 1998). The labour market is of key importance and people must be equipped with the transferable skills and qualifications that are needed to thrive in the world of work. Through work people derive not only an income, but also self-esteem, social contacts, civic connectedness and ontological stability. However, free markets alone cannot achieve this. The state must ensure that work pays, by requiring employers to pay a minimum wage and by supplementing wages with in-work benefits or tax credits. Investment in potential rather than compensation for failure (passive welfare) should be the priority. Additionally, inclusion must not override the virtues of diversity and pluralism: communities should be empowered to take control of their fate based upon a knowledge of their local circumstances and needs.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is not something that counter-balances the above principles, it is itself a principle which eschews dogma (of Left and Right) in favour of evidence, verification and realism (Taylor-Gooby, 2000). Pragmatism allows government to be flexible, testing what does and does not work and changing accordingly, to adapt to alterations in society and the economy (particularly important in a global environment) and to combine the best features from a range of political ideas. Pragmatism is suited to a post-ideological age where we recognise that there is no perfect social model. Yet pragmatism is not necessarily a form of conservatism, but that which can be made to serve an ambitious and radical agenda.

This means that once we have chosen our goals, e.g. reinvestment in the public sector, we should not be inflexible about the means of delivering them (IPPR, 2001). Public goals require more than public means of delivery and it may well be that private companies and voluntary organisations are equally capable. This kind of pluralism ensures that the dangers of vested interests monopolising the public sector are avoided and that public, private and voluntary agencies can learn from one another. Ultimately, political pragmatism simply reflects the pragmatism
of ordinary people who are interested in ‘outcomes’ and do not much care about how the outcome is delivered. ‘What works’ must be the watchword and to automatically favour either the state over the market, or vice versa, is to prefer ideals to facts. But pragmatism is not only about the consumption of services, it is also that which favours a grassroots, bottom-up approach to social reform. Pragmatism allows people to make mistakes and learn from them. It is the learning which is important and not the imposition of a ‘one size fits all’ approach to social reorganisation.

In short, the NSD styles itself as a politics of the radical Centre that applies the principles of community, meritocracy, reciprocity, inclusion and pragmatism to a social environment shaped by conservative policies in an attempt to restructure society according to the social democratic belief in justice and opportunity for all within a humane form of capitalism. Is this the definition of the NSD with which we should be content or might the key objections to NSD arguments throw a different light on the matter?

**Objections**

What follows are the main criticisms of the NSD and New Labour, in response to the above principles and arguments, some of which we will return to over the course of the next few chapters. Note that these objections do not reject the above principles *per se*, merely what some see as their conservative content.

- Community only offers a middle way between collectivism/egalitarianism and individualism if these social philosophies are caricatured and simplified. Unless we recognise conflicts over its meaning and application, community is a vague concept that easily lends itself to romanticised visions of home, family and nation, perhaps explaining New Labour’s uneasy relationship with feminism (McRobbie, 2000; Franklin, 2000) and environmentalism (see Chapter 6).

- Because it is ultimately intended to be compatible with global capitalism, New Labour’s communitarianism tends to be authoritarian and moralistic rather than truly reflexive and heterogenous (Driver and Martell, 1997). Its commitment to pluralism is correspondingly shallow: excluding, *a priori*, calls for a more radical pluralism through the redistribution of wealth and ownership.

- Meritocracy is too weak a principle (Young, 1958). Genuine equality requires the removal of the structures that distribute power, wealth and capital unequally. To graft a few ‘meritocratic’ policies onto a class
society means that (1) existing structural inequalities are justified, because inequalities are now wrongly held to result from individual efforts, and (2) those at the social bottom are held responsible for their disadvantages because they obviously did not make proper use of the opportunities provided for them.

- Equality of opportunity is meaningless without some equalisation of outcomes, otherwise the former ossifies into the very system of undeserved advantage and disadvantage that it is meant to correct. ‘Outcome equality’ requires not just social protection (Giddens, 2002a: 39–40), but a substantial redistribution of material and cultural resources. Just distribution is not only a zero sum game, but it does depend upon some degree of redistribution from those with to those without.

- The distinction between active and passive welfare is spurious (Lister, 2001a). Welfare has always been ‘active’ in that there has always been some expectation that benefit claimants will work, hence the principle of social insurance. The distinction has become popular to disguise the fact that what is now called active welfare is little more than a synonym for workfare policies that often coerce and punish the victim. Economic efficacy is now supposedly gained by reforming the worker rather than reforming the market.

- The idea that the Old Left ignored the importance of duties is another caricature (Deacon, 2000: 15). In fact, the NSD merely updates the principle of ‘less eligibility’ to which state welfare has always subscribed, both pre- and post-Beveridge. What traditional social democrats recognised, unlike New Labour, was the duty of the state to structure the job market. And at its worst what New Labour has done is to decentralise responsibility while centralising power upon those who already hold it.

- Responsibility is far more complex than new social democrats imagine. For instance, it might be said that duties correlate to powers rather than to rights per se (see Chapter 2), so that a real ethic of social responsibility necessitates a far greater redistribution of power than that envisaged by the NSD. By ignoring this point, New Labour might also be accused of decentralising responsibility but of centralising power even where they have attempted to be most radical, e.g. devolution. Therefore, this is yet another emphasis that attempts to legitimate existing inequalities.

- Reciprocity, too, is much more complex. There are general and particular forms of reciprocity, as well as short-term and long-term versions. There are rights that do not correspond to duties and duties that do not correspond to rights. We might claim that because rights are fundamental to human welfare, they do give rise to unconditional
entitlements to those goods without which a minimal level of well-being cannot be maintained. Additionally, it could even be claimed that the NSD does not take responsibility seriously enough (Fitzpatrick, 2001b, 2001c) – see Chapters 2 and 7.

• New Labour has been extremely inconsistent in applying the principle of reciprocity. For instance, it has required claimants to jump through a number of hoops in order to qualify for state benefits, establishing continuity with the previous Conservative administrations, often justifying this as a means of empowerment (‘by forcing people into employment they will benefit in the long run’). However, it has imposed few responsibilities upon affluent households or powerful corporations and individuals.

• Equality cannot be redefined as inclusion without betraying the essential aims of distributive justice (Levitas, 1998: Chs 7–8). Exclusion may imply more than the lack of an income, but possessing a decent income is the sine qua non of effective social participation. To ignore this is to substitute selectivist policies for redistributive ones. It condemns many on low incomes to a revolving door of retraining, low-waged work, retraining... ad infinitum. This misidentifies the source of social exclusion and the social problems that are thereby generated and, by imagining that large degrees of income inequality are compatible with social inclusion, favours only a weak form of inclusion.

• The NSD incorporates conservative conceptions of dependency in three senses. First, it fetishises market forms of independence. Second, it treats dependency upon the state as the main problem. This misses other forms of dependency that may be equally damaging, e.g. upon the labour market and upon the family. Third, it identifies the welfare state as the essential problem rather than the welfare state’s market environment. The NSD’s solution is then to make the benefit system more selectivist and conditional in order to adapt it to the very flexible and polarised labour market which is the real origin of most social problems.

• Social participation is equated with participation in employment, neglecting the informal sector and the unpaid forms of work that lie outside the wage contract and so marginalising the contribution that domestic labour (still predominantly performed by women) makes to national and global wealth.

• Without reference to robust principles and ideals, pragmatism is nothing more than a dissimulated form of conservatism. Pragmatism has an ideological force depending upon the political context within which it is applied and whether that context is being accepted or challenged. Pragmatism is the ideology that dare not speak its name. In New Labour’s case, deciding ‘what works’ has involved introducing
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private sector ethics and practices into the public sector while there has been little hint of introducing the public into the private.

- The idea that what is important is output rather than the means of delivering the output rests upon a spurious distinction between ends and means: as if the nature of the latter does not affect that of the former. In reality, the means determine the ends (Leys, 2001: Ch. 4).

Introducing private provision into public services subtly alters the nature of the latter by introducing commercial, competitive and profit-oriented values and standards into the public sphere. This may or may not be desirable, but the issue of whether it is cannot be sidestepped through a ‘common sense’ appeal to pragmatism.

If these objections are fair – and we will return to some of them throughout Part I – then we need to redefine the NSD. The NSD is indeed a politics of the radical Centre, but a Centre that has been hegemonised by the Right and from which the NSD is reluctant to escape. The essential criticism of the NSD is therefore this.

Post-war social democracy achieved an equilibrium of accumulation and legitimation: the capitalist market provided the finance for welfare services which, in turn, provided this form of ‘welfare capitalism’ with justification and validation (O’Connor, 1973; Habermas, 1975). By the 1970s this equilibrium had become increasingly unstable: it was claimed by both Left and Right that private markets had reached the limits of their social potential and that the state could no longer guarantee social and cultural stability. The proposed solutions were different, however. According to the Left, if private systems of accumulation were exhausted, then it would be necessary to find non-private forms, to socialise the means of accumulation by taking more of the economy into public ownership. According to the Right, if the state could not guarantee legitimacy, then it would be necessary to privatise the means of legitimation, of loyalty. With the inability of social democratic governments to reconcile this disequilibrium, the blame for economic turmoil was placed upon the Left and so the solutions of the political Right prevailed. The effect was the increasing use of markets, quasi-markets and private forms of investment, priority given to low inflation rather than full employment, privatisation and increased inequality.

But the conservative agenda dealt not only with economics, but also with morals and social expectations. People were taught to expect less from each other. Social relations were individualised and structured as forms of contractual exchange; social disadvantage was pathologised and treated as a source of menace and risk. Oppositional voices were defeated, silenced, harried and overworked. The public sector was infused with market-like reforms: league tables, centralisation, competition, standard-
isolation, auditing, bureaucratisation, remote control managerialism, per-
petual reviews and reforms (Clarke et al., 2000), as well as diversionary
criticism and demoralisation. The result has been a privatisation not
only of the economy, but of culture and discourse, the means of self-
description, the inner economies of the self.

It is this privatisation of legitimisation, in both its economic and cultural
forms, that the NSD perpetuates. Whereas post-war social democracy
sought the social control of the economic, the NSD seeks the economic
control of society, helping the radical Right to reverse the political flow so
that the outer circuit of Figure 1.1 predominates over the inner. The NSD
‘reverses the political circuit’. The defeat of ‘old social democracy’ and the
conservatisation of the Centre has now been promoted by the social
democratisation of the Right’s hegemony. To put it simply, society is
reshaped by the above Centre-Left principles to fit the imperatives of the
free market. The NSD’s emphasis is certainly different and more pro-
gressive, but the consequence is the same: the desocialisation of society.

To repeat: the NSD is not equivalent to conservatism, but is an effective
conduit for it, an unwitting accomplice or useful idiot.

The case against New Labour and the NSD has been stated bluntly and
so the task now is to justify it, not by substantiating each and every aspect
of the above objections, but by concentrating upon those that are most
useful to the book’s aim and to the argument of Part II. In Chapter 2 we
examine the NSD in terms of justice and citizenship, Chapter 3 deals with
the state and the information society, while Chapter 4 furthers our under-
standing of the NSD by looking beyond New Labour to social democracy across Europe. But before we can initiate those discussions, we have to establish the basic case: that the NSD represents the conservatisation of the Centre and the social democratisation of conservatism, rather than anything more progressive.

The age of mainstreams

This basic case is established by looking at how and why the NSD conceives of politics and political struggle.

In the introductory chapter, I complained about those who simplified the history of social democracy. This simplification is performed by those who wish to distance themselves from the very tradition upon which they continue to draw and one consequence of this is that what they defend also ends up being simplified. Take the approach of Tony Giddens, for example. Giddens repeatedly succumbs to the temptation to homogenise his social democratic predecessors and peers. He ignores the extent to which the ‘old’ social democracy was already a complex negotiation between competing principles, though one that did not treat pragmatism as an end in itself (Callaghan, 2000; Pierson, 2001), and he overestimates the flexibility and reflexivity of the NSD. This overestimation is easily explained. New social democrats set out to collapse the conceptual and discursive distinctions between Left and Right, public and private, etc., but in so doing they have to elide the very real divisions, associations and identities which continue to exist and from which those distinctions derive their salience (Clift, 2001). Because new social democrats adopt the *vocabulary* of consensus they imagine that the *reality* of consensus must follow automatically (Fairclough, 1999). The NSD is therefore far more flexible and reflexive at the level of language than it has proved to be in practice. Indeed, it is far less flexible and reflexive than the old social democracy which, by recognising the structural depth of divisions such as class, is more able to effect a politics of reconciliation where consensus is (however imperfectly) built upon and through a recognition of enduring social conflict. By valuing the harmonies of big-tent politics, the NSD’s version of consensus is quite shallow and, at worst, helps to mask the power of corporate capitalism (Callinicos, 2001). In fact, because social harmony has not followed the harmonies they construct within discourse, new social democrats frequently adopt a patronising attitude towards those who disagree with them, distinguishing sharply between allies, those whose ‘therapy’ is not yet complete and those who are allegedly ‘incurable’ (Giddens, 2001: Ch. 2; 2002a: 10–28).
This explains why the ‘Third Way’ debate was ultimately a non-starter. By setting up a crude contrast between the Centre and what they took to be either the far Left or Right, Third Wayers have neglected the simple fact that there are multiple Centres and many different forms of social democracy (see Chapter 4). Giddens (2000: 31; 2001: 3) briefly considers this possibility only to reject it – since accepting it might imply that the old social democracy is not so redundant after all – by ultimately appealing to a *deus ex machina* that supposedly reinforces the superiority of Third Way politics: the advent of globalisation and information society as that which allegedly renders all other strategies obsolete (Giddens and Hutton, 2000: 45–51). As noted in the introduction, the NSD therefore appeals to a TINA logic (‘There Is No Alternative’) which represents the intolerant closure of the social imagination, what I have elsewhere called the ‘extremist Centre’ (Fitzpatrick, 2002a), in stark contrast to the pioneering self-image that it likes to project.

If, then, the NSD simplifies both itself and its predecessors, and if it overlooks the extent to which there are multiple Centres and multiple forms of social democracy, why is this and what are the potential implications?

In essence, the NSD bases itself upon a limited theory of politics and political struggle, the strategy of which is to search for a unified coalition that will support a pragmatic instrumentalism where politics is about efficient management and ‘what works’. Mouffe (2000: Ch. 5) characterises this approach as *politics without adversity*, the avoidance of enemy making in the belief that social partnership requires the absence of antagonism. In truth, new social democrats are perfectly willing to make enemies of those they consider to be ideologists, though because theirs has been a journey towards the political Right the ideologists have been identified more on the Left, i.e. in the gap left behind. Yet this kind of enemy making is inadequate because it ignores Mouffe’s point that liberal democracy depends upon *creative* disagreement, not pluralism for its own sake, but one that drives a mutual learning process across the social and political fields. This notion of creative dissent is important not only for liberal democracy, which is otherwise emptied of the resources it needs to constantly renew itself, but for those who wish to bend liberal democracy in the direction of their favoured principles and values. Social democrats lost the initiative in the 1970s, not because they failed to adapt to the new realities of market capitalism, but because they treated those ‘realities’ as inevitable and failed to reconfigure social democracy across a broader spectrum of movements, organisations and alliances that pull away from the reductive logic of free market capitalism (see Chapter 9). So far from representing a break with the past, the NSD replicates the worst
features of the old (Krieger, 1999: 170–1): a politics that yearns for the non-political.

So pluralism must not only be ‘external’ but ‘internal’, not only disagreement with political enemies, but also a constant search with friends for new forms of political friendship: a reflexive pluralism. What is objectionable about the NSD is not its alliance with Centrist politics – after the discrediting of centralised communism a retreat to the Centre was natural and inevitable – but its insistence that the meaning and implications of ‘the Centre’ are inevitably fixed around conservative configurations. Yet if politics must imply reflexive pluralism then there is no such thing as ‘the Centre’, since this is always subject to the flux of negotiation and contestation. This is not just the simple and obvious observation that ‘the Centre’ means different things in different countries, e.g. the Swedish Centre is still highly redistributive, whereas the American Centre eschews income equality; it is the point that even within particular political communities the Centre is a fractured alliance of forces that push and pull in opposing ideological directions. The Centre, then, is everywhere a multiplicity of ‘Centres’ and the agenda promoted by the NSD (where politics is reduced to managerial efficiency) is not determined for us, but is only one of many on offer. The NSD is the ideological attempt to colonise the space of social democracy once and for all and to banish those versions of Centre-Left politics that point us away from conservative capitalism.

Therefore, the definition of politics and struggle advanced by the NSD is very one-sided. Its vision of political struggle is the surmounting of disensus so that we can all sit around a table and agree on how to run the trains: struggle is a journey towards a closure, a final consensus. By contrast, a politics of reflexive pluralism regards struggle as a paradoxical, never-ending loop of ‘enclosure’ and ‘disclosure’. Enclosure implies the closing of social forms around one aspect of the social field; disclosure implies the breaking open of social enclosure by devising new descriptions, practices and alliances. Strategic disclosures then lead towards new forms of enclosure that, in turn, also require breaking open. So enclosure and disclosure are always interdependent and relative to one another: without disclosure, enclosure engenders social totalities (and eventually totalitarianism); without enclosure, disclosure is aimless, ineffectve and chimerical. This distinction therefore cuts across the ideological spectrum: there are both Left and Right versions of enclosure and disclosure. But in our present conjuncture, after the reforms of the last quarter century, what we face is a Right-wing closure.

Therefore, the case against the NSD is that by either not recognising this at all or, at best, underestimating it the NSD not only fails to ‘disclose’ conservatism, but goes some way towards consolidating the conservative enclosure (Hutton, 2002). Through the conservatisation of the Centre and
the social democratisation of the Right, the NSD conjures a totalitarianism of the mainstream.

We have received our first hint of why I refer to this as the age of mainstreams. Mainstreaming signifies the contemporary closure of social cognition, value and action around conservatism. But because this process is less visible in some countries than in others, a politics of the mainstream may also offer the potential for reopening the social field. In order to unpack this idea, and suggest what ‘reopening’ might imply, I have to say a bit more about political struggle.

I want to outline a theory of ‘open hegemony’, a notion of political struggle that derives from liberal, Marxist and post-structuralist perspectives on society, without being reducible to any one of them. The two key figures in this respect are Karl Popper and Antonio Gramsci.

Popper (1945) argued that only open societies could secure freedom and peace within the post-war world. For a society to be open, it must contain institutions and cultures that permit and encourage the scrutiny and criticism of leaders and the structures which lend them their authority. This requires an educated, liberal, free-thinking citizenry that does not allow closed hierarchies of power to be imposed upon the social order. Struggle is always the struggle of openness against closure.

Popper’s argument is a simple yet ingenious redescription of liberal tenets. Its strength, though, is also a debilitating weakness, since even at a basic level there are many different versions of liberalism and, by implication, different versions of the open society. By not following through this line of thought, and by rejecting Marxism upon spurious grounds (Hollis, 1994: 71–7), Popper invites the support of simplistic apologies and defenders. In particular, by regarding the state as the principal source of closure, Popper repeats the tendency of classic liberals to either overlook the dangers of market monopolies or even to prefer market domination as a barricade against statism (Hayek, 1982). Therefore, if the concept of openness is to be useful, then it must receive a treatment more sophisticated than that which Popper himself is willing to provide.

Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony is equally well known, denoting a form of domination effected either through the voluntary or forced consent of those dominated. This consent is secured because the dominant are able to project their particular interests, values and interpretations of the social world as common sense, as a neutral reflection of reality that is universally applicable. Such hegemony then allows the dominant to remake the world in their image, to confirm the universality of their worldview through a self-fulfilling reconstruction of society. To resist hegemonic dominance therefore requires counter-hegemonic strategies on the part of the dominated. Marxists should concern themselves not only with revolutionising the economic base, but also with
hegemonic struggle within civil society; indeed, the latter is a condition of the former.

Like Popper, Gramsci’s vision of society lends itself to simplification. If the overwhelming organising principle of society is a conflict between capital/bourgeoisie and labour/proletariat, then Gramsci’s interpretation of political struggle holds water. Yet if this conflict, however important, is just one of many, some of which intersect the capital/labour division and some of which do not, then hegemonic resistance becomes a much more complicated affair. This was the fundamental point made by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). If ‘the social’ is not reducible to an essential logic, then hegemony is no longer polarised along a class dimension, but is dispersed along manifold dimensions of identity and affiliation. Resisting oppression therefore requires a complex sociocultural critique that recognises the salience of non-class forms of domination. All struggle is profoundly political, since the political is not merely a set of representative mechanisms (liberalism) nor simply a reflection of economic dominance (Marxism).

Nevertheless, if this post-Marxist revision of Gramsci is persuasive, less persuasive is the post-structuralist alternative. As I will argue again in Chapter 9, by abandoning all reference to extra-contextual spaces, i.e. traditionless standards that enable us to judge traditions, post-structuralists leave themselves in something of a social vacuum. Take their response to those critical theorists such as Habermas who dare to imagine that they have theorised at least the outlines of the extra-contextual standards that post-structuralists deny exist. In rejecting such claims post-structuralists are neither able to deliver the knock-out blow that would dispel critical theory once and for all – since this strategy would undermine the agonistic pluralism that they support – but neither can they propose a rapprochement with critical theory, given the incommensurability of its premises.

We seem to be left in an impasse. A simple conception of the open society would be one populated only by free-market conservatives; and though a more complex reading of social openness might lead us towards the concept of hegemony this too is vulnerable to a simplistic appropriation. Yet how to devise more complex readings without falling into the traps that ensnared post-structuralists?

My solution is to propose a theory of open hegemony that captures the paradox of reflexive pluralism that has just been discussed. For political struggle redefined as an open hegemony, the ideal is neither openness nor utopia, but an oscillation that arcs elliptically between the two. The liberal ideal is admirable, but neglects the fact that attempts to curve the social grid around particular imperatives are inevitable and desirable: inevitable, because the grid’s contours are already shaped by
multiple gravities of power; desirable, because if an open society’s only rationale was to maintain its openness then it would quickly lose legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens (something that has arguably been happening in our ‘post-ideological age’). Therefore, openness is not the static property imagined by liberals, a redoubt against closure, but a perpetual fluctuation away from and towards itself.

Yet equally the horizon of openness must never be lost sight of. If the grid is allowed to curve totally around any one gravitational force, then it collapses in on itself, imploding into a totalitarian finality. Therefore hegemonisation must allow carry an alterior logic within itself, must never seek its own end. To repeat the point made in Fitzpatrick (2001a: 199), it is as dangerous to arrive at utopia as it is to avoid its call and utopianism must be a journey which avoids its own destination. Political struggle is therefore antimonious. It is the maintenance of a loop of enclosure/disclosure within which ideological principles and ideals, far from being abandoned, are activated. For as the loop circulates again and again, the aim is to approximate society more and more to one’s vision of the good, to drag the Centre towards yourself. But this requires not a postmodernist celebration of difference-for-the-sake-of-difference, but the willingness to prioritise some struggles above others based upon a reading of the contemporary conjuncture (see Chapter 6).

Against this interpretation of society and political struggle the conceptions of the NSD appear naive, constantly invoking the tyranny of three: once we had the statist egalitarianism of the Old Left which, because it failed, gave way to the New Right’s market libertarianism that wrecked society and so led electorates back towards social democracy, albeit one that must adapt to new social realities. On this reading, the ‘reopening’ of society is already underway due to the NSD’s ability to synthesise what were traditionally considered to be opposites and apply this lesson to social and economic developments. However, on my reading, the NSD is wrong on two counts: wrong about counter-hegemonisation and wrong in its cartographic reading of where we are.

According to the NSD, it has successfully turned society away from conservatism by accepting the reality (and often the desirability) of its reforms, but redirecting the resulting environment towards the goals of social inclusion and communal responsibility. Counter-hegemonisation therefore implies that in order to defeat your opponents you have to wear some of their clothes. At the beginning of the new century we are now travelling from welfare to social investment states, having been briefly diverted towards the libertarian market. But according to the above theory of open hegemony, counter-hegemonisation requires a degree of reflexive pluralism that new social democrats, in their determination to crowd out alternative social democratic traditions and possibilities, have
not come close to demonstrating. Counter-hegemonisation also needs a willingness to contrast what your opponents say with what they do. But by accepting much of what the radical Right has said and done, this contrast has been muted at best. New social democrats have played the game without trying to change many of the rules. For instance, it has appealed to a particular aspect of middle-class identity, the desire for security, but without a critique of privatisation and marketisation that would enable the goal of security to be redefined and allow other more progressive and cooperative aspects of middle-class identity to emerge and mobilise with other social groupings. Consequently, the NSD retains not only the economics of the Right, but also its moral authoritarianism and intolerance for dissent.

The NSD therefore confuses political struggle with electoral expediency: it assembles constituencies upon a middle ground that, having been shaped by the Right, is now held to be immutable. Its electoral successes have been impressive, but have not generated any long-term visions of social emancipation other than a process of permanent modernisation, or adaptation to social changes that are somehow held to evade political control. So the mainstream, the opposite of extremism that nevertheless replicates its exclusionary logic, its closure of social possibility, becomes the only acceptable reference point. The tyranny is internal, a dictatorship of the Centre reconfigured around the Right’s conservatism.

Yet as we shall see throughout this book the social grid has not imploded entirely and oppositional voices have refused to be silenced. The mainstream can also become a site of renaissance and renewal since the values which are strong enough to keep us tethered to the authoritarian market must also be strong enough to loosen the grip. The freedom which mutilates itself in the desire for more security, more consumption, more competition, is also a freedom that can recognise alternative forms of social life, can recognise because such recognition has been clearer in the past, articulated by forms of social democracy that continue to survive (see Chapter 4). Therefore, although we are not locked within the existing mainstream we must think from within and through it if we are to spy the political spaces that lie beyond. This is why I base my philosophical alternative upon social democratic traditions, though not the NSD which seeks to enclose those traditions around conservative silences.

**Conclusion**

To summarise: the NSD represents the conservatisation of the political Centre and the social democratisation of conservatism. While not equating to conservatism, it does represent the hegemonisation of the Right...
rather than a counter-hegemonisation to the Right. However, the mainstream is not necessarily closed around a conservative agenda, as there are potentially multiple versions of the political Centre and social democracy on offer. And although NSD purists want us to believe that all nations will travel down the road pioneered by Britain and America, this is by no means inevitable.

As such, I contend that the NSD is not a new politics, but is at best the first steps on a long march back towards truly progressive ideals, one from which valuable lessons can be learned, if only about how not to proceed. My argument in Part I is that ‘old’ social democratic traditions are far from exhausted and that the kind of principles outlined earlier can be genuinely reconfigured away from conservatism. Therefore, the disclosure of the social field does not mean abandoning social democracy, but does mean radicalising it in ways that the NSD has not begun to imagine.

Notes

1 Though his initial enthusiasm was for the term ‘Third Way’, one that makes occasional appearances in this book, he subsequently tempered this enthusiasm.
2 I am not going to make much reference to the ‘Third Way’ for reasons that will become clear later.
3 In short, the UK will be our main point of reference, but note that Chapter 3 will make some reference to America.
4 This risks upsetting those social, one-nation conservatives and Christian Democrats for whom the term bears different implications. However, this is a tradition of thought that makes few appearances in this book and so I feel able to appropriate the term. I am not going to offer a critique of conservatism directly though it is possible to infer such a critique from my analysis of the NSD.