The concept of the social draws together many of the core themes of this collection, especially human insecurity, the diminished provision of public goods, and the sustainability of social reproduction in an era of intensifying globalization. Globalization is a contested term perhaps best understood as a set of interactions whose uncertain parameters are, in many respects, historically unique and still unfolding. At a minimum, the many dimensions of contemporary globalization can be subsumed under two related processes – globality, the irreversible forces, many technological, that are breaking down barriers of time, space, and nation and fashioning the planet into a global community, and globalism, a contestable political posture that promotes a transnational worldview, philosophy of governance and institutional structures (Beck 2000: 1–3, 11–15). The prevailing version, neo-liberal globalism, prioritizes economic growth and market logics over all other goals and institutions of governance. With varying degrees of coercion, neo-liberal globalism seeks to enforce privatization, trade liberalization, the deregulation of capital, and the erosion of the public sector and of democratic control on all national polities.

The contemporary world is marked by a deep and perilous gap between the promises of neo-liberal globalism, and the insecurities of daily life for the majority of humankind. For more than two decades, global and national policy elites have shared an unprecedented consensus concerning the most appropriate set of public policies to achieve economic growth and human development on a global scale. Armed with forceful critiques of the national regulation of markets, the welfare state, and big government, neo-liberal economists, housed in the think-tanks and international financial institutions of the globalist North, contrived what can only be understood as a preliminary
experiment in global neo-liberal governance. Also termed economic globalization and the Washington consensus, neo-liberal globalism has been imposed on the global South and the former Communist bloc under the terms of Structural Adjustment Policies and Poverty Reduction Strategies and advanced everywhere through the institutional mechanisms of new constitutionalism (Gill 1995b). This legally binding international regulatory regime aspires to create markets where none existed before, to construct an unfettered global market and globally integrated production processes that transcend national boundaries and controls, and to facilitate the spontaneous flow of capital to every corner of the planet.

Almost a generation after its implementation, however, this most recent experiment in unfettered economic liberalism is now widely understood as an unsustainable blueprint for governance in a globalizing era. The unleashing and empowerment of market forces on a global scale as well as the application of neo-liberal precepts on local terrains and cultures have exacted a heavy toll on individuals, families, and communities, intensifying the desperation of poverty, opening a yawning gulf between the rich and the poor, both within and between countries, and fuelling political alienation, insecurity, and violence everywhere (Brodie 2003). The ultimate measures of good governance, human development and security, have never been more elusive for the vast majority of humankind. For example, the 2002 UNDP Human Development Report describes worldwide levels of inequality as “grotesque” with poverty deepening among the poorest of the poor and the income gap between countries of the globalist North and the global South widening to record proportions (UNDP 2002: 18–19). In the past two decades, the number of countries scarred by extreme inequalities in income distribution has doubled to include approximately one-quarter of all countries (Culpeper 2002: 3). In record time, neo-liberal globalism has seriously aggravated old social problems such as unemployment and inequality and created new ones; among them, social dislocation and exclusion at unprecedented levels, unsustainable pressures on the fragile processes of social reproduction, and the marginalization of countries and entire continents (Amin 2000: 613). The smug pronouncement of the 1980s that “there is no alternative” to neo-liberal globalism has given way in the early twenty-first century to a belated recognition of the many failures of market-based governance and of the necessity of building a new consensus around a different governing strategy capable of underwriting some measure of human security on a global scale.

As this chapter describes, the current era is not the first time when political communities have been forced to temper the vagaries of market fundamentalism. Threats to human security exacted by the first great era of laissez-faire were progressively countered through state regulation, public ownership and the enactment of the social – a shifting terrain of political struggle and public policy focused on individual and societal protection as well as the promotion of social cohesion and political stability (Brodie 2002a). Such critical governing