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New Labour’s Politics of the Hard-working Family

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This chapter uses the case of New Labour’s family politics to investigate the general claim that the party rejects a social democratic politics ‘grounded in collective agency, attachments, and interests’ (Krieger, 1999, p. 19). It argues that New Labour has not abandoned the attempt to construct political subjects, as its politics both presupposes the existence of bonds of community and seeks to strengthen them. This is, in fact, the core of Blair’s ‘social-ism’: an ethical judgement that individuals are socially interdependent human beings who owe a duty to one another and to a broader society (Blair, 1994, p. 4). But does the displacement from class to the notoriously slippery concept of community leave the meaning of this collectivity radically unspecified, and therefore incapable of constituting lasting attachments (Krieger, 1999, p. 160)? I argue that it does not, because the particular case of the ‘hard-working family’ is promulgated as typical of the universal notion of community, providing it with a concrete representation. My main thesis, then, is that the ‘hard-working family’ has emerged as the principle subject posited by New Labour politics. This marks the abandonment of the working man (and his dependants) as Labourism’s historical subject. As Mandelson and Liddle put it, ‘Whereas the old left saw its job as to represent trade unions, pressure groups and the “working class” ... New Labour stands for the ordinary families who work hard and play by the rules’ (1996, p. 18).

This also allows for a new perspective on the debates within social policy, which have concentrated on the tensions and contradictions between New Labour’s politics of the family and its welfare policies that emphasize work (for example, Levitas, 1998; Driver and Martell, 2002). There is general agreement that these positions conflict, although the degree to which this is the case is a matter of some continuing controversy. What this debate overlooks, however, is an understanding of how these ‘obvious’ contradictions are experienced as coherent parts of the same New Labour project, tied together by the notion of the ‘hard-working family’. This can, in part, be explained
by the nature of political discourses themselves – which can tolerate high levels of logical inconsistency in terms of both their conceptual morphology and the types of subject they promote (Freeden, 1996, p. 71; Laclau, 1977, p. 104). It also points to a significant change in the way that policy is now formulated: 'New Labour is perhaps the first government genuinely committed to the view that presentation is part of the process of policy formation' (Franklin, 1998, p. 4; Fairclough, 2000, p. 122). This dimension should not be ignored, because it impacts upon the quality of the contribution policy scholars can make.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the dislocation of Labour and European social democracy, and its impact upon the class-based agency that the parties of the West European left traditionally privileged. The aim is to show how an analysis of structures and institutions can provide political discourse analysts with a useful resource for identifying points of discursive concentration. This is also, implicitly, a response to the accusation that discourse analysis is 'subjectivist' and privileges agency over structure (for example, Dallmayr, 1989, p. 131).2

What such an analysis cannot offer, however, is an understanding of how these changes have been interpreted by the main thinkers who have influenced New Labour. From the outset, New Labour has drawn upon and articulated two conflicting analyses of family change: the social conservatism associated with Etzioni and the notion of the post-traditionalist (or 'democratic') family that informs reflexive sociology (Deacon and Mann, 1997, 1999). New Labour in general, and Blair in particular, are usually seen as being closer to Etzioni on this point, viewing the family as a counterbalance to flexibility and change rather than an expression of it (Driver and Martell, 2002, p. 48).

The analysis of these tensions within New Labour discourse is now well advanced in the social policy literature. What is so far lacking, however, is an appreciation of how these divergent strands come to be represented as part of the same political project. It is at this point that I introduce the notion of the 'hard-working family' as the nodal point which organizes New Labour's discourse on work and the family, as well as holding together the contending strands of New Labour's communitarian values, as mapped on a liberal-authoritarian dimension.3

Broadly speaking, the tensions that arise at the level of public philosophy and sociological analysis4 are reconciled at the level of popular discourse. The 'hard-working family' entered New Labour discourse via its political marketing operation, but moves to integrate presentation into the political process have resulted in its holding an important role in organizing New Labour discourse. In particular, I show how the hard-working family gives substance to the empty signifier of 'community', and serves as an important locus for New Labour's development of a 'value'-driven rather than 'class'-driven politics.