This book has explored the ways in which the exclusive nature of associations of family, community and place are being challenged and reconfigured by alternative social relationships involving local and global political movements, urban voluntary associations, and new face-to-face and computer-mediated forms of belonging. New social ties are characterised as thinned out, fluid and transient. Yet they are also often expressed as intense associations and offer possibilities for confronting old inequalities. My central argument is that a friendship discourse is being used as a way of managing these rapid changes in social ties. Friendship’s flexibility and adaptability ensures that it appeals to different and sometimes contradictory discourses and social trends: neoliberal discourses and processes of individualisation as well as discourses of equality, justice and democracy. I argue that friendship is being monitored as a form of governance in Western societies, within a social capital discourse. And, conversely, by offering a discursive framework for claiming intimate relationships as non-hierarchical, friendship becomes a powerful metaphor for the postmodern condition. Alongside new, disembedded ‘postsocial relations’ mediated by Internet and cell phone technology, traditional ties are being reshaped not only by informality, speed and interactions over distance but by new ideas of the ‘self’.

The quality of kin relationships is being gauged by the moral value of friendship. In turn, friendships are increasingly being authenticated by association with the alluring and nostalgic aspects of family and community bonds. The deployment of the metaphor of friendship to describe family relationships serves, then, a chain of aspirations within the search for the pure relationship. However, while friendship signifies a challenge to old hierarchies, this bond contains no obligations or guarantees of responsibility and guardianship in the way that older, traditional
ties such as ‘family’ and community have done. The problem with friendship is that mutual trust, interdependence and care for others are apparently undermined by the fluid and indecisive nature of this personal tie. Friendship is unable to call upon the same kinds of legal and bureaucratic regulations that privilege and preserve kin relations over non-kin relationships.

The fear among scholars of postmodernity is that the culture of individualism, in which the celebrated concept of friendship is anchored, is undermining the moral regulation of individuals and may be leading to moral indifference. The literature on subjectivity thinking about the modern and postmodern individual is conceptualised in terms of relational inadequacies. As Knorr-Cetina (2001: 525) states, the individual is characterised as ‘uprooted’, ‘disembedded’, ‘thrown back upon its own resources’, ‘inward turning’, ‘individualised’, ‘atomised’, ‘ontologically insecure’. This subject is now signified as self-reliant yet potentially confused and apathetic. The precarious nature of this set of social conditions highlights the urgency of a common moral framework for connecting people together.

These issues are focused on in this final chapter by addressing the problems of trust, justice and care associated with new, fluid and elective social ties. Higher divorce rates and a crisis of care of both children and the elderly are trends coinciding with new-found freedoms, increasing elective relationships and women’s growing autonomy. These concerns lead to a questioning of the ideological and physical onus placed on them to take responsibility for caring for dependents. Not only is the level of trustworthiness of non-face-to-face interaction, such as Internet-initiated communication, brought into sharp relief but so is the level of trust in governments, political leaders during a period when leadership and hierarchy are being questioned. Trust in the integrity of the self and of others cannot be taken for granted in an individual-centred society of opportunism. Giddens (1991) argues that a new type of politics is needed to deal with the rise of new uncertainties, knowledges and social movements brought about by globalisation, expanded self-reflexivity and a post-traditional society. He argues that life politics must restore solidarity and recover or devise new traditions to create a meaningful context for people’s lives. For Giddens, only through the creation of a new politics can trust be generated. This new, radical politics involves a revaluation of the ways in which we care for citizens and share out the material resources to support the collective well-being of members of society in the form of the modern welfare state.

In the following section, I look at the ways that ‘trust’ is being defined, measured and interpreted by governments today. Trust is being conceived