‘Ecology, Political Economy, New Labour’

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‘Meet the new boss
same as the old boss’

Introduction
The election of New Labour in 1997 opened up for many the possibility that the economic strategy of the British state could be changed away from the neoliberalism which had prevailed. While there is a debate (on which more below) about the extent to which Labour’s ‘modernization’ amounted effectively to an accommodation to the neoliberalism of the Thatcher and Major governments, the claims to a novel political-economic strategy implied in the name ‘New’ Labour, and also in Blair’s attachment to the ‘Third Way’ between neoliberalism and old-style social democracy, has opened up a discursive space where alternatives to neoliberalism can be discussed. A number of commentators have effectively argued that the ‘Third Way’ is a thinly veiled front for a government strategy which has many more continuities with previous Conservative governments than it has differences. As we will outline below, we are largely persuaded by this interpretation. Yet Blair’s ideological rhetoric invoking an alternative approach has invited politicians, political commentators, activists of various hues and academics alike to debate the nature of any emerging alternative to neoliberalism which is, should or could emerge.

At the same time, however, the place of ecology in the way in which this opened discursive space has been used is rather difficult to discern. Critics of New Labour, whose interpretation of New Labour as neoliberalism (Hay terms this ‘Thatcherite revisionism’, 1999: Ch. 2) rarely discuss ecological questions (and where they do, the account is not particularly convincing). And it has also been clear that while New Labour itself can make positivesounding noises about the environment, such concerns are peripheral to the core of the New Labour project.

1 This paper is in part a development of Paterson (1999), which elaborated the ecological limits of the social democracy implicit or often explicit in works arguing that globalisation is not occurring, and Barry (1999a) which developed a theory of ‘green political economy’. It is also part of a larger project on ecology and political economy that both authors are engaged in.

2 This epigram was conceived before we realised that George W bush had used it in his US presidential campaign. It does seem odd that it was used by him. As one letter in the Guardian stated, and apposite here, Bush might have been better using The Buzzcock’s ‘Sooner or later, you’re going to have to listen to Ralph Nader’.
So our concern here is with the place of ecology in contemporary thought concerning political economy, taking debates about New Labour as the starting point. We argue that neither New Labour nor its main critics on the Left who have opened up the space for innovative thinking about political economy, adequately understand the implications of ecological questions for political economy, and suggest some starting points for understanding the connections here.

Our starting point for such an inquiry is Harvey’s assertion that ‘all socio-political projects are simultaneously ecological ones, and vice versa’ (Harvey 1993: 39). New Labour and its critics need interpreting in this way. Our question is therefore not simply about New Labour’s environmental policy (although that becomes a part of the exercise) but more an inquiry into the ecology of its accumulation strategy. In what ways to the core of Labour’s political-economic strategy (and those of its main critics on the Left) presume certain sorts of throughput and flows of materials and energy in the economy, and shape the trajectory of that throughput?

The environment in New Labour’s strategy
In the run up to the election in 1997, the Labour Party made noises which were interpreted by commentators that its environmental policies would be significantly different to those of the outgoing government. Consequently, expectations about New Labour’s performance in environmental terms were, while dampened (as New Labour worked hard to diminish expectations amongst their core supporters tirelessly before their election victory), nevertheless considerable. Many believed that the Labour government elected in 1997 would deliver significant shifts in key areas of policy affecting environmental performance. In particular, such optimism was felt in areas such as transport and its consequences, climate change (with Labour prepared to commit the UK to significantly more stringent CO2 emissions targets than the Conservatives, were, and to play a more active role in the international diplomacy on global warming), energy policy more generally, and overseas environmental aid (with the ‘ethical’ foreign policy) (e.g. Jacobs 1999; Jordan 2000).

In addition, the government had seemed to start to understand the necessity of integrating environmental questions in the core business of government. Thus Tony Blair, shortly after the election, proclaimed that governments should ‘make the process of government green. The environment must … be integrated in to all our decisions, regardless of sector. They must be in at the start, not bolted on later’ (as quoted in Jordan 2000: 257). Within New Labour discourse, environmental concerns were thus regarded as a classic instance of what they termed the need for ‘joined up’ government (ibid.: 258; Cabinet Office 1999). The government implemented a number of institutional reorganisations when in office in line with these claims. Most notable have been the creation of the ‘superministry’ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), and a cross-departmental Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) designed to look at how all department’s practices are in line with overall objectives in this regard (ibid.: 260-1). In other words, at least rhetorically, there is an understanding of the interconnections between environmental policies and other aspects of government policy, and the need to think about government strategy as a whole in terms of its environmental consequences.

But fairly quickly, such optimism has subsided. As outlined by Michael Jacobs, General Secretary of the Fabian Society and a well known writer on environmental politics, in a Fabian pamphlet, ‘it is evident that New Labour is not comfortable with the environment as a political issue’ (1999; 1). Jacobs’ pamphlet, Environmental modernisation, is an attempt both to show why New Labour has been hesitant and failed to deal with various environmental
policy areas adequately, and to show how Labour could develop a much more ambitious set of environmental policies, within its own ‘Third Way’ framework.

Sticking (for the moment at least) to environmental policy narrowly construed, three policy arenas are perhaps worth exploring to illustrate the disappointment and some of its political features: transport, GM foods, and energy policy/climate change policy.

Transport
As Jordan suggests, transport could be taken as a test case both of the novelty of ‘Third Way’ politics and of its environmental commitments (Jordan 2000: 268-9). For the former, it represents a classic balancing of rights and responsibilities characteristic of Third Way rhetoric. For the latter, ‘there is no better example of the need for better inter-departmental co-ordination than transport policy’ (ibid.: 268). Labour came into office in a context of significant problems concerning transport (road congestion, roads protests, chronic problems in the rail network, in particular) and a set of policies designed to deal with these problems. Many of these policies formed a significant part of environmentalists’ optimism concerning the incoming government. They aimed to reduce car use, reduce CO2 emissions from transport, increase use and provision of public transport. These would not only meet Labour’s environmental commitments, but were also dealt with in the context of their approach to ‘social exclusion’ (Third Way-speak for poverty).

One of the problems that became quickly apparent was that despite the attempts to portray their policies as conflict-free, favouring everyone, conflicts within government surfaced rapidly. John Prescott, whose commitment in this area was relatively strong, was ostensibly in charge of transport policy. However, conflicts between Prescott and Blair surfaced early on, with the Prime Minister concerned that the agreed policies would alienate sections of the electorate on which the New Labour project was held to depend. While this section was perhaps most ubiquitously known as ‘Middle England’, coming a close second has been the phrase ‘Mondeo man’ (Jordan 2000: 270; Hay 1999: 97), revealing much about the consumerist assumptions of Labour’s electoral strategy. ‘Much to his (Prescott’s) annoyance, Blair has intervened on more than one occasion to pacify the anxious car drivers of Middle England, personified by the archetypal “Mondeo Man” who bore him to power in 1997’, writes Jordan (2000: 270).

As a consequence, while transport policy has been noticeably different to that of the Conservatives, with increased spending on public transport (much of it late in the day, in the spending review announcements by Gordon Brown in July), re-regulation of the privatised rail industry, and legislation facilitating congestion charging in city centres, it has been significantly less ambitious and aggressively pursued than even John Prescott would have wanted. Key legislation facilitating the full creation of a Strategic Rail Authority and other measures have been greatly delayed. The generalised commitment to reduce car use has not been followed up with specific targets against which to judge progress in this regard.

New Labour and GM Foods
One of the reasons for the degree of support within the New Labour government for the biotechnology industry and GM foods, even in the face of a sceptical public which rejects them, is that they fit very neatly with New Labour's ‘third way’ ideological worldview, and its
commitment to economic globalisation. There are various factors which make biotechnology compatible with the ‘third way’ include.

First, biotechnology is a ‘knowledge-based’ economic activity, and thus is a perfect example of the type of industry that New Labour in general, and Tony Blair in particular, sees as crucial to Britain, and Europe, in the future. The prominent role played by the United Kingdom in the recent Lisbon ‘e-commerce’ European Summit, is a good example of its conviction about and commitment to the knowledge economy. In reference to biotechnology, at the same time, the Blair government is aware of how while Britain is good at scientific invention, primary research and discovery, in comparison to the US, it does not have the same success in terms of the commercial exploitation of British-based and funded science. As the recent Nuffield Council on Bioethics Report on GM crops noted, “it has been recognised that the UK has in the past been much more effective at scientific discovery than commercial exploitation. This has led to much recent emphasis on wealth creation in the prioritisation of research targets” (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 1999: 43).

Second, biotechnology also fits the New Labour ‘globalisation’ story in a number of ways. Firstly, given the competitive market for biotechnology (estimates are that the United Kingdom biotech industry could be worth £ billion in 20 years- FIND SOURCE), it is imperative that the United Kingdom maintain its comparative advantage in the industry. As it happens the competitive advantage Britain does have is not in relation to GM foods, but medical applications of genetic engineering. Secondly, economic globalisation means that there is a huge potential market for British-produced GM technology and its applications.

Third, preference for ‘expert-led’ and centralised forms of policy formulation, recommendation and decision-making. Here the appointment and subsequent controversy over the membership of the official advisory group on biotechnology is illustrative. Some members of the panel had links with the biotechnology industry, and there was a token member from the anti-GM side.

Fourth, GM technology as part of a putative ecological modernization/environmental modernisation New Labour policy framework for the environment, the basis principle of which is that policies aimed at ecological sustainability/ sustainable development and economic competitiveness and growth are compatible rather than mutually exclusive (Jacobs, 1999).

This fits with the New Labour preference for 'supply side' solutions, often technologically based, as in the case of biotechnology, rather than policy approaches which centre around issues distribution (i.e. policies concerned with social or distributive justice). That is, the 'third way' is focused on wealth (and welfare) production rather than its distribution, and this more than anything perhaps is what gives New Labour its 'post-socialist' complexion, and explains why it is regarded as more ‘pro-business’ as compared with the party 10 years ago, and indeed, in comparison with the current Conservative party.

The main point about supply side solutions and technologically-based policies is that often the do not have the same socio-economic effects as distributive policies which for example require transfers from the rich to the poor. While of course no policy, whether technologically-based or not does not have socio-economic effects, the advantage of these supply-side approaches is that they do not require big changes in the distribution of power in
society, or any restructuring of political or economic institutions and relationships, and above all they promise policies the effect of which is that ‘everyone gains’ (both rich and poor, both the powerful and the powerless etc.) in keeping with the standard (liberal) Pareto optimality criterion. Supply side solutions are thus more politically acceptable in that they do not challenge or require major alternations in socio-economic inequalities or the distribution of power in society. In this, as in so many other respects, the New Labour project has more in common with the previous Thatcherite project which pioneered supply side politics in the UK.

However, while the vast majority of the debate about biotechnology has so far focused on GM foods, the reality of the biotechnology industry in the United Kingdom is that:

a) more people are employed in the pharmaceutical and medical application of biotech than in agricultural application. Of the 35-40,000 jobs in the biotechnology industry, only 3,000 are dedicated to agriculture (Hansard, 1999).

b) there is considerably more public support for medical biotechnology development and applications. For example, a MORI poll conducted for Novartis UK, in September 1999, found that, “the public seemingly approves of scientific advances that bring medical benefits more than those advances that apply to food, agriculture and the environment” (MORI, 1999).

Indeed, approval for the medical uses of biotechnology extends to some of the environmental groups who are strongly campaigning against GM foods. For example, Friends of the Earth (UK), are keen to distinguish GM foods from GM medicine,

There is an important distinction between medical and food uses: medical applications are usually contained, and take place with the consent of the patient, while GM food is effectively being forced into the food chain...So the benefits from medical uses of GM should not be used to justify GM foods. While the use of the this technology in medicine may be responsible and accepted, the modification of our food and crops has raised substantial concern (Friends of the Earth, 1999).

So, on the face of it, it seems rather odd that the British government, in the face of public concern about food and agricultural applications of biotechnology (in which the United Kingdom does not have a comparative advantage, nor a significant employment stake), should have so strongly supported GM foods, and not sought to defend biotechnology through introducing and highlighting the pharmaceutical and medical applications of it to the debate.

At the same time, it is clear that the whole issue of GM foods has created and/or revealed tensions with the Government. For example, the recently published Sixth Report of the British Government Panel on Sustainable Development had a section on ‘Ethics of Genetic Modification’ (2000: 14-15). In it, the Panel criticises the Government’s Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP) suggestion of the principle of ‘substantial equivalence’ as the main principle upon which to make judgements about GM foods. The report states that, “The Government must do all within its power to evaluate the consequences of GMOs, in our diet and in the environment, before authorising their release for agricultural and other commercial purposes. The principle of ‘substantial equivalence’ should be questioned and testing methodologies for GM foods developed” (British Government Panel on Sustainable Development, 2000: 14; emphasis added). This critique of
substantial equivalence is in line with the arguments of other interest and lobby groups against GM foods, such as the Food Ethics Council and various environmental groups. However, the British Medical Association has also endorsed this critique of substantial equivalence. It has stated that, “certain novel genes inserted into food may cause problems to humans is a real possibility, and 'substantial equivalence' is a rule which can be used to evade this biological fact” (BMA, 1999: 8).

The Sixth Report of the British Government Panel on Sustainable Development, echoing the view that the precautionary principle should be the main basis upon which decisions are made about GM, concludes that, “The burden of proof must lie with those who are proposing to introduce GMOs into the natural environment, though there must be independent scrutiny of this work” (ibid.: 15). It also suggests that,

there should also be open debate on the benefits and hazards of GMOs. This should include their use in poor countries, and the danger of biotechnology companies using monopoly positions to limit biodiversity and establish patents on variants of natural products. In such debate there should also be consideration of the alternatives to GMOs, including organic agriculture, and the need to maintain wild life and the good health of the natural environment in all its complexity (ibid.: 14).

This appeal to organic agriculture as an alternative and reaction to GM foods is something that is also raised by Michael Jacobs’ recent Fabian pamphlet *Environmental Modernisation*, discussed further below.

English Nature (the state body charged with the conservation of the English environment and countryside), has also made statements which are at odds with some of the more pro-GM food stances of other parts of Government. In a position statement on GM, updated this year, “English Nature recognises that the use of some genetically modified crops (such as those modified for fungal resistance and insect tolerance) may have potential benefits for farmland wildlife, particularly if their use results in better targeted or lower impact of agrochemicals. However, so far there appears to be little evidence that such benefits have been realised” (English Nature, 2000). English Nature also expressed concern (one shared by almost all the groups and interests opposed to GM foods) that GM agriculture would continue the shift towards even more intensive forms of agriculture and food production, and the potentially negative effects of this on remaining ecological biodiversity. Its view is that,

Using certain types of GM crops has the potential to reduce biodiversity further by increasing agricultural intensification. English Nature believes there should be careful assessment of the risks to, and implications for, biodiversity and for the environment generally before decisions are made on the commercial release of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) (English Nature, 2000).

Thus, all in all, the British Government is faced with a public overwhelmingly against GM foods, divided within itself about it, and seemingly unable or unwilling to shift the debate about biotechnology towards medical as opposed to agricultural and food applications.

**Energy Policy and Climate Change**
Another policy arena in which such contradictions emerged concerned energy policy. The government committed the UK to aggressive reductions in CO2 emissions, of 20% by 2010 (DETR 2000). John Prescott personally played an important role in forging the deal at Kyoto in November-December which resulted in the first international legally binding targets on emissions of CO2 and other greenhouse gases. But at the same time, the government pursued an energy policy (as well as of course a transport policy, as above) which undermined the likelihood of achieving this target, and thus the basis of the UK’s professed leadership on climate change.

With the exception of a windfall tax on the profits of selected privatised utilities, and a moratorium on new gas-fired power stations (to protect jobs in the coal industry), the government largely continued the previous Conservative government’s energy policy. The cornerstone of this has been the promotion of increased competition in energy supply with the declared intention of reducing prices for electricity and gas. The regulator for these utilities generally has acted to prevent increased prices even if these might help meet environmental goals, in order to protect consumer interests (defined as low prices). As a consequence, the energy intensity of the UK economy has increased, and the likelihood of the UK meeting its targets on CO2 emissions under both the Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as under the EU division of commitments to that Protocol, has been made significantly harder. Projections are that the UK will fail to meet its Kyoto commitment to reduce 6 selected greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5% by 2010 - they will only be reduced by 10% (Jordan 2000: 272).

More generally, the attempts to introduce ‘joined up policymaking’ in the environmental field have failed. Jordan (2000) shows the pre-existing institutional structures of government have resisted attempts at co-ordination. The ‘Green’ ministers located in each department (all departments had one minister whose responsibilities included ‘greening’ their department, and who were to meet collectively to co-ordinate their activities) have been largely ineffective. The environmental appraisals of departmental policies have only been poorly undertaken, and most departments only pay lip service to the attempts by the DETR or the Sustainable Development Unit when conducting environmental appraisals of their own policies. Most notably perhaps, in the Labour 1997 Manifesto, the SDU was to be established in the Cabinet Office, but when in office, it was in the end located in the DETR, giving it much less co-ordinating authority (Jordan 2000: 268).

In the examples above, this can be seen in the way that the DTI has resisted proposals to promote solar technologies while the DETR has advocated such promotion (Toynbee 1999). More deeply perhaps, it can be seen in the way that at no point in debates about energy pricing has the ecological consequences of the governments commitment to low energy prices been noticed. As Jordan points out (2000: 271-2) the elements of Labour’s energy policies in this regard stand in stark contrast – commitments to reduce consumption in line with climate change commitments, combined with commitments to reduce prices through increasing

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3 This section was written before the climate change white paper was produced and for reasons of time we have not been able to incorporate material for this for this paper. Preliminary analysis of this suggests a noticeable shift in government policy on climate change which increases the likelihood of it meeting its target. Of particular importance is the apparent (if belated) realisation by the DTI of the economic potential of renewable energy. Also omitted here is analysis of the climate change levy.
competition. Similarly, in debates about the price of new cars, Labour adopted the slogan ‘rip-off Britain’ with the DTI promoting its new found role as champion of consumer rights. But nowhere in this debate was any serious discussion of elements of environmental policies regarding the car which might use pricing mechanisms of car ownership to affect car prices and thus use.  

New Labour’s political economy

Two questions are thrown up by the account given by Jacobs for why New Labour’s environmental performance has been disappointing. On the one hand, it raises the question of how deeply New Labour has understood the necessity of integrating environmental questions into all areas of government policy. On the other hand, Jacobs’ analysis raises the question of the distinctiveness of New Labour’s economic strategy from that of the previous Conservative government’s.

Jacobs gives a rather odd answer to the first question. He argues that Labour can integrate a solid set of environmental policies into its current economic strategy, without necessarily transforming the key aspects of that strategy itself. So he reflects the importance of such integration, but seems to infer that it is possible for governments to choose (or not) to integrate such policies with (at least some sorts of) economic strategy. In what way these environmental policies are ‘integral’ to economic strategy is not thus clear, since it seems to be a bolt on extra.

Jacobs thus attempts to provide a rationale by which New Labour, within its own self-understanding, can develop a set of environmental policies. He suggests that the central reason why New Labour’s environmental performance has been disappointing is to do with the way that environmental policies have been framed within an overarching discourse – either green radicalism, or sustainable development – to which Labour has traditionally been resistant. Nevertheless, Labour made much of the improved environmental performance that would result from its election in 1997, as Jacobs points out.

Jacobs argues that, once brought out of its overarching frameworks, a set of policies can be developed to deal with specific environmental problems within New Labour’s own framework.

For Jacobs, many environmental policies can be simply ‘bolted on’ to this economic strategy. He terms this ‘environmental modernisation’, and while it is clear this comes out of the ‘ecological modernisation’ approach of people like Hajer (1995), the debt is only briefly acknowledged, late in the work (Jacobs 1999: 45). Though there are debates about the characteristics of ecological modernisation (Barry, 1999; Christoff, 1996), Jacobs’ environmental modernisation is heavily weighted towards a supply-side, technological (and state-bureaucratic centred) interpretation, in which to put it bluntly, through technological improvements in resource efficiency, coupled with matching improvements in labour.

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4 The government was of course engaged in such pricing policies in its fiscal policy, with the introduction of differential road tax levels dependent on the size of engine. But the ‘joined up government’ was not evident in relation to these two debates which were treated separately, and the knock on ecological consequences of the reductions in car prices (which dwarf the differential increases produced by the changes to road tax).
productivity, we can have our growing economic cake without this resulting in ecological problems.\footnote{Our view is that environmental modernisation is consistent with and indeed a new stage in the process of market or capitalist led economic modernization. As a part of this ongoing economic modernisation project (especially evident in the New Labour project) environmental modernisation, like economic modernisation historically is associated with both market and state institutions increasingly regulating social affairs in general (Polanyi, 1957; Tilly, 1992), and social-environmental affairs in particular (Walker, 1989).}

So, for example, Jacobs discussed how in the context of general economic and industrial policy, the focus of Labour’s strategy is to increase labour productivity. He suggests that the concept could be expanded or extended to increasing environmental productivity, referring to decreases in the ratio of natural resource throughput to GDP (1999: 30-31). He argues that the Sustainable Technologies Initiative established by New Labour could be a mechanism for promoting this (although he complains of its lack of funds and asserts the necessity of significant increases to achieve the environmental productivity gains).

In a number of other areas, such as health (focusing on the BSE debates), urban life (focusing on transport, particularly the car), and social exclusion, Jacobs suggests that Labour can in fact significantly improve its environmental performance without having to change its fundamental political-economic approach (see generally Jacobs, 1999: 30-42). This ‘environmental modernisation’ can be achieved through changes in taxation and regulatory measures designed to improve the environmental performance of the economy while contributing to New Labour’s overall goal of a more general ‘modernisation’.

But two things (at least) are unclear in Jacobs’ account, which are important for our purposes here. First is the question of why precisely New Labour has not developed such an ‘environmental modernisation’ approach. For Jacobs, it is the background hostility to environmentalism as an ideology, perhaps combined with a lack of political imagination, which is the central explanation. New Labour needs to be persuaded that it can integrate such policies within its overall approach. This is thus purely a question of agency and will, and not, as we will argue below, a contradiction between the economic strategy and the requirements of sustainability.

Second, if we abandon the overarching discourse of environmentalism, then what is the normative basis for enacting environmental policies? At a number of points in Jacobs’ text, the contradiction which remains from having abandoned such a normative basis are clear. For example, while discussing possible policies consistent with his approach, he discusses cars under the rubric of the quality of urban life. He applauds some of what the government has done in terms of enabling congestion charging in city centres, but then goes on to say an environmental modernisation approach would facilitate many more policies which would maximise the impact of such policies. In particular, he argues for policies that would make it possible for people in towns and cities not to use their cars, but travel by other means (public transport, cycling, walking, etc).

But from his own analysis earlier on in the work, this fails to exhaust (pardon the pun) the environmental impacts of the car. The implication is that the primary question is one of urban congestion. He then comes up with a classic Third Way piece of rhetoric: From the perspective of environmental modernisation the crucial requirement here is to avoid the impression of being anti-car. There is no political mileage in this at all. Contrary to the
claims of many environmentalists, cars have tremendous benefits, and people value them. …

The issue is simply that in certain places, and at certain times, the number of cars on the road causes unacceptable congestion, and for this reason, in these places an times [city centres in
daytime], car access will have to be constrained. (Jacobs 1999: 41).

The attempt to conceal conflict, to present politics as if it is a matter of finding the composite, is a classic part of ‘Third Way’ rhetoric, as emphasised in particular by Elliott

and Atkinson (1999). One effect is to fail to please anyone, a central element in the origins of the fuel blockades in September 2000.

But the point for me here is that all other sorts of environmental problems associated with cars, alluded to elsewhere in Jacobs’ text, are avoided here. Later in the same paragraph he does qualify the point, but in a subordinate clause (the whole sentence is worth quoting to show its de-emphasis, although it is the latter part of the sentence which we are particularly interested in here):

Outside those times and places – particularly urban commuting and inter-urban motorway travel – there will be no restrictions; though continuing efforts must be made to improve fuel efficiency and emissions. (ibid.)

But he has already shown earlier in his text, that transport energy use, and thus at least CO2 emissions, are increasing across the OECD at the same rate as GDP. In other words, despite current rates of efficiency gains (which have continued through the 80s and 90s, despite historically low fuel prices), the benefit of these are recurrently negated by increases in overall distances travelled in particular by car. Thus on his own admission a strategy to reduce overall use is crucial to achieving particular environmental goals (in particular global warming in this case) which only under the most wildly optimistic conditions can be met purely by efficiency gains.

Elsewhere, the failure of integrated thought here is also apparent when he notes (while discussing in fact controversies over GM foods and the need to promote organic foods more effectively) that the DTI has become more a consumer advocate than a protector of industry interests. He alludes as evidence here how it has taken up the question of ‘over-priced’ cars in the UK, and has put pressure (so far seemingly with considerable success) on the car manufacturers to lower car prices (Jacobs 1999: 37). But he fails conspicuously to pick up on the contradiction here in New Labour strategy.⁶ On the one hand they claim to be trying in their transport strategy to promote lower car use. On the other hand they are trying actively to make it easier for people to buy cars.⁷ In their transport documents and in Prescott’s speeches in this area, their argument has been that it is possible to have this both ways – to aim for higher rates of car ownership but lower levels of use. Their evidence has usually been a form of comparative statics – other West European countries have higher rates of ownership with lower levels of use – but this seems highly simplistic, failing to take into account for example the more dense nature of continental cities and towns, which make urban car use often (even more) irrational (compared to in the UK).

⁶ Of course this is the whole point of the ecological/environmental modernisation approach – to overcome or to render non-contradictory the imperatives of capital accumulation, exponential economic growth and ecological sustainability.

⁷ We are not of course arguing here that collusion by car manufacturers to keep prices high is a good thing. But given a choice of targets to attack for dodgy business practices, it seems indicative of the government’s priorities that the car industry was chosen (along with, although not quite as ferociously, supermarkets).
The second question raised by Jacobs’ account is whether or not Labour has an economic position distinct from neoliberalism. Jacobs argues that the Third Way does constitute a position distinct from both neoliberalism and ‘old’ Labour. The central core of this distinctness for Jacobs is the form of economic interventionism: an industrial policy which focuses not on ‘picking winners’ as in the 1960s, but more on the development of labour market skills and a set of infrastructural or regulatory systems designed to promote the ‘knowledge economy’ as the engine of Britain’s economic modernisation. This is combined with ‘active labour market’ policies (welfare to work, in particular) designed both to improve the rate of new job creation and discipline the unemployed further into taking up those jobs which do exist. For Jacobs, there is no necessary contradiction between this strategy and pursuing environmental goals (since a ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘e-commerce’ as the main future basis of the British economy can deliver high rates of economic growth, employment and competitive advantage while requiring less energy and material resource throughput), and thus the explanation for the disappointment in Labour’s performance is the one given above.

An alternative explanation for the disappointment of Jacobs and others in Labour’s environmental performance is that the core economic strategy of New Labour is in fact in basic contradiction to many of the policies Jacobs wishes to see enacted. Part of this explanation depends perhaps on a claim that Jacobs gives far too rosy a view of New Labour’s interventionism and distinction from neoliberalism (cf. Hay 1999). (Of course, even if a distinct economic strategy is admitted, then contradictions still may remain).

We don’t want to have to say enormous amounts about this in general terms. Suffice to say that the main substantive debate in both political discourse and in academic debate concerns the degree to which New Labour has successfully fashioned (or in fact actually wants to fashion) a genuine alternative to the Keynesian welfare state social democracy of ‘old’ Labour, and the neoliberalism of the previous Conservative governments – a ‘Third Way’. Specifically, commentators are usually concerned with allegations that New Labour in practice is little more than neoliberalism with more or less of a human face. In popular debate, the most prominent work arguing that New Labour is in fact neoliberal (with not much of a human face) is Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson’s *The Age of Insecurity* (1999), while in academic work on the subject, the most sophisticated account propounding this view is Colin Hay’s *The political economy of New Labour* (1999). On the other side of the fence, one could point of course to Anthony Giddness’ two works *The Third Way* (1998) and *The Third Way and its Critics* (2000), or, not quite so close to Blair’s entourage, Stephen Driver and Luke Marten’s *New Labour* (1999). Jacobs also takes the latter view. Much of the debate here seems to turn on interpretations of New Labour’s ‘active labour markets’ policies and more general attempts to devise supply-side measures in labour markets to improve employment rates, as well as economic productivity. For Giddness, or Driver and Martial, this is taken as evidence of a departure from neoliberalism, which (allegedly) left such elements to individuals and firms see if can find egs/quotes. For critics however, this is in fact interpreted as evidence of a continued neoliberal approach. Largely, the argument here would be that the active investment in education, training, promotion of labour force skills, etc, is in practice fairly minimal, and that the ‘active labour market’ policies amount in fact to an intensification of policies already adopted by the Conservatives (the Job Seekers Allowance becomes the welfare-to-work policies in the New Deal), and in fact reflect a neoliberal approach where the state is disciplining the unemployed into taking more active measures to find and take work (whatever the conditions of that work) (e.g. Gary 1998). Such
policies of course now have a green spin in the introduction of ‘environmental task forces’ as one of the options available to the unemployed (Elliott and Atkinson 1999: 138, 233). We are persuaded by the latter view. To regard active labour market policies such as welfare-to-work as a departure from neoliberalism is to ignore the way in which neoliberalism is a fusion (often internally contradictory) of authoritarian social conservatism and free market economics, and welfare-to-work policies come as much out of the former as the latter. Driver and Martial for example, focus only on the free market aspect, and thus welfare-to-work appears as a departure.

This then gives us one sort of grounding for doubting the environmental potential of the New Labour government, and for suggesting that the incompatibility of New Labour and environmentalism is intrinsic, not accidental, as Jacobs ultimately implies. Thus the fudge and failure to pursue a clear strategy regarding for example transport policy can be more easily understood here. The political imperatives of appeasing ‘Mondeo Man’ reflect an accumulation strategy predicated on car-led mobility. Flexible labour markets require flexible labourers, and the flexibility of the car in terms of mobility is key here. Those voters dependent on the car thus become key elements in Labour’s electoral strategy, and simultaneously key elements in their economic strategy, which requires continued (if not accelerated) throughput and consumption of strategic economic goods, notably cars. Other examples are more equivocal, however. The failure to pursue aggressively renewable energy seems a key text case less of the contradictions between New Labour’s neoliberalism and its environmental policies, as a failure to integrate environmental questions into its ‘modernisation’ agenda. While new technologies in which the UK has a strategic edge have been a key element in their accumulation strategy, this has focused primarily on biotechnology and information technologies. New energy technologies, in particular solar photovoltaics, which as far as many observers were concerned the UK had (in 1997 at least) a competitive edge, and which seemed on the verge of major market breakthroughs, have received very little support, and thus the UK has lost major market share in this field. Major producers, notably BP and Shell, have set up production of these technologies outside the UK (Toynbee 1999; Monbiot 2000). Thus the integration of environmental policies (particularly in this case the energy side of its climate change policy) to economic strategy has failed dramatically. This is evidence perhaps more of the way in which the core of New Labour still regards environment as a constraint rather than an opportunity.

The ecology of New Labour’s critics
But when we look at some of New Labour’s main critics on the left, their use for an ecological politics is not necessarily better. We want to look primarily at what we would say are three key recent works here: Hay’s political economy of New Labour (1999), Elliott and Atkinson’s Age of Insecurity (1999), and Kees van der Pijl’s Transnational Classes and International Relations (1998). By the last of the three, we move away simply from discussions of New Labour (although it has clear implications for any analysis of the phenomenon) but through the three pieces we want to make various ecological points, and van der Pijl’s arguments are useful additions to the other two in this context. we should also perhaps preface this section by stating that we also choose them simply because we think they

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8 A detailed analysis of this is beyond my scope for this paper. But we would expect that a collation of quantitative data concerning changes in the numbers of households where one adult is travelling long distances to work, and is required to be mobile in this fashion, combined with qualitative data on people’s perceptions of their ‘need’ to drive, would back this point up.
are all superb works of which we are extremely fond, and thus we hope any criticisms will at least be immune from ‘straw person’ objections.

Political ecology of New Labour?^9^

According to Colin Hay (1999), the emergence of New Labour, or the ‘modernisation’ of the Labour Party, has a common explanation by commentators in terms of two twin dynamics. The first consists of two sets of political forces, in particular party competition (Downsian moves to the middle, or to the right of the middle even) and changing political/electoral forces, such as class dealignment in voting patterns, and other shifts in voter preferences. The second consists of economic forces, principally globalisation (the term is used by Hay and others in this debate to refer primarily to financial liberalisation and heightened capital flows).^10^ The latter argument depends on acceptance of one or other version of a structural dependence thesis, where the state (whichever party is in power) is structurally dependent on capital for its legitimacy, and thus parties, in particular social democratic parties of which capital has considerable suspicion, must accommodate themselves to the interests of capital if they are to be electable.

Hay’s argument is that these explanations are incorrect. While it may be true that New Labour has assumed that both of the political and economic dynamics is true, and has thus acted accordingly, this does not mean that such arguments are in fact true. Hay argues neither is, and that thus there is much more scope for a ‘preference shaping’ strategy than assumed by both political scientists working in this field, and by Labour strategists.

Hay has a parallel argument that neoliberalism, while it may reflect the perceived interests of capital, in practice this is a) not the interests of capital as a whole, but rather the interests of certain fractions (although he doesn’t emphasise the fractionalist nature of his argument) and is more importantly b) the short term interests (share price maximisation, etc), at the neglect of long term stability. Thus paradoxically, in order to realise the long term interests of capital, Labour must shape capital’s preferences away from neoliberalism.

Underlying Hay’s book, as in much other writing in the field, is a conflation of two elements: a social democratic project (involving redistribution, etc) and a developmental state project. However, that the two are distinct elements of political-economic strategy (although they may of course be combined) is not explored in Hay’s book. In the latter chapters in particular, Hay opts pretty decisively for the latter. The conflation is made possible by the long-standing (at least since 1945) position of social-democratic parties that growth is the means by which the need for difficult questions concerning redistribution are both made possible (capital will accept redistribution more readily in conditions of growth) and made unnecessary if capital protests too much (the poor can get better off even if they get a declining share, if the cake is getting bigger fast enough).

^9^ We pick Colin Hay’s book here partly because it is a superb analysis of New Labour, and one we have many sympathies with. But we also pick his work because in other contexts he has an acute understanding of the contradictions between accumulation strategies and ecological constraints, so the omission here is particularly notable. See Hay (1994; 1996)

^10^ It is perhaps worth noting that most general works on globalisation do not limit it narrowly to the globalisation of finance, although most would agree that that is the area of transnational economic flows which is most globalised. See e.g. Held et al (1999) or Scholte (2000), for useful overviews.
State legitimacy is, in part, dependent upon a commitment to lessen inequalities via redistributive measures. However, co-existing with this is the standard defence of economic inequality which claims that it is necessary for creating the conditions for economic growth. In other words, an unequal distribution of the benefits of socially produced wealth is a necessary condition of a growing, successful economy (less is said about the unequal distribution of the costs and risks of economic performance). Wealth and income inequalities are argued to be economic incentives which are absolutely essential for encouraging the best individuals are employed which contributes to overall economic productivity and growth. The basic argument is that while some gain more than others, everybody gains. This green critique of economic growth can also be regarded as an argument against the social inequalities that are a structural component of contemporary social and economic policies.

The increase in inequality in the United Kingdom over the last twenty years can be interpreted as evidence of this relationship between economic growth and socio-economic inequality. The green argument for a steady-state economy, or an economy in which maximising output or profits was not the dominant imperative, can also be seen as an argument for decreasing social and economic inequality. With an economy not geared towards maximising production, income, and formally paid employment, the justification of an unequal distribution of socially produced wealth cannot be that it is required for procuring greater wealth production. In short, with the shift to a less growth oriented society, the normative basis for social co-operation needs to be re-negotiated, as does social policy. The implications of this are radical, given that one of the central justifications for state social policy is to lessen socio-economic inequalities via the redistribution of income, goods and services generated from a growing economy. The ecological argument is that if one wishes to reduce inequalities, then accepting limits to growth may be a more realistic way of achieving it, since demands for a less inegalitarian distribution of social wealth are more likely in a non-growing economy. However, such talk of a principled rejection or downplaying of the traditional commitment to economic growth, would obviously lead to strong resistance from both labour and capital interests, since it spells nothing less than the radical transformation of industrial society. Hence it is little wonder that this finds no space (ideological or otherwise) within the ‘big tent’ of New Labour.

But the ecology of this conflation is particularly problematic, because it ties critics of New Labour to a growthist agenda. That Hay does this is clear. Neoliberalism is problematic, in part because it exacerbates economic inequalities, etc., but principally because it fails to remedy, and in fact exacerbates, long term structural weaknesses of the British economy which deleteriously affect rates of growth and investment, and the international competitiveness of the British economy. For example, hay writes that ‘This new economic convergence [between Labour and the Conservatives] effectively precludes the degree of supply-side intervention that is the condition of the restoration of an indigenous growth dynamic to the British economy’ (Hay 1999: 160). When diagnosing the ‘British affliction’, this is clearly for Hay about the capital market led financial system rather than bank led finance in the UK, and the subsequent under-investment in industry (ibid.: 165-67).

What is also missed by hay here (although again in his other work already cited he is clearly aware of this) is the way in which ecology can be seen as one of the contemporary

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11 For other expressions of Hay’s focus on the importance of developmentalism, see Hay 1999: 127, 169, 208). For social democrats expressing a similar critique of New Labour, see for example Coates 1996.
conjunctures with which all political-economic projects have necessarily to deal, transforming the conditions for state intervention. He argues that any alternative political project (to neoliberalism) presupposes, as did Thatcherism itself, a “battle for the hearts and minds” and an attempt to supplant the dominant paradigm by an alternative conception of the political good may be the very condition of post-Thatcherism” (1999: 47). But what remains unexplained is the normative basis of social democracies renewal. “An alternative vision is required. Yet, like all realistic visions, it must be grounded in a tightly focused analysis of the current conjuncture” (Hay, 1999: 71) He writes this latter passage in a context of arguing that decisive structural shifts have occurred which preclude a simple reintroduction of the post-WWII Keynesian project. What is unexplained is why the various political-economic shifts (class dealignment in voting behaviour, structural changes in the composition of the electorate, post-Fordism, financial deregulation and mobility, in particular) are the only, or even primary ones to regard as the ‘current conjuncture’. In particular in this context, the forms of mobilisation around environmental change, as well as sometimes environmental change itself (the October-November floods perhaps being one example, certainly claimed in public discourse as evidence of global warming) provide contexts for state action which are part of the basis for any ‘realistic visions’, but which complicate the growthism of mainstream social democracy.

Thus in political terms, much could be made of the ‘Mondeo Man’ phenomenon, already alluded to in relation to Jacobs. Hay also uses the phrase as a byword for the median voter (1999: 97). This involves an inscription (in general political discourse, not noted by Hay) of a certain form of consumer identity onto the electorate. The signifying capacity of cars in relation to class, gender and overtly political subject positions. But while used, both by Hay and in general political use, to signify a certain political-economic location (C2 floating voter, ‘middle England’), and thus a position along left-right continuum (the phrase is in the middle of a discussion of the application of Downs’ economic theory of democracy to New Labour’s modernisation – the moving of Labour to the political middle or even to the right of centre), it also can be used to signify how certain consumptive practices are privileged in political discourse. A political middle defined by the ownership of a (particular brand of) car reflects the privileging of car drivers as a group and car use as a mode of consumption and (im)mobility. Thus at the same time that New Labour has done the things Hay says in terms of moving to the right politically, it also has done so connecting certain forms of political identity to certain forms of consumptive identity, and thus to certain forms of socio-ecological practice. 12

Greening the Age of Insecurity?

Like Hay, Elliott and Atkinson’s vicious and powerful critique (1999) of what they term ‘the age of insecurity’ brought about by the world-wide adoption of neoliberalism, regards New Labour as fundamentally a supporter of this neoliberal world order. The Third Way, for all its rhetorical attempts to chart a course between neoliberalism and ‘old’ Labour, ultimately fails

12 An interesting alternative signifying role of car ownership is given by Sachs (1993) who notes that those who most benefit from economic globalisation and the ecological crisis it creates is that portion of the human population who own cars (who are in the minority). Another possessive/consumptive identity important for signifying purposes and intent within New Labour is computer/IT ownership/use, witness the concern about a developing gap between the knowledge rich and knowledge poor.
to do so. “Perhaps the greatest failing of the Third Way was its apparent belief that it had somehow ‘replaced’ the laissez-faire model as opposed to presiding over it” (1999: xiii).

The bulk of their book is devoted to a critique of free market capitalism, focusing on its injustices and inequalities, its instability and resulting insecurities, and the way that the Left, in Britain in particular, but also elsewhere, has since the mid-1980s become progressively more accommodated to its main tenets. Like Hay, there is considerable emphasis on the deflationary tendencies of neoliberalism, and the way that Keynesian policies can deliver higher rates of economic growth, which both can reduce poverty directly and also create resources for redistribution (e.g. Elliott and Atkinson 1999: 242, 244).

But unlike Hay, they devote significant attention to environmental problems, policies, and environmentalism. It appears in the book in two contexts. First it appears as evidence for the failures of neoliberalism. Thus neoliberalism and globalisation appear as a cause of environmental destruction, in the case of for example the Indonesian fires in 1997 (1999: 12). There is little however explanation of the connection, the closest being in a rather idealist claim that neoliberalism has a ‘cavalier attitude to the environment’ (1999: 19).

Second, and more important (although their failure to identify what it is about neoliberalism which is environmentally destructive is perhaps instructive about the limits of their alternative) it appears as a very significant component of ‘the big alternative’ (Ch. 8) which they entitle ‘Green Keynesianism’. This has for them four elements. The first is taking back economic control over money and prices, reclaiming from the logic of ‘market forces’. The second is the reclamation of a sense of a common life – through environmental measures, community building commitments to public transport and public services. The third is providing for security in its myriad forms – economic, social, national. The fourth is a focus on individual freedom (Elliott and Atkinson 1999: 269-292).

Compared to Hay, then, Elliott and Atkinson at least therefore attempt to integrate environmental questions into their political economy. They consider it as one of the conjunctures which questions of political economy must be informed by. But the contradictions running through their attempts to do this are palpable.

Firstly, like Hay they remain fundamentally committed to a growth agenda. At times, they praise the ‘austerity’ of Greens, for example the Conserver Party (1999: 273), and express sympathy for Schumacher (p. 249). They also give significant space to debates about alternative economic indicators to GDP, arguing for the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare approach (p. 248).

But at the same time, they explicitly reject limits to growth arguments (p. 277). What they miss are even the more obvious contradictions between growth and sustainability. For example they praise the reflation of the economy by the Conservative government in 1992-3 specifically by boosts to the car industry through ‘abolishing the levy on new cars to stimulate consumer spending’ (p. 263). While they do make the point of the need for new economic indicators like the ISEW, they elsewhere conflate ‘quality of life’ (which ISEW essentially aims to measure) with ‘living standards’ (a narrow economic measure effectively understood in terms of GDP) (p. 225). They praise austerity (p. 273) but at the same time want a high wage economy (p. 269). And while they note the new critiques of capitalism which emerged in the 1970s which argued that capitalism was overproductive (by people such as
Schumacher), they put this alongside the standard underconsumptionist argument that capitalism, if left to its own devices, fails to deliver adequate growth. But they fail to note the tension between these two critiques.

Elsewhere in the book, their growthist agenda is even clearer. The best way to run the economy (in the interests of employees in particular) is to ‘run it at full tilt’, they argue for example (p. 206, see also 241-4). What this reflects is that their presumption is that it is only neoliberalism that is ecologically problematic; a proper Keynesianism with a focus on renewable energy and public transport is potentially ecologically viable. Thus they are highly nostalgic or a Keynesian past, even in its ecologically problematic form. They have a nostalgia for a car-dominated economy rather than an information technology dominated one – arguing that it was an ‘instrument of egalitarianism’ (p. 271) and celebrating its role in producing early 20th century growth (p. 35).

Ultimately, Elliott and Atkinson’s approach amounts to a simple appropriation of environmentalism for social democratic ends. Their ‘Green Keynesianism’ doesn’t involve much in the way of a transformation of Keynesianism itself, and doesn’t ultimately take seriously the challenge placed by ecology to the traditional left. Their preference for running the economy ‘at full tilt’ is enough to make us wary here.

Ecology and Neo-Gramscian International Political Economy: Kees van der Pijl

This latter point concerning Elliott and Atkinson is one which Kees van der Pijl’s *Transnational Classes and International Relations* (1998) could be used to contrast. Van der Pijl’s main aim is to restate Marxist political economy within an age of transnationally organised capital. But he, like Elliott and Atkinson, attempts to do so while incorporating ecological questions as part of his main project. But for Elliott and Atkinson, the Fordist-Keynesian era remains untainted with any serious ecological challenges - these problems are only associated by them with neoliberalism. By contrast, one of van der Pijl’s interesting insights in this context (although not elaborated on at great length) is that the ecology of these two moments of capitalist development are, while significantly different, not necessarily any less problematic.

Van der Pijl’s ecological questions revolve around two themes. First, he focuses on the way in which the discipline of capital is imposed upon ‘nature’, and on the way in which the imposition of this capitalist discipline ‘exhausts’ the environment (or in his terms the ‘natural substratum’), and thus threatens the productive potential of industry or even the viability of human society.

Here, his analysis is close to the ‘second contradiction of capitalism’ thesis developed by O’Connor (1991). Whereas the first contradiction of capitalism is premised on the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, the second contradiction of capitalism has to do with the disjuncture between the capitalist mode of production (both forces and relations) and what James O’Connor (1991) has called the ‘conditions of production’. Following Marx, he holds that there are three such conditions; ‘personal conditions’ i.e., human labour power, ‘communal general conditions’, i.e. urban space, communications and infrastructure, and ‘external conditions’, i.e. nature or environment. From this perspective the ecological crisis can be regarded as a crisis of the ‘external conditions’ of capitalist production. Capitalism destroys the very natural basis upon which it
exists. Since this external condition is not ‘produced’ by capitalism (or by any form of human social agency for that matter) the capitalist state secures and regulates capital’s access to them. The capitalist state ensures the availability of these essential productive conditions to capital. At the same time, as has been noted previously, it is also the case that New Labour through its stress on ‘supply side’ labour market interventions (particularly in respect of skills and education), is also engaged in securing the ‘personal conditions’ of production.

The first contradiction referred to the inability of capitalism to sustain itself internally due to the contradiction between socialised production and individual appropriation, and can be seen as a crisis engendered by capitalism being parasitic upon the non-capitalist social world. The second contradiction on the other hand is caused by capitalism being parasitic upon the nonhuman world. From the Marxist position the ecological crisis is part of a wider economic and political contradictions of capitalism. It is for this reason that an ecological analysis and politics by themselves are necessary but not sufficient to dealing with ecological problems. Without making the link between the crisis-tendencies of capitalism and these problems, environmental policies such as those proposed by New Labour may ameliorate the effects of some environmental risks without addressing the structural causes and contexts which give rise to those problems. What the second contradiction of capitalism thesis shows is that one cannot have an adequate political ecology without political economy.

Marxist political economy would not say that the ecological crisis arises from capitalism running up against natural or absolute limits. The ecological crisis within capitalism arises in the form of higher costs of production as the collective conditions of production are degraded, made scarce and thus more costly, as a result of the actions of individual capitals. In a sense, this system irrationality of capitalism is similar to the ‘tragedy of the commons’, where individual capitals systematically destroy the ‘capitalist commons’ that are its ‘conditions of production’. As O’Connor puts it, “‘Limits to growth’ thus do not appear, in the first instance, as absolute shortages of labor power, raw materials, clean water and air, urban space, and the like, but rather as high-cost labor power, resources, infrastructure and space” (1994: 163, emphasis added). When the conditions of production become scarce and thus costly, the system responds to the short-sightedness and collective ecological irrationality of the rational actions of individual capitals seeking to maximise profits, by the state (and supra-state agencies) taking a more interventionist stance in regulating access to the conditions of production.

Basically, the economic system causes ecological damage which as a ‘market failure’ becomes the responsibility of the state. Witness the growth in environmental legislation for example, the creation of state agencies to regulate water, air, soil, forests, urban space, analogous to the expansion of the welfare state to regulate personal conditions of production, such as health, education and housing. In managing the ecological crisis (but of course being unable to adequately solve it) the capitalist state takes it upon itself to manage the collective and long-term interest of capital in cheap and available conditions of production. State regulation of environmental conditions of production acts to displace potentially system-threatening economic and ecological-economic crises into the political realm (Hay, 1994: 219). Ideologically, the way the state does this is via the extension of economic rationality to encompass ecological goods and services as can be seen in the way New Labour prefers economic or market based solutions to environmental problems rather than direct state regulation and intervention. The state’s ‘crisis management’ function is extended to cover ecologically-based economic crises.
Van der Pijl suggests there are three moments in the imposition of capitalist discipline. The first is that of original accumulation, the primary appropriation and commodification of nature through human labour. The second is in the capitalist labour process, through transforming human workers to meet the needs of capital. The third is in the realm of social reproduction, where increasingly social norms and relationships are shaped to meet the requirements of commodification and exploitation (van der Pijl 1998: 36). Van der Pijl argues that it is primarily in the third mode of the imposition of capital where ecological destruction occurs: “the tightening discipline of capital in the reproductive sphere also implies the exhaustion/destruction of the biosphere” (1998: 46).

Van der Pijl’s second ecological theme is that of resistance. Van der Pijl suggests that whereas in earlier times resistance may have been primarily in reaction to the first two moments of the imposition of capitalist discipline, increasingly, resistance is to the exhaustion of the biosphere and social reproduction (pp. 36-8, 46). In a manner not unlike Polanyi (whom van der Pijl cites on these themes) it is the (in)capacity of society and nature to sustain continual commodification and exploitation which provides the root of resistance.

While van der Pijl doesn’t address immediate questions concerning New Labour, he does however provide a basis for thinking about the political-economic questions facing society which simultaneously address the possibilities for alternatives to neoliberalism, and which take seriously ecological questions. One useful final contribution he makes here is that while in general, the focus of his ecological critique is capital as a social relation in general, what he does intimate, is the different ways in which specific regimes of accumulation both exhaust the biosphere and provide contexts within which political responses to environmental degradation emerge. For example, he argues that the Limits to Growth report (Meadows et al 1972) “made clear … that continuing the Fordist/corporate liberal patterns of capital accumulation would exhaust the natural substratum of the mode of production” (1998: 124).

The Limits to Growth was funded by the Club of Rome, a transnational capitalist class organisation funded by car manufacturers among others. Under neoliberalism, forms of both the exhaustion of the biosphere and of political mobilisation around these are different. The Business Council for Sustainable Development is hence a very different sort of organisation from the Club of Rome (p132)

Conclusions

The point we end the discussion of van der Pijl is to revisit the quote from David Harvey at the top of the paper about the inherent interconnections between socio-political and ecological projects. For van der Pijl, fordism and neoliberalism have different ecologies (although he doesn’t elaborate this point to a great extent). But at the same time he places this in a larger context of inherently ecocidal tendencies of capitalism. Thus, while Elliott and Atkinson contrast ecocidal neoliberalism with a (potentially) ecologically benign social democracy, van der Pijl has no such basis for such a complacent reclamation of leftist politics.
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