Abstract: In this paper, I build on Paul Cloke’s (2002) provocative argument about the necessity of developing an ethical stance in human geography. I do this, however, through an assessment of the implications of a number of changes – in the nature of the labour market in Great Britain, in the assumptions that lie behind welfare provision under New Labour and in the position of women and men in Britain – rather than through an emphasis on the Christian values that infused Cloke’s argument. I show how the dominance of an individualistic ethos pervades both the labour market and the welfare state, undermining notions of collective welfare and an ethic of care, within the wider context of the hegemony of a neoliberal ideology in global as well as national politics. If an ethic of care is to be (re)instituted, it will demand wide-reaching changes in the ways in which organizations and institutions operate at a range of spatial scales as well as new sets of responsibilities towards co-workers, members of households and the wider public. I conclude by considering some of the implications of such an ethic for everyday practices within the academy.

Key words: workfare, worklife balance, neoliberalism, individualism, ethic of care.

I Introduction: the dominance of neoliberalism

The social transformations that are the focus of this paper have been facilitated by ‘the hegemony of neoliberalism, alongside the naturalization of capitalist values’ (Mohanty, 2003: 508). Neoliberalism, in the last two decades or so, has assumed
the status of a dominant narrative or a regime of truth in the western world. Based on claims for the apparent superiority of laissez-faire or free-market principles, neoliberalism enshrines economic rationalism, competition, entrepreneurialism, individualism and independence, values that are represented as the antithesis of state responsibilities for living standards and care of the individual, the household or social groups. Neoliberalism came to dominance during the brutal Thatcher/Reagan years and its principles continue to inform many of the policies of New Labour, despite the return to a greater degree of state intervention in certain areas, including measures to relieve poverty, especially among families with children. Despite this, however, and despite labour-market participation rates at an all-time high, the extent of social inequality under the Blair governments has increased rather than decreased.

One of the key assumptions of neoliberal theory is that the opportunities for individual prosperity are dependent on participation in an unregulated labour market. Freed from constraints, individuals will be able to act as free and rational agents, making and remaking employment choices, producing a flexible portfolio in which maximizing individual choice is possible, and so increasing individual autonomy. As is clear in the language of neoliberalism, mutual dependence, self-sacrifice and care for others are unvalued notions. In a telling comment in her critique of neoliberalism, Susan George, Director of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, noted that (George, 1999):

The central value of … neoliberalism itself is the notion of competition – competition between nations, regions, firms and of course between individuals. Competition is central because it separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys [sic] and the fit from the unfit. It is supposed to allocate all resources, whether physical, natural, human or financial, with the greatest possible efficiency.

What it cannot do, of course, is allocate those resources that are outside the market – goods, services and labour exchanged voluntarily or for love, in the household and in the locality. So neoliberalism not only separates the men from the boys as George noted but also, in a general sense, the men from the women. Neoliberalism diminishes the spaces available for voluntary or collective actions, spaces often, although not solely, associated with women’s actions (Bourdieu, 2000):

[Neoliberal measures] call into question any and all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market: the nation, whose space to manoeuvre continually decreases; work groups, for example through the individualization of salaries and of careers as a function of individual competencies, with the consequent atomization of workers; collectives for the defence of the rights of workers, unions, associations, co-operatives; even the family, which loses part of its control over consumption through the constitution of markets by age groups.

In summary, then, the new neoliberal corporate capitalism has transformed citizens into consumers. It has challenged and restructured the old institutions of production, reproduction and the state in ways that have radically transformed relations of dependence and care between people and social groups and the assumptions about gendered responsibilities that held these spheres together.

In association with the rise of neoliberalism, a range of other social changes and ideologies are implicated in the exacerbation of inequality. As we move into the twenty-first century, it seems evident that global economic and political processes are now more brutal, both transforming and exacerbating class, gender and racialized inequalities. The rise of religious fundamentalisms, with their masculinist
and often racist rhetoric, are posing a challenge to other philosophical positions and political movements, in particular, I believe, to feminist struggles. Furthermore, the conditions of everyday life are affected by the growing militarization of the industrial complex, the extension of an unequally accessible information highway and, of course, the current so-called war on terror, waged primarily by an arrogant US President fuelled by machismo and a belief in the right of the USA to take unilateral action. This latter action has led not only to intolerable breaches of the human rights of prisoners in Guatanamo Bay (and the despicable reluctance of Blair to protect the rights of British citizens imprisoned there) but also intolerance and racist abuse of Muslims in general. In western nations, especially the USA and the UK, there has also been a huge rise in the prison population, as well as the abrogation of a range of rights of assembly and representation in the last few years.

All these changes have profound implications for local communities and for individual women, men and children across the globe, adding urgency to geographers’ responsibilities to theorize the global construction of the local, to the task of connecting material transformations and new structures of inequality to the recognition of cultures of difference. Here, like Mohanty (2003), a provocative postcolonial feminist theorist, I believe that: ‘How we think of the local in/of the global and vice versa without falling into colonizing or cultural relativist platitudes about difference is crucial in this (the current) intellectual and political landscape’ (p. 509). As I have suggested elsewhere, this theoretical challenge – how to hold together conceptions of difference and structural inequality – is an important task for critical social scientists (McDowell, 2004).

II Competitiveness, individualization and gender divisions of labour

I want now, however, to take a closer look at the local in the global, to address contemporary changes in the workplace and in working lives, as well as in the home and the community in Great Britain. I want to explore the major changes and policy initiatives that have exacerbated individual competitiveness, challenging the principles of social solidarity and mutual responsibility. In succeeding sections, I look in turn at changes in the labour market and the workplace, and at recent social and welfare policies relating to labour-market participation and to parenting. By first discussing the labour market and then the welfare state, I do not want to give the impression that these are separate spheres of life. On the contrary, as the long post-war feminist project has insisted, ‘enterprises and households are not separate “sectors” of society, but deeply interconnected sites in a single process that is simultaneously transforming both jobs and families’ (Ferree et al., 1999: xxv). As I document in more detail in the rest of this paper, the current social and economic transformations of industrial societies do not respect the common or long-standing distinctions between the public and the private, between the state and the family. They are instead recasting the divisions and recombining them in ways that make brutally plain the ways in which the activities of production and reproduction are fundamentally interconnected. Even so, despite the construction of the labour market, the welfare state, families, households and local communities as an interconnected gendered system, the distinction between the labours of production and reproduction continues to have salience. It is a division that has long been
and remains a gendered one in which the activities undertaken in each sphere are differentially valued and rewarded.

As many feminist scholars, geographers among them, have documented, a gendered division of labour is not only a key feature of the organization of unpaid work in the home and the locality but is also a fundamental feature of the organization of production, albeit taking different forms at different times and in different places. In everyday life, individuals and households struggle in particular ways to combine the activities of production and reproduction, work and home, in an attempt to achieve what in contemporary parlance has become known as work/life balance.

This gendered division of labour is not only a fundamental feature of industrial societies, it is also a site of inequality (Brush, 1999: 161–62):

Making things and making things happen is masculine; caring for people, especially reproducing the next generation, is feminine. Moreover the distinction between production and reproduction renders women and men not just separate, but unequal. Men’s productive activity counts historically and financially. Women’s reproductive activity yields, at best, private and non-pecuniary rewards; at worst, exploitation from business, intrusive scrutiny from church and state, and abuse from individual men. In short, *industrial societies organise gender* [original emphasis]. Men are workers, women are mothers.

But also, gender organizes industrial societies. The compulsory distinction between masculine and feminine, the marginalization of women’s experiences, and the justification of both difference and subordination through appeals to anatomy, hormones, genes or evolution all mark the division between production and reproduction in terms of gender.

These distinctions are unstable and variable and also marked by class and ethnic/racialized differences. Changes in the gender regime, however, tend to be ‘lumpy’, distinguished by periods of crisis or transformation, rather than always changing (Connell, 1987; Walby, 1997). The current period, I suggest, is one of crisis and change in which gendered social relations are being recast into forms that are not yet clear. The older divisions described so clearly above by Brush are, I want to argue, being challenged by changes in working patterns and in the nature of jobs and occupations as well as by a range of social policies captured in the term workfare. These changes are based on sets of assumptions that challenge traditional gendered divisions of labour. As a consequence, the associations between different forms of work, whether paid or unpaid, are being disrupted and the associations of masculinity and femininity with particular spheres of life and with different sets of responsibilities are being undermined.

### III New divisions of labour and patterns of working life

The major features of economic change in the British economy in the last 25 years or so are almost too well-known to need repeating here. Captured in the terms Fordism and post or neo-Fordism (Amin, 1994; Harvey, 1989; McDowell, 1991), the majority of the British workforce now no longer labours over hot metal or an assembly line but is instead engaged in various forms of selling services. In the new postmillennial economy, more than two-thirds of all workers, over half of them women, are employed in the service economy. Now, 60 per cent of all men and 82 per cent of women in employment work in the service sector.

Women’s growing participation (from one-third to a half of all waged workers
over the second half of the twentieth century) has been in the main in public and private consumer services. It has reduced the older pattern of regional differences that characterized the manufacturing economy, as consumer services are in the main sensitive to local markets and so have expanded across the British space-economy. Countering this trend, however, has been the rapid growth of high status, well-paid producer services (inputs to other parts of the labour process) and associated professional occupations, especially financial and business services, in Greater London and the southeast, reflected in a growing regional variation in incomes. The former types of ‘servicing’ work have been termed ‘high touch’, distinct from the apparently more rational and cerebral ‘high-tech’ work of science and industry (Brush, 1999). This spatial distinction parallels a growing polarization between employees, in terms of the conditions and patterns of work and in rewards and security of employment. A division is opening up between masculinized ‘self-programmable’ labour – workers with high-level skills and credentials in career positions with the prospect of prosperity – on the one hand and low-skilled, often uncredentialized ‘generic labour’ where workers of both sexes labour under ‘feminized’ conditions, with low levels of security and poor pay (Castells, 2000).

These changing divisions of labour and new patterns of inequality raise important questions about the relationships between employment, geographical diversity and the social construction of gendered identities, especially masculinity, in areas formerly dominated by heavy, male-dominated industrial jobs. The forms of male dominance in all arenas of social relations including (hetero)sexuality that typically have been associated with industrial capitalism have been in large part dependent on men’s labour-market participation and their role as ‘breadwinner’ in the dominant gender regime (Connell, 1995). Yet it is becoming clear, as I have shown in my own recent work (McDowell, 2003), with young white working-class men with low educational credentials that the prospects of these men being able to establish the pattern of working and family life and adult independence that was typical among their fathers is beginning to recede in the sort of low-wage, low-skill employment opportunities that are all that are open to them nowadays. As Dixon (1997: 92), for example, has noted:

For many school leavers, traditional patterns of gendered labour division have little relation to life experience. Part-time labour, casual work and unofficial self employment have established a new working pattern. The notions of a ‘job for life’ around which identities can be constructed and publicly maintained and presented and a ‘living wage’/breadwinner’s wage which maintained gendered patterns of economic dependence have limited relevance now to working class life.

Many older men, too, are the victims of manufacturing decline as well as delayering and downsizing of management structures. Indeed Gordon Brown, the British Chancellor, identified men over 50, whose labour-market participation rates are currently falling, as ‘the lost generation’, whereas numerous commentators have identified a more widespread ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Clare, 2000; Faludi, 2000) among men of all ages and classes, challenged apparently by women’s growing educational successes and their competitive position in the labour market.

It seems then that economic transformations are connected to growing unease about gender identities and about men’s and women’s responsibilities within the home and in the labour market. For optimistic proponents of the ‘new economy’, which is characterized by mobility and flexibility as high-tech workers construct and successfully
market their individualized portfolio of skills, these changes are positive. Beck, for example, has argued that workers are increasingly untrammelled by the old class and gender divisions that restricted their opportunities; instead self-designed individual performances are what counts. Giddens (1991) has also identified the growing significance of individual agency, suggesting ‘we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’. He has linked the growing individualization to positive changes in patterns of social and sexual relations, while not denying some of the harsher features of man’s continuing inhumanity to woman, in sexual violence for example. In the workplace, the emphasis on performance seems to have increased the significance of gendered identities, themselves constituted as mobile, fluid and flexible. Thus, Adkins (2000), among others, has suggested that, in business organizations, delayering and teamwork has increased the significance of ‘feminized’ patterns of working. Men, it seems, are increasingly rewarded for performing acts traditionally associated with femininity (Martin, 1994), what Susanne Moore (1988) memorably termed ‘getting a bit of the other’ in a chapter entitled ‘The pimps of postmodernism’. Women, however, are less often rewarded for masculinized performances in the workplace but instead are too often subjected to ridicule (McDowell, 1997) as I uncovered in my study of investment banking in London in the 1990s.

There is also a more pessimistic version of the consequences of the rise of ‘new economy’. Both male social theorists of labour-market change including Sennett (1998) and Gorz (1999) and numerous feminist commentators have argued that current economic changes have corrosive effects for individuals and for working-class communities. Globalization, transnational ownership, disinvestment, casualization and flexibility, as well as the astonishing rise of low-paid unskilled service employment, has produced a growing group of workers, many of them women, who are unable to live on their wages (see, for example, Ehrenreich’s 2001 study in the USA and Toynbee’s 2003 parallel work in the UK). From 2002, it also seemed as if the gender wage gap in the UK was again reopening after a period of limited convergence. It is also clear that, for many working-class families, more than one wage is essential to even begin to approach an average standard of living. The need for multiple wage-earners in a household, however, means that all the work of social reproduction must be squeezed into a shorter and shorter time or redistributed among other networks. Furthermore, among the growing class of women in professional occupations, beneficiaries of the expansion of university education and growing access to some of the professions as well as new occupations in the cultural economy, there is evidence of stress and unhappiness. These women and their partners may be able to purchase replacement domestic labour, but as Drucilla Cornell (1998) has argued ‘many women remain dissatisfied with the need to show we are really like men even though we are without many of the support systems many men have. Professional equality has, for many women, meant sacrificing love and family life’ (p. ix). We might add for many professional men as well.

In 2002, with Diane Perrons at the LSE, Colette Fagan and Kevin Ward at Manchester and Kath Ray at UCL, I began an ESRC-funded research project to explore the consequences of economic restructuring and women’s rising labour-market participation rates for patterns of everyday life and the distribution of the total labour involved in social reproduction. It is a comparative study of families with dependent children in Manchester and London as we are also interested in north–south differences in economic opportunities as well as the impact of costs of living, especially...
housing. It is becoming clear from our empirical work just how complex are the household arrangements of middle-class and working-class households in London. Arrangements are often fragile and a single failure may cause the whole complicated system of ‘balancing’ care and employment to unravel. As the unofficial strike at British Airways in the early summer of 2003 made clear, for low-paid workers often doing shift work, a change in their terms and conditions of employment is a problem. It seemed that it was common practice among the women working in low-paid positions on the check-in desks to cover each other at either end of their shifts to help in childcare and picking up children. For these women, the threat of split shifts would disrupt their childcare provision and make life intolerable.

It is clear from this example and from our research in Manchester and London that decent, widely available and accessible, in terms of both cost and location, childcare would make a huge difference to households with dependent children. One of the major weaknesses of current policies to increase the total level of labour-market participation, especially among mothers, including single mothers, is the limited provision of both childcare and care for other dependants, including elderly relatives. It is not clear to me that the state has realized that it has so fundamentally challenged women’s role as primary caretakers: a role that has been reinforced for centuries either directly by law or indirectly through the manipulation of social institutions, whatever women’s own investment in the intimate relations of caring.

I want to turn therefore to a brief examination of the assumptions that lie behind contemporary workfare and parenting policies before considering alternative ways to provide for relations of caring.

IV Workfare policies

As I have just argued, the labour market and households are part of an interconnected system. In western democracies the link between the types of work carried out in each arena and its regulation typically has been through state welfare policies of varying sorts. One of the most noticeable features of the post-Fordist neoliberal era has been a challenge to established welfare policies and their commitment to social protection for a wide range of individuals and groups regarded as dependent (Peck, 2001). Since the 1970s, especially following the 1973 and 1979 oil crises, there has been an evident movement in the USA, as well as in several European countries, towards neoliberal social welfare regimes. These regimes emphasize market-led provision, deregulation and the reduction of universal benefits (Musterd and Ostendorf, 1998; Peck, 1998; 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002), united by a common belief that the availability of universal welfare benefits at a reasonable level prices people out of work. It is a sad irony that at the very time as working lives have been transformed and incomes have become less reliable and more inadequate for growing numbers of employed workers in the UK, the Government has chosen to place a growing emphasis on employment both as a source of financial support and as an indicator of social esteem, respect and self-worth. In this policy commitment to the work ethic, structural inequalities in the labour market are ignored. Since 1997, when the first New Labour Government was elected, several measures to increase the total level of labour-force participation in Great Britain have been introduced. This has been achieved in the main through the combination of a series
of new labour-market policies to increase the ‘work-readiness’ of currently unemployed individuals and others who are outside the labour market, and reforms of the benefit system to tie it more closely to the labour market. In recent debates, ideas about family dysfunctionality, which I shall explore in more detail in the next section, and poor work ethics, based on claims that the poor are unskilled and unprepared for work, have dominated official discourse. At its crudest, in this scenario, the unemployed are characterized as workshy layabouts rather than, for example, the victims of poor schooling, of regional inequality or at the mercy of the vagaries of a labour market increasingly dominated by low pay and casualized work in its lowest ranks. The focus of the welfare system has moved to an emphasis on transitions – on facilitating the movement from welfare to work, through jobsearch programmes and the provision of skills training with penalties for non-compliance and attendance – rather than the provision of a secure and basic minimum income for all to ensure daily reproduction. Those who chose not to be included in the labour market should no longer have automatic rights to an income. As Alastair Darling, then Secretary of State for Social Security, explained in a radio interview (on Radio 4, ‘World at One’, on 24 November 1997), the new welfare reforms would finally end ‘the something for nothing culture’ in Britain. In its second term, the Government’s insistence on labour-market participation was extended to include not only lone parents but also disabled people and claimants of sickness benefit in an extension of the Job Centre Plus scheme (combining the job centre and benefit functions) which includes compulsory regular assessment meetings to ensure ‘job readiness’.

In the new Britain of New Labour, then, the workless and unemployed are no longer to be compensated for their lack of work by the state but instead, wherever possible, they are to be retrained and made ready to enter the labour market, ensuring that they take individual responsibility for their own lives, echoing the emphasis on individualization in the work of theorists such as Beck and Giddens, the latter, of course, the key advocate of the Third Way (Giddens, 1998; 2000). In the launch of the New Deal programme in 1998 (DSS, 1998) – the major policy to implement the shift towards individual responsibility – the outline of a ‘third way’ for welfare reform was sketched out (p. 19):

The welfare state now faces a choice of futures. A privatized future, with the welfare state becoming a residual safety net for the poorest and most marginalized; the status quo, but with more generous benefits; or the Government’s third way – promoting opportunity instead of dependence, with a welfare state providing for the mass of the people, but in new ways to fit the modern world. . . . We propose. . . a modern form of welfare that believes in empowerment not dependency. We believe that work is the best route out of poverty for those who can work. We believe in ensuring dignity and security for those who are unable to work because of disability or because of caring responsibilities, as well as those who have retired. This system is about combining public and private provision in a new partnership for the age.

In this document, the postwar ideal of a society based on universal state benefits was jettisoned. The postwar compact, based on economic planning and a universal welfare state, underpinned by full, lifetime employment for men who would share their income with dependants, has been replaced by the notion of flexible employment for all those who are physically fit, regardless of their other responsibilities, including the care of children. This is a remarkable and largely unremarked (Carnoy, 2000; McDowell, 2001) shift in the nature of family responsibilities and one which has not, so far, been facilitated, as I argued a moment ago, by the provision of accessible and affordable childcare services for all families with children. In addition, it is a
change of ideals that is not yet reflected in the realities of labour-market provision, in wage rates and in a wide range of social policies that continue to reflect the notion of a male breadwinner income, complemented by the earnings of secondary workers. As Jill Rubery (1996) so pertinently pointed out, in the UK an important set of organizational and institutional arrangements continues to construct certain categories of the potential workforce – women, many young people and the less skilled – as cheap labour (p. 31):

These include the continuation of the male breadwinner system of social organization, thereby providing employers with a large supply of cheap female part-time labour; the social security system which, by topping up wages through the family credit system, provides the basis for those with household dependants to enter low wage or part-time jobs; the education system which has expanded the supply of young people available to work for ‘top-up’ wages; early retirement schemes and redundancy pay-offs which have provided a supply of older workers for part-time or self-employment (and we might add in 2003 increasingly inadequate pensions provisions); the tax and social security system which has encouraged the growth of self-employment as an easier route to tax avoidance than direct employment; the introduction of youth training schemes paying low allowances which has provided the basis for adjustment downwards of all youth wage levels to match the new institutions.

Thus, welfare, tax and labour-market institutions continue to facilitate and maintain a segmented labour market with a wide range of employment systems and practices, making it virtually impossible for the growing proportion of the labour force in low-wage service-dominated jobs to achieve independent living on an individual basis despite the dominance of this ideal in current policy reforms.

V Discourses of parenting

As well as the continued dependence of the welfare and tax systems on traditional notions of gendered responsibilities, one of the most glaring paradoxes of the reification of the values of independence and individualism in the shift towards workfare policies is that the achievement of adult self-sufficiency embedded in these policies apparently continues to depend on a particular version of selfless parenting, particularly, of course, by mothers. Thus, parenting practice has also become a key item on the Blairite reform agenda as state intervention in the families of the disadvantaged and socially excluded is seen as a significant method of inculcating hegemonic moral values among sections of the community who have failed to sign up to labour-market participation, deferred gratification, abiding the law and the whole gamut of social values that are part of the (neo)liberal agenda of this government. Thus instead of policies that recognize the lack of material and social advantages of the disadvantaged, policies aimed at changing their behaviour and instilling ethical self-control and self-governance are the chief mechanism to regulate the poor, whose problems are seen as a consequence of their disconnection from mainstream values and aspirations. The origins of these New Labour parenting policies lie, I believe, in the notion of the cycle of deprivation identified by Keith Joseph who suggested that poverty ran in families as a result of children absorbing the values and lifestyles of their parents, reproducing them across the generations. I have been an academic long enough to have been part of an ESRC programme evaluating this notion (and I hope contributing to its discrediting; McDowell, 1983). I regret its
current resurrection in, for example, the Sure Start programme in deprived local communities which was launched with the stated intention of breaking ‘the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children’ (see Home Office, 1998), while at the same time welcoming efforts to improve early childhood learning.

Under the Conservatives, the disjunction or contradiction between state intervention in families and adherence to a market-based version of liberalism was always clear. New Labour has tried to avoid the paradox at the heart of its family and parenting policies by the same sort of unsatisfactory compromise of a third way just outlined in the discussion of the New Deal. Here, too, a social democratic version of Etzioni’s (1995) communitarian values has been welded onto neoliberal notions of individualism, and the individualization and democratization of personal relationships celebrated by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. Thus the ideal aimed for by New Labour is individual rights and social responsibility, liberty and obligations, or what Blair prefers to term rights and duties.

An initial outline of the new approach can be seen in a speech that was made by Blair in 1992 in the symbolic surroundings of a desolate local-authority estate in Southwark (2 June 1992; source Social Exclusion Unit website at www.gov.uk):

> We should reject the rootless morality whose symptom is a false choice between bleeding hearts [presumably old labour] and couldn’t care less [Tories?], what we need are policies grounded in the core of British values, the sense of fairness and a balance between rights and duties. The basis of this modern civic society is an ethic of mutual responsibility or duty.

In attempting to weld together these contradictory approaches, New Labour found an awkward compromise in a rhetoric of progressive liberalism that acknowledges the multiplicity of family forms in contemporary Britain. Thus multiple familial and sexual relationships are regarded as permissible and indeed are seen as a fundamentally private matter. Yet families must also provide ‘the building blocks for safe and sustainable communities’ (Home Office, 1998: 2). As I have shown in a recent paper assessing the policies introduced by the Blair Governments to regulate working-class youths, parents are assumed to have a set of ethical obligations to ensure their children do not truant, do not stay out late, do not hang about street corners nor indulge in various behaviours that might upset neighbours (McDowell, 2002). The policies to ensure these ethical standards include forms of resocialization through parenting classes as well as threats of fines or imprisonment. As Jack Straw noted in a speech made in 1998 when he was then the Home Secretary, ‘We want to support parents as they bring up children, while encouraging parents to fully appreciate their responsibilities. We do not want to get to the situation where, by offering more support to parents, they become less responsible and more dependent on the State. That is the opposite of our intention’.

So, instead of material aid, parents need to be shown how to fulfil their moral duty as a good parent through their acceptance of advice and information. ‘By learning better parenting skills, they can help to improve their child’s health and educational attainment, as well as their own confidence and self esteem’ (Home Office, 1998: 5). Thus material disadvantage is recast as social exclusion to be remedied by lessons in self-esteem.

As many commentators have pointed out, the notions that lie behind many policies to challenge social exclusion, local-area policies and educational policies, are based on middle-class values (Haylett, 2003; Levitas, 1998). Thus parents are
expected, as well as developing better parenting strategies, to become thoughtful consumers of schools (and universities), able to judge between them on the basis of quality indicators, to sign agreements with schools about homework, even agreeing to read to their children each day, and generally to ensure that they and their children take advantage of the advice proffered by middle-class mentors and guidance counsellors in policies from Sure Start for toddlers, through the Connexions service for 14–19-year-olds and on into the New Deal and the parenting classes just discussed, which incidentally are also on offer to young offenders. As Chris Haylett (2001) has thoughtfully argued, those working-class individuals and parents who do not avail themselves of all these opportunities for re-education are constructed as an abject and dangerous underclass. In an utterly astonishing white paper issued earlier this year (Home Office, 2003), it was seriously suggested that the parents of persistent young offenders should be committed to residential homes for retraining – the sort of proposal that I think was last mooted in one of the volumes of William Booth’s *Life and labour of the people of London* in the first decade of the twentieth century (see Fried and Elman, 1969). As the political theorist Nicholas Rose (1999) has pointed out, this is a form of what he terms ‘ethico-politics’ (p. 193) dependent on the moralistic micromanagement of everyday life, based on technical instruments to regulate the unwilling and uncomprehending without an explicit and vigorous political debate about the ethics and extent of responsibilities and duties to others.

So what sort of debate is need and what sort of policies? It seems to me that the timid proposals recently introduced to ensure a more satisfactory balance between work and life are less than adequate, even though they are a welcome beginning. It does seem to be becoming clear that labour-market participation and higher incomes are not necessarily the panacea they were once thought to be, by government policy analysts and feminist activists alike. There is growing evidence, for example, that it is not just Alan Milburn – the Health Minister who resigned his cabinet position in June 2003 to spend more time with his sons – who finds the long-hours’ culture among professional and high-tech workers stressful. An *Observer* poll in June 2003 found 42% of employees regularly work more than the national average of 48 hours a week, the highest average in the EU. A total of 48% of men and 57% of the women questioned reported working longer hours than five years ago and similar proportions (49% of men and 58% of women) said that the hours they worked spoilt their enjoyment of free time) (*Observer*, 2003).

The economist Richard Layard, a governmental advisor, has called for more emphasis on human welfare in general rather than work *per se*, arguing that public policy should primarily be aimed at raising levels of happiness, which is not guaranteed by higher incomes. Despite an economy twice as big as 30 years ago, the proportion of people claiming to be happy has fallen. Layard concluded that measures to shorten the working week can be justified simply because they make people happier; but his suggestion makes little sense for households struggling on poverty wages, where the right to request shorter hours and opportunity to take unpaid parental leave are pipe dreams. These policies are only appropriate for employees on high wages, not for the growing numbers of the working poor, as well as those who labour unpaid to care for dependants. So what might a system that encouraged mutual support and an ethic of caring for others look like and
how might it alter everyday forms of interactions in the different spaces of a modern nation state?

VI An ethic of care rather than an ideal of independence: towards social solidarity

In this penultimate section I want to consider the implications of replacing the current dominance of the ideal citizen as an independent individual fully participating in the labour market at the same time as developing a sturdy self-reliance in other areas of life by a more socialist ideal of solidarity and mutuality between networks of individuals in relationships of different forms of interdependence. As Young (1997), among other political theorists and philosophers, has recognized, the norm of independence in modern political theory and, as I have just shown, that lies at the heart of recent shifts in the labour market and welfare provision is ‘male biased and operative in relegating dependent people and their usually female caregivers to an inferior status’ (p. 114). Similarly, other feminists (Phoenix, 2003) have suggested that neoliberalism itself embodies idealized hegemonic masculinist values – chance, choice and competition between rational individuals who are free agents – in ways that position not only many women but also many men as less eligible subjects.

I want to argue here that, instead of a normative commitment to independence, promoting greater equality requires a system of social support that will encourage and facilitate forms of social interaction that are not based on individual competitiveness: what in the title to this paper I termed an ethic of care. There is a huge philosophical literature, not all of it feminist, about ethics, care and justice (see, for example, the reader on feminist ethics edited by Gatens, 1998), too complex to discuss in detail here. First let me state what I am not going to argue: I do not want to suggest that women automatically have some form of attachment to a superior ethical stance that is a consequence of their nurturing capabilities. This clearly would fall into the trap of essentialism, and yet it is undeniable that there are clear associations between gender, caring and philosophical attitudes based on common practices and responsibilities as Chodorow (1978) has demonstrated through her work on mothering. At the same time the philosopher Carol Gilligan (1977) was issuing an important challenge to the long-standing argument in western philosophy that women’s moral sense was not only different from, but inferior to, that of men. She argued rather that women reason based on different premises, approaching moral problems in a contextual or particularistic way with greater reference to their feelings for and interconnections with others. This view – what has now become known as the relational view of self – has become extremely influential in feminist theories of sexual difference and indeed more widely in, for example, geographical work. It has been used to explain different/multiple standpoints, acknowledging that the affective relations between people are relevant to the resolution of ethical dilemmas, and so challenging conceptions of normative justice.

Clearly the debate between these different philosophical positions is too large a subject to be adequately explored here. I want only to plead here for the replacement of the current unholy alliance of the ideal citizen as an independent individual and a virtuous but private member of a family and community, committed to self-help and
self-realization. I believe that the notion of an ethic of care based on mutual obligations and relations of trust is as applicable to the public sphere of the labour market as it is to social relations in the familial or domestic arena. But I also want to argue that its development will depend on the transformation of gender relations and the introduction of policies to achieve greater equity between men and women in both the public and the private sphere. In developing this argument I turn, as I have done before, to the powerful work of Nancy Fraser, especially in her book about the current ‘post-socialist’ condition (Fraser, 1997). Here she contrasts the old masculinist breadwinner model of labour market and welfare state support that is currently in a state of flux, not with a neoliberal individualist version but instead with a universal caregiver model, based on the principle of greater gender equality and a wider distribution of the responsibility for the labour of caring. This model is itself gender-neutral in that it relies neither on a conventional notion of gender equality (which too often has assumed women must adopt masculine traits) nor on an essentialized version of difference, in which the particular role of women as caregivers is recognized and recompensed. Instead gender equity and social solidarity is theorized by Fraser as ‘a complex notion comprising a plurality of distinct normative principles’ (p. 45).

While the principles may be normative, they are embodied in seven interconnected programmes of reform which are dependent on their context. The seven principles/programmes that she insists on as essential to the development of an ethic of social solidarity are: antipoverty measures (here the Blair Government’s minimum wage is a good start, although the level is too low); greater income equality (the current disparities in Britain are obscene, raising a question about the need for a maximum as well as a minimum wage); measures to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable people; greater equality in the distribution of leisure time; equality of respect; antimarginalization measures (and here Fraser explicitly mentions masculinist work cultures and women-hostile political environments that marginalize women); and anti-androcentric measures to decentre masculinist norms and practices.

A great deal of work will be necessary to spell out the implications of these principles for institutions, organizations and social relations at a range of spatial scales. I want to conclude, therefore, with brief consideration of one institutional site that involves many of the readers of this journal: the British university system, assessing recent policies and practices in the competitive neoliberal atmosphere at present and how they measure up – or not – to Fraser’s multiple definition of equality.

VII British universities

During the second term of the current government, there has been an evident shift away from the communitarian notions embodied in earlier versions of the third way and towards a greater emphasis on markets and on informed consumer choice. In the public sector, this has been associated with new forms of managerialism and an audit culture presented in a guise of progressive governance but, I think, not convincing many of the workers in or consumers of public services. In the university sector, this shift is particularly evident in the recent white paper on the Future of Higher Education (2003) in which the value of a university education is discussed primarily in economic terms – in its value to the individual in terms of lifetime earnings and value to the economy as a whole in terms of contributions to industrial growth.
Students are to become customers in an educational market in which courses are differentiated by price. I searched the white paper almost in vain for any inkling that higher education might be about knowledge creation, the search for truth, the pursuit of scholarship or personal growth and self-discovery, let alone the recognition of its role in strengthening democracy though an educated citizenry. Instead, the dual role of the university proposed in the paper is to advance economic prosperity through utilitarian research and to promote social inclusion through widening access. Charles Clarke, now Secretary of State for Education, in his Parliamentary presentation did at least mention social justice, but however hard I try I cannot understand how charging poor students large sums of money to acquire a university education makes a contribution to greater social justice.

On the very day the white paper was released, Blair himself made a Parliamentary speech defending his programme of what he insists on terming the ‘modernization’ of health, education and other public services, arguing that ‘reform is the root of social justice’. While many Labour backbenchers were dismayed by the market orientation of the reforms, John Reid (2003), then chairman of the Labour Party, in the Guardian the same day (24 January) defended his Prime Minister and explained the new relationship between providers and consumers: ‘Our vision of public services is one where we open up the system to diversity, choice, flexibility of working, setting the creativity of local services free within a framework of national standards and systems of accountability’. How my heart quails at some of these words: diversity – yoked to mission in the HE white paper – meaning some of our colleagues will be forced into teaching-only institutions and forbidden to do parts of the job that they signed up for when they entered university life; and flexibility – economic geographers have shown only too well through their research efforts the consequences of labour-market flexibility.

Reid ended with a plea for the providers and the consumers of public services ‘to play our part in making the system work’ (p. 19). What does making the system work imply, however? In the health service, Reid’s explicit sphere of responsibility, it seems to be through a culture of targets and monitoring which, as health service critics have argued, makes a nonsense of clinical judgement and patient care, instead refocusing attention on reducing waiting lists and patient throughput. In the universities, the same culture of overregulation by target is evident as universities are ‘drowned in an alphabet soup of acronymed initiatives, regularly torpedoed by philistinism and envy’ – the words are those of Chris Patten on his installation as the Chancellor of Oxford University on 25 June 2003. Instead of implementing these policies, he insisted that ‘universities should lead arguments, not just respond to them’. While Patten accepts the view that universities should contribute to economic growth, this does not ‘excuse ignoring the value of the university as the guardian, champion and disseminator of Enlightenment values’ (Chris Patten quoted in The Times, 26 June 2003, p. 10).

VIII What are universities for?

So what are universities for in the twenty-first century? As Gordon Graham (2003), Regius Professor of moral philosophy at Aberdeen, noted in the Times Higher Education Supplement in June, societies do not live by economic effort alone. I want
to quote him at some length, as he is a powerful advocate of an anti-utilitarian agenda for higher education (THES, 20 June 2003, p. 21):

[Societies] also have an intellectual life, a life embodied in art galleries, museums, libraries and concert-going, and in a newspaper-reading public that buys books, watches television documentaries, listens to radio discussion and attends lectures. Crucially this is the dimension of social life that sustains political debate in a broad sense and provides the forum in which opinion is formed and critical watchfulness is maintained. It is a part of social life that needs stimulus and maintenance no less than the commercial sector, and it is here, in my view, that a defence of universities and public spending on them is to be mounted.

If universities and what goes on in them, whether teaching or research, were to be reduced through selective funding or government policy to the utilitarian function of knowledge transfer for economic benefit, or educational strategies for greater social equality [although I must emphasize here that I do believe this latter objective to be part of a university’s purpose, albeit not necessarily by engineering admission quotas], it is not merely the autonomous intellectual purposes of universities themselves that would be threatened. Society in general would be impoverished, starved of the injection of intellectual capital so many of its finest manifestations require.

So, while I want to suggest that we must continue to struggle against purely utilitarian visions of the purpose of higher education, I believe that we must look more critically at our own everyday social practices and the current cultural assumptions on which these are based. It seems to me that the neoliberal assertion of the value of competition has been too uncritically accepted within the higher education system. The research assessment system, in particular, and the associated concentration of research funding in elite institutions, has all but destroyed ideals of collegiality and of disciplines as a community of scholars involved in a common project. I am sure I am not alone in regretting this change and yet I seldom hear voices raised against it, finding instead that I and many others who might define themselves as left-wing or as critical social scientists have become participants in debates about how best to play the system, often to gain local advantage. There has been little discussion about how Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) criteria might discriminate against particular categories of academic workers, although what is known as the Mercer case taken against the LSE demonstrated indirect gender discrimination. Similarly, the overwhelming emphasis now placed on securing external funding has encouraged what Richard Collier (2002), Professor of Law at the University of Newcastle, has defined as the ‘rise of entrepreneurial masculinities’ in universities (p. 1). Swedish research has shown, for example, that women are less likely to be awarded research grants, requiring two and a half times as many publications as men to be successful. There is no equivalent monitoring in Britain, although a recently announced scheme by the Research Councils to undertake gender audits is welcome.

Current practices have exacerbated the competitive, masculinist, long-hours culture of university departments in which individualized performances are now apparently, in the recent pay proposals, to be rewarded and local pay bargaining may replace the national scheme. In this evolving university hierarchy, the discourse is dominated by how to be more competitive, how to move from less to more highly ranked departments, how to produce ‘cutting-edge’ research (or more correctly highly ranked), how to buy oneself out of the more mundane tasks of teaching or administration, how to attract ‘stars’ to fill vacancies rather than debates about how to produce a more congenial and supportive environment in universities or to challenge the dominant codes of cultural capital that reproduce a predominantly white, straight, male, middle-class body of university teachers. It surely is not coincidental
that one of the institutions at the apex of this hierarchy, Imperial College, an institution that has led the way in arguing for higher fees and for greater research selectivity, is allegedly ‘under fire on equality’ (Baty, 2003). Similarly, an inquiry into the prevailing culture at Cambridge University at the end of the 1990s regretted the taken-for-granted elitist and masculinist atmosphere that positioned the usual cast of ‘others’ as outside the norm.

Universities, as self-designated liberal institutions based on, as Patten noted, Enlightenment values, are of course, committed to social justice and equality as their mission statements claim, but, as feminist critiques have revealed, the Enlightenment notion of the individual citizen is based on the denial of relations of dependency that, as I argued above, are a key part of a feminist ethics of care. A considerable body of evidence now exists documenting the ways in which gendered dynamics of recruitment and promotion in universities, pay differentials, the gendering of core tasks (teaching, research, administration, pastoral responsibilities) as well as the governance, management cultures and dominant practices operate to disadvantage women (Acker, 1993; Davies et al., 1994; Malina and Maslin-Prothers, 1998; Morley and Walsh, 1996; Statham et al., 1991; West and Lyon, 1995). While family and parental leave, flexitime, reduced hours and so on, as well as the undoubted goodwill of many individuals working in the university system, may make life easier for all those with caring responsibilities, they leave untouched the complex system of cultural norms and institutional practices that ‘keeps men tethered to an increasingly demanding workplace [and] women professionally marginalized and economically dependent (Abrhams, 2000: 746). This is why Fraser’s insistence on measures to achieve equality of respect and challenge marginalization, to change cultures as well as procedures, to restructure current gender divisions in ways that render gender less significant as a dimension of difference, is so crucial.

In changing ourselves and our current practices, I also hope that we might be able to recapture those older pleasures of academic life, and persuade others of their value, especially an interest in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

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Note

1. Feminist philosophers have noted that ‘community values are often conservative with regard to women’s “proper place” and virtues, historically, have been gendered in ways that are unappealing to feminists’ (Gatens, 1998: xv).
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