The curious employment of the term ‘liberal’ in American politics is well-known. While, in the rest of the world, ‘liberals’ occupy a position on the Right of the political spectrum, in the United States, to be identified as a ‘liberal’ is to be grouped with the Left. An anomaly, to be sure, but not one whose origins are too difficult to trace. Like weak currencies staked to the value of the dollar, the most common American political labels are pegged to the underlying value of one’s position vis-à-vis the welfare state: liberals in favour of it, conservatives opposed. Elsewhere, the liberal tradition found its roots in a particular concept of individual freedom. In the US, however, ‘liberal’ somehow came to mean ‘free-spending’, with particular reference to the state’s social welfare budget. These days, of course, self-confessed liberals of the generously spending kind are increasingly difficult to find. Once in office, President Clinton quickly shook off the outmoded ‘Traditional Democrat’ campaign platform with which he had won election (urban renewal and a national health-care plan) for the sleeker, sexier ‘New Democrat’ line: ‘An end to welfare as we know it!’ An indication here, then, that
American liberals are finally coming back into line with the world standard for their ideological valence: delighted by markets and individuals; deeply suspicious of the welfare state.

Ideology, in this sense, means something like Weltanschauung: the particular hue of one’s political stripe. To think about ideology and the welfare state in this register would be to inquire into ideologies of the welfare state: Spiro Agnew’s New Elite of pointy-headed intellectuals leading America down the slippery slope to Stalinism or J.K. Galbraith’s senile Malthusian economists hopelessly misconstruing the nature of the New Industrial State. Yet, the classification of different species of political belief is only one possible move within the field of ideology critique. Of at least equal importance is the task of mapping and analysing relationships between the more general categories of ‘belief’ and ‘politics’. Thus, from the 1960s until the early 1980s, an entirely different school of commentary arose around the question of ideology in the welfare state. How, scholars like Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas asked, might the welfare state play a role in the management of political dissent and the building of ideological hegemony? For intellectuals on the Left, the question was distinctly Janus-faced. On the one hand, the welfare state was a victory – a concession wrenched from capital by militant trade unions and shrewd social democrats. On the other hand, the welfare state seemed to be the ultimate bourgeois trump card – capitalist reform putting an end forever to any speculation about a socialist revolution.

This, of course, was the first (pre-1989) version of an ‘End of Ideology’ thesis. As Seymour Martin Lipset made the case in 1960:

This change in Western political life reflects the fact that the fundamental problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state. . . . This very triumph of the democratic social revolution in the West ends domestic politics for those intellectuals who must have ideologies or utopias to motivate them to political action.¹

In the 1980s, as Reagan and Thatcher opened an assault on the welfare state, one could have reason to lift an eyebrow at thinking like this. After the 1990s, as Clinton and Blair cheerfully took over the job of privatising and down-