

Beyond Citizens and Consumers? Publics and public service reform

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In this article, I explore some of the issues associated with the rise of the consumer as a focal point for public service reform. In the first section, I consider the ways in which the consumer has been counterposed to the citizen in recent political developments, while suggesting that this opposition may conceal other important processes and identities. In the second section, I sketch a brief history of the image of the consumer in public service reform in the UK, particularly associated with the New Labour governments of 1997–2010. Following that, I draw on a research project conducted among users, workers and managers in three public services in the UK. Here I focus on how users identify themselves and their relationships to public services. What, I ask, is the significance of their reluctance to see themselves as either consumers or citizens? Finally, I ask what their alternative identifications might point to as principles for organising public services.

The consumer versus the citizen?

In recent decades, the image of the consumer has become central to debates about the economic, social and political future of both developed and developing countries. The consumer has come to stand for the array of market freedoms associated with economic or neo-liberal globalisation. This image of the consumer has played a particularly significant role in shaping new forms of public service organisation as governments seek to reform, modernise or reinvent their systems of public provision. In the process, consumption and citizenship – and their associated figures of the consumer and citizen – have been treated as opposed and antagonistic principles of social organisation (see, for example, Needham 2003; Root 2007 and Somers 2008). The antagonism between the citizen and the consumer owes much to the “marketising” impulse of many recent national and international political projects

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and their policy prescriptions. For both proponents of this view and its critics, citizen and consumer identities line up a series of vital binary distinctions:

Figure 1
Citizens versus Consumers

Citizen	Consumer
State	Market
Public	Private
Political	Economic
Collective	Individual
De-commodification	Commodification
Entitlements	Exchange

In this view, the citizen is aligned with the state (citizenship as a legal and political status), where the consumer is embedded in the market. The citizen is a figure of public life, while the consumer is a private actor (making his/her own choices). Similarly, where the citizen is part of a collective identity and involved in collective processes (democracy, public participation, etc.) the consumer is essentially an individual figure. The citizen – particularly in the field of social rights – is associated with processes of what Esping-Andersen (1990) called de-commodification (removing entitlements from market processes and market criteria). By contrast, the consumer is associated with the opposite – processes of commodification or re-commodification, in which principles of exchange, rather than entitlement, govern the limits and possibilities of consuming.

For much of the twentieth century, capitalist societies of the West were shaped by movements that sought to confine or diminish the scope of the market, while broadening the de-commodified public realm. Enlarging political democracy and constructing public arrangements of welfare were two of the widespread dynamics, culminating in what has been called the “golden age” of the welfare state, and of the nation-state (Huber and Stephens 2001; Leibfried and Zürn 2005). From the late twentieth century, we have seen constant efforts to revise that balance between public and private, or between state and market. In particular, efforts have been focused on “liberating” the market from its state-imposed inhibitions (forms of regulation, direction and constraint). Such trends have been discussed as freeing capital, the market, the entrepreneurial spirit and even enabling labour to be more “flexible” (Harvey 2005; Somers 2008).

Such trends have also been represented as freeing “individual choice” for consumers in almost all areas of life. There are claims that the defining characteristic of modern Western societies is that they have become “consumer cultures”. Such consumer cultures are dominated by the “cash nexus”: the exchange of money for desired goods and services. It is important to note that although the sociological

term is the “cash nexus”, the most advanced consumer cultures – the UK and USA, for example – have been fuelled as much by credit/debt as by cash. It is this image of the free choosing, autonomous consumer that has inspired programmes of public service reform, involving the potential spread of market-based experiences, expectations, practices and relationships to the public realm.

Although this opposition between the citizen and the consumer has been central to many recent political disputes, it may be worth taking a step back from it. The stark simplicity of this opposition between the citizen and the consumer conceals a number of troubling issues. In practice, the figures of the citizen and the consumer turn out to be less substantial or solid than they first appear. The image of the citizen sees them striding forward, the bold embodiment of the republican tradition. S/he self-confidently articulates political views, engages productively in public dialogue and makes demands on the state as of right. Equally, the consumer forms judgments and makes choices, assertively pursuing self-interest and bursting free of social and political constraints. In practice, both of these figures have proved more contingent. Citizenship, as Ruth Lister has argued, is an “essentially contested concept” (2003, 14). Much of this contestation has been about the enlargement of who is entitled to count as a citizen – against limitations by property relations (including slavery), gender, race, age and a variety of criteria of “competence” and “belonging” that have structured patterns of exclusion from citizenship. Citizenship’s substance – the content of rights and entitlements – has been remade by struggles aimed at enlarging the areas of life that are “de-commodified” or made subject to social or political, rather than economic, calculation.

More recently, we have seen efforts to “roll back” such arrangements or to reform them in ways more compatible with the flexibilities and freedoms demanded as the price of participating in the new global marketplaces. In the process, some have argued that citizenship had become overblown, exceeding the proper limits of the political sphere and extending social and political calculation into places where it had no business being. There are several interwoven arguments here. The first centres on questions of intrusion and interference: the claim that there are domains of life in which the state has no proper place. The realms of the market and the family are the two most frequently claimed spaces of “natural freedom” and the state should be restrained from “interfering” in them. There are also arguments that centre on distinctions between individualised and collective domains of life where citizenship threatens to transform areas of individual concern and practice into inappropriately collectivised ones (often dismissed in terms such as “social engineering” or the failings of “mass” provision).

But the consumer has also been a more complex figure than the heroic image would imply. Historically, there have been different types and images of the consumer (Maclachlan and Trentmann 2004; Trentmann 2006). At times, the consumer has been looked upon with scorn and criticism, reflecting an anxiety about

consuming as a practice that “uses up” scarce or valued resources. Such concerns persist, of course, in environmental and ethical politics around the excesses of contemporary consumerism (Clarke, Newman et al. 2007). Consumers have also been the focus of collective mobilisations – a pattern somewhat at odds with the current valorisation of the consumer as the highest point of individualism. As Trentmann (2001) shows, the consumer interest was collectively organised around food (such as bread and milk) in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain. More recently, there have been consumer mobilisations around such diverse issues as automobile safety, corporate politics, “McDonaldisation” and economic globalisation (Hilton 2003). Despite the dominant rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, imbalances between the collective power of producers and individualised consumers have provided a fertile ground for such mobilisations.

In parallel with Lister’s observation about citizenship, Gabriel and Lang’s examination of different conceptions of the consumer emphasises their contested and complex character. They argue that “[b]y stirring various traditions together we are seeking to reclaim some theoretical recalcitrance for the concepts of consumption and the consumer. We introduce the concept of the ‘unmanageable consumer’ to express this recalcitrance...” (1995, 4). Gabriel and Lang offer multiple views of the consumer that they explore. Their book offers nine variants: the consumer as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity-seeker, hedonist, victim, rebel, activist and citizen. The image of the consumer that has dominated political and policy debates in recent years is the first of these – the consumer as chooser, an image derived from economic discourse, or perhaps, more accurately, what Thomas Frank (2001) calls “market populism”. Critical challenges to the consumerist turn in public policy have tended to rest on a mirror image of the consumer as chooser – the consumer as victim. In such debates, consumers are either the sovereign heroes of their own lives (independent, confident, judgement-forming and choice exercising agents) or the cultural dupes preyed upon by forces beyond their control (and often beyond their knowledge).

My purpose in drawing out these complications of the figures of the citizen and consumer is to indicate that, although they dominate recent debates about politics and policy, the citizen and the consumer may not offer robust positions from which to direct or assess public service reform. In particular, I want to use these complications to suggest that there may be other possible figures – forms of relationship and identification – that are significant in the provision and use of public services. Certainly, this is what our own research revealed when we examined how people thought of themselves when using public services in the UK.

New Labour: putting the consumer into public services

In 1997, New Labour came to power in the UK committed to a programme of public service reform and modernisation. This commitment involved a paradoxical mixture of continuity with, and change from, the preceding period of Conservative government. Public services had already experienced eighteen years of “reform” under those governments, involving diverse logics and mechanisms – including fiscal retrenchment, privatisation, decentralisation, marketisation and quasi-marketisation – whose variety was organised through the connective principles and practices of managerialism (Clarke and Newman 1997; Newman and Clarke 2009). New Labour’s reforming zeal had strong continuities with the practice of “permanent revolution” in the Conservative era. New Labour’s original commitment to maintain Conservative public spending limits expressed this sense of continuity. At the same time, however, New Labour stressed both public purposes and public service values, emphasising a commitment to processes of collaboration, partnership and “joined-up” government as alternatives to the fragmented and competitive world of services created by Conservative reforms (Newman 2001). Public services could, when suitably reformed, contribute to the well-being of a modern British people who, New Labour recognised, desired high-quality public services (Office of Public Service Reform 2002).

This positive disposition to public values and public service seemed like a sharp break with eighteen years of Conservative degradation. But public services needed reform to bring them into line with defining characteristics of the “modern world”. This conception of modernity was a powerful organising theme in New Labour discourse: it defined a sense of time, constructed New Labour’s “newness”, disarmed criticism (“old thinking”), and linked questions of the nation’s future to its place in a modern world. The modern world differed from the old world in which public services were created – the moment of post-war social democracy – in a number of critical ways (see, for example, Clarke and Newman 2004; Finlayson 2003). Identifying the need for “welfare reform” in 1998, the Prime Minister argued that:

Reform is a vital part of rediscovering a true national purpose, part of a bigger picture in which our country is a model of a 21st century developed nation: with sound, stable economic management; dynamism and enterprise in business; the best educated and creative nation in the world; and a welfare state that promotes our aims and achievements.

*But we should not forget why reform is right, and why, whatever the concerns over individual benefits, most people **know** it is right. Above all, the system must change because the world has changed, beyond the recognition of Beveridge’s generation. The world of work has altered – people no longer expect a job for life;*

traditional industries have declined; new technologies have taken their place. There is a premium on skills and re-skilling through life. The role of women has been transformed. Family structures are different. We live longer, but work for fewer years. And the expectations of disabled people have changed out of all recognition, from half a century ago. We need a system designed not for yesterday, but for today. (Blair 1998)

At the core of New Labour's view of the modern world was the sense that globalisation had changed the economy and, with it, the forms and habits of work that were needed to succeed. Such changes had consequences for gender roles and patterns of family or household formation. In the process, Britain had become a "consumer society" in which a proliferation of goods and services enabled a wide variety of wants and needs to be satisfied. This everyday experience of consumer choice was contrasted with the austerity of public services, whose "one size fits all" model of provision was shaped by the context of wartime and post-war rationing:

Many of our public services were established in the years just after the Second World War. Victory had required strong centralised institutions, and not surprisingly it was through centralised state direction that the immediate post-war Government chose to win the peace. This developed a strong sense of the value of public services in building a fair and prosperous society. The structures created in the 1940s may now require change, but the values of equity and opportunity for all will be sustained. The challenges and demands on today's public services are very different from those post-war years. The rationing culture which survived after the war, in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations ... Rising living standards, a more diverse society and a steadily stronger consumer culture have ... brought expectations of greater choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility. (Office of Public Services Reform 2002, 8)

If these expectations defined the "modern world", they also provided the benchmark against which public services should be judged. This image of consumer culture as defining the character of modernity was a recurrent theme in New Labour approaches to public services. Almost every policy document and many of the major speeches grounded themselves in this view of a transition from tradition to modernity: a transition perfectly symbolised by the figure of the consumer. This change opt a consumer culture constituted the imperative for public service reform:

People grow up today in a consumer society. Services – whether they are private or public – succeed or fail according to their ability to respond to modern expectations ... People today exercise

more choices in their lives than at any point in history. Many can afford to walk away from public services which do not command their confidence. (Milburn 2002)

Choice – understood in this precise consumer model – came to play an increasingly central role in New Labour’s approach to public service modernisation (see, inter alia, Clarke et al. 2007; Needham 2007). Choice was identified as the core dynamic of the consumer experience and was adopted as the “lever” for reforming sluggish or recalcitrant public services. In a submission to the 2004–2005 Public Administration Select Committee on Choice and Voice in Public Services, Ministers of State argued that choice must be central to public services reform because:

- It’s what users want
- It provides incentives for driving up quality, responsiveness and efficiency
- It promotes equity
- It facilitates personalisation. (Ministers of State 2004, 4)

Such claims are much disputed, but were central to New Labour’s model of reform. Our own study emerged as a response to this centrality of the figure of the consumer. We were interested to know how people providing and using public services thought of the consumer/citizen identifications.

From the lying-down patient of the past to the standing-up consumer of the future?

In a 2003 speech at the Royal College of Physicians, the then “Patients Czar”, Harry Cayton, argued for the need to reform health care through the following contrast:

So often in state provision of services universal provision meant the equity of the mediocre. That might have been acceptable to those lying down patients of the past but it will not do for the standing up consumers of the future. (BUPA Health Debate, 2nd September 2003).

This contrast of past and future is quintessentially New Labour. It presents two identities (patient and consumer) and links them to states of passivity (bad) and active and assertive choice-making (good). Such distinctions between patients and consumers, or citizens and customers, pointed to new ways of providing services that made them look and feel more like the experience of being a consumer – making available the choices that people experienced in other areas of their lives. Our

study explored the extent to which people saw themselves as, or wished to be treated as, consumers of public services.²

Within the larger study, we asked users of three services (health care, social care and policing) who they thought they were when they were using public services. As Table 1 indicates, hardly anyone understood themselves as consumers or customers when a choice of different identifications was offered:

Table 1
Who are you when you use public services?

	Health	Police	Social Care	Totals
Consumer	3 (3.1 %)	1 (1.6 %)	0	4 (2.2 %)
Customer	3 (3.1 %)	1 (1.6 %)	4 (22.2 %)	8 (4.4 %)
Patient	30 (30.9 %)	0	4 (22.2 %)	34 (18.9 %)
Service User	23 (23.7 %)	6 (9.4 %)	6 (33.3 %)	35 (19.6 %)
Citizen	5 (5.2 %)	11 (17.2 %)	1 (5.6 %)	17 (9.5 %)
Member of the Public	20 (20.6 %)	19 (29.7 %)	0	39 (21.8 %)
Member of the Local Community	13 (13.4 %)	26 (40.6 %)	3 (16.7 %)	42 (23.5 %)
Total	97	64	18	179

(People could select up to two answers. Number of respondents: 106.)

The table indicates that both service-specific identifications (patient/service user) and ideas of membership (of the public or local community) had the strongest appeal. So why did people not see themselves as consumers? We asked people to explain their choices (some in writing; some in follow-up interviews). What emerged as a consistent theme was that they saw using public services – and especially the health service on which I focus here – as involving distinctive relationships. Many summarised the significance of these relationships as meaning that “it’s not like shopping”:

I don't like “customer” really, because it implies a paying relationship on a sort of take it or leave it basis – more like going into a shop and seeing what's available and choosing something. I don't think it's quite like that ... Whereas if I am in a shop ... I am just there to buy something, I don't have any relationship with them

2 The project, *Creating Citizen Consumers: Changing Identifications and Relationships*, was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption Programme (grant number: RES-143-25-0008) and took place between 2003 and 2005. The study explored views of the changing relationships between the public and public services in three services (health care, policing and social care) in two different locations (Newtown and Oldtown) in the UK. More details can be found at www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers.

... No, I don't want to be a customer. I want to be a patient. I think once you become a customer you are lumped with customers in a shop ... whereas as a patient you have that personal relationship which is very difficult to break. (Newtown health user 1)

This view of the consumer or customer experience as a distant and impersonal transaction was a common theme in our study. It contrasted forcefully with what people desired from health care – personalised and continuing relationships in which needs and treatment were worked out in some sort of partnership between the patient and medical practitioners.

I feel I am a patient and I would like to develop my relationship with my health care professional. Because the way I view it is, being a diabetic, and any other problem I may have health wise, I'm the one who's got it and I have to lead it. The people who are around me are my team who are helping me get there. And a healthcare professional is part of my team. (Oldtown health user 3)

This view of being a patient does not fit the “lying down patients of the past” described above. This is an active and assertive person who leads “my team” – but who certainly does not view health care as a consumer relationship. This extends to a strong degree of scepticism about whether “choice” can – or should – be a central feature of health care provision. Most people were sceptical about choice:

I know “consumer” and “customer” imply choice and that is what we are supposed to want. I would consider it an acceptable achievement if everyone could have what was best in the matter of treatment as of right. There are certain cost considerations but that is another issue). “Choice” may be a political ploy to take our eye off the ball and confuse us as to what really matters. Choice sounds a good thing – but is it? (Newtown health user questionnaire 23)

This was in no way a “nostalgic” view of the past glories of the NHS. People were profoundly committed to seeing improvements in services – both in their resourcing and how they worked. But there were deep anxieties about the contemporary directions of reform, as in this discussion in one of our focus groups:

J: I do think it really matters who provides the service because if we are going to have a society where people have equal access, it can't happen while we have this stupid thing about it doesn't matter who delivers the service. It is absolutely essential that the public service can provide the best quality service, across ...

S: In the end the private sector has to make money, that is what they are there for. And the NHS doesn't. And that is why I am uneasy. And I am uneasy that they are pushing us towards an

American model where you will either be in and OK or out and very poor and get the basics, with a huge swathe in the middle. And if you've got a condition that knocks you out of health insurance – I just don't want to go the American way (Newtown health Focus Group).

Throughout our study we met this mix of aspirations (for better services and better treatment) and anxieties (about the level of resources, the directions of change and the quality of services). The challenge for government reform programmes, and for public services more generally, is to meet this mixture of aspirations and anxieties. This is not an easy task: these publics are unstable and contradictory, and this has consequences for both the large-scale political-policy realm and for the small-scale work of encounters with members of the public in public services.

In the UK, the policy response – reforming public services around the figure of the consumer – has had contradictory consequences. Although there have been observable improvements in a range of public services (including the health service), the impact is complicated by a public that has grown increasingly sceptical and demanding (Clarke 2005). It is sceptical about government claims (about investment and improvements, for example). It is also demanding, expecting that governments will (and should) do more to improve public well-being, to minimise social risks and to promote equity alongside improving quality.

At the level of service encounters with the public, public services also face contradictory pressures: to improve the quality of the encounter; to individualise or personalise services, to reduce costs, to enforce moral compliance or induce behaviour change while treating the service user with respect. Part of the unpredictability of the service encounter centres on the current instability of what we have called elsewhere the “knowledge/power knot” (Clarke 2006; Clarke et al. 2007). The provision of public services previously rested on a largely unchallenged combination of bureaucratic and professional power, to which patients, clients, applicants or users were subject. Authority in the encounter was clearly embodied in the person of the public service provider. A variety of changes have destabilised that fusion of knowledge and power: social and user movements challenging professional power; consumerism and the rise of voice and choice; processes of decentralisation and devolution taking authority beyond the institutions of public authority; and possibly a more general “decline of deference” in modern society. Public service providers now face “unsettled encounters” with the public in which knowledge, power and authority have to be negotiated – almost on a case-by-case basis as different members of the public arrive with divergent and sometimes contradictory desires and expectations.

The distinction between the citizen and the consumer – and the attempt to reform public services around the figure of the consumer – were both part of these trends and an attempt to shape them. But our own research suggests that the chang-

es are both more and less than the idea of a “consumer culture” would suggest. Certainly, the reform programme of consumerism both simplifies some of these trends and causes suspicion about the potential loss of the publicness of public services. The difficult challenge remains: how can public services be modernised in ways that balance equity and quality; that sustain a collective character while being more responsive to individuals in need; and that promote individual and collective well-being in the face of new economic and social risks.

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