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Introduction

This is an exciting time to be writing this book. Debates about publicness and the public sphere for the last 20 years or so have been preoccupied with narratives of decline: public services being privatised, state funding squeezed, public culture debased, politics corrupted, and so on. Underpinning such narratives is a fundamental assumption that any wider sensibility of public connectedness and public action is in retreat in the face of growing individualism and consumerism. The fortunes of the state, the institutions of the public sector, and the public itself are thus deeply entangled in the dismantling of the public domain.

But in the early 21st century we have begun to trace the emergence of key concerns and debates – about the environment, security, food safety, global warming, social exclusion and democratic participation, all of which require public action – both within and beyond the nation state. But what is the potential for public action given the fragmentation of state power, the demise of a public sector and the impoverishment of the public domain? Some look towards a market based citizenship that privileges consumer power as a means of securing equality and participation through the exercise of choice. Others look to the power of the internet to create new spaces of connectedness and to mobilise public action across, as well as within, nation states. Yet others (mainly in western Europe) look back nostalgically to the social democratic state and attempt to defend the public sphere from the incursions of neo-liberal rule. All highlight the significance of debates about what a politics of the public, and the role of public services, might be.

The politics of the public

Questions of what is public (and thus a focus for collective action) and what is now to be left to the market and to the actions of private individuals is at the forefront of

reform programmes. This remaking of the relationship between public, private and personal is a profoundly political matter. Of course this is not a new question: the association between the public sphere and the social democratic state is based on relatively recent social and political settlements. But the dislocation of this settlement is troubling, not least because of its association with a new phase of neo-liberal politics. As such, struggles around what should be a matter for the state, for the market and for individual responsibility are currently heightened.

These struggles are shadowed by a sense of uncertainty about who forms the public – and where it is to be found. The public is simultaneously thought to have disappeared in a collapse into a loose collection of selfish individuals, has its opinions solicited through old and new technologies of public opinion surveying, is seen as fragmented and fractured by divergent interests and identities, and is thought to be either complacent and complicit, or unstable, unpredictable and excessive in its expectations. At one edge, such shifting images of the public leak into debates about populations – the problems of social demography (age and fertility have commanded most recent attention); the troubles of social composition (associated with multi-ethnic societies and multicultural governance); and the problem of social dysfunction and social disorder (the wrong sort of people in the wrong places doing the wrong things). At another edge, questions about the public leak into controversies about citizenship: its increasingly troubled relationship to national identity; its shifting mixes of rights, responsibilities and relationships; the ways in which it is enforced and enacted in everyday life; and the contested character of access to citizenship.

We can also see equally troubling issues about publicness – for example, in claims that we are seeing the death or decline of the public realm (and its displacement by private interests). In relation to public services, such arguments have circled around the question of how the publicness of public services is constituted. In Britain, the question was answered by pointing to an embedded chain of connections in which publicness was secured: public services served members of the public, directed by public policy (made in political institutions in which the public interest was expressed through representative/democratic procedures), funded by public resources, organised in a public sector, and staffed by public employees (who embodied an ethos of public service). We want to note two things about this conception of publicness. First, it was always a piece of institutional mythmaking (rather than an accurate and reliable description). Each of the links in this chain could be, and has

been, challenged – from the problems of representative politics through to the difficult mixtures of power, paternalism and the public service ethos, for example.

Secondly, in the last thirty years, this chain of has been dismantled. Political direction has moved to an ‘arm’s length’ relationship through the use of agencies, privatizations, public-private partnerships, and the creation of markets and quasi-markets in public services. Representative politics has had a shrinking hold on public enthusiasm, engagement and trust, while being supplemented by an ever-widening variety of forms of consultation, participation and ‘citizen engagement’. Public resources (derived from taxation and social insurance) have been combined with sources of private (corporate) finance and with less visible but significant developments around co-payment and co-production of services, or even transforming some services (including aspects of financial security) into private (personal) matters. Public services have been turned into multiple providers, many located in the private or third sectors or multi-sectoral hybrids, whose employees are not ‘public servants’. Tracing publicness in these emergent fields is problematic – is it to be found in finance, in governance arrangements, in regulatory surveillance, or in the ‘end user’ (members of the public)?

Such debates are taking place against a backdrop in which, while public services remain the object of reform, there seems to be a growing awareness of the disbenefits produced by previous cycles of change. The imperatives of managerisation – captured in part in the rhetoric of the New Public management – continue, with profound consequences for public services and for those who work in them or depend on them. But the future of public services is being shaped against a backdrop of debates about the need for new forms of democratic practice; for forms of governance based on ideas of partnership and participation, and in the context of debates about citizenship and inclusion, in the legitimacy of political institutions, and so on. Such concerns are producing an explosion of new ‘public’ discourses: public accountability, public governance, public participation, public value, and many others. And they are producing a new set of discourses about the public role of public services, even where these no longer form part of a public sector.

As such public services and the proposed directions of their remaking appear at the centre of public and political debates. Such debates swirl around a series of key terms – efficiency and effectiveness, activation, personalisation, partnership,

markets, social enterprise, social justice, choice, citizens, consumers, good governance, contestability, globalization, devolution or localism, the public service ethos, multiculturalism, diversity and inequality. Sometimes these terms behave as if they are the products of coherent political-cultural lines of thinking, such that the Right proclaims the superiority of markets in promoting efficiency and effectiveness and in creating personalised and enterprising public services. Meanwhile the Left champions citizens, social justice and the public service ethos. However, we think it is much more common for these terms to exist in unpredictable and unlikely combinations, for example, when contestability, competition and choice are seen to address diverse needs, remedy inequality and promote social justice. As the British Prime Minister said in 2004, we are committed to extending choice 'from the few to the many' as a politics of egalitarianism. Such combinations can, of course, be written off as the consequence of New Labour's neo-liberal turn. But such strange combinations promote both political and policy puzzles about the future of public services – and even about how to make sense of, and engage in, such debates.

Our purpose in this book is to explore this shifting landscape of publics and public services. We start from a set of orientations – that publicness is politically important; that its old certainties have been profoundly disturbed and are now being reworked in unpredictable and confusing ways; and that attention to such emergent forms of publicness is of critical political, practical and analytical importance. We do not believe that questions about the future of publicness – and the place and character of public services – can be satisfactorily posed, much less answered, by succumbing to either the fantasies of the marketising right nor the nightmares of the statist left. Both tell stories of the opposition between markets and states. Both exclude problematic elements from this binary distinction. Both announce (though in very tones of celebration and lamentation) the current triumph of the market. While we understand the simple pleasures of story telling, such 'grand narratives' exclude or gloss over almost all that we find interesting, troubling and difficult about changing publics and changing public services. In this book, we try to offer a different way of looking at and thinking about publics and their relationships to services.

The politics of public service reform

Public services are everywhere the subject of projects to reform, reinvent and modernise them. The state of public services and the proposed directions of their remaking appear at the centre of public and political debates. Such debates swirl

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What is interesting about the current reform agenda is that it seems no longer to be couched in terms of the NPM. As we argue in Ch 4, NPM is now viewed in historical terms in the academic literature and in much professional/policy/political discourse. Many strands of the current reform agenda (though not all) decentre the organisation, the site which the NPM struggled to transform. They also open up the need for new orientations and skills on the part of public service staff. The current policy agenda tends to look towards changing the behaviour of the public in an effort to render citizens more health conscious, more work oriented, better parents, or more active contributors to the public good through voluntary and civil society participation. While the dominant managerial logics associated with the high point of the NPM were based on economics, it seems that public services now require more sociological and psychological skills in order to engage in developmental and behaviour changing strategies.

Public services are, then, being reassembled in multiple ways: not only as businesses, but as complex partnerships, and in new kinds of relationship with the public. The drive for efficiency and performance has by no means been displaced, but overlaid on it – in what are often deeply uncomfortable ways – are debates about

the role of public services in 'empowering' citizens and communities, the development of partnerships and collaborative ventures with 'civil society' groups, and the fostering of 'co production' arrangements with service users. For example a recent book – tellingly titled 'Public Matters – set out a 'progressive' agenda for public service reform that (look at chapter titles? Or don't bother to mention?) The current reform agenda, then, does not offer a linear trajectory of the privatisation of state bodies. Public services are implicated in governmental strategies for promoting entrepreneurship and business through commissioning practices coupled with 'market development'. Many have been 'freed' from their direct links with the state to compete for 'customers' of public services, including customers from other nations within an enlarged European Union. But public services are also implicated in strategies concerned with enhancing citizenship and social cohesion, supporting forms of 'civil society' based activity, and promoting democratic involvement.

Thinking paradoxically: decline and proliferation

Both the conceptions of the public and their institutional embodiments seem to be distinctively at risk in the current period (Marquand, 2004). But there are real temptations to treat decline as the only story, ignoring two key dynamics. One is the steady expansion of the reach of the state and other governmental institutions in response to issues such as crime and security. While state welfare may be under threat, there has been a proliferation of governmental strategies concerned with the management of potentially unruly population groups – strategies for the control of anti-social behaviour, the disciplining of the 'socially excluded', the integration of migrant populations, the management of those seeking to cross national borders and the exclusion of 'undesirable' alien populations. This dynamic involves an extension of state powers and of the public/private institutions through which such power are exercised (most obviously prisons, police forces and immigration services, but also partnership bodies concerned with constituting 'self governing' communities and with promoting social inclusion and cohesion).

A second dynamic that challenges the picture of a declining public sphere is concerned with the extensions of 'publicness' that are taking place alongside strategies of privatisation and marketisation. Again this has visible and less visible components. Most visible is the proliferation of public bodies concerned with the regulation of services delivered through the market or through some combination of public and private authority. Rather less visible – and rather more ambiguous in its

embodiment of 'publicness' – is the proliferation of sites and spaces in which the public is invited to participation in the design, delivery or governance of institutions and services. At stake in each is third form of proliferation – that of discourses of the public and publicness: the language of public policy is pervaded with concepts such as public value, public accountability, public scrutiny, public engagement, public empowerment and many others.

Our starting point, then, is to try to understand decline and proliferation together. One possible reading of the conjuncture of decline and proliferation is based on the inevitable and unassailable spread of neo-liberal rule: that is, it is only because the market has 'won' that publicness can once again be spoken, albeit in ways that are not allowed to challenge the inevitable logics of reform. A second reading also privileges the neo-liberal narrative, claiming that this particular phase of neo-liberalism requires the transformation of citizens, freeing them from their old attachments to political rights and their expectations of what the state – and public services- should deliver, and constituted as self governing, responsible and information rich actors, equipped for the global economy. We think that both of these readings are deficient, in that they simplify the logics of change and so produce a simplified version of politics. Our starting point is to try to understand decline and proliferation together in a reading that highlights the ambiguities that are produced, and the new political – and public – spaces that might be possible as a result. And throughout we highlight the implications for public services and those who work for the public.

In each chapter of this book we trace the relationship between processes of decline and proliferation, paying particular attention to questions of power. For example the changing relationship between public services and publics might be understood as one of 'empowerment', with the public participating as co-producers of services, in service design, and in innovative forms of provision that defy categories such as state or market. Such processes might also, however, be understood in terms of a politics of incorporation, in which forms of politics that could potentially form counter hegemonic movements are deflected through new alignments with governmental power. Or they could be described as new governmentalities, whose aim is to create more responsible, accommodating subjects, more fitted to a neo-liberal conception of reform and progress. This ambiguity cannot, we argue, be resolved once and for all: the binary between empowerment and incorporation, or between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms of politics, are too abstract to be helpful as analytical

categories. Throughout the book, then, we try to hold such ambiguities open as spaces in which the politics of the public is struggled over.

In this book we also attempt to offer ways of conceptualising change that avoid 'from' and 'to' dualities inscribed in 'epochal' accounts of change. The book starts from a view that changing publics, changing public services produce a series of unstable relationships and encounters. That is, despite the dominant image of public services as changing in ways that simply respond to new formations of the public (as individualised, reflexive, consumer oriented) our focus is on :

- the discontinuities in the process of change. We see no steady process of progress towards empowerment and democratisation; rather these are overlaid uncomfortably on other regimes of power in which bureaucratic hierarchies remain embedded and in which managerial logics privileging business efficiency dominate (Newman 2001)
- the disjunctured relationships between publics and public services – relationships in which 'the public' in all its forms bring multiple experiences, attachments and aspirations to their encounters with public services, producing a series of 'unstable encounters' (Clarke et al 2007)

We engage critically with the idea of the roll out of a singular reform programme, providing examples of different logics and principles in different countries. But rather than using such data to provide a comparative text, we focus on trying to understand the importance of transnational flows of ideas, people and resources and how these shape the development of institutions and practices in particular places. We explore this through notions of 'translation' that illuminate not only the flow of ideas but the processes of enrolment and attachment in specific sites

This proliferation of projects, innovations and contestations around publics and public services makes us wary of announcements of the death or decline of the public. Publicness remains a site of significance: the focus of material and symbolic investments. In this book, we hope to tease out the shifting and fluctuating fortunes of publicness, looking at the different challenges to its old institutionalizations, exploring the attempts to supplant it with new orientations – privatised, marketised, individualised, while paying attention to the ways in which the public is being reinvented, emerging in new sites, forms and institutionalizations. In the process, we try to be attentive to the processes of destruction and diminution to which publicness has been subjected, while not falling to prey to a nostalgic romanticism about older institutionalizations of publicness: when were public services so great that we would

like to go back to them? When was the public ever wholly open, accessible and inclusive? We take an equally sceptical view of contemporary developments – the emergent forms of publics and publicness. We think there are problems about reading them one-sidedly – either as the product of global neo-liberalism or as its antidote (the expressions of an authentically popular public). Our concern is to explore the ambiguities, uncertainties and paradoxes associated with the contemporary condition of publicness – and to draw out the conditions, tendencies and contradictory dynamics associated with the politics of the public in the 21st century.

Key words

This concern with **ambiguity** provides one of the organising concerns of the book. In recent years, we have been struck by the simultaneous ‘decline’ and ‘proliferation’ of publicness and our interest in writing this book has been driven by that puzzle – how do we make sense of the persistence and reinvention of the public? But we are also consistently struck by the problem of analysing and evaluating this persistence and proliferation. Are bits of publicness merely the residue of earlier political-cultural times? Are they merely a ‘smokescreen’ for the spreading virus of neo-liberalism? Or are they new sites of public formation, investment and mobilization, alternatives to the de-collectivising, de-socialising and de-publicising waves of neo-liberalism? This puzzle – and indeed the possibility that such emergent forms may be more than one thing – engaged us in the work that underpins this book.

Ambiguity is linked to two other key words as orienting principles for our approach here. It has a profound connection with our continuing interest in the analysis of **articulation**: the formation and mobilization of discursive and political connections into dominant blocs (and thus the production of subordinated elements). For us, this concern with articulation as a set of political and discursive practices has been an enduring contribution of cultural studies to the analysis of contemporary processes and projects. We take it as a starting point that no keyword (in Raymond Williams’ sense: 1977) has a fixed or necessary meaning – not even ‘public’. Point here is that the language of the public is highly mobile, unfixed. We can identify it as positioned in different chains of meaning in which it takes on different associations - public sector, public sphere, public interest, public accountability, public culture, public places, public interest, public value) – it can therefore be appropriated by very different

political projects. Refer forwards or mention here the 3 discursive chains highlighted in chapter 1 that are particularly significant for us.

Words are articulated into specific political-cultural projects that aim to either fix or change aspects of social formations. Such projects – to modernise government, to improve the population, to make the nation competitive – are usually contested, either actively or passive. The concept of articulation denotes the political-cultural work that has to be done to mobilise both meanings and people in order to realise a project (and the work of dis-articulation and de-mobilisation that is necessary to close out other projects). As a result, we are particularly concerned to explore the attempted closures around dominant politico/cultural logics of rule, and attempted co-options of such logics for other purposes (not necessarily resistance – just other purposes that inflect, twist or borrow from the dominant logics). Such other purposes are important because this field of meanings and mobilisations forms a site in which emergent publics (identifications with, or membership of, a larger public) or publicness (sites and practices, spaces, cultural representations, civility, institutional norms) might be shaped.

The third of our keywords for the book's approach is **assemblages**: the idea that the institutionalization of specific projects involves the work of assembling diverse elements into an apparently coherent form. In the context of studying public services, the idea of assemblage points to the ways in which policies, personnel, places, practices, technologies, images, architectures of governance and resources are brought together and combined. Assemblage does two particular things for us in this book. It draws attention to the work of construction (and the difficulties of making ill-suited elements fit together as though they are coherent). And it makes visible the (variable) fragility of assemblages – that which has been assembled can more or less easily come apart, or be dismantled. In a period where we have seen the vulnerability and mutability of what appeared to be solidly established institutionalisations of public services, the idea of assemblage allows us a way of working with the double dynamic of solidity and fragility.