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Publics, Politics and Power: remaking the public in public services.

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Introduction (pre publication final draft)

This is an exciting time to be writing this book. Discussions of publicness and the public sphere have tended to be 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 the growing power of markets, 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 sphere.

But in the early 21st century we can see the emergence of new concerns and debates – about the environment, security, food safety, global warming, poverty, 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 (especially in Europe) look back nostalgically to social democratic or welfare states and attempt to defend the public sphere from the incursions of neo-liberalism. All point to vital disputes about what a politics of the public might be.

The politics of the public

Questions of what is public (and thus a focus for collective action) and what is to be left to the market or the actions of private individuals have been at the forefront of current programmes of state reform. Of course, this is not a new question: the association between the public sphere and welfare states was based in relatively recent social and political settlements. But the dislocation of these settlements is troubling, not least because of its connections with neo-liberal politics. As a result, struggles have intensified around the remaking of the relationships between public, private and personal. These struggles are shadowed by a sense of uncertainty about who forms the public – and where it is to be found (Newman, 2005a). At one and the same time, the public is thought to have collapsed into a loose collection of selfish individuals, while having its opinions solicited through old and new technologies of public engagement. It 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 concerns about populations – the problems of social demography (ageing and fertility have commanded most recent attention); the troubles of social composition (associated with multi-ethnic societies and multi-cultural governance); and the problems of social dysfunction and social disorder (the wrong sort of people in the

wrong places doing the wrong things). Questions about the public also 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 its benefits.

In this book, we make much use of the word ‘publicness’ as a way of talking about the combination of things, ideas, issues, people, relationships, practices and sites that have been *made public*. Such things, people, and issues get made public by a variety of means, but all of them involve processes of making visible matters of connective concern. Public issues or problems (objects) imply publics to take an interest in them (subjects) and these are connected by institutions, relationships and practices (mediums: see Barnett, 2007b; see also Latour and Weibel, 2005). Publicness is historically and socially variable – the combinations of things, sites, people, ideas and the rest are not permanently or intrinsically public: their construction as public matters involves political struggles to make them so. They may also be de-publicised, and de-politicised (taken out of recognisable public concern). Recently, publicness has become the nodal point of multiple debates, connecting arguments about civil society, community, citizenship, old and new forms of solidarity, social divisions and diversity, and the search for social cohesion, integration and identity. The health of the body politic, the frayed fabric of social order, the wealth and well-being of the nation, even the level of happiness among the population, are persistent matters of public interest, concern and debate. So too is the role that public services might play in creating such conditions and in remedying such problems. One key question about the place and role of public services concerns how their publicness 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, were funded by public resources and organised in a public sector, were accountable to public bodies, and were 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 myth-making, 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 public accountability. Second, in the last thirty years, this chain of connections has been dismantled. Political direction has moved to an ‘arm’s length’ relationship through the use of agencies, privatized contractors, 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 the transformation of some services into private 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’ in the conventional sense. Tracing publicness in these emergent fields is problematic: is it to be found in finance, in governance arrangements, in regulatory surveillance, or embodied in the ‘end users’ (members of the public)?

Such debates are taking place in a context where, while public services remain the object of reform, there seems to be a growing awareness of the problems produced by previous cycles of change. The imperatives of managerialism – 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 through arguments about new forms of governance: the rise of networks and partnerships, innovations in democratic practice, the development of ‘co-production’ and ‘choice’ as service models and initiatives directed towards citizenship and social inclusion. Such developments are producing an explosion of new public discourses: public accountability, public governance, public participation, public value, and many others. And they are producing new arguments about the public role of public services, even where these no longer form part of a public sector.

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 different 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 publics, politics and power. In this book, we try to offer a different way of looking at and thinking about publics and their relationships to services.

Public services as mediums of publicness

The subtitle of this book – remaking the public in public services – underlines our interest in public services as mediums of publicness. That is, public services can – under some conditions – act as a focus for the formation of public imaginaries and collective solidarities, and help sustain solidaristic attachments. Membership of a local library, participation in the governance of a school, and even commiserating with others queuing for treatment in a hospital accident and emergency unit, are all potential sources of a public imaginary. This means that public services are not only public because of their material basis in public funding or being located in a public sector. They are both constituted by, and constitutive of, notions of publicness. They are constituted because of their association with a particular set of ‘public’ discourses and cultural resources; and they are constitutive through the ways in which publicness is constantly being remade through the practices of public service work and technologies of public governance. There is an important argument about the diminution or erasure of the publicness of public services resulting from the introduction of markets, contracts and a consumerist focus. It is often asserted that, without collective solidarities, it is impossible to have state-funded welfare delivered through public institutions. We want to turn this on its head, arguing that collective

provision and public institutions can help constitute collective belongings through the relationships and identifications they foster.

We can trace several ways in which the role of public services as mediums of publicness is being remade:

- Public service bodies act as channels through which public culture is sustained, reproduced and reframed. Many services promote, organise and regulate cultural events, and some operate their own communications media.
- The proliferation of public participation initiatives in contemporary governance regimes means that public services have become significant mediums of communication and democratic participation.
- Public services are implicated in ‘place shaping’ activities that influence how publics encounter each other in the public sphere.
- Public services are involved in the remaking of ‘community’ and ‘civil society’ through strategies of partnership and capacity building.
- Public service staff are implicated in emerging strategies of governing that require publics to become more responsible and self reliant, or to change aspects of their behaviour.
- It is in the everyday dilemmas of public service work that the meaning of concepts associated with the public sphere – openness, tolerance, equality and justice - are being remade or reinscribed.

We argue that mediums matter. For example, markets as a medium have had particular consequences for the sustainability of publicly oriented solidarities and

identifications. Of course, publicness is formed and shaped through multiple mediations – the mass media and cultural organisations play crucial roles. But we want to argue that publicness is also shaped also through individual and collective experiences of, and encounters with, public services. This makes the technologies and practices of public service work, public management and public leadership critical elements in shaping publicness. Public services are engaged in the remaking of the public domain through practices of design, the policing of space, and the governance of public interactions. They deploy new information technologies as ways of engaging in dialogue with particular publics as well as a means of re-engineering systems of service delivery.

However public services are everywhere the subject of projects to reform, reinvent and modernise them. The state of public services and their proposed futures appear at the centre of current public and political debates. These 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, 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, while the Left champions citizens, social justice and democratic renewal. 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 then British Prime

Minister said in 2004, choice must be extended ‘from the few to the many’ as part of a politics of egalitarianism. Such combinations can, of course, be written off as the rhetoric of a particular government’s neo-liberal turn. But such strange combinations promote both political and policy puzzles about the future of public services and about how to make sense of, and engage in, such controversies.

In thinking about futures, it seems that they may no longer be dominated by the terms of the New Public Management. The NPM has come to be viewed as an historical phase in academic literatures 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. Instead they look towards changing the behaviour of the public in an effort to render citizens more health conscious, more work oriented, more effective parents, or more active contributors to the public good through voluntary and civil society participation. This has implications for the orientations and skills needed by public service staff. 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 therapeutic or psychological skills in order to deliver developmental and behaviour changing strategies.

This suggests how public services are being reassembled in multiple ways: not only as businesses, but also as complex partnerships and hybrid organisational forms, and in new kinds of relationship with the public. The drive for efficiency and performance has by no means disappeared, but overlaid on it – in what are often deeply uncomfortable ways – are new demands that public services should empower citizens and communities, develop partnerships, collaborate with ‘civil society’ groups, and

foster ‘co-production’ arrangements with service users. Much of this has been cast as a new ‘progressive’ agenda (e.g. Diamond et al 2007; Pearce and Margo, 2007). The current reform agenda, then, is not a simple project of privatising state bodies and public resources. Public services are certainly 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 the ‘customers’ of public services, including customers from other nations within an enlarged European Union. But public services are also enrolled 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

In this book we explore some of these paradoxes inherent in thinking about a politics of the public. Much critical academic and political discussion during the last two decades has offered a narrative of decline that attributes a central role to forms of politics that one might term both ‘anti-social’ and ‘anti-public’. Here, conceptions of the public and their institutional embodiments seem to be distinctively at risk in the current period (e.g., Marquand, 2004). But there are temptations to treat decline as the only story, ignoring two other 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 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 both an extension of state powers and the construction of public/private institutions through which such powers are exercised (most obviously prisons, police forces and immigration services, but also partnership bodies concerned with producing community safety and promoting social inclusion or 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 more and less visible aspects. 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 a 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.

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: 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 will, at various points, be pointing to the ‘dark sides’ of publicness: the capacity for publics to be parochial, exclusionary and traditional in their orientations; or the tendency for them to fail to live up to the aspirations of those seeking to mobilise, engage or activate them. Similarly public institutions – and those working for them- can exhibit a bleaker side. It may be that the oppressive practices associated with bureaucratic and paternalistic forms of power are being eradicated, and the ‘knowledge-power knot’ that sustains professional authority unravelled; but public services are now implicated in a range of new strategies for ‘governing the social’ that may be regarded as coercive and punitive in their effects. They also form part of the governing apparatuses that distinguish between publics (desirable populations) and non-publics (a range of marginalised and troublesome groups), even while targeting the latter for a range of more or less disciplinary interventions, from the administration of anti-social behaviour policies to the development of programmes designed to overcome ‘poor parenting’.

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. To do so we will be offering a series of vignettes, not as examples of a particular issue, but as a way of seeing how diverse trends and tendencies come together – with more or less strain and discomfort – in a particular site in which publics and publicness are being reconstructed. In reading them there is a need to note the specificity of each. They do not illustrate general trends, but attempt to show the complexities and ambiguities condensed in specific sites and practices. In writing this book we have not attempted to produce a comparative, text, but have tried to set our own knowledge of, and engagement in, the UK (and other Anglophone places, such as the USA) against examples, narratives and analyses drawn from various ‘elsewheres’ to generate both a more complex view of the dynamics of publicness and a richer analytical capacity for thinking about change – especially about new formations of publicness.

Key words

Our interest in writing this book has been driven by the puzzle of decline and proliferation: how do we make sense of the persistence and reinvention of the public? 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; and in particular, drew us to the idea of *ambiguity* as a way of marking the different conjunctural possibilities embedded in the remaking of publics and public services.

Ambiguity is linked to two other key words as orienting principles for our approach here. It has an important 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'. The language of publicness is currently highly mobile, or unfixed. We can see it being recruited to, and positioned in, different chains of meaning in which it takes on new associations – for example, public sphere, public culture, public places, public interest, public safety, public scrutiny, public value. The language of publicness can be – and is – appropriated by very different political projects.

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 political-cultural logics of rule, and the attempted co-options of such logics for other purposes (not necessarily resistance – just other purposes that inflect, twist or borrow from 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 publicness, 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 institutionalizations of publicness, the idea of assemblage allows us a way of working with the double dynamic of solidity and fragility.

In the following chapter we put these concepts to work in exploring the complexity of transitions of ideas and institutionalizations of the public, and in teasing out different ways of trying to make sense of this multiplicity of changes.

