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Citizen-consumers and public service reform: at the limits of neo-liberalism?

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the question: what is not neo-liberal? It explores the problem of treating neo-liberalism's universalising ambitions as having come true in practice and argues that this obscures both the uneven and partial impact of neo-liberalism and the forms of political cultural work that are needed to make it come true. Focusing on one quintessential neo-liberal development - the transformation of citizens into consumers - the paper uses evidence from a recent study of public service reform in the UK to suggest that neo-liberal subjects have not (yet) materialised in this specific context. It considers how New Labour and neo-liberal discourses 'tell the time' of other social imaginaries, attempting to residualise them as left-overs from earlier ways of thinking.

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Do we inhabit a neo-liberal age? For many analysts of the present, neo-liberalism appears to be the dominant structuring force that aligns economic, political and social change. It is the connective thread that links the economization of social life, the reform of welfare states and the core political discourses of globalization. Much effort has been devoted to the analysis of neo-liberalism: its shape, its structure, its dynamics, its elementary forms, its programmatic character. This paper is organised around one smaller and rather more contrary question: *what is not neo-liberal?*

The paper is in three parts. The first explores why I want to pose this question at all: examining what the conditions for it are. The second part tries to tease out the question of what is not neo-liberal in relation to one specific empirical example. In many discussions of neo-liberalism, the remaking of the citizen as a consumer is emblematic of neo-liberalism, embodying its transformation of older liberal/welfarist or social democratic arrangements into neo-liberal forms. This paper draws on a study of the relations between citizens or consumers and public services in the United Kingdom. The final part of the paper takes up some aspects what it means to think conjecturally about neo-liberalism as a political-cultural project. In particular it examines some of the political-cultural work involved in spreading, installing, universalising and naturalising neo-liberalism. ¹

Why worry about what is not neo-liberal? It is clearly hard enough to define what is neo-liberal, why add another question? I want to start with this question because of two related concerns, the first of which is an empirical question about neo-liberalism's apparent *omni-presence*. It has become increasingly difficult to think about what places and spaces are not neo-liberal. Neo-liberalism *appears* to be everywhere and everywhere appears to be neo-liberal:

There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neo-liberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s. Deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common. Almost all states, from those newly minted after the collapse of the Soviet Union to old-style social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand and Sweden have embraced, sometimes voluntarily and in other instances in response to coercive pressures, some version of neo-liberal theory and adjusted at least some policies and practices accordingly. (Harvey, 2005, p. 3)

Similarly it is difficult to think about what political formations, discourses, ideologies and projects are not neo-liberal, which suggests that the universalising ambitions of neo-liberalism appear to have come true in practice: we now think neo-liberally. The third aspect of this elasticity concerns the programmatic dimension of neo-liberalism. It is now difficult to see the world without noting what we might call the 'plague spots' of neo-liberal policy and practice. Everywhere we turn we can see processes of marketisation, privatisation, activation, or responsabilisation. These seem to be the characteristic technologies of neo-liberal rule. I want to step back from this omni-presence and ask: where are

¹ The paper was first presented at a conference organised by the Unit for Interpretive Criticism at the University of Illinois in April 2005: *Fetishizing the Free Market: the cultural politics of neo-liberalism*. I am very grateful to the conference organisers for the invitation to take part, and to the participants in the conference for the profoundly thoughtful and thought-provoking discussions that took place.

the edges? Where does it stop? What else co-exists with, surrounds, and bumps into neo-liberalism?²

The second concern addresses the conceptual elasticity of neo-liberalism, though a better phrase might be conceptual promiscuity (Barnett, 2005). It is a concept that enables one of the more unlikely conversations in the human and social sciences to go on because it appears to be shared by both political economists and Foucauldian governmentals. The term neo-liberalism makes them seem to talk the same language. Of course I want to stress *appear to* here since I think by neo-liberalism they often mean substantially different things. Neo-liberalism for political economy tends to be a process of class re-composition, restorative project of bourgeois class power, the reassertion of the logic and authoritative capital and the extension or invention of new means of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005). For governmentals, neo- (or sometimes 'advanced') liberalism has something to do with changing modes of governing the social: organising the conduct of subjects in new forms, in new practices with new forms of regulation (Rose, 1999; Petersen et al. 1999). Nevertheless, the concept clearly works to make a sort of convergence possible because both of these perspectives use neo-liberalism as a way of registering something about new alignments or configurations of economic, cultural and political domains, even though they mean very different things by those terms. But it does seem to me that this convergence might also be a site of analytical anxiety. As a result, I want to take a more sceptical view about neo-liberalism and its conceptual and empirical reach.

This implies a more conditional view that it might be better to treat neo-liberalism as a project seeking to make the world in its image rather than an achieved condition (see also Clarke, 2004a, ch. 5). Neo-liberalism certainly has universalising ambitions: it attempts to create or constitute the global as a neo-liberal field. But we should not mistake ambitions, intentions and fantastic projections for what happens in practice. We should understand that bits of the world may prove to be recalcitrant. They may not simply fall into line with the projection of what a neo-liberal world should look like. So I have an abiding interest in the sites, forms, discourses and practices of recalcitrance. In this context I use recalcitrance as a less politically and emotionally loaded concept than the term resistance. Resistance offers a more romantically charged view of people's reluctance, refusal, grudging compliance, grudging non-compliance, and foot-dragging distance from the summonings of power and authority. Recalcitrance seems to me to be a less decisive, less conscious, and less politically driven view which allows us to understand the tensions, the disjunctions, the dis-engagements, and the reluctances: in short, the many modes in which people live their subordination (Clarke, 2004c).

Let me unpack the question of what is not neo-liberal further. I want to think about *what* is not neo-liberal in terms of other political imaginaries or other political cultural projects. But I also want to think in terms of *where* is not neo-liberal to keep available to us the unevenness of time and space in the face of the collapse of spatial differentiation in conceptions of the universalisation of neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005). Universalisation certainly marks the ambitions to wipe

² Harvey, it should be said, also engages in a more differentiated analysis of the uneven impact of neo-liberalism, emphasising the partial adoption of neo-liberal policies and the dynamics of 'twists and turns', 'slow reversals' and the 'turbulent currents of uneven geographical development' (2005, p. 87).

out space but does not mean that space is wiped out in practice (Massey, 2005). Secondly, if there are other things, other projects, other imaginaries at stake in and around the places of neo-liberalism, it may be worth reflecting on the conditions and consequences of neo-liberalism's *co-habitation* with these others. While it would be possible to have a long, relatively general discussion of those issues, I intend to approach them here through one specific empirical example. This example deals with what is understood to be an absolutely core shift associated with neo-liberalism: the remaking or reinvention of citizens as consumers.

Transforming citizens: consumers as a neo-liberal archetype?

This transformation of citizens into consumers has been a central thread of New Labour governments' work on the state and the relations between state, society and economy in the UK for the past eight years. It is a central rationale for its approach to the reform and modernisation of public services around conceptions of choice and the rise of the consumer. This is a process of reform that has strong continuities with the neo-liberalism of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s who tried to shatter the institutionalised forms of Labourist or social democratic imaginaries (Clarke, 1997; Clarke and Newman, 1997). They challenged these social democratic forms, embedded in institutions of welfare and public services, through their promotion of consumer choice in a range of critical services. For example, they promoted 'parental choice' over schools for children, and constructed what was known as the 'right to buy' scheme for tenants of public housing, which aimed to create the opportunity for tenants to transform themselves into property owners as part of a much wider project of creating a 'property owning democracy'.

For New Labour the consumer rather than the citizen embodies what it means to be 'modern' (Clarke and Newman, 2004; Finlayson, 2003). New Labour political discourse narrates the necessity of moving public services from a citizen focus to a consumer focus. It embeds this imperative in the story of wider national and global social change. It identifies the creation and development of welfare and public service with the end of the second World War: the construction of what is sometimes called the Keynesian or the Beveridgean welfare state (Hughes and Lewis, 1998). The New Labour narrative identifies that period with what it calls a 'rationing culture' in which services were constructed on a basis of collective interest, a source of spirit of national self sacrifice and understanding that a certain austerity about the funding and provision of public services was a necessity (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002). This moment of national, economic necessity embodied a conception of collective sacrifice and so a 'rationing culture' provided a model of austere collectivism in which limited resources were carefully eked out to a grateful public. But, they argue, the society has shifted over the fifty years between 1945 and the end of the 20th century from a rationing culture to a consumer culture. In such a consumer culture, the old model of public services is anachronistic because such services fail to match the experiences and expectations of consumer choice in other areas of people's lives (we discuss this in more detail in Clarke, 2004a; and Clarke, Smith and Vidler, 2005).

This is an insistent distinction, affirming that public services need to be reformed simply to be aligned better with the lives that people now lead. A consumer culture is one in which people can pursue their individual needs and wants, and expect responsive, flexible, adaptive organisations that fulfil their desires, meet their needs and satisfy their wants. The problem constructed in this narrative is

that public services are dis-junctured from those experiences and expectations. They frustrate the individualism, they stifle the diversity of needs and wants, and they fail to be responsive. Many reasons are adduced for that failure, but what I want to stress at this point is that narration of 1945 to the 1990s as one of a binary shift from an austere rationing culture to an expansive and innovative consumer culture. I want to stress this binary conception of the historical sequence because it makes disappear a whole set of politics and culture practices and collective mobilisation that took place in the middle. The New Labour narrative characteristically inscribes the distinction between the 'old (statist) left' and the 'new (market-centric) right'. New Labour constructs a transformative 'Third Way' between Left and Right; between state and market (Blair, 1996; Giddens, 1997). New Labour is particularly defined in contrast to Old Labour (and Old Left). New Labour is committed to enlarging the responsiveness, the dynamism and the flexibility of the public services in response to the needs and expectations of a complex public. In the middle, in that little gap between Old Left and New Labour, the complex, expansive, transformatory politics of the New Left and new social movements disappear from view. All those struggles which attempted to take the social democratic welfare state and say: it's not enough; it fails to address not just diversity but relations of structured difference that produce inequality; it fails to transform and enable people's lives; it fails to really redress the inequalities of market relations; and it fails to deliver anything but the barest minimum of poverty protection. In one sense, this is merely a historical footnote but it has implications for how we think about the history of welfare states and how we might understand the attempt to displace and render invisible a certain set of politics around those institutions.

Nevertheless, the reworking of public services around this figure of the consumer is surely neo-liberalism embodied in practice. The consumer is a core image of the neo-liberal claim about the nature of the world and how it must be. The shift from citizen to consumer seems to embody a set of much wider distinctions: for example, from the state to the market; from the public to the private; from collectivism to individualism; and from social democratic welfarism to neo-liberalism. One reason for drawing out that list of distinctions is to demonstrate how the citizen to consumer shift is widely understood as emblematic of neo-liberalism. But another reason is to suggest that (as usual) such a tidy list of binary distinctions might make us think twice. Such second thoughts might be reinforced by some of the results of our work on the construction of the citizen/consumer. I want to explore these reservations about the shift from the citizen to consumer in three different ways. I want to think about the relation between citizen and consumer as *a political project*. I want secondly to think about it in terms of *a governmental project*; and thirdly I want to think about it in terms of the processes and problems of *producing political subjects*.

The binary distinction that I have just sketched profoundly under-estimates the political cultural work that has been and is needed to make neo-liberalism possible: to make it look imaginable, plausible, necessary and inevitable. This is at least a question about what work is needed to clear the ground of other orientations, other understandings, and other imaginaries so that neo-liberalism can flourish. More complexly, it is also a question of how to build political alliances and political blocs and how to mobilize key sections of the population into a voting bloc. Such a bloc needs to be at least compliant with the project's sense of purpose and direction. It is also a question about how the neo-liberal project is connected to, and voiced through, other politics, other discourses, or other rhetorics. New Labour does not simply announce that the consumer is the

only possible project. It narrates the consumer as addressing and settling a whole set of other political, moral, and social problems. So New Labour makes the consumer engage with questions of equality and indeed in the process then reduces them to questions of equity. It engages with a politics of difference, even though it reworks that into a question about the infinite variety of individual difference, a field of flattened diversity rather than a question about the relation between difference and inequality. New Labour's consumerism takes up a whole series of political struggles around forms of power and forms of domination in public institutions, particularly challenging their organisational and occupational practices and their discriminatory exercise of power and authority.

So, for example, it is possible to see the traces of struggles to release women's bodies from the patriarchal professional days of the medical profession; to redeem disabled people from the bio-medical model and its enactment in both medicine and social care; and to disentangle the power of the police from its racist practice. New Labour announces that a consumer orientation will satisfy individual needs, promote equity, enhance diversity, extend empowerment and, in particular, extend choice from the few to the many. It seems to me that there is a question about what is going on in those complicated voicings of a neo-liberal project. Are they just rhetorical smoke screens that conceal a marketising and privatising shift? Or do they involve a process of articulation in which different positions are taken account of, engaged with and used as part of the process of building a political bloc? The process of building such blocs is, in liberal democracies, one condition for constructing new political, economic and cultural alignments, and new directions; but it also involves the duller but equally significant work of party competition and political calculation. As a result one part of analysing New Labour's view of consumerism involves assessing its claim about a consumer orientation constructing a more equitable distribution of choice - 'for the many, not for the few'. Alternatively, the 'choice agenda' might be viewed as a more tactical ploy intended to engage the sceptical middle classes in maintaining public services and sustaining the Labour party vote (Clarke, Smith and Vidler, forthcoming).

Turning to the second issue, it seems to me that neo-liberalism is *both* a political project and a governmental project. As a governmental project it requires the rearrangement, re-making, or reinvention of the apparatuses, policies and practices of governing the people (see also Clarke, 2005). The simplifying binary view of the shift from citizen to consumer; state to market, and public to private underestimates the amount of governmental work that is needed to institutionalise neo-liberalism in these assemblages of policies and practices. It is not just, as the policy literature sometimes says, a matter of an 'implementation gap'. Rather we need to think of the apparatuses, the occupations, the organisations and the practices as already multiply contested. Conservative and critical forms of professionalism, varieties of managerialism, radicalised orientations in social work, health and education - all have left their traces on the apparatuses of public provision. And so the practice of a governmental project involves finding a means of transforming the institutions themselves. That might mean reconstructing institutional form, organisational design, and occupational character. One might view the long, thirty year history of public service reform in Britain as containing a variety of strategies of institutional reform in which the introduction of internal markets co-exists 'contracting out' and privatisation, as well as the introduction of new modes of management, which attempt to displace and subordinate professional practice. The deconstruction of different sorts of occupational formations through attempts to de-unionise, de-professionalize, and

re-professionalize around new criteria combine in a series of strategies to re-make the institutional formation of government (Clarke and Newman, 2005). Nevertheless, one would have to say that this looks like a slow, limping and grudging process. Indeed, the constant turmoil of innovation in these fields suggests just how recalcitrant and reluctant to move these institutional formations are.

Two other elements add to this institutional recalcitrance. First, the level of public attachment to, and affective investment in, such services makes them difficult to change (Taylor-Gooby, 2001). In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) remains publicly emblematic of what collective provision might be about. No British government has yet managed to engage in what we might think of as the 'correct' neo-liberal strategy: to privatise the NHS. Rather it has been subject to a series of different innovations, reforms, realignments and reconstructions, each of which falls short of the essential neo-liberal character of privatisation (though by no means leaving the institution unchanged). One of the reasons for this rather roundabout approach to institutional transformation is clearly the intensity and depth of popular investment in both the practice and the *imagery* of the National Health Service. No political party has ever made the calculation that its political popularity could survive full privatisation of the NHS.

The second element of institutional recalcitrance around the construction of the citizen as a consumer centres on the difficult governmental work that is needed to realign the institutions - the systems, the occupations and their forms of integration and coordination. For example, it turns out to be quite difficult for a number of organisational reasons to produce 'choice' in public services. To deliver 'choice for the many' requires excess capacity within systems (which consumes much needed resources). In addition, choice makes no sense at all in some instances. Many of the staff and managers in public services that we have interviewed as part of our project say: we might be sympathetic to the idea of choice; we might even be enthusiastic about the idea of choice. But with the current level of resourcing what we mainly spend our lives doing is managing demand downwards: trying to ration, trying to prioritise, and trying to reduce the level of pressure. As a result, choice is effectively reduced to 'take it or leave it' (Vidler and Clarke, 2005).

There is much more that could be said about these 'institutional' problems and their implications for a governmental project centred on producing the citizen-as-consumer. Here, though, I will turn to the third problematic aspect of the binary view of the shift from the citizen to the consumer: that it underestimates the problems of producing political subjects. Let me sketch some of the results of our research.³ We have been looking at three public services: health care, social care and policing. Using a mix of questionnaires, interviews and group discussions,

³ *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Changing Relationships and Identifications* was funded by the ESRC/AHRB *Cultures of Consumption* programme and ran from April 2003- May 2005 (grant number: RES-143-25-0008). We studied three public services (health, policing and social care) in two places (Newtown and Oldtown). We distributed 300 questionnaires (returns from 106 users and 168 staff = 46% return rate). We conducted 24 interviews with managers; 23 with front-line staff; 10 with users and held 6 user focus groups. The project team was John Clarke, Janet Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler, Louise Westmarland, based in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University, UK. More details at: www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers.

we've been exploring a fairly simple question with people: who do you think you are when you use public services? We were interested in whether people had a self-conception, or an identification of themselves, as consumers of services. Quite simply, hardly anyone identifies themselves as a consumer or a customer in relation to public services, as Table 1 indicates:

TABLE 1: User Identifications

| | number | % of answers | % of people |
|--|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| consumer | 4 | 2.2 | 3.8 |
| customer | 8 | 4.4 | 7.5 |
| patient | 34 | 18.7 | 32 |
| service user | 35 | 19.3 | 33 |
| citizen | 19 | 10.5 | 17.9 |
| member of the public | 39 | 21.5 | 37 |
| member of local community | 42 | 23.2 | 39.6 |
| <i>Respondents could choose one or two identifications</i> | <i>N = 181</i> | | <i>N = 106</i> |

Indeed, in the interviews and group discussions people reasoned eloquently about why they are not consumers in relation to public services. What follows is an extract from one such interview. This is an extended example of someone reasoning their way across identifications and the relationships and orientations that they imply:

With the health service as a national health service, it's more than, I feel it's more than just the services that you consume. I mean I am concerned with it more on the whole than just being consumers. So even if I wasn't attending the hospital or seeing my GP regularly, OK I'd still register with a GP, so from that point yes I would be a consumer, but it's not... If I was 100% healthy and not using, consuming the services, I would still feel a relationship to the health service because I pay for it, it is not Tony Blair's or whoever's money, it's our money, we paid for it, it's the nation's, the national health service. And I do consider that when I cast my vote. So even if I wasn't actually in need of the service it still does affect me and I still would consider that at election time. So I feel it's more than just a direct consumer because you are paying for a national service for everyone's benefit. Whether you actually need to consume that service or not, is not the primary consideration. So it's wider than just being considered a consumer, I feel.
(Newtown health user 3)

This statement maps a complex set of relationships and orientations that are at stake in one public service (the NHS). In the many comments and discussions that we have collected, it is possible to see people thinking their way through what using public services means to them and especially why the consumer identification does not work for them (Clarke and Newman, forthcoming; see also Holland and Lave, 2001, on 'dialogic' approaches to subjects):

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 would have what was best in the matter of treatment as of right. (Newtown questionnaire 23)

One of the key things is that they say time and time again: 'it's not like shopping'. People understand that the consumer imagery references the experiences and practices of shopping and observe that their relationships to public services are never like that. As that previous example hinted, when people use public health care, social care, or policing they typically engage with them in a situation of distress. People use them to try a remedy a condition in which they do not wish to be. These are not freely chosen moments nor are they moments when people wish to be in the distant 'transactional' mode that they associate with being a consumer:

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...(Newtown health user 1)

But while hardly anyone identified themselves as consumers, not many more identify as citizens (see Table I above). The term seems not to have the particular density that people want to talk about when discussing their relationship to public services. It seems somehow too abstract, too 'political', perhaps, and not *relational* enough. Instead what we find are two main ways of talking about public services. One is in very service specific terms, for most people talking about their relationship with health care stress the identification of being a patient. They then talk in extremely complex ways about what it means to be a patient. But nevertheless they understand patient to define the particularity of their relationship to health care in the process of using or consuming it. They may at the same time see themselves as many other things: a taxpayer, a voter, a member of a consultative body and so on. But patient seems to best describe the location and the relationship that they find significant (Clarke and Newman, forthcoming).

Oddly, at the point of which we started this research project, the Students Association at my university, the Open University, announced at a meeting of the University Senate that they would really be grateful if the University stopped addressing them as customers (the University had adopted the widespread language of customer focus). The students' representatives argued fairly emphatically that the term customer failed to capture the *particularity* of their relationship with the University. Instead, they argued that the term student (with all its flaws and problems) defined a relationship with the University that made them members of a particular sort of community.

This issue of membership formed the second key strand in how our respondents identified themselves in their relationships with public services. Substantial numbers identified themselves as members of the public, or as members of local communities. The significance of 'membership' is clearly a difficult conceptual

issue, but these two terms were consistently signalled as important ways of identifying the relationship with public services. The membership of a local community may be a way of people trying to capture the locus of services provision. All three services - health care, policing and social care are, in some sense, locally provided (though the geographical shape of the local varies between the services).

In this context, I do not want to do any more than note the peculiarity of these findings. They do not reflect a widespread shift towards a consumer or customer identification. Nor do they seem embedded in an alternative social democratic or republican conception of social citizenship. These two terms (citizen, consumer) are taken - in politics and in the social sciences - to be the binary framing of current changes. Yet, somehow people's own identifications are located elsewhere - either in service specific (patient/user) or 'membership' relationships. Instead, I want to reflect on one of the frequent reactions to this data when we have presented it publicly. In different ways, it has been suggested that the people, the orientations and the data are, in some way, 'out of time': belonging to a previous era.

Merely residual? Problems of telling the time.

Bundled up in this question of being 'out of time' are a number of different issues. Are the people we have interviewed 'older' or the products of a social democratic or collectivist generation? Are we encountering the 'legacy effect' of older ideas in a period of transition? If we went back two years later, would we discover that people have changed their identifications? At one level, these are all reasonable questions to ask about the results of a small piece of social investigation. They reflect limitations of the data, its mode of collection and its timing. And yet, there is something about the frequency and intensity with which these questions are posed - particularly in political and policy settings - that suggests 'time' may be doing important discursive work here. A particular sort of time is being told. The time at stake in these comments is constructed around characteristic temporal imaginaries that seem to play a potent role in New Labour and neo-liberal discourses. Distinctions between old and new, or between traditional and modern, work on constructing a flow of time between Past and Future. In these distinctions, the Past appears as the location of our troubles, mistakes and misfortunes. In contrast, the Future holds out the promise of overcoming such conditions. The present tends to be less discussed - merely a staging point on the necessary, inevitable and desired trajectory towards the Future. But in the present, the work of political discourse is to distribute people, orientations and political imaginaries to either the Past or the Future. Strange collectivist orientations, conceptions of publics, communities and categories of membership are - in this view - merely residual. They are the left-overs of older formations: the detritus of collectivism, welfarism, or social democracy. And such detritus will inexorably be washed away by the river of time.

I do not want to argue against the possibilities of historical change, but there is something significant here about the ways that political projects deploy 'residualising' discourses: telling the time in ways that locate critics, refusals and alternative imaginaries as belonging to the past. This is a recurrent motif in New Labour discourse: indeed, time is inscribed into its very title (see, for example, Clarke and Newman, 2004; Finlayson, 2003). These practices of residualization make sense as part of how we might think conjuncturally about the present. The emphasis on conjunctural analysis in cultural studies derives primarily from the

engagement with Gramsci (Grossberg, forthcoming). In his writings, it is possible to see a view of conjunctures as moments in which many forces, pressures, and tendencies are condensed or compressed: they are combined and over-determined. The multiplicity and simultaneity of forces in a conjuncture makes it impossible to see a singular, necessary or pre-given direction. Even if there are dominant forces and tendencies, outcomes favourable to their objectives or ambitions are not guaranteed. Conjunctures are also the site of multiple possibilities - lines of potential development that imagine different futures. Finally, conjunctures are contested: different political-cultural projects contend for the capacity to *direct* the conjuncture. Such political-cultural projects attempt to construct the arc of past, present and future that defines the 'one best way' through and out of the conjuncture, mobilising social forces into alignment with this trajectory (and de-mobilising others). Projects aim to represent their preferred direction as necessary, inevitable, desirable and as the only meaningful route to 'progress'. In doing so, they have to harness and manage the contending forces to make the inevitable come true. They strive to direct the complex, contradictory and condensed elements of the conjuncture into one line of development: to invent and produce 'linearity' out of the contradictory field of forces and possibilities.

Raymond Williams (1977) distinguished between dominant, residual and emergent cultural elements in a conjuncture as a way of conceptualising the simultaneity of competing political cultural projects. It may be that his category of 'residual' too readily accepts decline and displacement as the necessary fate of some political cultural repertoires, but the insistence of treating other - non-dominant - elements as part of a conjunctural cultural formation is important. Dominant projects - even neo-liberalism - do not have the world to themselves. They co-exist in the same conjuncture of space and time with other imaginaries and need to displace, co-opt or subordinate these others. In this discussion of New Labour and neo-liberalism, I want to emphasise how 'telling the time' is a distinctive and potent discursive strategy, locating alternative conceptions of how the future might be constructed as 'residual', 'out of time', 'nostalgic' or the product of 'old ways of thinking'. This practice of 'residualization' is one strategy for dealing with alternative projects - it is a strategy of *displacement* (displacing alternatives in time, rather than space).

But the other two strategies - cooption and subordination - are also visible in New Labour's work on the 'citizen-consumer'. A number of other political discourses are drawn on in the construction of this figure, not least a 'politics of equality' and a 'politics of difference'. New Labour is insistent that the consumer/choice model of public service reform can deliver equity (by extending choice to the 'many, not the few') and remedy the flaws of a monolithic and mono-cultural model of public services provision (critiqued in the metaphor of 'one size fits all') by promoting services that are responsive to diversity. Rather than displacement, this is a politics of articulation, appropriating the discourses and even the 'voices' of other positions. Through the process of what Hall (2003, following Gramsci) calls 'transformism' such articulations or co-options both appropriate alternative discourses and subordinate them - they become the 'supporting cast' for the big story. But it is clear that such co-options are more than just rhetorical - the discursive repertoires and the voices through which the dominant speaks also modify the dominant position itself. It cannot remain 'pure' - either in its formulations or its alliances. Neo-liberalism, as I have argued elsewhere (2004a), rarely 'goes out alone' - rather it is to be found keeping company with very

different others in specific regional and national 'indigenizations' or 'translations' as it comes to land in different places.

What I most want to emphasise here is the intensity of political-cultural work that is involved in constructing a dominant project: the tasks of displacement, co-option and subordination; the practices of normalisation and naturalisation; and the discursive work of translation, transformation and articulation. 'Telling the time' of other discursive repertoires is one way of managing some of these challenges. But it also points to the *persistence of recalcitrant imaginaries*: those alternative possibilities that refuse to be wholly displaced, co-opted or subordinated. Such collectivist imaginaries - being 'members' of larger bodies - point to the limits of the neo-liberal discourse and its New Labour articulation. Such imaginaries could be either residual or emergent - but they are certainly active forces in the present and may yet underpin other futures.

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