Creating citizen-consumers? Public service reform and (un)willing selves.

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This chapter explores the role of conceptions of the consumer in the reform of public services in the UK. In such reforms the consumer has embodied both a specific vision of modernity and a model of the agentic 'choice making' individual. We examine the way that the figure of the consumer has been enrolled into political and governmental discourses of reform and its problematic relationship to the figure of the citizen. We then consider responses from people who use public services: exploring their preferred forms of identification and conceptions of the relationships that are at stake in public services.[i] These responses indicate a degree of sceptical distance from governmental address and point to problems about the effectiveness of strategies of subjection. We conclude by considering the analytical and political significance of *unwilling* selves as dialogic subjects.

Reinventing citizens as consumers

In recent attempts to reform public services in the UK, the figure of the consumer has played a starring role. Narratives of the citizen-as-consumer identified the rise of a consumer society or a consumer culture as driving the need for change in public services. Such terms mark a distinctive break between the past and future of public services:

> 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

Service Reform, 2002: 8).

This notion of a consumer culture/society involves a particular view of the practice of consumption and the identity of the consumer that are taken to mark a distinctive phase of modernity. Although formally consumption refers to the practice of making use of, or even using up, objects, here consumption is equated with market exchange mediated by the cash-nexus. In the process, other practices and locations of consumption are subsumed in the generalization of the exchange model (Clarke, 1991, ch. 4). Similarly, the consumer becomes construed as a person (an individual) who forms choices and realises them through money (or functional substitutes, such as theft or credit/debt). The defining feature of the consumer is thus the act of purchase: commodified goods, services or experiences are the means to consummating needs, wants or desires. It is this historically and culturally specific understanding of consumption and the consumer that provides the reference point and the discursive resources for imagining citizens as consumers of public services (on the variations of the consumer see Maclachlan and Trentmann, 2004 and Trentmann, 2006). This individuating conception of the empowering or liberating character of purchase is a core element of what Thomas Frank has called 'market populism' (2001) and is intimately entwined with the emergence of

neo-liberalism (whether this is understood as an ideology or a mode of governmentality, see Larner, 2000).

Neo-liberalism locates the consumer as a 'willing self': a subject capable of self-direction who has, hitherto, been unreasonably constrained by state or regulatory conditions. The consumer thus embodies 'private' rather than 'public' authority (Hansen and Salskov-Iversen, forthcoming). The consumer is thus threaded into the neo-liberal imaginary as a critical figure for constructing the antagonism between the state and the market as forms of social coordination. 'Liberating' the consumer provides one critical imperative for dissolving the state/market distinction by enlarging the reach of the market. In the UK, the Thatcher-led Conservative Party that came to power in 1979 inaugurated programmes of marketization and privatization of public services, including a central discursive role for ideas of 'choice'. Although there were other views of 'consuming' public services before then, the trajectory of the contemporary figure of the citizen-consumer took off from this political-cultural conjuncture (and was echoed in other Anglophone states). Choice – and its capacity to articulate the contrast between the active consumer and the passive citizen – was a key feature of Thatcherite anti-statism and anti-welfarism. The transnational New Right articulated this as the difference between the virtues of the Market in contrast to the oppressive, inefficient and monopolistic State (variously conceived

of as bureaucracy, as hierarchy, as monopoly provider of
public services, and as state socialist societies).

Public choice theory created a political and intellectual
space for the articulation of the citizen-as-consumer. It
provided an 'economic' critique of public bureaucracies
(e.g., Dunleavy, 1991; Niskanen, 1971). Pointing to the
perverse combination of absent market disciplines and the
presence of incentives to 'empire building', careerism,
and an inwards focusing of organizational attention,
public choice theory challenged claims about such
bureaucracies being led or guided by a public service
ethos. On the contrary, the approach suggested that
public servants were just as self-interested and venal as
everyone else – but were not inhibited in the pursuit of
such self-interest by the challenges and constraints of
market dynamics. In elaborating this view, public choice
theory distinguished between Producer interests and
Consumer interests – with bureaucratic monopolies being
driven by Producer interest at the expense of the
Consumer.

The consumer/choice link was a potent feature of several
aspects of Thatcherism's remaking of the welfare state
and public services in the UK during the 1980s. Most
notable were the decision to enable tenants to buy
council houses in the Housing Act of 1980 and the
creation of a 'quasi-market' to enable school 'choice' in
the Education Reform Act of 1988 (see, for example,

Pryke, 1998; Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Fergusson, 1998; Forrest and Murie, 1991). Choice was construed as the defining characteristic of the consumer's relation to public services and had a complex relationship to 'marketizing' processes (see, inter alia, Bartlett, Roberts and Le Grand, 1998; and Taylor-Gooby, 1998). The 'right to buy' in housing dissolved (partially) the distinction between the public and private sector to shift public resources (at a subsidised price) into private ownership. 'Choice' in schooling gave parents (the proxy consumers of education) the non-cash mediated right to express preferences about the school that they wished their children to attend. As a result, parents attempted to choose schools – and schools got to choose children (and their parents). Elsewhere, 'market stimulation' was intended to spend public money on creating a market of competing providers (for example in the field of domiciliary and residential care after the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act). Competition between providers (whether in an 'internal' or an 'open' market) was expected to drive down costs, improve efficiency and deliver better results to the users or consumers of services (Cutler and Waine, 1997, ch 3).

The citizen-as-consumer was to take a further turn in the post-Thatcher landscape of British politics. The Conservative party in the 1990s turned to the 'consumer' interest as a way of realigning the relationship between the public, government and public services. In the

abstract, Thatcherism had been profoundly antithetical to
conceptions of the public and 'society', inclining
towards privatization either to the market or to the
household. In contrast, the Major governments adopted a
stance of improving the quality of public services. This
commitment was embodied in The Citizen's Charter
(launched in 1991) and the proliferation of other
'Charters' for a range of other public services. The
Citizen's Charter (and its offspring) articulated a
particular fusion of consumerism and managerialism in
public service provision (Clarke, 1997; Pollitt, 1994).

Public services and the consumer society

The return of a Labour Government in 1997 raised new
questions about the future of public services. New Labour
had strong continuities with Thatcherism and was
profoundly shaped by Anglophone neo-liberalism. But this
underspecifies its character as a political project and
programme. Elsewhere we have argued that the
transnational ambitions of neo-liberalism need to be
negotiated into specific national political-cultural
formations – they cannot simply be imposed, at least in
the context of Western nation-states (Clarke, 2004a). New
Labour's public service discourse was marked by attempts
to deal with potential sources of discordance,
disagreement and opposition and suture them instead into
the logics of neo-liberalism. Such processes involve more
than 'mere rhetoric': they involve a politics of

articulation, drawing alternative political-cultural conceptions (and the social forces that are attached to them) into supporting, but subordinated, roles in the new project (this is discussed at greater length in Clarke et al., 2007).

The starting point for New Labour's articulation of the citizen-consumer was its critique of the 'old' formation of public services – and its anachronistic character in a the 'modern world' of a consumer culture. As the earlier quotation from the Office for Public Service Reform indicated, the New Labour project juxtaposed old and new in the distinction between a 'rationing culture' and a 'consumer culture'. It regularly recycled this distinction in the view of old state monopolies as being built on a 'one size fits all' model in contrast to the diversity of wants, needs and desires in the modern world:

> Since every person has differing requirements, their rights will not be met simply by providing a 'one size fits all' service. The public expects diversity of provision as well as national standards. (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002, p 13)

> … we must respond to the individual's aspirations and needs, and we must reflect the desire of the individual to have more control over their lives. We must recognise that the one size fits all model that

was relevant to an old industrial age will neither satisfy individual needs or meet the country's requirements in the years to come (Blair, 2003a, p 17).

Thirty years ago the one size fits all approach of the 1940s was still in the ascendant. Public services were monolithic. The public were supposed to be truly grateful for what they were about to receive. People had little say and precious little choice. Today we live in a quite different world. We live in a consumer age. People demand services tailor made to their individual needs. Ours is the informed and inquiring society. People expect choice and demand quality (Milburn, 2002).

The figure of the consumer thus embodied the effects of major social changes, to which the 'old' model of public services was ill-adapted. But New Labour had to address social and political expectations that had not been met by Thatcherite programmes of privatization, marketization and residualization of public services (Newman, 2001). In the public as a whole, among public service workers and among party members, there has been a consistent view that public services are necessary and that they need to be improved (not least because of the effect of 18 years of Conservative degradation). In this field of expectation, we can see (at least) three key issues that New Labour's commitment to reform and modernization has

to engage with, and incorporate. The first was the question of what political principles or values should drive these reforms (especially in the light of concerns about 'privatization by stealth' or the abandonment of 'Old Labour' commitments). What emerged was a typical Third Way distinction between persistent values and changing means of enacting them in the 'modern world':

> The values of progressive politics – solidarity, justice for all – have never been more relevant; and their application never more in need of modernisation… At home, it means taking the great progressive 1945 settlement and reforming it around the needs of the individual as consumer and citizen for the 21st century. (Blair, 2002)

The second key issue was that of equality. The political juxtaposition of market and state in twentieth century social democratic discourse involved a contrast between inequality-producing mechanisms (the market) and equality-producing (or inequality-remedying) mechanisms (the state). Reforming public services around principles that derive from contemporary forms of market society (the consumer, choice, etc.) needed to be negotiated against this view of inequality. This was done in two ways: first, New Labour argued that the state – in its public services – has created inequality; second, they claimed that choice could itself be a means of producing equality.

To those on the left who defend the status quo on public services defend a model that is one of entrenched inequality. I repeat: the system we inherited was inequitable. It was a two-tier system. Our supposedly uniform public services were deeply unequal as league and performance tables in the NHS and schools have graphically exposed. …The affluent and well educated.. had the choice to buy their way out of failing or inadequate provision – a situation the Tories 'opting out'; reforms of the 1980s encouraged. It was a choice for the few, not for the many. (Blair, 2003b).

A choice for the few, not the many, emerged as a significant anchoring point for the consumerist approach to reform. Indeed, critics of choice were challenged for their 'elitism': wanting to reserve the privileges of choice for the few. New Labour's consumer discourse also picked up on a range of challenges to public services around 'equality' issues – around race/ethnicity; gender, sexuality, age and disability. From these, New Labour articulated a need to make services responsive to diversity:

Since every person has individual requirements, their rights will not be met simply by providing a 'one size fits all' service. The public expects diversity of provision as well as national standards.

> Government too wants such standards, but not at the
> expense of innovation and excellence. So these goals
> must be complementary, and support each other in
> practice (OPSR, 2002, p 13).

But where social movements drew attention to, and
challenged, the relationship between patterns of
difference and structures of inequality, the Consumer
discourse treated diversity as an individual fact, as the
earlier quotation from the Office of Public Service
Reform indicated: 'The rationing culture which survived
after the war, in treating everyone the same, often
overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations'
(OPSR, 2002, p 8). In this formulation, differences are
not inequality-related (or generating). Rather,
differences exist as individual characteristics or
aspirations to which services should be more responsive
(see Lewis, 2003 on conceptions of difference and
diversity in social policy). Structural conditions that
generated Equal Opportunities conflicts over forms of
'second class citizenship' are dissolved into a field of
individualised idiosyncracy.

Finally, the figure of the Consumer owed much to the neo-
liberal critique expressed in Public Choice theory. New
Labour's appropriation of the figure of the Consumer
borrowed this antithetical view of Producer and Consumer
interests (and the role of government as the People's

Champions against the Producer interest, see Clarke, 1997).

> Public services… have to be refocused around the
> needs of patients, the pupils, the passengers and the
> general public rather than those who provide the
> services. (Blair, 2002, p 8)

One key means for breaking the hold of the Providers was to introduce 'contestability' – enabling and encouraging competing providers alongside the (or even instead of) the public sector 'monopolies':

> Our aim is to open up the system – to end the one-
> size-fits-all model of public service, which too
> often meant one supplier fits all, with little
> diversity, irrespective of how good new suppliers –
> from elsewhere in the public sector, and from the
> voluntary and private sectors – might be. (Blair,
> 2003b)

The figure of the Consumer has been central to the New Labour discourse of public service reform. Other terms did not simply disappear: the figures of citizens, communities, the public, users of services continued to appear. So, too, did more service specific terms patients, passengers, pupils and parents, when health, public transport and education are being discussed. Nevertheless, these were increasingly subordinated to the

idea of the consumer (and/or customer), a process
described by Hall (2003) as 'transformism'.

**Transforming citizens: the consumer as a neo-liberal
archetype?**

For both political economy and governmentality approaches
to neo-liberalism, the consumer is a central figure
(Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Newman, forthcoming). It is a
core image for the neo-liberal claim about the nature of
the world and how it must be. For example, Nikolas Rose,
discussing advanced liberal governmentality, argues that:

> In this new field, the citizen is to become a
> consumer, and his or her activity is to be understood
> in terms of the activation of the rights of the
> consumer in the marketplace.
> Consider, for example, the transformations in the
> relations of experts and clients. Whilst social rule
> was characterized by discretionary authority,
> advanced liberal rule is characterized by the
> politics of the contract, in which the subject of the
> contract is not a patient or a case but a customer or
> consumer … Of course, these contracts are of many
> different types. Few are like the contracts between
> buyer and seller in the market. But, in their
> different ways, they shift the power relations
> inscribed in relations of expertise. This is
> especially so when they are accompanied by new

methods of regulation and control such as audit and
evaluation.... The politics of the contract becomes
central to contests between political strategies
concerning the 'reform of welfare', and to strategies
of user demand and user resistance to professional
powers. (1999: 164-5)

The shift from citizen to consumer seems to embody a set
of much wider distinctions: for example, from the state
to the market; from rights to contracts; from the public
to the private; from collectivism to individualism; from
social democratic welfarism to neo-liberalism; or from
'government from a social point of view' to advanced
liberal rule. This list of distinctions demonstrates just
how deeply the shift from citizen to consumer shift is
understood as emblematic of neo-liberalism. However,
such a tidy list of binary distinctions might also make
us think twice. Such second thoughts about the
reliability and usefulness of the citizen/consumer
distinction are reinforced by some of the results of our
work on the construction of the citizen/consumer. In what
follows, we explore these reservations about the shift
from the citizen to consumer in three different ways:

(i) the relationship between the governmental project of
constructing citizens as consumers and the political
projects in which it has been embedded;
(ii) the problematic relationships between
identifications, relationships and practices; and

(iii) the problem of subjects who appear as *unwilling* selves.

The binary distinctions that we have sketched above tend to under-estimate the political-cultural work that has been, and remains, 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. Neo-liberalism does not enter a vacant or evacuated terrain: rather it faces the challenge of displacing, co-opting or subordinating competing conceptions of the world. At the least, it needs to occupy this landscape in such a way that political and social subjects are compliant with a neo-liberal sense of purpose and direction. For us, this raises questions about how the neo-liberal project has been connected to, and voiced through, other politics, other discourses, or other rhetorics. New Labour did not simply announce that the consumer is the only possible project. As we have seen, it narrated the consumer as addressing and settling a whole set of other political, moral, and social problems. So New Labour made the consumer engage with questions of equality and reduced them to questions of equity. It engaged with a politics of difference, while reworking it into an issue about the infinite variety of individual difference. New Labour's consumerist orientation took up a variety of struggles

around forms of power and forms of domination in public institutions, particularly those that challenged their organisational and occupational practices and their discriminatory exercise of power and authority, and condensed them into the demand for 'choice for the many'.

Both political economy and governmentality conceptions of neo-liberalism risk short-circuiting these forms of political work (though for different reasons). The temptation is to treat neo-liberalism as a relatively coherent, universalising or globalising project. 'Politics' in its narrow institutional sense appears as either irrelevant, or as the rhetoric through which class interests are simultaneously spoken and concealed. In Foucauldian approaches in particular, the intentional widening of the concept of politics to the entire field of power/knowledge formations has tended to displace attention from the narrower institutionalist forms. However, we continue to see both national formations (albeit transnationally constituted national formations) and the practices of institutional politics as central to understanding both the logics and limits of neo-liberalism (Clarke, 2004a and b; see also Kingfisher, 2002, and Sharma and Gupta, 2006). The process of articulating neo-liberalism is subject to significant national political-cultural variation and requires the work of governments to produce some of the critical conditions for the 'governmental project'. At a minimum,

politics – in its institutionalist sense – mediates the possibilities for any neo-liberal governmental project.

It is in this sense that we want to insist on treating neo-liberalism as both a governmental project and a political project. As a governmental project it requires the rearrangement, re-making, or reinvention of the apparatuses, policies and practices of governing peoples (Newman, 2005). The simplifying binary view of the shifts from citizen to consumer, state to market, and public to private underestimate 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 – have all left their traces on the apparatuses of public provision. And so the accomplishment of a governmental project involves transforming the institutions themselves: reconstructing institutional forms, organisational designs, and occupational cultures.

One might view the long, thirty year history of public service reform in Britain as a succession of strategies of institutional reform in which the introduction of

internal markets co-exists with 'contracting out' and
privatization, as well as with the introduction of new
modes of management, which attempt to displace and
subordinate professional practices (Clarke and Newman,
1997). 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). Despite claims about transformations, this looks
like a slow, uneven and incomplete process. Indeed, the
constant turmoil of innovation in these fields suggests
just how recalcitrant and reluctant to move these
institutional formations have proved.

There is 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, we turn to some of the findings
from a recent research project on 'creating citizen-
consumers' in which we looked at three public services:
health care, social care and policing (Clarke et al.,
2007). Using a mix of questionnaires, interviews and
group discussions, we explored a simple question with
people: who do you think you are when you use public
services? We were interested in whether people had a
conception, or an identification, of themselves as
consumers of services. Quite simply, hardly anyone

identified themselves as a consumer or a customer in relation to public services, as Table I 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
Respondents could choose one or two identifications	*N = 181*		*N = 106*

In the interviews and group discussions people reasoned eloquently about why they are not consumers in relation to public services. In the following extract one health service user explores the complex field of 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). The idea that 'it's not like shopping' is one
recurrent phrase that people used to denote the
distinctiveness of public services (Clarke, forthcoming).
People understand that the figure of the consumer

references the experiences and practices of shopping and observe that their relationships to public services are never like that. Furthermore, 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: illness, vulnerability, being victimised. 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 we found two main ways of talking about public services. One is in very service specific terms: most people talking about their relationship with health care stress the identification of being a patient. They talk in extremely complex ways about what it means to be a patient, but nevertheless

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):

> Patient is the traditional term and I think it is still appropriate. The <u>NHS is a service</u> to users (in the local community). 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 of the ball and confuse us as to what really matters. Choice sounds a good thing – but is it? Sorry, this is one of my hobby horses! (Newtown health user questionnaire 23: patient and service user: emphasis in original.)

We will return to this quotation later in the chapter to explore its reflexive complexity. But it is important to note that conceptions of membership formed the second key element in how our respondents identified themselves in their relationships with public services. Substantial numbers saw themselves as members of the public, or as

members of local communities. The political cultural
significance of 'membership' is a difficult conceptual
issue, implying relationships of both inclusion and
exclusion, but these two terms were consistently
signalled as important ways of identifying the
relationship with public services. The identification
with being a 'member of a local community' may also be a
way of people trying to capture the localness – the
spatial specificity – of service provision. All of the
services have local systems of provision, although the
geographical arrangement of the 'local' varies, with few
co-terminous boundaries.

At this point, we want to stress the peculiarity or
perverseness of these findings. They do not reflect a
widespread shift towards a consumer or customer
identification. The political and governmental project
that New Labour represents has failed to embed itself in
the identifications or self-conceptions of these users of
public services. But neither do they seem to be grounded
in an alternative social democratic or republican
conception of citizenship. These two terms (citizen,
consumer) are taken – in politics and in the social
sciences – to be the binary framing of current changes.
Yet people's own identifications seem to be located
elsewhere – either in service specific (patient/user) or
'public/community membership' relationships.

Commitment and compliance: the constitution of subjects

There are a number of limitations about the study on which we report here. It treats subjection primarily as a matter of identification – do subjects sign up to, or occupy the dominant discursive figures? We think it is significant that they do not – both for New Labour claims about the social changes to which public services must adapt, and for governmentality arguments about the creation of enterprising selves or consumer identities in the process of 'economising the social'. We return to the analytical implications of people not identifying with these positions in the final section, but here we turn to the relationship between discourses and practices in the enactment of governmental projects. This poses the question of whether subjection is primarily a matter of commitment or compliance. Do subjects occur because they come to recognise themselves in the dominant discursive figures, or because the institutionalised relationships and practices require them to behave in certain ways?

For the construction of the citizen-consumer, this might mean that constructing fields of choice in which choices are obligatory positions people as if they are consumers. In such circumstances (parental choice in schooling; choice of hospital and so on), people are required to act as consumers whether they understand themselves in such terms or not. That is to say, the 'conduct of conduct' may be accomplished by the regulating effects of a field of relationships and practices rather than through forms

of identification. This may be what Margaret Thatcher called the TINA effect ('There Is No Alternative'): compliance is what is required, rather than commitment. Such behavioural compliance may bring identification or subjective attachment in its wake, but it is not a necessary requirement. In short, people may behave like consumers, even if they do not think of themselves as consumers.

In one of our interviews (with a voluntary sector organisation), a version of this 'compliance' model is explored, with the interviewee reflecting on both the popular distance from the consumer identity and the use of consumer-like practices to make demands on public services:

> I think what people want are good public services. I think they want good local deliverable public services. I don't think they want – I don't think they want to apply consumer principles to those. I don't think they want choice, I don't think they want competition and I don't think they want market forces. I think they want good, um, schools, good hospitals, good GPs…
>
> I think people behave as though it's true … I think people behave as if it's true so I think people when they're not happy with something, um, employ the techniques for dealing with it that they employ in a

consumer, um, situation. So you know … if they don't
like what happened to little Johnny in school
yesterday they will go and challenge in the way that
they might if their fridge broke down after three
days. So I think actually people do employ those
techniques … I think that might be because they
haven't been given any other skills in part and
because there are no other overt frameworks through
which they necessarily understand they can do it. …
I mean I think the fact that everybody … is now
accountable means that everybody thinks they have a
right to challenge and there's lots of good that's
come out of that shift but I think the bad is that
sometimes that's not the most productive way of
dealing with something and it's often not the most
appropriate. But it is consumerism. I mean that is
what you do as a consumer. You would be – the
strength lies with you because you're the purchaser
and therefore that gives you the power. And I think
people have taken that and apply it to all, um, all
areas of dispute. (Newtown voluntary 01)

Here the suggestion is that the practices of being a
consumer offer one, and perhaps the only available, means
of being assertive or demanding in interactions with
public services, even if people do not seek choice,
competition or consumer principles. Being a consumer
implies what might be called 'transferable skills',

rather than transferable orientations, principles or identities.

We think that both these views of practices, rather than identifications, as being significant for the installation of a neo-liberal consumerist orientation in public services raise important issues. But they also open up further problems about how we assess or evaluate such developments, particularly in terms of identifying their 'consumerist' character. Making choices (particularly where people are *compelled* by state authority to make choices) is not the same as being a consumer. Nor are we sure that being assertive or demanding is the same as using consumer techniques. At a behavioural level (leaving aside questions of identification and action), we are not convinced that it would be possible to clearly distinguish the practices of a choice-making or demanding consumer from an 'expert' and 'co-producing' patient (committed to 'leading their medical team') or from an assertive, rights-bearing citizen. There are multiple political, cultural and personal routes to a sense of being 'entitled' (see, for example, Cooper's analysis of conceptions of 'belonging', 1998).

In part, these comments point to a problem about the conceptualization of the consumer. Much of the writing about the consumer in relation to public services (both positive and critical) treats the consumer as the

embodiment of economic models – rationalistic, calculating and atomised. For neo-liberals and their allies, the consumer thus embodies the triumph of markets over repressive and constraining states, for critics it marks the de-socialisation of the public realm. But both share a presumption that consumers do indeed behave like consumers. The sociological and cultural studies literature on consumers and consumption tends to undermine this economistic conception of the consumer – pointing to the varieties of rationality in play in consumption (and the valorization of 'irrationality' in dynamics of pleasure and desire), and stressing the diverse social dynamics (personal, familial, communal, sub-cultural, local as well as global) that shape the practices and choices of consumption. Such studies challenge the apparent coherence and unity of the consumer as s/he is imagined in economic terms (see, for example, Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Daunton and Hilton, 2001; Trentmann, 2006). Instead they point to what Gabriel and Lang term the 'unmanageable consumer' whose defining feature is precisely its unpredictability. Neither the idealised sovereign nor the despised dupe, the consumer reappears as a mobile and multiple subject. This returns us to questions about how to think about subjection in terms of subjects who are contingently willing and unwilling, and who are heterolingually dialogic, rather than trapped in a binary dynamic of acquiescence or resistance (Holland and Lave, 2001; Morris, 2006).

Unwilling selves and dialogic subjects

In this final section, we turn to questions about the subjects of discursive practice. Elsewhere, we have argued that too many studies of governmentality too readily assume that discourses translate into practices, and that discursively constituted subjections evoke the subjects they seek (Clarke et al, 2007). Here, we focus on the second of these points. There are both empirical and analytical problems about assuming that the subjects summoned in and through discursive practice will come when called. As we have seen, our own study suggests that the identifications at work among the public fail to align with the consumer/customer orientation. In particular, people actively refuse the identification of being a consumer of public services – and the implied de-differentiation between public services and the market place. Nor do people grasp their relations to public services within the binary of citizen-consumer so central to contemporary public, political and political science debates (Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Newman, forthcoming). Similarly, providers of public services expressed reservations about choice and consumerism as principles for the (re-)organization of services, in part because of their dislocating effects on established occupational and organizational formations of knowledge and power.

The discussions of 'consumer' in our study are consistently marked by scepticism, cynicism, distance and denial. These views are voiced by 'subjects of doubt' (Clarke, 2004c). Such subjects reflect upon the dominant discourse, its interpellations and the subject positions it offers. They reason about different sorts of identifications and the relationships they imply. They make choices about what terms evoke their desired personal and political subject positions. They embody key elements of what Holland and Lave (2001) call 'dialogism' – the Bahktin-derived conception of subjects who 'answer back'. The quotations above testify to people who know that they are being spoken to – and are reluctant to acquiesce or comply. One of the earlier quotations perfectly captures this dialogic reflexivity: 'I know 'consumer' and 'customer' imply choice and that is what we are supposed to want…'choice' may be a political ploy to take our eye off the ball and confuse us as to what really matters.' There speaks a subject who hears the process of subjection ('that is what we are supposed to want'), recognises its political-cultural character ('a political ploy'), and offers an alternative account of what we want: as a 'matter of right'. We think that such 'subjects of doubt' imply a form of analysis that pays attention to the fractures or disjunctures in the circulation of discourses – rather than assuming their success in recruiting or enrolling the subjects they seek (see also Marston, 2004).

It may be important to reflect that these are subjects who are *already* sceptical. Their scepticism means that they do not need the revelatory mode of academic analysis to demonstrate what they already know: that language and power are entwined; that words have consequences and implications; that the future is being constructed and is contested; that identifications matter. Neither tearing aside the veil of ideology nor uncovering discursive constitution seems adequate (either analytically or politically) to the way that such subjects live their relationship to social institutions and political practices. They are, of course, not *outside* discourse: it makes more sense to think of them as mobilising multiple discourses to enable a space of scepticism about the dominant. They inhabit the world of 'common-sense' in its Gramscian sense where 'traces' of heterogeneous philosophies, ideologies, discourses are layered up and may be put to use (e.g., 1971, pp 324-5). This Gramscian view is, we think, different from more sociological conceptions that treat common-sense as the forms of everyday knowledge always and already colonised by dominant understandings. In contrast, Gramsci was insistent about the multiplicity of common-sense and about the implications of that multiplicity for the possibilities of political work and engagement. In particular, he stressed how – in political terms – common-sense always contained elements of potential 'good sense', rather than being merely regressive or reactionary. In the disjunctured and sometimes

contradictory relationships between these different and
divergent elements, 'perspectives' on the dominant may be
opened up.

These questions about language, subjection and scepticism
point to a view of governing as a profoundly uneven and
incomplete process in which subjects succumb, sign up, or
comply but may also resist or prove recalcitrant and
troublesome. In the process, attempted subjections are
likely to be less than comprehensive and only temporarily
settled. In short, we incline towards an approach that
stresses a *politics of articulation* rather than a
politics of subjection. We see a danger in studying the
processes of subjection from the standpoint of the
aspirations of the dominant point of view. The temptation
is to see the world aligning with the plans, visions or
scripts of the dominant. Governmental projects like
people to know their place. But people prove strangely –
and unpredictably – reluctant to acquiesce . Starting
from an unruly conception of the social as a field to be
governed might enable a better view of the uneven and
incomplete character of subordination and subjection. We
may see the rich repertoire of ways in which people live
their subordinations: the enthusiastic engagement, the
calculating compliance, the grudging or foot-dragging
recalcitrance, the practices of resistance or refusal,
the elaboration of alternative possibilities. That
implies looking for the ways in which people fail to
'know their place' – or sometimes remain overly attached

to it, when authority would like them to move to a new
place.

From this starting point, the social is a contested
terrain in its own right, subjected to multiple and
conflicting attempts at 'mapping' places, positions,
relations and differences (and all the inequalities that
such differences may distribute). Some of those mappings
are 'governmental' – the official classifications,
distinctions, locations used to constitute populations.
But the social is also a field of resources – identities,
potential solidarities, languages and voices – with which
the subjected and subordinated may 'answer back' to the
dominant and would-be hegemonic 'hailings' of authority.
We do not mean to romanticise the social in drawing
attention to its recalcitrance. The distance between
people and intended subjections is not intrinsically
progressive, nor even intrinsically political (in the
sense of mobilizing collective action). However, as
Chatterjee (2003) insists, the recalcitrant, difficult
and demanding existence of the 'governed' has profound
political effects. It is possible, of course, that
systems – economic, political or governmental – may work
without the complete subjection or subordination of their
subjects. As we suggested earlier, grudging or calculated
compliance may, indeed, be enough to make things work.
Equally, passive – non-mobilized – dissent or scepticism
may enable forms of political and governmental rule.
Nevertheless, the gaps between imagined subjection and

lived identifications and attachments should alert us to the limits of plans and projects. In the process, we might also note the power and potential of both residual and emergent alternatives to the dominant – the elements and fragments of alternative futures (Williams, 1977: 121-3). That is why 'unwilling selves' and 'dialogic subjects' might be worth our attention.

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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
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Westmarland, based in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The
Open University, UK. More details can be found at:
www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers.