

Citizens, Consumers and Co-producers

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Citizenship is in flux, challenged by shifting conceptions of the state and innovative forms of political action. The space to be a citizen is ever expanding – we are citizens of the European Union, not just of our nation state; new technologies connect us to civic movements that span continents; interconnected economies alert us to questions of distributive justice on the other side of the world.

Yet the space to be a citizen is also contracting. The distinctively public sphere – in which we make arguments based on non-market criteria – is being eroded. The very notion that there is public space in which our relations with others are ›decommodified‹, as Esping-Anderson (1990) put it, is under threat. The welfare institutions which express our common identity and equal status as citizens are diminishing. Commenting on the 1980s, Ignatieff noted that ›most political rhetoric, whether of left or right, addresses the electorate not as citizens but as taxpayers or as consumers. It is as if the market were determining the very language of the political community‹ (Ignatieff, 1995: 72). Twenty years on, the penetration of the market into the public sector is so thorough that we need new conceptions of citizenship to make sense of – and where appropriate – resist it.

This article considers the role of citizenship in the European welfare state tradition and the challenges it faces. It discusses potential directions of future travel and suggests that the theory of co-production, if properly applied, offers the best hope for a notion of citizen which remains distinctively active and progressive.

Citizenship and Public Services

Discussion of a European welfare state tradition must begin by acknowledging the diversity of public service provision across European states. Alongside diversity of provision, different states make distinctive assumptions about the relationship between the individual, the community and the state. Esping-Anderson's (1990) trichotomy of liberal, conservative and social democratic welfare regimes picks out the distinctive themes of entitlement, responsibility and care that characterise public services in exemplars like the UK, Germany and Sweden.

Yet European countries aspire to some common values in public services, in a manner which differs from elsewhere, most notably the United States. It is these values, rather than the specific structure of the welfare state, which can be said to be at the heart of the elusive European welfare state tradition. European governments advocate values such as universal access, equality, efficiency and accountability in the provision of public services. The European Union itself is specifically committed to supporting such basic principles as solidarity, equity and universality in for instance the provision of health care (Barcelona Council, 2002). Most European countries do not place as much emphasis on the United States on economic growth per se as a determinant of quality of life or happiness. They have been less willing to judge every-

thing by market criteria, placing greater emphasis on social justice, the environment, customs and traditions, the vitality of community life and many other non-economic determinants. The provision of public services is one of the main mechanisms to support the pursuit of such non-market goals.

A particular understanding of citizenship has undergirded public services in this welfare tradition. The aspiration, if not always the practice, of public service delivery has been to reinforce civic values of solidarity, equity, fairness and participation. Taking the solidaristic point first, public services have striven to be an expression of collective purpose and a particular understanding of the common good. Particularly in those services characterised by universal access – such as health and education – citizenship itself is the badge of entitlement. There is no need to petition the state or demonstrate eligibility. Public spaces such as libraries, hospitals, schools and universities are as much community resources and sites of social interchange, as units of service delivery.

Second, public services are an attempt to realise the equality of status bestowed by the identity of citizenship. Funded through progressive taxation, public services are essentially redistributive. They spread the costs across the whole population and place the greatest distance between the funding and receipt of services. In core services, such as health, risk is pooled across the whole community to limit the liability of any individual (Pollock, 2002).

Third, public services reinforce citizenship as a practice as well as an identity. Abstract relationships between citizen and state become tangible and personalised in the local employment centre or welfare office. Claiming our rights to health, education and social services we become active citizens. We get access to a wide range of essential resources and reconcile ourselves to the rationing decisions that limit our entitlement to other services. We witness – at best – the procedural fairness of bureaucracy and recognise the claims of others. As Pearce and Margo (2007) argue, it is the perceived distribution of public resources as much as anything that shapes relationships between communities. This insight, ›shifts the focus of race relations and community cohesion to the governance and administration of core public services: the funding and allocation of social housing, school places, GP services, and so on‹ (Pearce and Margo, 2007: 7).

Fourth, public services are a constitutive part of democratic discourse. Pressing for the expansion of those services in traditional formats like public meetings or the polling booth, or more innovative contexts such as citizens' juries, demonstrates collective citizenship in action. Although abstract notions such as equality, justice and solidarity may animate our political parties, it is the realities of public service delivery – the cost and scope of education, health services, pensions and environmental provision – that are of interest to voters during election campaigns. Popular opposition to the European Commission's recent attempt to liberalise public service provision – described by Grahl as the ›*reducto ad absurdum* of Neoliberal Europe‹ (2007: 38) – was arguably a key factor influencing no votes in constitutional treaty referenda (Grahl, 2007: 38).

Thus public services, in this welfare model, express society's collective goals, provide a common public realm, confer value on individuals as citizens and shape notions of identity and belonging. It is important to acknowledge that this linkage between public service provision and progressive civic values was not always so evident in

practice. Mass state services were often inefficient, arbitrary and coercive, servicing middle class users more effectively than the poor and drawing on conservative understandings of the family (Clarke *et al.*, 1987, p. 105; Goodin and Le Grand, 1987). However the aspirations of this welfare model – that public services are part of a vision of the good society, not merely the provision of a safety-net for the poor or a response to market failure – remain compelling. Public services do not stand outside society but form an integral part of it, intimately bound up with the notions of citizenship. In most countries these norms of citizenship are state-centric – conceptions of European citizenship remain weak (Maas, 2007) – yet the understanding of what it means to be a citizen speaks to a commonality of purpose beyond national borders. The notions of identity, belonging and kinship that underpin citizenship are strengthened in societies with robust public services and equitable distributions of resources.

Marketising Public Services

In waves of reform across advanced industrialised states since the 1980s these linkages between citizenship and public services have been weakened. The pace and consistency of reforms has varied between countries, yet the direction of travel has been remarkably similar. The state's role as the direct funder and provider of public services has shrunk. New funding streams have been sought in place of taxation – privatisation, public-private partnerships, private insurance, upfront user charges. New service providers – private companies, charities, social enterprises – have been commissioned. Responding to a range of pressures – the fiscal constraints of the Stability and Growth Pact and the Maastricht Criteria, the tax aversion of electorates, the mobility of investment capital, ageing populations – states have stepped back from the role of public service provider into that of commissioner, regulator, exhorter.

In some countries these reforms have been unapologetically neo-liberal. In many others the reforms have been undertaken in the name of a ›third way‹-style social democracy which must remake the state in order to save it (Blair and Schröder, 1999). Yet the patterns of reform are uncompromisingly neoliberal (Grahl, 2007). Drawing on, and feeding, public hostility to taxation and suspicion of ›undeserving‹ welfare dependents, governments have fostered a common assumption that public service provision can only survive by allying its interests and modes of operation with those of private capital. Some services, such as electricity, water and telecommunications, have been privatised and deregulated so that they can operate in a conventional market environment (Hall, 2006). Where natural monopolies exist – train services for example – competitive bidding by external providers has created a periodic market. In situations where provision remains in-house ›quasi-markets‹ have been created, for example by giving patients (or their representatives) vouchers to choose between hospitals or allowing people with physical disabilities to control their own care budget (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993; Le Grand, 2007). Where even quasi-markets are difficult to create – for example in local environmental regulation services – there is a call for what we can call ›pseudo-markets‹, in which people are treated as if they are customers with an exit power rather than clients who take what they are given and are grateful for it (Brereton and Temple, 1999). Public managers are subject to tight performance management regimes as a substitute for exit, designed to ensure that all customers experience a common set of service standards.

A short-hand for the disparate and wide-ranging reforms that are taking place across Europe is marketisation, a shrinking of the difference between the public sector and the private. The intellectual rationale for the reforms comes from public choice theory and new public management techniques which, with some modification, have been in the ascendance in Western democracies for over thirty years (see articles of Drechsler for New Public Management and of Schröter for public choice theory in this issue). Domestic pushes towards public service marketisation have been joined by thrusts from the European Union whose commissioners are pushing for the liberalisation of ›services of general interest‹ (Grahl, 2007).

The impact of these reforms on the efficiency and effectiveness of public service provision is contested (compare for example Le Grand, 2007 with Whitfield, 2006). Mechanisms such as public private partnerships help national exchequers to balance their books but there are concerns that short-term savings are being made by depressing workers' pay and conditions or entering into costly long-term repayment schemes (Grimshaw and Roper, 2007; Pollock *et al*, 2004). What is very evident is the extent to which the reforms have decoupled traditional relationships between citizenship and public services. The impact can be seen in each of the four parts of that relationship discussed above.

First, the reforms pose a challenge to social solidarity. The assumptions of procedural fairness which help to unite diverse communities are eroded deliberately by the public choice premises of the reformers, and indirectly by complex ownership structures which muddy accountability for service allocation. The emphasis on ›what's in it for me‹ delegitimises the redistributive premises of public services. The utilitarian premises of marketisation and new public management strip health and education down to its individual benefits. School curricula become narrowly tailored to the needs of the ›knowledge-based economy‹ (Lisbon Strategy, 2000). Higher education institutions demand a greater contribution from the student, as an investment in their future earnings. The costs of personal and medical care in old age fall on the individual, rather than being intergeneration transfers expressing a shared responsibility. Eligibility for health care becomes conditional on the life choices of individual citizens, with reduced entitlement for those who make the wrong choices – the obese and those who smoke, for example. As patients, students and pupils gain more individual choices over their public service experiences, the scope for collective choices shrinks. The very notion of schools, universities, hospitals, libraries, post offices as public spaces for non-marketised interactions shrinks as their managers frantically seek to turn a profit or face closure. Civic institutions atrophy – town halls are converted into luxury apartments, public squares become gated shopping malls (Kingsnorth, 2008) – and the notions of publicness and citizenship dissipate.

Second, the reforms erode the equitable premises that underpin the common status of citizenship. Private providers of public services have an incentive to cherry pick the most amenable patients and pupils. Social enterprises such as faith-based organisations may discriminate against users who don't share their values. People are given choices and must then bear the costs of those choices. Debates about whether choice in school and education reduce or increase inequalities in public services are hard fought. Evidence shows that user choice will only enhance equity if it is applied under certain conditions and there are clear indications that those conditions are frequently not applied in practice (Le Grand, 2007).

Third, the marketising reforms transform the relationship between state and user on the frontline of public services. The user is encouraged to be – and in some cases explicitly called – a consumer or customer of those services (Clarke *et al*, 2007; Needham, 2007a). The public choice premises underpinning these reforms are often fairly explicit (Finlayson, 2003). Public service provision is configured as an adversarial relationship where consumers do battle with producers to get access to scarce resources. The public service ethos is discarded as a protectionist tool for underperforming bureaucrats (Needham, 2007b). Traditional providers who in the past have ›dictated‹ to users must be disciplined and constrained. This ›user comes first‹ rationale delegitimises the accountability of public services to anyone other than the individual customer. It sidelines or derides forms of accountability to other stakeholders or to political representatives. Trade unions, in particular, have been marginalised by these reforms (Cunningham and James, 2007). Other organised interests – for example user pressure groups – have also been discredited, given public choice assumptions that they do not represent the interests of ordinary consumers (Olson, 1971; Pollitt, 1993: 185). New providers of services, such as charities, must do so under strict criteria, eschewing their critical campaigning roles (Kelly, 2007).

The potential for public services to be a channel for citizens' collective political participation – the fourth linkage – is also weakened by the marketising agenda. Rather than public services being shaped by political voice – expressed in public meetings, citizen's juries, deliberative workshops – the market model emphasises exit. Where service users do express their interests it is through market research exercises – customer satisfaction surveys, opinion polls, focus groups – which reinforce the isolated identity of the public service customer (Needham, 2002). We may be asked our opinion as a student, a patient, a local resident, but these identities exist in parallel. The integrating logic of citizenship is lost.

Together these reforms leave little space for a civically infused notion of public services. Their premises – the venality of bureaucrats, the tax aversion of the public and the impossibility of a common good – become self-fulfilling. A public service ethos is squeezed out by performance-related pay and stultifying targets (Le Grand, 2003); public trust in governments' handling of public services plummets (Diamond, 2007); ethnic tensions flair over perceived inequalities in access to public resources (Dench *et al*, 2006). It becomes hard to construct an account of non-marketised social relations. As McIvor (2005: 97) puts it:

»[A]n insistent marketisation of economic and social relations will dissolve the practical and epistemological resources needed to sustain and guide any progressive state action. If we are continually looking to ›strengthen markets in the public interest‹ we may find that there is no real ›public‹ left to serve or answer to, and that its ›interests‹ can only be defined abstractly by civil servants, anonymous regulators and public purchasing agencies, for whom it comes to mean little more than the maintenance of the market itself.«

There is a danger that citizenship becomes dislocated from the experience of using public services. If people are encouraged to think of themselves as customers of those services, then issues of democracy and the public good become as peripheral for the public sector as they are for the private.

Co-productive Alternatives

Alternatives to the marketisation of public services are emerging in small pockets across Europe. The remunicipalisation of public services in Trondheim is one of the best known and has been an inspiration to other campaigners (Little, 2007). Opponents of the reform programmes are becoming increasingly sophisticated at tackling them at the European level, successfully resisting – in the short term at least – the service liberalising measures contained in the Bolkestein directive (Grahls, 2007). Organisations such as the European Trade Union Confederation and the European Federation of Public Service Unions continue to press for a new legal framework of public services to provide protection from predatory capital.

At the same time as resisting specific cases of market intrusion, there is a need to reconceive the relationship between citizenship and public services. There is no golden age of active citizenship to which reformers can refer. Nor, as Clarke reminds us, should one, ›romanticise the persistence of the public realm – it remains selective, unequal, differentiating, constraining and oppressive in many ways‹ (2004: 44). However there are ways to understand the linkage between citizenship and public services which have more descriptive accuracy and stronger progressive credentials than the public choice or marketisation account.

One approach which can help to set out a new model of active citizenship is co-production. Alford defines co-production as ›the involvement of citizens, clients, consumers, volunteers and/or community organisations in *producing* public services as well as consuming or otherwise benefiting from them‹ (Alford, 1998: 128 – emphasis in the original). This account recognises that successful delivery of public services requires high trust relationships between users and providers on the front line, and active input from citizens, whether it is as patients looking after their own health through giving up smoking and joining a gym, or through parents and pupils getting homework done at the weekends, or people sorting their waste for recycling. These are all productive activities, and the people who do them cannot easily be cast in the role of consumer, separated off from other people who do the producing.

Understanding public services as delivered through a co-productive relationship encourages us to look more carefully at enhancing frontline interactions between service users and providers. Continuity and expertise of staff for example becomes more important than the flexible deployment of a low skill labour force. Citizens are required to be active and informed service users rather than passive consumers.

There are efficiency and effectiveness gains to seeing public services in co-productive terms. By emphasising user input into the productive process, co-production improves allocative efficiency, making front-line providers and their managers more sensitive to user needs and preferences (Percy, 1984: 437). Co-production creates ›more involved, responsible users‹ (Leadbeater, 2004: 59), who are ›more knowledgeable of the content, costs and limitations of municipal services and their joint responsibility with service agents for their delivery‹ (Brudney and England, 1983: 62).

Beyond these utilitarian benefits, co-production also offers ways to reinvigorate the four civic component of public services. First, the solidaristic element of public services can be reaffirmed through group and collective forms of co-production. Brudney and England (1983: 63-4), for example, point out that although co-production may take individualistic forms – such as filling in a tax return or taking medi-

cation at the right time – group modes of co-production can bring users together to shape or provide services, perhaps in the form of ›walking bus‹ initiatives for school children. Co-production may also take collective forms that benefit the whole community rather than groups of users, such as lay magistrates and jurors.

Second, co-production, particularly in its collective forms, can enhance equity in public services, spreading resources to those most in need. Recognising the unique insight that service users have into their own needs and resources is an essential component of equality of recognition. Its emphasis on the active citizen does however need to be accompanied by awareness of the barriers faced by some public service users in being active co-producers. Miller and Stirling highlight the importance of individual and social capital to effective co-production and argue that users with less individual capital (physical and financial resources, health status, skills, knowledge) must be supported to participate effectively (2004, 5).

Third, co-production can improve relationships between citizens and service providers on the frontlines by being more accurate and explicit about the contribution that the relationship makes to effective services. Co-production can be a expressive tool (building trust and communication between participants, allowing bureaucrats and citizens to explain their perspective and listen to others) as well as an instrumental one (revealing citizens‹ needs, identifying the main causes of delivery problems and negotiating effective means to resolve them).

Fourth, co-production can create new opportunities for democratic discourse. Beyond transactional understandings of the co-delivery of public services it is possible to see citizens being involved in debate over co-design and co-commissioning (Bovaird, 2007). Co-production can link into the more collaborative understandings of service design that are evident in online open source systems such as Wikipedia and Linux. Collaborative relationships between users and providers erode former hierarchies of information control and service design, and establish new, flatter systems of interaction. Leadbeater sees online collaboration, for example, as enabling ›more people to become (in Hannah Arendt's phrase) »craftsmen of democracy«: inquiring into how things work, getting their hands dirty, challenging the power of experts and professionals who dominate policy-making‹ (Leadbeater, 2008).

Thus co-production offers scope for an active and progressive relationship between citizenship and public services. Its insights are not radical – on one level it can be seen as simply a more accurate way of describing how good quality public services have always operated – but its understanding of what makes public services work is quite different than the marketising logic of public choice and new public management. It needs to be deployed with care. Co-production should not be a rationale for pushing the costs and risks of service provision onto the user – the emphasis is on collaboration not substitution. Nor should it be a form of DIY (do-it-yourself) welfare, analogous to the co-productive activities of the consumer of flatpack furniture (Wikström, 1996).

However it can be the rationale behind new dialogical mechanisms in frontline service provision. Examples of co-productive initiatives demonstrate its broad potential. The Sure Start initiative in the UK, for example, involves parents in co-producing services for pre-school children including training mothers as peer counsellors to support other breastfeeding mothers (Bovaird, 2007). In Norway, in mental health care and rehabilitation for people with chronic illness and disability, patient groups

and associations are involved in planning, development and evaluation of service provision (Andreassen, forthcoming). The Villa Family project in France facilitates care for the elderly within the local community by providing high quality accommodation and professional support for a host family rather than distant institutional solutions (Bovaird, 2007). Work to understand the needs of diabetes patients in Bolton, England, has led to the development of an 'Agenda Card' to help people manage their chronic condition and access personal coaches (Burns *et al.*, no date). Though diverse, all of these examples shape services through dialogue between service user and provider, and active input from the service user and/or broader community. The paternalistic assumptions of traditional welfare states – that services are conceived by professionals and delivered to clients – are absent. So too are the adversarial assumptions of neoliberalism – that consumers must push their maximal claims against an insensitive bureaucracy.

Conclusion

The political battles in advanced industrial democracies – over immigration, multiculturalism, environmentalism – highlight the continuing relevance of citizenship with its version of equality of status and the common good. What is in retreat in many states is a notion of publicness and an active defence of the public realm. Public services, the most tangible and salient manifestation of publicness, are shrinking (Haque, 2001), and the link between citizenship and public services being decoupled. Core public service values of solidarity, equity, fairness and democracy are being undermined by complexity, fragmentation, profit-seeking and a lack of accountability.

The challenges facing European countries in relation to public service reform are similar, despite the many differences in funding and provision. A marketising logic twinned with new public management techniques is stripping public services of their civic dimension in the name of utilitarian – and highly contested – efficiency gains. Through a process of 'policy transfer', tools and institutions of marketisation transmute from one national setting to another (Dolowitz, and Marsh, 2000). Models of public private partnership developed in the UK are exported across Europe. Private service providers such as Lyonnaise des Eaux gain control of former public assets such as water in a range of states. Membership of the European Union offers an ambiguous influence, supporting the social model through stronger employment rights but discouraging state investment in public services through the Stability and Growth Pact and pressing states to liberalise their public service sectors (Bieler, 2003; Grahl, 2007).

It is necessary to reaffirm the link between citizenship and public services, to require something more of service users than the role of passive consumer. The theory of co-production offers a way to understand better the relationship between public service users and providers, and provides insights to drive new forms of service design. Collaboration, so central to the technological advances of Web 2.0, can play a role in public service delivery – be it online or in face-to-face negotiations of service parameters. Co-production offers the potential to reinvigorate solidarity, equity, fairness and democracy within public services.

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