

## Introduction

*'... the rise of the demanding, sceptical citizen-consumer...'*  
(Secretary of State and Minister for Welfare Reform, 1998: 16)

This book is about this strange figure – the demanding and sceptical citizen-consumer. We explore how s/he was discovered and interpreted and – most importantly – how s/he came to play a central role in the continuing remaking of British public services. It is important to spend a little time thinking about the strangeness of this figure of this citizen-consumer – and why s/he became the focus of considerable political and policy controversy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Academic, political and popular debates have swirled around the notion of citizen as a consumer of public services who expects to exercise choice in the provision of public services, just as s/he exercises choice in the 'consumer society'. As the Prime Minister announced in 2004:

In reality, I believe people do want choice, in public services as in other services. But anyway, choice isn't an end in itself. It is one important mechanism to ensure that citizens can indeed secure good schools and health services in their communities.

Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services. We are proposing to put an entirely different dynamic in place to drive our public services; one where the service will be driven not by the government or by the manager but by the user – the patient, the parent, the pupil and the law-abiding citizen. (T. Blair, quoted in *The Guardian*, 24 June 2004: 1)

As we shall see, not everyone accepted this view of the citizen, nor did the co-ordination of public services through choice prove to be a universally popular proposal. Despite that, by 2006 the principle of choice was being extended across a range of public provision – from parental choice in education to the fields of health and social care (though in very different forms). This book explores the construction of the citizen-consumer and the connections to ideas and practices of choice in public services. We begin though with the figure itself – this peculiar hybridised and hyphenated combination of citizen and consumer. They are not words that are readily associated, so their hyphenation already marks something distinctive. Taken on their own, each term is usually taken to identify a particular field of relationships, identities and practices (Hughes, 1998). These fields differ from one another in almost every respect. The citizen is an egalitarian figure, lodged in a republican imaginary of liberty, equality

## 2 Creating Citizen-Consumers

and solidarity. The horizontal relationships of citizenship are ones that stress egalitarian principles (one person, one vote; everyone is equal before the law, and so on). The vertical relationships in which citizenship is produced and practised are typically those between citizens and the state. These evoke bonds of mutual obligation – the duties each owes to the other. But they are also mutually productive. It is the consent of the citizen that empowers the state; while the state provides and secures the conditions that enable citizens to lead their lives. In these very abstract terms, the citizen is a *political construct*: a key figure in the liberal social imaginary of Western capitalist democracies (on social imaginaries, see Taylor, 2004).

In contrast, the consumer is located in economic relationships. S/he is engaged in economic transactions in the marketplace, exchanging money for commodified goods and services. These, too, can be understood as relationships of liberty and equality – though in rather different ways. The freedom here derives from what Macpherson (1962) called ‘possessive individualism’ – the capacity to dispose of one’s own property as one wished. The individual is self-directing, capable of choosing how their own well-being may best be served. There is a version of equality here, too. All individuals (subject to certain legal restrictions) are equally endowed with the capacity to be self-directing: all are ‘free to choose’. At the same time, the relative anonymity of market exchange underpins a different sort of equality: all money is equal. The market responds to ‘price signals’ rather than personal characteristics. The market – through its ‘hidden hand’ – reconciles the wants of many producers and consumers (subject to available resources). In these abstract terms, the consumer is an *economic construct*: a key figure in the liberal social imaginary of Western capitalist democracies. Indeed, it is important to understand that both figures – the citizen and the consumer – are critical elements in the liberal social imaginary: they co-exist in more or less uncomfortable combinations with one another. But they do co-exist. Indeed, they may be seen as the defining figures of the liberal social imaginary: the framing conceptions of how people and societies are, and of how they should be.

The citizen is embodied in public identifications and practices; where the consumer is usually thought of as a private figure. The citizen is associated with the rise of a ‘public realm’ in which both citizens and public institutions are more or less insulated from private interests and passions (du Gay, 2005). In the public realm, people as citizens fulfil their obligations to one another, engage in mutual deliberation and exercise thought and choice in the definition and pursuit of the ‘public interest’. By contrast, the consumer is figure motivated by personal desires, pursuing their own interests through anonymous transactions in which relationships between buyer and seller are characterised by mutual indifference.

These two figures dominate the liberal political imaginary and embody its conceptions of liberty, freedom, individualism and equality. They exist in a degree of strain with one another, but are also co-constitutive of each

other: the 'public' figure of the citizen forms the other face of the 'private' figure of the consumer. For most of this book, we will need to keep these two issues in view: the tensions between the citizen and the consumer and their interconnectedness. It is generally easier to see the differences and antagonisms between them. They appear to embody essentially different relationships, practices and principles of social co-ordination. Not least, they have come to stand for the two principles of co-ordination – the market and the state – which dominated the twentieth century. The citizen embodies what Esping-Andersen (1990) called the 'de-commodification' of public rights, goods and relationships – their removal from the market-generated or market-related patterns of wealth and income inequality.

In socialist and social-democratic thought, then, the state and citizenship have been bulwarks and buttresses against the vagaries and vicissitudes of markets. Such a conception allowed for uneven and contradictory consequences. The state never fully displaced the market (even in state socialist societies) – the inequalities generated by markets could be mitigated but not removed (though the range of 'acceptable' inequality differed substantially between societies) and the state might effectively function as a support for the reproduction of capitalist societies by mitigating their worst effects. For liberals – and more recently, neo-liberals – precisely the reverse has been true: states interfere with the proper functioning of markets (or, at least, states that go beyond their basic business of securing the conditions for doing business). Markets co-ordinate society more efficiently and effectively than states (or 'command and control' co-ordination) can ever hope to because they are dynamic and responsive.

In these general terms, the citizen and the consumer embody a series of binary distinctions:

<i>CITIZEN</i>	<i>CONSUMER</i>
State	Market
Public	Private
Political	Economic
Collective	Individual
De-commodification	Commodification
Rights	Exchange

Now, these are simplified distinctions. We need to attend to different sorts of complications associated with them. The first is a reminder that these different figures co-exist within the liberal political imaginary – citizens and consumers occupy different areas or domains of social life (Taylor, 2004). But the alignment of, and balance between, political and economic spaces is variable – both between societies and over time. For much of the twentieth century, capitalist societies of the West were marked by movements and struggles that sought to confine and diminish the scope of the market, while broadening the de-commodified public realm. Enlarging political democracy and constructing public arrangements of welfare were

#### 4 Creating Citizen-Consumers

two of the widespread dynamics, culminating in what has been called the 'golden age' of the welfare state, and of the nation-state (Huber and Stephens, 2001; Leibfried and Zürn, 2005). From the late twentieth century, we have seen constant efforts to revise that balance between public and private, between state and market.

In particular, efforts have been focused on liberating the market from its state-imposed inhibitions (forms of regulation, direction and constraint). Such trends have been discussed as freeing capital, the market, the entrepreneurial spirit and even enabling labour to be more 'flexible' (Harvey, 2005). But they have also been represented as freeing 'individual choice' for consumers in almost all areas of life from food to travel to entertainment. As we will hear in more detail later, there are claims that the defining characteristic of modern Western societies is that they have become 'consumer cultures'. Such consumer cultures are dominated by the 'cash nexus': the exchange of money for desired goods and services. (It should be noted that, although the sociological term is the 'cash nexus', the most advanced consumer cultures – in the UK and USA, for example – have been fuelled as much by credit/debt as by cash.) It is in this context that the hybrid figure of the citizen-consumer begins to appear, indicating the potential spread of market-based experiences, expectations, practices and relationships to the public realm.

Before pursuing that development, we need to note two more complications about the figures of the citizen and the consumer. The first is that they are less substantial or solid than their representation in the liberal social imaginary suggests. In that imaginary, the citizen strides forward, the bold embodiment of the republican tradition. S/he self-confidently articulates political views, engages productively in public dialogue, and makes demands on the state as of right. Equally, the consumer forms judgements and makes choices, assertively pursuing self-interest and bursting free of social and political constraints. In practice, both of these figures have proved more contingent. Citizenship, as Ruth Lister has argued, is an 'essentially contested concept' (2003: 14). Much of this contestation has been about the enlargement of who is entitled to count as a citizen – against limitations by property relations (including slavery), gender, race, age and a variety of criteria of 'competence' and 'belonging' that have structured patterns of exclusion from citizenship (Lewis, 1998). Citizenship's substance – the content of rights and entitlements – has also been the focus of extensive conflict, aimed at enlarging (or diminishing) the areas of life that are 'de-commodified', or made subject to social or political, rather than economic, calculation.

More recently, we have seen efforts to 'roll back' such arrangements or to reform them in ways more compatible with the flexibilities and freedoms demanded as the price of participating in the new global market-places. In the process, some have argued that citizenship had become overblown, exceeding the proper limits of the political sphere and extending social and political calculation into places where it had no business

being. We might distinguish three interwoven arguments here. The first centres around questions of intrusion and interference: there are domains of life in which the state has no proper place. The realms of the market and the family are the two most frequently claimed spaces of 'natural freedom' and the state should be restrained from 'interfering' in them. Here we can see a connection to the second set of arguments which work on the distinction between the public and the private. Again, the market and the family are treated as essentially private domains in which public interest and public powers represent an intrusion. Finally, there are arguments that centre on distinctions between individualised and collective domains of life where citizenship threatens to transform areas of individual concern and practice into inappropriately collectivised ones (often dismissed in terms such as 'social engineering' or the failings of 'mass' provision). Later, we will see how these types of arguments have come to bear on the provision of public services and voiced the need to reform them in more consumerist directions.

But the consumer has also been a more complex figure. Historically, there have been different types and images of the consumer (Maclachlan and Trentmann, 2004; Trentmann, 2006b). At times, the consumer has been looked upon with scorn and criticism reflecting an anxiety about consuming as a practice that 'uses up' scarce or valued resources. Such concerns persist, of course, in environmental and ethical politics around the excesses of contemporary consumerism (Malpass et al., 2006). Consumers have also been the focus of collective mobilisations – a pattern somewhat at odds with the current valorisation of the consumer as the highest point of individualism. As Trentmann (2001) details, the consumer interest was collectively organised around food (such as bread and milk) in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain. More recently there have been consumer mobilisations around such diverse issues as automobile safety, corporate politics, 'McDonaldisation' and economic globalisation (Hilton, 2003 and 2006). Despite the dominant rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, imbalances between the collective power of producers and individualised consumers have provided a fertile ground for such mobilisations.

In parallel with Lister's observation about citizenship, Gabriel and Lang's examination of different conceptions of the consumer emphasises their contested and complex character. They argue that '... by stirring various traditions together we are seeking to reclaim some theoretical recalcitrance for the concepts of consumption and the consumer. We introduce the concept of the 'unmanageable consumer' to express this recalcitrance...' (1995: 4). We will return to Gabriel and Lang's concern with the recalcitrant and unmanageable consumer at various points in this book. Here, though, we want to stress the multiple views of the consumer that they explore. Their book offers nine variants: the consumer as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity-seeker, hedonist, victim, rebel, activist and citizen. The image of the consumer that has dominated political and policy debate in recent years is the first of these – the consumer as chooser. This imagery is

## 6 Creating Citizen-Consumers

derived from economic discourse, or perhaps, more accurately, what Thomas Frank (2001) calls 'market populism'. As we will see, critical challenges to the consumerist turn in public policy have tended to rest on a mirror image of the consumer as chooser – the consumer as victim. In such debates, consumers are either the sovereign heroes of their own lives (independent, confident, judgement-forming and choice-exercising agents) or are the cultural dupes preyed upon by forces beyond their control (and often beyond their knowledge). This heroes/dupes split has been a recurrent one in arguments over popular culture (Clarke, 1990).

The contemporary world is marked by a drive to universalise the consumer as chooser – to spread the relationships, experiences and practices of (market-mediated) consuming to new places and new populations. It is one of the core dynamics of corporate globalisation. The freedom to 'spend one's own money' is one of the defining elements of the combination of freedom and democracy that characterises the 'new world order'. In the process, the consumer has been constructed – and celebrated – as a universal identity. In this book, we talk about this as a process of spreading or installing 'consumerism' and use related terms like consumerist imperative or orientation to describe its place in policy formulations. This draws on what Matthew Hilton (2006) has called a 'pejorative' meaning of consumerism, but here we mean it to identify the tendency to treat the consumer as an organising figure for policies, processes and practices. As with citizenship, however, the would-be universalism of the consumer proves subject to some social (and spatial) limitations. Most obviously, access to 'one's own money' is profoundly unequally distributed. Consuming (in its market-mediated form) requires money or its proxies. Consuming thus has implications for the organisation of lives such that increasing attention needs to be given to the acquisition of money or its functional substitutes (mainly credit or theft).

There are, of course, 'magical' representations of consuming as a practice detached from its conditions of existence. These circulate widely, both in advertising and in wider political-cultural discourse, and they hold out the prospect of consuming as an ungrounded activity, in which the self can be produced. This contemporary imagery of consumption is a fundamentally aspirational formation – one driven by the promise of future fulfilment. This psychic structure works both for individuals and whole societies (think of the relation between the promise of consumption and the break up of the Soviet bloc, for example). As we will argue later, 'choice' is the focus of a variety of aspirations and anxieties and – in its consumerist form – rests on a promise that the problems or dissatisfactions of the present can be remedied by more or different choices in the future (Clarke and Newman, 2006; Clarke et al., 2006; Vidler and Clarke, 2005).

So, both the citizen and the consumer are more contingent, contested and contradictory figures than their conventional depiction might allow. What matters for us, though, are the consequences of that complexity for the process in which they become hyphenated. This book explores the conditions and consequences of the particular hyphenation articulated

by New Labour as the basis for modernising public services in the UK between 1997 and 2005. What happens if citizens are addressed and treated as consumers of public services? And what are the consequences of practices and identities of consuming if they are displaced into the realm of citizenship?

The book is based on a research project that investigated the elaboration of discourses of consumerism and choice by the New Labour governments in the UK, examining how public service organisations responded to these new policy discourses, and their impact on relationships between public services and their publics. The project set out to explore changing relationships and identifications in three services (health, policing and social care) in two UK sites ('Oldtown' and 'Newtown'). Further details about the project are set out in the **Appendix** and can also be found at [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers). This book presents the results of the project, together with an assessment of their significance for understanding the political-cultural formation of New Labour.

**Chapter 1**, *Changing times: perspectives on the citizen-consumer*, considers the turmoil that has surrounded public institutions since the 1980s. For almost three decades, public services, ideas of the public interest and the composition of 'the public' as a collective entity have been challenged and contested. We address the problems of analysing such turbulent times and the transformations that they have brought into being. In particular, we situate our analysis in this book between three major perspectives on these topics – a Giddensian view of modernity; a political economy approach to global capitalism and its alter-ego neo-liberalism; and a Foucauldian inspired approach to changing forms of governmentality.

**Chapter 2**, *Public service reform: the rise of the citizen-consumer*, explores the conditions of New Labour's adoption of the 'citizen-consumer' as the emblem of public service reform. We trace some of the different political and cultural currents that made this hyphenated figure both possible and plausible. In doing so, we consider some of the contradictory and unstable features of New Labour's programme of reform.

**Chapter 3**, *Delivery problems? Consumerism and institutional variation*, shifts the focus of attention to the impact of New Labour's consumerist orientation on three different public services – health care, policing and social care. The institutional formations and policy trajectories of the three services are different in a number of important ways and highlight some problems about thinking of the process of change as simply involving a shift from citizen-centred services to consumer-centred ones.

**Chapter 4**, *Unstable encounters: users, staff and services*, looks at some of the reactions of staff and users in these three services to the consumerist orientation. Drawing on key concerns about consumerism developed in Chapter 1, we consider how users and staff view Challenge (the relation between professional/organisational authority and lay responses), Choice (as a means to improving services), Inequality (as a possible effect of increasing choice in public services) and Responsibility (in the transfer of

## 8 Creating Citizen-Consumers

responsibility from state to citizen for well-being, independence and social order).

**Chapter 5**, *Managing consumerism: from policy to practice*, considers the reactions of managers in the three services to the consumerist orientation. Again, these vary across the three services, revealing different institutional formations and policy trajectories. The chapter also explores how managers – and the organisations they direct – have received, interpreted, inflected and adapted the consumerist imperative in the light of existing organisational orientations and other governmental pressures. Each of the services discussed here was already caught up in the difficult process of thinking about how to reconstruct its relationships with a changing and turbulent public. New Labour's consumerism engaged with these concerns and tried to shape them in a particular way.

**Chapter 6**, *Sites of strain: consumerism and public services*, examines some of the dilemmas arising from consumerism in public services. More accurately, we look at how this consumerist orientation has intensified and exacerbated a series of persistent troubles in the organisation and provision of public services. The focal points are the tensions between choice and equity; the problems of reconciling needs, wants, rights and resources; and the challenges to professional authority wrapped up in the tangles of the 'knowledge/power knot'. The chapter concludes by examining the idealised – and problematic – figure of the 'responsible consumer'.

Chapter 7, *What's in a name? In search of the citizen-consumer*, explores the problem of 'naming' the people who use public services. Both providers and users of services seemed uncomfortable with the imagery of consumer and customer. However, this was not a simple rejection of the consumer image in favour of the citizen. We suggest that the dominant binary distinction between citizen and consumer failed to capture how people think of themselves in relation to public services. Other conceptions conveyed a more active and collective sense of the publicness of public services. In this context, 'choice' appears as a focus of ambivalent and ambiguous personal and political reactions. The relationship between the public and public services, we suggest, remains a turbulent issue – not resolved by New Labour's turn to consumerism and choice.

**Chapter 8**, *Beyond the citizen-consumer*, offers conclusions about some of the issues brought to light in the book. Three things stand out for us. The first was raised by the ways in which people addressed their relationships to public services – offering complex, mobile and relational reflections. We suggest that social scientists may need to take such 'reasoning subjects' seriously, rather than seeing them as subordinated or subjected by dominant ideologies or discourses. Secondly, we consider New Labour's discovery or invention of the citizen-consumer as part of a political and governmental project, and the problems of analysing such formations. Finally, we contemplate the prospect of the decline or disappearance of the citizen-consumer in the continuing ferment about the future of public services and their relationship to changing publics.