



MEANINGS OF PUBLIC AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

David A. McDonald



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Critically assessing meanings of the term “public”, this book situates the emergence and expansion of “public services” within market-based forms of production and consumption.

It highlights the potential for making public services more progressive within market societies, but underscores their ongoing capture by private interests and emphasizes the inherent limits of reform within a “bourgeois public sphere”. The author explores opportunities for more expansive forms of non-marketized public services, examining emerging debates on the theory and practice of equitable, participatory and sustainable forms of publicness that go beyond mere ownership. The book then asks how we can build a robust international “pro-public” movement that juggles universal needs with local context.

With a focus on essential public services such as water, electricity and health, the text is global in its scope and written for a broad audience. It will be useful for those interested in social and public policy, public services and public administration, political theory, economic geography, social movements, sustainability and development.

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1 What's Public about Public Services?

What is a public? It is a curiously obscure question, considering that few things have been more important in the development of modernity.

(Warner, 2002, p. 49)

Attempts to privatize essential services have met with widespread resistance over the past 30 years. This opposition has given rise to a global anti-privatization movement that has been remarkably successful at challenging private sector intrusion into a wide range of service sectors. Rigorous research and dogged activism have helped to slow – and in many cases reverse – the privatization juggernaut, exposing its failings around the world, from water to healthcare to prisons and forests (Ahlquist et al., 2017; Amadi, 2019; Beck, 2020; Bieler, 2021; Blum & Ullman, 2012; Dower & Markevich, 2014; Gibson et al., 2002; Hermann, 2021a; Kingstone et al., 2013; McClure et al., 2020; Robinson, 2013; Sarker, 2014; Whiteside, 2020).

The success of the anti-privatization movement is due in part to its consistent messaging about the problems of privatization, backed up by standardized research methods. Countless studies have found privatization to increase costs, lower quality, encourage corruption, reduce wages, damage the environment and marginalize the poor (Austin et al., 2016; Bakker, 2010; Bayliss, 2002; Bel & Warner, 2008; Bel et al., 2010; Clifton et al., 2016; Dagdeviren, 2009; Lobina et al., 2011; Lohmann, 2012; Sclar, 2001; Spronk, 2010; Tan, 2007). This uniformity of findings has helped cash-strapped NGOs, busy trade unions and diverse community organizations fight a David and Goliath battle up against deep-pocketed multinational corporations, mainstream media, international financial institutions and well-heeled consumer associations that promote privatization. In doing so, the anti-privatization movement has inspired thousands of protests and policy reforms, contributing to a culture of success and a growing belief that the giant of privatization can be slain (Bakker, 2013a; Graham et al., 2013; Kale-Sukra, 2012; Kingsnorth, 2012; Kishimoto et al., 2020; Loomis, 2013; Marois, 2021; McDonald, 2016a; Pigeon et al., 2012; Wainwright, 2018; Warner et al., 2021).

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By contrast, there is no equivalent global “pro-public” movement – by which I mean people and organizations united in their vision for what public services should be, as opposed to what they should not be. There are increasing demands from anti-privatization activists to “bring public services back into public hands” but no clear consensus as to what this means in practice or what kinds of actions are required to make services “public” again. Academic research on the topic is growing but limited, often employing dissimilar research theory and methodologies, while calls for change by activists and practitioners on the ground can differ dramatically across place and sector. There is mounting agreement that public services should be affordable, democratic, transparent, equitable and environmentally sustainable, but the details of these goals are not consistent, and not always explicit, sometimes serving to obscure important institutional and ideological differences around what constitutes a public service. Much of the pro-public discourse implies that public services should be owned and managed by the state, for example, but there is no common agreement as to what kind (or level) of state is required, or if governments should be involved at all.

This lack of pro-public accord is not surprising given the diversity of “actually existing” public services around the world, and the complex organizational and ideological realities that inform them. Nor is this lack of consensus necessarily problematic. In fact, I will argue in this book that a diversity of pro-public opinion and action is a positive and necessarily dynamic feature of an effective and sustainable pro-public movement, contributing to the strength and durability required to remake and rebuild more equitable and sustainable public services in the future.

In the short term, however, a fragmented pro-public discourse does create problems for the building of an effective global pro-public movement. Most obviously, it can undermine solidarity, sowing divisions and allowing pro-privatization opponents to take advantage of ideological and organizational discord. It can also contribute to a false sense of cohesion, with phrases such as “public ownership” concealing fundamentally different perspectives on what “public” means and how “ownership” can lead to different outcomes.

The lack of a coherent pro-public dialogue can also encourage organizations to fall back on more familiar anti-privatization terrain. Rather than searching for new practical and linguistic ways forward, it can sometimes be easier to call for a return to (or the protection of) the status quo, even if previous or existing forms of public services are problematic in terms of equitable access, environmental sustainability and affordability (not to mention being explicitly racist, homophobic or misogynist, as some public services have proven to be (Colgan et al., 2009; Devakumar et al., 2020; Miller & Vittrup, 2020; Mooney, 2003; Rapp et al., 2021)). There are countless public services around the world worth fighting for, of course, but pro-public activism should not romanticize public services that were never as impartial,

sustainable or democratic as they are sometimes claimed to be. Doing so can trap us in a false sense of accomplishment, limiting the realms of what is possible.

There is also the problem of public services that promote commercialization, with neoliberal forms of “corporatization” and “New Public Management” having fundamentally confounded what is meant by “public” and how we have governed the public realm during the neoliberal era (Andrews et al., 2020; Bel et al., 2021; Clarke, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; McDonald, 2014; Newman & McKee, 2005). Such marketized forms of public services may be public in name but can be analogous to privatization in practice, confusing the goals of a pro-public movement and potentially undermining progressive pro-public objectives.

Creating a united global pro-public movement will therefore be no easy task. The variegated terrain upon which these debates necessarily lie requires a willingness to acknowledge and understand the diverse and often incompatible positionalities of what constitutes publicness. Collaboration will also require working across diverse organizational capacities and strategies. It will necessitate a willingness to be critical of existing public services while paying respect to the millions of frontline public service workers, managers and policymakers who have committed their lives to providing the best public services they can. Pro-public work must also be cognizant of the fact that most people in the world are simply struggling to survive, with little time or energy to think about the more esoteric questions posed in this book or to engage directly in the actual remaking of public services on the ground.

Encouragingly, there is a significant and dynamic pro-public movement emerging, along with new and progressive ideas for change and a growing pool of successful cases of transformation. From Spain to Colombia to Indonesia, community groups, unions, policy makers, activists and academics around the world are insisting on a new public service compact, such as the Global Manifesto for Public Services released in late 2021 and signed by more than 175 organizations (see [Appendix 1](#)). This book aims to help shed light on this evolving movement, showcasing the demands that are being made for pro-public reforms in different parts of the world and assessing their implications for the future of public services.

I am inherently optimistic, à la Gramsci, of the potential for these social forces to create meaningful change, but intellectually cautious as to the limits of reform available to us within the structural constraints of a market economy. I take a radical position in this regard, arguing that we cannot allow ourselves to be trapped within the discursive and material parameters of liberal market logics (hence the title of [Part 1](#) of this book: Limits). But I also argue that there is enormous potential to move beyond these constraints, developing shared conceptual frameworks and strategies that allow us to define and operationalize non-marketized notions of public in the future (hence the title of [Part 2](#) of the book: Possibilities).

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In doing so I outline a conceptual and methodological framework for defining what constitutes a “public service” and how we evaluate its “success”, while aiming to avoid an overly deterministic view of what public means in every context and sector. Universal public service principles such as equity, solidarity and participatory engagement are proposed as the foundation of a unified pro-public agenda, but this framework is infused with contextual flexibility, encouraging localized diversity in terms of what non-market public services can look like in a (post)capitalist world order.

The book stems from a decade and a half of research and engagement with activists, unions, community organizations, NGOs, academics and practitioners exploring “alternatives to privatization”. My goal is to help showcase the many fascinating examples of these efforts to rethink and remake public services, hopefully contributing to the building of an increasingly rigorous and robust methodological and theoretical conversation about definitions of public and what this means for future research and action around public services. Following [Ferguson \(2009, p. 167\)](#), I want to ask what happens if politics is not just about “expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful. What if it is, instead, about getting what you want? Then we progressives must ask: what do we want? This is a quite different question than: what are we against?”

The book begins with a historical review of the emergence of the word “public” within market economies, and how it has manifested itself in the meaning and practice of public services in our contemporary “bourgeois public sphere”. My aim is to reveal the intrinsic flaws and contradictions of liberal notions of publicness, which I will argue is a necessary and unavoidable step towards escaping (at least in part) its market clutches and challenging the false binaries of public and private that have plagued efforts to revise and revive public services within capitalism over the past 150 years. The result of this liberal binary has been a pendulum-like swing of public and private as a constitutive feature of capitalist notions of public service provision – one that still acts to constrain the scope of possibilities today.

Looking forward, the book then offers tentative proposals for rethinking the meaning(s) of public services, reviewing options for who delivers them, proposing ways of measuring performance and reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of building a (relatively) unified global pro-public movement in the future.

What Is Public?

Any attempt to develop a revised vision of public services must start with what is meant by public. This is a deceptively difficult task. For a concept that lies at the very heart of debates about privatization it is remarkably under-discussed in practical and theoretical terms. As [Frederickson \(1991, pp. 395–6\)](#) noted three decades ago with regard to “the meaning of public

in public administration”, those who “practice and study public administration usually have some notion of what they mean when they refer to public, but because of the general lack of an explanation of the concept it is often the case that contrasting and contradictory notions of the public are the real sources of difference of perspectives....[U]sually a perspective on the public is assumed, and it is further assumed that there is agreement on what is assumed”. Little has changed since then.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2007) provides little assistance in this regard, offering up two tension-laden definitions of public, neither of which serves to clarify its meaning. The first is an abstract concept associated with universality: “Of or relating to the people as a whole; that belongs to, affects, or concerns the community or the nation”. In other words, public is intended to mean “everyone”. But this definition leaves open the question of who constitutes a “community” or “nation” and where the physical boundaries around these publics may or may not lie (a confusion compounded by the fact that earlier dictionary references defined public as “of or belonging to the human race as a whole”, but which the OED now says is “obsolete, rare”). In other words, the word public conjures up images of inclusivity and universality, but who exactly is included in this public (and why or why not) is left vague.

The second part of the OED definition of public refers to it as a manifestation of government: “of or provided by the state rather than an independent commercial company; in general, and in most of the senses, the opposite of private” (OED, 2007). But here too there is ambiguity, with no clear indication of where public boundaries end and private ones begin. According to the OED, “the varieties [of public and private] are numerous and pass into each other by many intermediate shades of meaning. The exact shade often depends upon the substantive qualified, and in some expressions more than one sense is vaguely present; in others the usage is traditional, and it is difficult to determine in what sense precisely the thing in question was originally called public”.

Dictionary definitions of “public services” are no less problematic. On the one hand public services are defined as “an amenity regarded as essential to the community and provided by a government”, but also open to provision by “other agencies”, including the private sector (OED, 2007). The Merriam-Webster dictionary goes so far as to say that public services are “the business of supplying a commodity (such as electricity or gas) or service (such as transportation) to any or all members of a community”, with state and private sector actors both considered equally eligible to deliver them. In other words, public services can be public or private, with an apparently seamless substitutability.

Kennedy (1982, pp. 1352–4) refers to this definitional blurring as “loopification”, in which notions of public and private fuse into one another “without ever reversing direction”. For Stone (1982, p. 1442), “any scholar with a curiosity about public/private is tempted, perhaps well-advised, to carve out

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public and private this or public and private that, as the only way around the vaguest abstractions or the slyest tautologies”.

But these tautologies cannot be resolved within liberal conceptualizations of public. I will argue in this book that these abstractions are an expression of deep-seated inherent structural frictions that lie at the heart of market-based notions of public and public services. These strains emerged alongside capitalist economies in 18th-century Europe and continue to be shaped by contemporary market forces around the world. Indeed, the very notion of a universal public – and universal public services – was born out of the political and economic necessities of early capitalism, with private capital requiring a public sphere independent of arbitrary oversight which could also create the public amenities needed for facilitating private accumulation through mass production and consumption. As markets grew, so too did the demands for inclusion by those on the margins, expanding the public sphere, until those demands threatened to undermine control of the public domain by private capital, at which point universality began to be clawed back. Notions of public were quickly limited to representative forms of expert governance, growing restrictions on mass consumption and the opportunity for expanded private provision of collective public goods and services.

This is the “bourgeois public sphere” that the majority of people live within today. It is the most expansive form of public in world history, having provided an unprecedented explosion of public rights and public services – much of which is to be celebrated – but it is limited and contradictory in nature, with profound implications for the types of public and public services we may or may not want in the future.

Part 1 of this book examines the limits of this bourgeois public sphere, drawing on a literature about marketized notions of public and expanding this to our understanding of how it constrains equitable and democratic forms of universal public services. I employ a broad historical review in these chapters, aiming to capture the overarching dynamics of how this public sphere fits within the *longue durée* of public service history, and how it has shaped the theory and practice of public services in the world today.

Part 2 is an examination of alternatives to this bourgeois public sphere, exploring conceptual and practical possibilities for building new concepts of public and public services, as well as suggestions for constructing a new type of global pro-public movement, within and outside market constraints. Here the discussion is also far-reaching in its geographic, sectoral and institutional scope, intended to highlight the potential for positive change with broad brushstrokes, while employing concrete examples from different parts of the world to ground the discussion in more practical terms.

It is not my intent to be empirically comprehensive in this book. There are far too many diverse struggles to claim representivity, and pro-public movements on the ground are constantly emerging and changing. It is an extraordinarily dynamic and fluid situation for which I can only hope to provide a reasonable snapshot.

Nor is this book an exhaustive review of different theoretical meanings of public or the potentials of state transformation. I have adopted a well-established literature related to marketized conceptions of the public sphere and have attempted to expand on it sufficiently to accommodate emerging understandings of the complexities of intersectionality while at the same time permitting universal norms that allow for combined efforts to transform (state-led) public services. In this respect I have opted for a relatively short book, providing a broad overview of what I see to be the most critical terrains of debate and action, and have proposed tentative suggestions for how public services might be conceived of and operated in the future, hopefully prompting further debate on the topic.

The Limits of Public

My starting point is an investigation of the ways in which the concept of public has been created and shaped by the rise of capitalism, beginning with its emergence in post-Renaissance Europe. I argue – drawing on [Habermas \(1991\)](#), though ultimately critical of his efforts to discursively reclaim a “golden age” of publicness – that our bourgeois public sphere was born out of the necessities of expanding commodity production and intensified by the need for new spaces and institutions of marketized forms of social reproduction. Pre-capitalist concepts of publicness were much more limited in scope than they are today, typically restricted to representational displays of authoritarian power in publicly accessible places, designed and overseen by an arbitrary ruling class. These publics were not negotiated interactions between autonomous or equal individuals but controlled from above and designed to demonstrate power; to placate and control a disenfranchised majority and facilitate systems of taxation. For the most part, pre-capitalist individuals did things in private, aware of and bumping up against a larger community of people and systems that bound them into a physical and socio-economic whole, but with no expectations of universal public rights or entitlements.

The rise of a capitalist market economy fundamentally altered these relations. An emerging capital-owning class challenged the notion of subjective and absolute authority and introduced, for the first time in large, organized societies, the concept of a negotiated and universal public sphere. This was a slow, uneven and erratic process, taking centuries to unfold, but it was a fundamental shift away from feudal social relations, transforming the ways in which public space, public opinion and public services were imagined, built and operated. It was nothing less than a revolution, and one which continues to evolve and shape our notions of public and public services today.

This bourgeois revolution is packed with tensions, contradictions and inequities however; more a public illusion than a public reality. As discussed at length in [Chapter 2](#), the structural pressures of emerging capitalist markets which initially made the public sphere a political necessity soon began

to curtail and restrict it, creating and perpetuating market-friendly state authorities and legislation to assist with capital accumulation, contain market crises and manage political and economic demands by workers and residents. In the process, the market has created commodified forms of public that mesh with the interests of private capital, and constructed disciplinary forms of governance to maintain and advance a public artifice. This bourgeois public sphere has changed over time and differs from place to place but the structural dynamics that led to its initial contradictions and limitations remain with us today, as do their implications.

Similar dynamics have unfolded with public services. There were services for general consumption prior to capitalism, of course, but none could be called public in the contemporary sense of the term: they were never intended to be universal, and it was always understood that they were provided at the whim of an arbitrary ruling class. Water services in ancient Rome are illustrative. With its massive aqueducts, 40% of the water flowing into the city was made available for tax-free public use, but the rest was set aside for the emperor and wealthy paying customers, with no expectation that the average citizen (let alone slave) had any moral or political claim on these services beyond what they were offered (Smith, 2007, p. 72).

It is with the emergence of capitalist markets that we begin to see an explicit commitment to service universality, first as political necessity, and then as economic imperative. Claiming a universal public sphere obliged some recognition of universal access to essential amenities. So too did commercial growth demand an expansion of mass consumption, with the services and infrastructure required to promote them. Deprived of roads, sanitation, basic education and improved health services, it was impossible to hire adequate numbers of productive workers or sell them goods, destabilizing capital accumulation. The history of capitalist markets has, in broad terms, been one of relying on public services and infrastructure for growth and stability, varying across time and place, and always complex and uneven, but central to the success or failure of any particular regime of capital accumulation (Pickvance, 1977; Castells, 1978; Harvey, 1982, 2005; Ball, 1986).

But rather than citizens making choices for themselves in an openly democratic manner, capitalist-era public services have never been truly universal or representative. Although more inclusive and expansive than pre-capitalist service systems, contemporary public services are increasingly dominated by technical “experts” making decisions on behalf of others, determining who gets access to what and the different types of services (and prices) that might be offered.

So too can public services be made fully private in this bourgeois public sphere, owned and operated by profit-seeking capital in the name of providing a public good, supposedly offering better rates and better choices for consumers due to their market responsiveness. Here is a bourgeois public sphere that has come full circle, (re)captured by the private interests that

first established this public realm to justify and expand its accumulatory ambitions.

Rather than seeing privatization as a linear end goal, it must be seen as part of a circular logic. Who provides public services is not ideologically important in a bourgeois public sphere; it simply depends on the structural requirements of the market at any given time. When the potential for “market failures” is high, public services tend to shift towards state production. When it makes sense to the needs of capital to have services provided by the private sector then the roles can be reversed.

This loopification has established a liberal truism that public services can be provided equally well by the public or private sector, depending on the circumstances. Finding the right mix is a matter of balancing the two along a continuum of public and private. [Chapter 3](#) examines “four moments” of such circularity, beginning with the “invention” of public services with Adam Smith, moving through the municipalization era of the late 1800s, to a scaling up of public services in the Keynesian period, to neoliberal notions of public from the 1980s. This brief historical review demonstrates how liberal theorists and policymakers have become more sophisticated at playing with this public/private mix, obfuscating the public-private divide.

Herein lies a key source of tension in debates about alternatives to privatization. It is often assumed that there is a binary of choice, with private sector service delivery at one end, and public (read state) services at the other. In reality, the two are inextricably intermeshed in a capitalist economy, with state-run public services being part of the larger fluctuating dynamics of private capital accumulation. In other words, public services should not be seen as an end in and of themselves, but rather a socially constituted and materially contested phenomenon requiring an understanding and shifting of the larger structural dynamics of capitalist markets.

I refer to this circularity as the “curse of the continuum”, whereby state-provided public services are often touted as a polar opposite to privatization (and inherently more beneficial to the broader public good) when in fact state-led public services can be equally (or more) problematic than privatization if their underlying objectives are that of commodification and the facilitation of capital accumulation. Without this explicit recognition, pro-public movements run the risk of conceptual and practical capture by market logics.

The Possibilities of Public

The remainder of the book is an attempt to work towards an alternative theory of public and public services. Constructing new ideas is inherently more problematic than deconstructing old ones, though, with fewer conceptual reference points to draw on in terms of what alternative models of public might look like or how they apply to services, particularly if the goal is to develop a globally relevant pro-public framework applicable to sectors

as diverse as public banking and waste management, and in locations as dissimilar as Germany and Burkina Faso.

I begin in [Chapter 4](#) by asking if it might be better to simply discard the word public altogether – given how tainted it has become by liberal theory and practice – and adopt the term ‘commons’ instead. But as compromised as public has become, I argue that it is more theoretically consistent and more politically strategic than commons, making it better to retain and rework the term. The chapter then lays out a preliminary proposal for how we might redefine public, starting with the premise that some notion of universality must lie at its heart but then arguing that it is vital to introduce flexible notions of public to accommodate alternative worldviews, practices and local contexts. This is accomplished in part by a pluralization of the term – publics rather than public – and by arguing that publics should be seen as a procedural act open to negotiation, debate and action amongst different groups and at different scales. Publics can and should have a core set of meanings that apply universally, but this does not mean that publics must be identical in every place or sector. Notions of public are “created in and through the public process”, they “do not exist in advance of it” ([Calhoun, 1998](#), p. 32). They are indeterminate and variable, with no guarantee of being progressive.

The pluralization of publics also allows us to reject neoclassical methods of defining public services, replacing them with more dynamic and less commodified criteria. My proposal is to substitute the consumptive neoclassical characteristics of goods and services, with more socially meaningful evaluations of how “essential” a service is and to what extent it would benefit from “collective provision”. Services considered essential would score high on the “public” scale, as would those which benefit from some form of communal production (be it by the state and/or some other mutual non-profit organization). Evaluative criteria would also include a combination of objective and subjective factors, ranging from biological necessity to cultural significance.

The goal here is to create an ontologically independent category of publicness that grants clear (but dialectical) separation from privateness. If public services are seen always and merely as an extension of private interest (as they are in neoclassical economics), it will be impossible to break from the liberal public-private continuum. I will argue that some services can be seen as universally public with local characteristics (such as water, health care and education), while others may be classified as public or private depending on local context and public opinion (such as sports fields or car insurance). The result is a dramatically different mapping of what constitutes a public service, while at the same time redefining and reinvigorating its boundaries with private.

[Chapter 5](#) explores options for operationalizing this new vision of public services, arguing that we have little choice but to engage with the state. As problematic and compromised as the state has been in market economies, the sheer scale and urgency of public service gaps leaves little option but

to remake state apparatuses at various scales. The proposal here is to work “within, against and beyond” the state, drawing on an emergent literature of how state formations – in combination with non-profit, non-state actors – are capable of creating more democratic and equitable forms of public services, illustrated by examples from different sectors and regions of the world. Employing a strategic-relational theory of the state, I argue that state institutions are a form of social relations in which state power is a product of an ever-changing and ever-evolving condensation of the balance of forces that exist within and beyond its jurisdiction. In other words, the state is not a monolithic, all-powerful, never-changing beast, but rather one moment of – and constitutive of – a broader ensemble of social and economic relationships which are open to struggle, with some state structures being “more open to some types of political strategy than others” (Jessop, 1990, p. 260).

In the medium term, the goal of remaking state-led public services in a capitalist economy is to reclaim “greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus value” (drawing on Harvey’s (2008, pp. 37–38) arguments for reclaiming the “right to the city”). This is an explicitly reformist position, recognizing that in most social-democratic phases of capitalism the proportion of surplus at the state’s disposal can rise significantly, but only if the state itself is brought under democratic control. In the longer run the objective should be to move the production and distribution of public services beyond their principal role of facilitating private capital accumulation, while working towards a post-capitalist system of public service provision driven by non-commodified principles that aim to fulfil use values instead of exchange values.

My argument here is that social democratic reforms to public services are a steppingstone, not an end goal. If we stop at the social democratic stage we remain caught in a marketized public sphere. It is not entirely clear to me what post-capitalist forms of public services will look like, or how they will manifest in different places and sectors, but the need to move beyond the accumulatory logics of the market is clear (as is the need to move beyond the old top-down and productivist Soviet-style socialist options of the past).

These changes are not going to happen overnight. They are generational shifts. Regardless of how quickly legal and institutional reforms can be put in place, deep-seated functional practices and public values are slow to change (although the climate crisis and health pandemics such as COVID-19 will hopefully serve to accelerate reforms).

The key to building more equitable, democratic and sustainable state-led public services in the short term is balancing progressive administration with meaningful social engagement. Skilled bureaucrats and frontline workers are essential to the reform of public services, but even the most well-intentioned of professionals cannot create more egalitarian forms of public services on their own. Nor are social movements yet “strong enough or sufficiently mobilized to force through this solution”, not having “converged on the singular aim of gaining greater control over the uses of

the surplus—let alone over the conditions of its production”. Creating transformative change with public services will require a combination of an effective and progressive state alongside a broad coalition of community, labour, NGO and other non-state actors prepared to demand non-marketized forms of public services, “if the dispossessed are to take back the control which they have for so long been denied” (Harvey, 2008, pp. 39–40).

There are, of course, cases where working with and within the state is not possible (either because the state is too autocratic or simply non-existent). In these instances, community-led services can and have proven to be an effective substitute. However, dogmatic notions of autonomous forms of public services in which all forms of state are rejected in favour of non-hierarchical self-organization can be deeply problematic. Although I am strongly supportive of the principles of local autonomy – without which pluralized notions of publics are meaningless – I argue in [Chapter 5](#) that it is essential to frame the energy and creativity of grassroots movements in relation to state structures in the (re)building of meaningful public services. Recapturing and remaking states is a daunting task, but much of the anti-state commons literature “evacuates completely any responsibility to think about how counter-hegemonic projects can contest the dominance of the state and the public realm by neoliberal forces” (Cumbers, 2015, p. 72), abandoning the most effective tool we have for addressing the urgent social, economic and ecological crises associated with unequal public services.

[Chapter 6](#) then looks at how (and if) to measure the “success” of revamped forms of public services, beginning with a review of the history of benchmarking in the public sector. It is argued that current performance evaluation methods for public services are heavily compromised because of their origins in the private sector and their ongoing control by corporate-friendly agencies such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The result has been performance evaluation practices for public services which promote commercialization and are largely undemocratic, as well as imposing Euro-centric expectations on public services worldwide. But rather than reject the principle of standardized measurement, the chapter argues that it is better to reclaim and remake benchmarking practices, without which it is impossible to know if new forms of public services are actually achieving their stated goals, whether they are improving over time, or how we might transfer “good” (as opposed to “best”) practices from one location/sector to another.

In keeping with the principle of flexiblized notions of universality, the chapter then outlines an alternative model of benchmarking for public services, replacing marketized criteria with more public-oriented ones (such as participation, equity and solidarity). The aim here is to create a benchmarking template with sufficient scope for comparability while at the same time allowing for difference across place and sector, incorporating localized notions of what constitutes success. None of this will be quick or easy, requiring a cultural shift in how evaluations are done, and the conversion

of managers and policy makers committed to current forms of evaluation. But without an alternative set of criteria for assessing change it will be difficult to move away from the constraints and expectations of our marketized public sphere.

Finally, in [Chapter 7](#), I return to the question of how best to build an effective global pro-public movement. The chapter begins with a discussion of how anti-privatization practices have been both an asset to and a drag on the development of a more explicitly pro-public set of voices. While it is necessary and unavoidable to continue fighting privatization it is equally important to allow for the creation of a relatively independent pro-public movement capable of providing constructive criticism of existing public services while at the same time proposing alternatives. The chapter highlights strengths and weaknesses of the current (and growing) number of pro-public organizations, examining factors for its growth and identifying potential obstacles in the future.

By far the biggest challenge will be developing a pro-public narrative that is easy to explain to the general public, policy makers and the media. Given how complex, and sometimes contradictory, notions of public and public services can be it will be difficult to create simple or consistent storylines. It will also be challenging to overcome differences of opinion within the pro-public movement on what constitutes adequate change, particularly on questions of social democratic reform. Nevertheless, it should be possible to build sufficiently coherent messaging across sectors and locations which can help to popularize and operationalize a pro-public agenda without imposing a singular vision of what successful public services should look like.

Conclusion

The central argument of this book is that we need a clearer and bolder vision for what we want public services to be in a capitalist economy, while at the same time using these new ideas and actions as political and economic leverage towards a post-capitalist world. These services will necessarily need to be state-led if we are to address the scale and urgency of the social, economic and environmental crises that the world faces today, but state ownership, per se, is not a solution in and of itself. As [Marois \(2021\)](#) argues with regards to public banks – that most elusive of public services – institutional function is more important than ownership form. Public services will need to be, at least in part, state owned to assert sufficient influence over the distribution of surplus, but it is more important that they are democratic and participatory in ways that allow us to mobilize them effectively to de-commodify and de-marketize our lives. In this sense, public services can be seen as the ultimate “commanding heights” of a post-capitalist economy, with the potential to shift the balance of focus towards equity, democracy and sustainability.

To do so it is necessary to change the ways in which we define what constitutes a public service, stressing use value over exchange value and giving clear (if flexible) boundaries around what types of services should be provided collectively by a public agency (e.g. health care) and which could perhaps be provided privately (e.g. haircuts) without undermining the communal good. Scalar definitions of what constitutes public will remain a challenge in practical and theoretical terms, but these boundaries are an unavoidable part of an inherently tension-ridden concept.

So too will it be difficult to decide what kinds of non-state, non-profit actors should participate in public service delivery alongside governments. What is critical is that public service debates disengage from an axiomatic correlation of public with government, while at the same time avoiding playing into entrepreneurialized or hyper-devolved narratives about the potential for communities to create ad hoc services for themselves. There is no perfect mix of state and non-state actors, but a fusion of the two, energized by the twin goals of democratic control and equitable distribution, should help to shift us away from false market dichotomies of state and civil society.

In sum, the goal is to create democratic non-profit public services run collectively, in non-commodified ways that aim for equity, accountability and sustainability, with everyone in the world being given access to an acceptable level and quality of public services. Each place and sector will look different – with its own “public terroir” – but there should be a universal sensibility and practicality to what can be achieved.

New conceptual and discursive frameworks for public are necessary if we are to break away from the constraints of our current liberal public sphere. As per [Kennedy \(1982, p. 1351\)](#), “an important and exciting moment in the history of a distinction arrives when troublemakers begin to argue that the distinction is incoherent because, no matter how you try to apply it, you end up in a situation of hopeless contradiction”. These troublemakers are here, challenging the errors of privatization while at the same time demanding more equitable, democratic and transparent public services in the future. Pro-public agitators can be found in small and large communities around the world. They are service users as well as frontline workers and NGO campaigners. They are marginalized groups that have suffered the injustices of an inequitable public sphere, but they can also be people in positions of power who can do something about it. They are a growing and eclectic group.

Although many of the examples I use in this book relate to a handful of core services that I am most familiar with (notably water, electricity and health care) my hope is that by highlighting the tensions and possibilities of change in some sectors it can help contribute to a better understanding of the potential for seeking common ground across a wide swathe of public services.

I do not want to be overly sanguine about the potential for pro-public alliances and cross-sectoral collaboration, however. There are irreconcilable

differences within the pro-public movement on questions such as the scope for state reform within a market system or the role of autonomous grassroots organizations in the production of collective services. So too are the dynamics and demands for service reforms radically different across place and sector, with education in Nigeria, transportation in Nepal and housing in France all having unique challenges that can be difficult to translate across geographic and sectoral lines. It is all the more important, then, to have broad and frank debates about overlaps and (dis)similarities if we are to continue to build effective global pro-public action and dialogue that move us beyond the limits of our bourgeois public sphere.



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Part I

Limits



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2 Our Bourgeois Public Sphere

We use the word bourgeoisie as an invitation to the reader to reflect critically upon the social origins of the ruling concept of the public sphere. Only in this way can the fetishistic character of the latter be grasped, and a materialistic concept be developed.

(Negt and Kluge 1993 [1972], xliv)

In an effort to understand the origins, limitations and possibilities of contemporary public services it is essential to begin with an exploration of how these services fit within the “bourgeois public sphere” that first emerged alongside market economies in Europe from the 18th century. It is not the only public sphere in world history, and is far from uniform in its distribution, but it is the public sphere that most of us inhabit today and arguably the first to give birth to a universal notion of publicness that offers theoretical equity to all. Public services cannot be adequately understood outside this discursive and material reality.

This bourgeois public sphere is full of promise and contradictions, simultaneously offering access to a network of collective resources and an opportunity to shape the public good, while at the same time restricting who is admitted, who makes decisions and who benefits from common assets. It is a creation of, and essential to the interests of private capital, and suffers from the same larger structural contradictions of crisis, instability and inequity inherent to all capitalist systems (Fraser, 2015; Harvey, 1982, 2014; Schumpeter, 1928; Smith, 2010; Streeck, 2016).

The analysis in this chapter draws heavily on a highly influential book by political theorist Jürgen Habermas, entitled “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society” (first published in German in 1962 but only translated to English in 1989). My focus is on his early materialist understandings of the link between an emergent capitalist class and its inherent need to construct – and then distort and limit – a universal concept of publicness. As a tool for “theorizing the limits of democracy in late capitalist societies”, Habermas’ assessment of the bourgeois public sphere is “an indispensable resource” (Fraser, 1992, p. 109) and

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a “foundational” must-read for anyone interested in the meanings of public within capitalism (Hill & Montag, 2000a; Salvatore, 2007). Despite all that has been revised and corrected in Habermas’ work his insights into the “paradoxical relationship between the public and the private have endured and remain essential to recent critical social theory and its understandings of the formations of public or counterpublics” (Mullaney & Vanhaelen, 2013, p. 1). And while it may seem improbable to draw a link between early notions of publicness in the salons of 18th century Paris and water provision in Nigeria today this is exactly the type of conceptual connection that this theoretical framework permits, and which allows us to understand both the origins and limitations of our contemporary public sphere.

But my reading of Habermas, like that of many others, counters his optimism about reviving a bourgeois “golden age” of publicness (Habermas, 1991, p. 32). His work has been attacked for “exaggerating the emancipatory potential of the idealized bourgeois public sphere” (Calhoun, 1992, p. 5), with Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 18) being dismissive of his “social democratic projects”, arguing that his early work opened up the possibility of radical social transformation but that “notions of communicative reason and action have come to define a process that constantly mediates all social reality, thus accepting and even reinforcing the given terms of the existing social order”. Hill and Montag (2000a, pp. 7–8, 3) refer to the “anaesthetizing effects of Habermas’ work”, arguing that he “seems to have provided ‘modernity’ with its theoretically sophisticated defense”, including a “systematic denial and rationalization of the violence and barbarism of legal and constitutional orders” in the name of “rational discourse”.

This is not to deny the relevance of rational discourse, but rather to ask whose rationality is dominant when it comes to notions of public. As Fraser (1992, p. 115) notes in her critique of Habermas’ notion of an “ideal” public, it “fails to examine other, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres. Or rather, it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere” (Fraser, 1992, p. 115). Habermas’ framework tends to exclude other world views, including “class, gender, or caste expressions [which] do not conform to his legitimized ways of contributing”, ignoring in particular “the role of orality and visuality” in what constitutes public discourse (Reinelt, 2011, p. 18).

I agree with these criticisms and will take them up in greater detail when discussing alternative public sphere(s) in the second half of the book. But I do want to retain the historical materialism central to Habermas’ original argument, wherein he exposes the emergence, transformation and contradictions of a bourgeois concept of publicness (and public services) in liberal, market-based economies around the world. This creation and conversion of a public sphere was not homogenous, linear or predictable across the emerging capitalisms of Europe – let alone the wider contemporary

world – but there is a pattern to the shift that reveals underlying material and ideological traits of a bourgeois public sphere and the conditions that have led to its ongoing tensions and contradictions, without which we cannot fully appreciate the constraints and limitations of liberal publicness in general.

This is not an inescapable storyline, however. There is substantial space for manoeuvre within our commoditized world, and there are expansive possibilities for new forms of publicness. Indeed, the contradictions of the liberal public order are such that it necessarily generates spaces of opportunity for marginalized people and organizations to resist and change it. How (and if) different actors respond to these hegemonic trends is central to my inquiries in [Part 2](#) of the book, and in particular the extent to which it is possible to escape a liberal paradigm of publicness that traps us in a debilitating conflation of public and private interests. If we are to break from the dead weight of the present, we must know our past.

I begin this chapter with a review of pre-capitalist conceptions of performative publics (with a focus on early forms of “public services”), followed by an assessment of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere, the contradictions that arose within it, the dissolution of a public-private divide and finally the development of a refueled public realm. My focus here is on early formulations of capitalist systems in Europe, but the aim is to highlight the underlying structural necessities of private accumulation inherent to all forms of capitalist reproduction and the ways in which these dynamics shape the formation of liberal notions of public. The resulting publics are invariably different in their cultural, political and social formulation, but the underlying dynamics and resulting constraints are largely consistent across time and place.

Pre-Capitalist Performative Publics

One of the primary reasons that early forms of public services were built and provided in relatively public ways was to create spectacle. As one contemporary observer of ancient Rome noted of the city’s massive aqueducts at the time: “The whole terrestrial globe offers nothing more marvellous” (as quoted in [Smith, 2007](#), p. 72). These aqueducts served important roles in the (re)productive activities of the city and were broadly (though far from universally) made available to the population. They formed a central part of the rhetoric of power in ancient Mediterranean societies, with Roman systems of water supply working through intricate networks of patronage with strong performative qualities: “While their patrons obtained glory, their citizens obtained good water” ([Squatriti, 2002](#), pp. 11–12; see also [Cespa, 2018](#)).

Excellence – or *arete* to the Greeks and virtues to the Romans – was long assigned to the public realm, where one could distinguish oneself from all others. As [Arendt \(1958, p. 49\)](#) notes:

Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by one's peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one's equals or inferiors.

Water and other basic services in medieval Europe were similar in their performative roles, although one begins to see a marked withdrawal from the relative publicness of the classical period to more private spheres of activity. Post-classical Italy, for instance, saw a shift from public water supplies to overwhelmingly private ones as a result of the retreat of the state from this arena, especially after the 700s with the seizure of water resources by powerful landlords: "Their attempt to monopolize this resource and turn it into private property depended on the unwillingness and incapacity to perpetuate the Imperial Roman tradition of water as a public, common resource" (Squatriti, 2002, p. 3).

Publicly available services persisted through the Middle Ages, but European life became more highly segregated into public and private realms, with household activities being largely private in nature and political activities being public, with a relative separation of these productive and social spheres of society (Goodman, 1992; Helly & Reverby, 1992). While most family and business activities were conducted behind closed doors, political events were staged by ruling monarchs in public spaces (e.g. jousts) and open to most of the subjects under their control. However, these events were not by or of the people, and not intended to be equal in any way. They were representations of private, landed power, conducted in a public format. Although ostensibly intended to entertain and officially express gratitude to an indentured majority, the effect was to demonstrate and reinforce monarchic authority; to subdue and placate a potentially restive and rebellious mass.

This lack of political commitment to a more substantive public sphere in medieval Europe can be seen by the virtual absence of the word "public" during this time (*le public* in French and *Publikum* in German). Philosophers spoke of "the world" (*tout le monde*, *Welt*) or "mankind" (with its gender-specific connotations) but not of "public" as a political or social category (Habermas, 1991, p. 26). In fact, the first recorded English uses of the word date only from the 15th century (Sennett, 1974, p. 16). Shakespeare, as a case in point, scarcely uses the term in his writings (appearing only 48 times in all his plays). When he did use the word, it was typically in reference to a public spectacle (e.g. the crowning of Antony and Cleopatra), or as an adjective to set the scene (a "public place" or "public street"), bereft of political content.

This public-private divide begins to shift in Europe in the early 1700s with the emergence of the architecture of "the palace" and a transfer of public functions from the street to enclosed spaces such as private parks and palace

halls (with Versailles, in France, being archetypal of the genre) (Blanning & Blanning, 2002). Nevertheless, the pattern of representative publicness not only survived this change but became more prominent, with grand festivities being staged more theatrically for the common people, who were still out in the streets as “public” observers, but now physically separated from the festivities without the façade of participation. Even the royal bedroom becomes a public stage of sorts, with the bed now seen as an elevated throne, although “still dependent on the presence of the people before whom it was displayed” (Habermas, 1991, p. 10).

The Emergence of a Bourgeois Public Sphere

Activities outside this European feudal public sphere remained largely private in nature, with the *oikos* of the home economy dominating the productive and reproductive spheres. Private business networks also began to emerge, with the expansion of mercantilist trade, but this also took place largely behind closed doors. Communications for trading were private as well, such as the newsletters of merchants and early finance capitalists. Traders relied on this market news but were unwilling to share the information with others lest it compromised their competitive advantage (Raymond & Moxham, 2016).

Eventually, however, “commodity exchange burst out of the confines of the household economy” (Habermas, 1991, p. 28) and with this emerged a need for a larger, “public” sphere of communication and interaction. As commodity production (as opposed to the more restricted mercantilist practice of commodity trading) became more widespread and complex, industry-specific and firm-specific news was insufficient. There was a growing need for multifaceted forms of information to feed a complex social economy, leading to the creation of independent networks of news agencies and journalists not tied to any particular firm or production sector.

Here was the beginning of an independent but symbiotic relationship between private and public. As the potential for private accumulation expanded in a marketized economy so too did the need for more publicly available sources of information about this market. Owners of private capital began to push for a more autonomous public sphere, with the delivery of “factual” and “rational” information that was independent of monarchical oversight. The target audience was still limited to a relatively small group of early capitalists, and continued to be compromised by the feudal power networks within which it operated, but the structural pressures for a broader sphere of public forms of communication and information could no longer be contained by older aristocratic structures.

In this way, the material demands of an expanding market created the need for an equally expansive network of news (i.e. *public*-ations), largely in print format. And as these news systems expanded so too did a news industry, with the news itself becoming a commodity. It was in the interests of the writers and editors of these newsletters to charge for the information

and insights they provided, and to make it competitive against similar products. Gradually, there is an emergence of formal political journals and professional journalists, and although these early products were still far from universal – intended as they were for a literate, male, European business-owning elite – the size and scope of the bourgeois audience was expanding along with markets in general (Baron & Dooley, 2005; Espejo, 2016; Pettegree, 2014; van Groesen & Helmers, 2016).

Paving the way for this industrial news was a communicative (r)evolution in the arts, most notably in the form of literary, painting and musical debates, which were seen as relatively safe issues to discuss in a public way – i.e. less threatening to the material interests of a still powerful landed gentry. This was a *de facto* testing ground for the new bourgeoisie; an opportunity to see how far they could push their new discursive envelope while at the same time providing respectable occasions for segments of the landed nobility to cultivate links with this rising class of otherwise “vulgar” capitalists.

Much of this public discussion began in the coffee shops of England (in their prime from 1680–1730) and the salons of France (particularly the period between regency and Revolution) (Cowan, 2013; Laurier & Philo, 2007; Ray, 2004). It was a place for aristocratic society and bourgeois intellectuals to come together in relative parity: “sons of princes and counts associated with sons of watchmakers” (Habermas, 1991, p. 33). It was a public sphere insofar as it was not behind the gated walls of the nobles or the bourgeoisie, and not limited solely to the landed aristocracy. But it was still exclusive in terms of who had the prerequisites to participate, and male dominated. Although women often participated in these institutions – with more freedom and opportunity than in pre-bourgeois public spheres – their scope was limited and many women found themselves abandoned by men keen to participate in public debates without them (Landes, 1988; Spencer, 1984).

Wealthy shopkeepers would sometimes visit coffee shops several times a day, often engaging in fiery debates on the arts in a hitherto inconceivable public environment of opinion making and sharing between equals. It eventually became obligatory for artists and writers to present their new material at salons and coffee shops if they were to be taken seriously as public figures (Ray, 2004).

These cultural deliberations also quickly became commodities themselves, with pressure to make novels, paintings and music available to a broader, consuming public by slowly expanding the artistic news market to lower strata of the bourgeoisie, by aggressively packaging and selling these products to an emerging cultural consumer class. With this we see a fresh form of bourgeois cultural representation in an effort to expand and intensify the public realm, exemplified by the creation of art critics as a new social category (Wrigley, 1993).

But what started as debates on the arts eventually turned to more heady topics of politics and economics. Having cut their teeth in the coffee shops and salons of Europe, and emboldened by their ability to make their opinions

heard beyond their fraternal class, the bourgeoisie began to demand more from this growing public sphere. As topics for discussion expanded to include debates about commerce and exchange so too did the independent media begin to expand, leading to the creation of a “fourth estate”. England was the first to introduce measures for a relatively free press – banning censorship of new public media with the Licencing Act of 1695 (Barker, 2014) – but others were to follow. Most of these liberalizations were gradual, but some, like France after its Revolution in 1789, came abruptly, with explicitly bourgeois laws on public communications effectively enacted overnight (Lefebvre, 2019). With increasing demand, public news became a growing commodity. Independent media owners became less politically motivated (and less nervous about offending royalty) and more profit conscious, increasingly dependent on advertising and market-friendly content for their clients (Baron & Dooley, 2005; Verhoest, 2016).

Importantly, ideological support for this expanding public realm came from liberal philosophers who argued that encouraging private individuals to engage in “rational” and “public” debate was the most effective way to develop wise governing principals and systems. The physiocrats declared that only *opinion publique* had true insight to make visible the *ordre naturel* (Habermas, 1991, p. 55). English philosopher Edmund Burke argued that “general opinion is the vehicle and organ of legislative omnipotence”: “In free countries, there is often found more real public wisdom and sagacity in shops and manufacturing than in the cabinets and princes of countries where none dares to have an opinion until he comes into them” (Burke, 1826, p. 197).

Liberal political economists (from Adam Smith onwards) lent additional weight to these philosophical arguments, arguing that a common good could derive only from private individuals making decisions for themselves in a free and public marketplace, without the collusion of others, contributing to an enhanced level of happiness for all through the provision of quality, affordable products and job creation. In other words, the public interests of the bourgeoisie were said to be identical to that of the general population, arguing that the pursuit of private gain served a larger public good. With this theoretical argument in place the bourgeoisie began to articulate a moral philosophy of publicness that was inextricably tied to the market.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie began to make demands for representative political authorities that could manage – in a minimalist way – the private transactions of this public market. Here we see the beginnings of liberal forms of the state, ostensibly elected by the public, serving the public good and founded on principals of public opinion. But this was still a constrained notion of public, constituted by a business elite and an increasingly market-dependent aristocracy. These were not the opinions of the population as a whole but rather that of formally educated, property owning, male individuals, acting in the name of the public at large.

Figure 2.1 provides a graphic illustration of this discursive shift in English-language documents from 1500 onwards, first with the rise of the



Figure 2.1 Use of “Public” and “Private” in English-Language Publications between 1500 and 2008

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer search by the author using a “smoothing setting” of 8 and English-language documents only. The y-axis indicates the relative frequency, in percentage terms, of the words “public” and “private” in documents over the period specified. (NOTE: A simultaneous search for the spelling “publick” mirrors that of “public” until the former begins to fall out of favour in the mid-1700s and disappears altogether by 1850).

use of the word “private” (uncommon in English until the emergence of an early bourgeoisie in the late 17th century), followed some 80 years later by a rapid rise in the use of the word “public”, coinciding with a bourgeois push for an independent public sphere. Although limited to English, this Ngram chart provides empirical support for a theoretical argument about the emergence of an independent and politically “private” class followed by the rise of a politically expedient and structurally necessary “public” sphere.

Contradictions Emerge

Although more inclusive and transparent than the monarchic systems they superseded, this new bourgeois public domain quickly came to be seen as a façade, with a property-owning elite being the only people with sufficient autonomy to engage meaningfully in public debate. The exclusion of those without property was justified on the basis that these individuals had the potential to become propertied themselves one day, and that they would benefit from the rational laws being built and sustained for their enjoyment in the future (Baynes, 1989). In other words, it was a pedantic and exclusive form of public that had come into existence, offering the alleged benefits of universal membership without the advantages of universal suffrage.

By the mid-19th century many liberal theorists were openly admitting that the Burkean ideal had not been realized (Alexander & Peñalver, 2012). They witnessed the increasing inequalities of the newly marketized world around them and recognized that those without meaningful access to the public sphere could resort to force to achieve their objectives (e.g. street protests, strikes), thereby undermining the claim that rational debate by

private individuals would lead to a “civilized” and productive public realm. Friedrich Hegel (in *Philosophy of Right*) saw this as a recipe for anarchy, leading him to call for a more conservative political force to reign in these destabilizing liberal tendencies.

But the demands for broader public enfranchisement continued and could not be ignored if the ruling elite were to avoid further unrest and accusations of hypocrisy. It was necessary to resolve the tension between a theoretical commitment to a universal public and the bourgeois dread of sharing power. The eventual compromise was to argue for a restricted qualitative character of public input while at the same time expanding it quantitatively, exemplified by French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. In *Democracy in America*, [De Tocqueville \(1969\)](#) used the example of post-revolutionary government in the United States to argue that public opinion has its limits, raising alarms as to the dangers of a “tyranny of the majority”, pointing to “blind beliefs” in “uninformed opinions” by “uneducated” people that threatened to undermine the “rational” decisions of a bourgeois-led state. He admitted that property owners could also be “dogmatic”, but his real target in these attacks were the working class, anti-colonialists and anti-capitalists. John Stuart [Mill \(1859, p. 379\)](#) supported de Tocqueville’s exclusionary inclinations, although politely suggesting that “we mean no disparagement to them”.

The problem was that the public sphere had grown unwieldy, allowing for too many theories and opinions to retain centralized control. To permit the average person to believe that their ideas were inherently equal to others was seen as dangerous, with potential for mob rule. As a result, public opinion was unceremoniously dumped from the liberal lexicon as the only legitimate source of rational law and reduced to “one power among many”. The general public was henceforth to be tolerated, not celebrated.

If public opinion was now one power among many, there was need for mediation. It is at this point that more urgent calls began for an expanded and enlightened state, intended to help the general public make the most “rational” decisions from the array of public choices available to them. [Mill’s \(1867, pp. 347–8\)](#) suggestion was to let “political questions be decided not by a direct or indirect appeal to the insight or the will of an uninformed multitude, but only by an appeal to views, formed after due consideration, of a relatively small number of persons specially educated for the task”. It was not politically feasible to simply reinstate the old nobility to run these mediating agencies, but liberal proponents such as [de Tocqueville \(1969, p. 697\)](#) could propose “aristocratic bodies” of “educated and powerful” citizens to manage the bureaucracies. The eventual outcome (varying across place and time) was a newly constituted market-friendly cadre of bureaucrats and policymakers making choices on behalf of the general public. Rather than public opinion emerging from open and transparent debate, it became the task of an enlightened and delimited set of state officials, effectively handing power back to an educated, propertied class though the back door.

The challenge for the bourgeoisie now was to manage an ostensibly equal-opportunity public sphere, incrementally enlarged by an enfranchised populous. The answer was not simply a more enlightened state, but also a stronger, more active and more formative role for government; one that could intervene in and manage an ever more polarized, antagonistic and crisis-prone marketized society, while still appearing to be acting in the general public interest. This was a calculated and necessary response on the part of new ruling elites to the (increasingly powerful) demands of the poor and working classes for a fairer type of economy and better access to what was being produced, while needing to be seen to moderate competing demands and redistributing wealth (at least on the home front in Europe; the colonies were a different story (Ince, 2018; Williams, 2014)). The new liberal state was tasked with trying to maintain a semblance of equilibrium in an increasingly unstable marketized public sphere: “The more society became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints, the more urgent became the need for a strong state” (Habermas, 1991, p. 144).

Dissolution of the Public-Private Divide

Disenfranchised groups used these liberal laws to create a collective voice for themselves in this new arena of public opinion, with labour unions, radical political parties, anti-colonial organizations and others acting as counterweights to the interests of private business. Where successful, they attracted counter-reaction from a bourgeoisie now willing to exchange some of their private clout for public political power, motivated by the necessity to maintain equilibrium in a private market system unable to self-stabilize.

Demands for better wages, safer working conditions, social security systems and the like were met with varying forms of reception – from violent repression to partial acceptance – but the trend was clearly towards a public resolution of previously private matters. Mediating these demands led to a slow but inevitable dissolution of the public-private divide that the bourgeoisie had initially built up to protect their private interests.

Having painstakingly built an independent public sphere to facilitate and legitimate a private business sphere, the bourgeoisie now had to collapse the two back together, obfuscating both in the process. From that point forward there has been a deep tension between what is done in an ostensibly universal public interest and what is done for private gain, with state interventions increasingly “guided by the interests of maintaining the equilibrium of the system which could no longer be secured by way of the free market” (Habermas, 1991, p. 146). Examples of this blurring of public and private realms were to be found in anti-trust legislation to regulate collusive business practices, state moderated wage consultations replacing firm-specific negotiations, a breakdown of the system of “private law” into social legislation and the formation of publicly-traded “private” companies that

increasingly took on state-welfare activities such as pensions and housing (Dunkley, 1981; Watson, 2003).

Legal scholarship on this blurring of the public/private divide is revealing. Although the emergence of the market “as a central legitimating institution brought the public/private distinction into the core of legal discourse during the nineteenth century”, this distinction began to unravel as the dividing lines became less distinct (Horwitz, 1982, p. 1424). As Stone (1982, pp. 1445–6, 1506) notes with regards to efforts to differentiate private corporations and government agencies when it comes to legal decisions and liabilities: “Political incentives and market incentives are too entangled for us unambiguously to sort out organizations subject to the one from organizations subject to the other....It seems impossible to eliminate a large class of hybrids not clearly on one side or the other”. As a result, “the boundaries between public and private, never clearly marked, have grown, with time, more faint and less valuable....Whatever lines may once have existed are closer than ever to obliteration”.

Kennedy (1982, pp. 1352–4, 1357) takes the argument further, arguing that there has been a “collapse” in the public/private distinction resulting in a “continuumization” of the two poles; a situation in which people see entities and actions as “not absolutely one thing or another”. The end result is “loopification”: a process by which “one’s consciousness is loopified when the ends of the continuum seem closer to one another...than either end seems to the middle....when one seems to be able to move by a steady series of steps around the whole distinction, ending up where one started without ever reversing direction”. As a result, “one simply loses one’s ability to take the public/private distinction seriously as a description, as an explanation, or as a justification of anything”. In effect, ontological difference between the public and private spheres had been obliterated.

Even the family was de-privatized to some extent by the emergence of welfare states, as individual family members became socialized by extra familial authorities. For Arendt (1958, p. 38), the emergence of society

from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.

A Refeudalized Public Realm

For Habermas (1991, p. 142, 144) this was the beginning of the end of any distinct publicness in a bourgeois society:

This dialectic of a progressive ‘societization’ of the state simultaneously with an increasing ‘stateification’ of society gradually destroyed

the basis of the bourgeois public sphere – the separation of state and society. Between the two and out of the two...the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ could not be usefully applied...[and] society was forced to relinquish even the flimsiest pretence of being a sphere in which the influence of power was suspended.

As the processes of economic concentration and crisis “pulled the veil of an exchange of equivalents off the antagonistic structure of [marketized] society...the more society became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints [and] the more urgent became the need for a strong state.” The reality of imperfect competition and the concentration of social power became more difficult to hide and defend. As a result, “the public sphere lost its place. It lost its clear boundary over and against the private sphere on the one hand and the ‘world public’ on the other; it lost its transparency and no longer admitted of a comprehensive view” (Habermas, 1991, p. 203).

In place of this idealized liberal notion of equal private people gathered together as a public, there emerged a series of private interest groups whose objectives were to turn the demands of particular associations into a credible “general interest”. What Habermas (1991, p. 200) refers to as the “secret politics of interest groups” resulted in a situation where “the public sphere has to be ‘made’, it is not ‘there’ anymore”, returning us to a “refeudalized” public realm.

Powerful corporate lobbies are the most obvious protagonists in this regard, with their large and sophisticated public relations programmes, but so is an increasingly influential and commoditized media. The latter, freed of its early role of catalyzing public debate and creating an emergent public space, could now focus on profits and more self-interested politics, reflecting the commodified nature of news and the opinion-shaping role it plays, particularly to promote market-friendly ideas and consumerist cultures. By the end of the 19th century, media in Europe had become “the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere” (Habermas, 1991, p. 185). The commodifying and oligopolizing effects of the market on communication had smothered the conditions necessary for a meaningful public realm. In this “manipulated public sphere an acclamation-prone mood comes to predominate. An opinion climate instead of a public opinion” (Habermas, 1991, p. 217). As Frederickson (1991, p. 397) notes, concepts of pluralism in public policy are nice in theory, but in practice “the well-established and economically favoured have an exaggerated ability to appear to represent the interests of the public” as a whole.

In short, the notion that a general public can transparently and collectively make public policy that represents general interests in a market economy had been undermined by the collapse of public-private spheres and the capture of opinion-making and legal systems by powerful corporate

interests. The nature and character of this trajectory has varied across different liberal democratic traditions and the emergence of new forms of media, but the general trend since the late 19th century has been towards a concentration of power in the hands of increasingly fewer groups who ostensibly make private decisions in the interests of a universal public (Baker, 2006).

Similar dynamics have shaped much of the post-colonial experience with “public” since the mid-20th century, with newly-independent regimes linked to Western powers calling for an enhanced public sphere but quickly limiting the potential for universal input in favour of expert opinion and decision making. Keynesian-era spending on public infrastructure largely benefited an emerging local elite alongside their metropolitan partners, with the subsequent neoliberalization of public spending serving to further tighten the flow of who was able to access essential services and who made decisions about their delivery and pricing (Bond, 2008; Lipton, 1977; Robinson, 2012). Varying degrees of public debate have offered some semblance of public participation as to the meaning and extent of a liberal public sphere, but for the most part the post-colonial experience has been a condensed version of earlier market-making eras, with notions of a universal public lubricating the material and ideological machinery of private accumulation in all market economies.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the bourgeois public sphere which emerged and expanded over the past three centuries is unique in world history. For the first time, on a grand scale, societies began to operate on conceptions of universality and the notion that all human beings have the same right to act, argue and deliberate in common ways that allow for the pursuit of collective interest.

In reality, this public sphere is universal in name but partial and limited in practice. It is a product of, and essential to, the development of market economies, facilitating the growth of private wealth through the creation of a public domain that legitimates private accumulation. At first expansive in its aims, this bourgeois public sphere has since been systematically circumscribed as demands for greater control and enfranchisement have threatened capital’s control over its material and discursive domain.

As decision-making in this public realm has been reigned in so too have notions of public become increasingly conflated with private, blurring their distinction and serving to conceal the biased ways in which our public sphere is managed, and in whose benefit it operates. The result has been the collapse of an ontologically independent public domain, now largely captured by the interests of private capital.

The emergence and remaking of this public sphere has differed dramatically across place and time and continues to change as capitalism morphs

and responds to innovative technological norms and political demands for access to collective processes. It also remains crisis prone, as the façade of universality is increasingly unveiled, and the realities of growing inequalities exposed.

With this in mind, I now turn to the more concrete question of “public services”, and ask how the emergence and transformation of a bourgeois public sphere has affected “the provision of services that hitherto had been left to private hands” ([Habermas, 1991](#), p. 147).

3 The Curse of the Continuum

The line of demarcation between the [public sector and the private sector] is constantly changing in accordance with the practical needs of the day. As to where precisely this line should be drawn, no great question of principle is involved.

John Maynard Keynes (1981, p. 695)

In the previous chapter it was argued that the bourgeois public sphere which emerged with early forms of capitalism has become the dominant form of publicness in market-based economies today. While universal in name it is partial and limited in practice, creating a false sense of inclusivity and blurring the lines between collective interest and private gain.

This chapter outlines the ways in which this bourgeois public sphere has shaped thinking around “public services”. Here too we see a world first, with notions of universality driving an unprecedented expansion of public services that are (theoretically) intended for all. Prior to this, the production and consumption of most goods and services were either restricted to the private household or distributed unequally through a formalized elite. With the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere we see the creation and extension of universal notions of collectivity.

But as with the bourgeois public sphere more generally, liberal conceptions of public services are inherently attenuated in practice; created and moulded largely in the interests of capital accumulation and essential to the growth of market economies. Gains in liberal public services have been considerable and widespread over the past 150 years – due in part to demands made by workers, women’s organizations, racialized communities and other marginalized groups for a better distribution of economic surplus – but their primary function in a capitalist economy remains one of building and maintaining an adequately productive labour force and expanding mass consumption economies (Castells, 1978; Harvey, 1982, 2005).

The “public” label has played a critical role in legitimating this process, while at the same time obscuring their public-private distinction, muddying the meaning of what constitutes a public service and who produces

them. The result is a liberal conception of public services which traps us on a public-private continuum in which private companies and state agencies are deemed equally capable of providing public goods. The effect has been a pendulum swing of public and private provision, depending on the material context of the time and place. The full theoretical expression of this rationale is to be found in neoclassical notions of public goods from the 1950s (which I examine in the second half of this chapter), but its genesis dates to Adam Smith.

The pendulum effect of this theory is evident in “four moments” of liberal publicness, each outlined briefly below. I begin with the “invention” of public services in the 18th century, moving to the municipalization era from the mid-1800s, the Keynesian scaling-up period from the 1930s, and, finally, neoliberal forms of public-private partnerships and New Public Management from the 1980s. Each period highlights how “public services” have been used to facilitate private accumulation, how capital has responded to growing demands for inclusivity, how shifting back and forth distorts the public-private divide and how capital has increasingly captured decision-making authority on public services while at the same time seeking to expand a false allegory of inclusion. Similar practical and theoretical tensions continue to complicate contemporary debates about a post-neoliberal vision of public services and a “reclaiming” of public services. Hence, the reference to a “curse of the continuum” in the title of this chapter.

Adam Smith and the “invention of Public Services”

The theoretical foundations for liberal notions of public services in a market economy remain largely unchanged since Adam Smith made a (qualified) case for “public works” in *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (1909). The introduction of public services was one of the earliest and most concrete expressions of a bourgeois public sphere, coming much earlier than moves to expand suffrage, institute collective bargaining or introduce welfare. Public services were also one of the few universal demands made by the early bourgeoisie, with water and primary education, for example, being intended for everyone in a geographical community, not just a property-owning elite. These services were never equal in quality or quantity – and the “barbarous natives” of the colonies were always excluded (Smith, 1909, p. 478) – but this period witnessed the first organized attempt to formalize public services on a large scale that were nominally intended for all.

The rationale for these demands was that certain goods and services were critical to the reproduction of an adequate labour force and the expansion of consumer markets, with Smith (1909, p. 474) highlighting the importance of social and physical infrastructure for “facilitating the general commerce of society”. Although the scope of such Smithian public services were restricted to a small number of sectors (“good roads, bridges, navigable

canals, harbours”, “water”, and “education of the youth”) their importance to the economy as a whole “is evident without any proof” (Smith, 1909, pp. 473–4).

From their inception, however, many of these “public” services were deemed best provided by the “private” sector. Where costs could be clearly apportioned and easily collected, Smith argued that it was best left to individual capitalists to take the risks and reap the rewards. If they failed, another private company could fill the gap, and market competition would keep everything in check. Using the example of a privately-owned but publicly used toll canal, Smith (1909, p. 476) argued that

private interest obliges them to keep up the canal. If it is not kept in tolerable order, the navigation necessarily ceases altogether, and along with it the whole profit which they can make by the tolls. If those tolls were put under the management of commissioners [i.e. the state], who had themselves no interest in them, they might be less attentive to the maintenance of the works which produced them.

Smith also argued that public services should, for the most part, pay for themselves:

It does not seem necessary that the expence of those public works should be defrayed from that public revenue, as it is commonly called, of which the collection and application are in most countries assigned to the executive power. The greater part of such public works may easily be so managed, as to afford a particular revenue sufficient for defraying their own expence, without bringing any burden upon the general revenue of the society.

In some cases, public services may even generate revenue for the state:

The coinage, another institution for facilitating commerce, in many countries, not only defrays its own expence, but affords a small revenue or seignorage to the sovereign. The post-office, another institution for the same purpose, over and above defraying its own expence, affords in almost all countries a very considerable revenue to the sovereign.

(Smith, 1909, pp. 475–6)

In other cases, however, direct state involvement was deemed necessary. When project costs are too high for any individual firm, for example, state subsidies may be necessary, or “joint stock companies” may be created (early forms of public-private partnerships), such as for “supplying a great city with water” (Smith, 1909, p. 484). Where costs could not be easily proportioned, or user fees not easily collected, it may be best left to (decentralized) public ownership:

those public works which are of such a nature that they cannot afford any revenue for maintaining themselves, but of which the convenience is nearly confined to some particular place or district, are always better maintained by a local or provincial revenue, under the management of a local and provincial administration, than by the general revenue of the state.

In these cases, costs “should be defrayed by the general contribution of the whole society, all the different members contributing, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities” (Smith, 1909, p. 477, 487).

Here we see the foundational principles of all liberal notions of public services to come: goods and amenities deemed necessary for “facilitating the general commerce of society”, with private companies capable of offering the best choice for consumers (with some limited state intervention to keep private self-interest in check). And so it was to stay for much of the 18th and 19th centuries in the early stages of capitalist expansion, with private or joint stock companies controlling most of the infrastructure we think of today as public services. The rapid industrialization of European and North American cities accelerated this growth in private firms providing services for the productive and consumptive needs of a growing working and middle class. Water, gas, transportation, waste management, healthcare and electricity services were among the networked amenities developed at that time, provided almost universally by private companies (Emmons, 1991; Melosi, 2000; Warner, 1987).

Where economies of scale and capital intensity mattered (e.g. water and electricity) there tended to be larger (and increasingly oligopolistic) players, with some of the largest private utility companies still in operation today owing their existence to this period (e.g. Suez, United Water, General Electric) (Granovetter & McGuire, 1998; Lorrain, 2005). More localized services such as waste removal were typically managed by small, sometimes informal, private providers, although consolidations quickly became the norm in these sectors as well (Melosi, 2005; Rosen, 2015).

It was not until the inherent inefficiencies of fractured private competition became evident in “natural monopoly” services – along with growing bourgeois fears of contagion when privately-owned services began to threaten the lives and welfare of a wealthy elite – that calls for state ownership, and more control over service decision making on the part of capital more broadly, ushered in the next phase of liberal notions of public services; the first of many along a public-private continuum.

The Municipalization Era (1850s–1920s)

The *laissez-faire* approach to public service development began to change in the mid- to late-1800s with a push to municipalize facilities – i.e. local governments taking ownership and control of services. This trend spread

throughout Europe and North America and carried into the 1930s (Booth, 1985; Crofts, 1895; Kellett, 1978). The overarching rationale for municipalization was that service provision by multiple providers was illogical and wasteful, particularly with ‘natural monopolies’ such as water, gas and electricity for which it made little economic or regulatory sense to have duplicated personnel and infrastructure.

Health concerns such as cholera outbreaks added to the pressure. In Britain, parliament passed a series of public health measures as early as 1848 mandating local authorities to act. Sanitary reformers had exposed the gross inadequacies of a non-interventionist approach that had allowed nine companies in London to partition the water supply among themselves in what became a “nine-headed monopoly” (Lewis, 1952, p. 57). It proved impossible to regulate them all, and none of these firms was clearly tasked with supplying water for other critical municipal purposes, such as firefighting.

Similar concerns were raised with capital-intensive services such as transportation, gas and electricity, but the municipalization movement came to encompass an extraordinary range of public services. England alone had public enterprises numbering in the hundreds, including slaughterhouses, cemeteries, crematoria, libraries, refuse and sewage disposal services, a printing plant, a sterilized milk depot and a wool conditioning house. Leisure activities were also commonly provided for by local government and included aquariums, boys’ clubs, parks, public baths, racecourses and theatres (Leopold & McDonald, 2012).

This state-owned enthusiasm nevertheless hid competing and often inconsistent ideological motivations for municipal takeover. On the left, some advocates of “municipal socialism” advanced a strong anti-capitalist sentiment – even in the United States where, at the peak of the Socialist Party in the early 1900s, “about 1200 party members held public office in 340 cities, including 79 mayors in cities such as Milwaukee, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Reading, and Schenectady” (Dreier, 2013, np, see also Fechner, 1929; Graicer, 1989). This brand of municipalization ridiculed the “robber barons” of the day, with explicit commitments to “fairness” and “universal access” based on “widespread anti-monopoly sentiment” that “flowed easily into calls for public production and distribution of basic goods and service” (Radford, 2003, p. 870). As Dreier (2013, np) notes of this time: “Progressive reformers fought alongside radical socialists to champion child labor laws, women’s suffrage, and the establishment of public hospitals and clinics while leashing the power of landlords, banks, railroads, and utility companies” (see also Nord 1982; Radford, 2003).

Just how “socialist” this movement was disputed, however. Many critics saw these initiatives as too compromised – practically and ideologically – to create real social and economic change, with no less a detractor than Vladimir Lenin (1907, np) declaring the municipalization trend to be incapable of bringing about larger socialist transformation. These far-left critics

disdained the gradualist municipal politics of the Fabians, rejecting the parliamentary road to socialism that they said gas-and-water enterprises represented. “The bourgeois intelligentsia”, argued Lenin,

elevate municipal socialism to a special ‘trend’ precisely because it dreams of social peace, of class conciliation, and seeks to divert public attention away from the fundamental questions of the economic system as a whole, and of the state structure as a whole, to minor questions of local self-government.

To the right were pro-market liberals who argued for municipalization on efficiency grounds, in part to combat the municipal socialist movement. John Stuart Mill, for example, took up the cause of water reform in Britain, criticizing the wastefulness of balkanized private supply. In 1851, he thought it obvious that great savings in labour “would be obtained if London were supplied by a single gas or water company instead of the existing plurality Were there only one establishment, it could make lower charges, consistently with obtaining the rate of profit now realised” (Mill, 1851, p. 88). It was an error, he argued, to believe that competition among utility companies kept prices down. Collusion was the inevitable result, not cheaper rates. Nor was water the only service that would be most efficiently provided by a single supplier. Mill also pointed out the benefits of centralization in “the making of roads and bridges, the paving, lighting, and cleansing of streets”.

Similar arguments were made in the United States, where the commitment to municipal services was more a response to the corruption and ineffectiveness of private companies than any ideological strategy. There were also Republicans who ran and served as reform mayors (Radford, 2003). These pro-market municipalizers were exemplified by the “goo goos” (short for “good government”) of Chicago in the early 1900s, whose

chief interest was to introduce honesty and business-like efficiency into city government. Believers in individualism, the Protestant work ethic, and private enterprise, they strove for a municipal authority that, once cleansed of corruption, would be smaller in size and function and would guarantee lower taxes and enforcement of public order and private morality.

(Morten, 2002, p. 28, see also Merriner, 2004)

It can be argued that the outcome (if not always the intent) of this initial wave of municipalization was to (re)invigorate capital accumulation, not to challenge it – a form of state capitalism that was to be a precursor to a more highly theorized, scaled-up and explicitly anti-socialist Keynesian project from the 1930s. Recognizing the inefficiencies and health dangers of fragmented private supply systems, policy makers and certain factions

of capital saw municipalization as the most immediate and effective way to prevent market decay and enhance market opportunities. As MacKillop (2005, p. 26) notes in the case of early water infrastructure in Los Angeles, “public investments furthered private interests on a grand scale,” as land developers pushed for public service extension to open new frontiers of accumulation. Capitalists allowed municipal socialism to develop and thrive, but only insofar as it suited their needs:

Nobody wanted this [municipalization] venture to be too ideological or harmful to private enterprise The idea was to make the municipal water service work efficiently, to ensure the city’s ‘greatness’, and without harm to the city’s financial situation. As long as this didn’t prevent the oligarchy from making money, they didn’t object.

The colonial experience with municipalization, it should be noted, was very different. British administrative councils in Southern Africa, for example, had no pretence of serving the public as a whole. The municipalization of the water supply in Johannesburg in 1905 was prompted as much by the water requirements of the mines as by those of (white) city residents. And Johannesburg chose to run its water service at a profit rather than lowering the price to encourage consumption among poorer, black inhabitants (Maud, 1938, p. 130). Moreover, public health crises were often used by colonial authorities to justify the mass removals of non-Europeans from central city locations rather than expand public service provision. In what has been dubbed “the sanitation syndrome”, white municipal administrations throughout Africa blamed epidemics on urban Africans and used this argument to rationalize the destruction of their housing and the creation of segregated cities, even though the rhetoric was one of municipalization for improved public services ‘for all’ (Swanson, 1977, pp. 338–9).

Scaling Up in the Keynesian Era (1930s–1970s)

Starting in the 1930s, and escalating rapidly in the 1940s, we see a winding down of the municipalization movement (particularly for “non-essential” services such as restaurants and theatres) and a scaling up of larger, networked state services to the national and regional level (Millward, 1997; Morton, 2002). Much of the latter took place in sectors where new technologies and modes of governance made large, networked services possible, such as with electricity and healthcare. Water provision, by contrast, stayed largely at the municipal level due to transportation costs, although policy and regulation were partly scaled up.

This nationalization trend was part of a larger paradigm shift in Western market economies at the time, with expanded public services seen as an essential part of a nationally coordinated stimulus package for production and consumption to recover from economic downswings (Keynesianism

and the welfare state), and for building national competitive advantage (Fordism) (Harvey, 1982; Jessop, 1982). Combined with the growing authority and capacity of central states – driven in part by the demands of big business for centralized bargaining – the rationale of service efficiency and strategic planning that drove municipalization was now being employed in the nationalization agenda, to “ensure that the commanding heights of the economy remained in public hands and was subject to government directions” (Aharoni, 2013, p. 165).

The shift from municipal to national state ownership was particularly dramatic in Britain. In the early 1940s roughly 30% of local government income was generated by locally owned public services. Three decades later this had been whittled down to less than 2% (Sheldrake, 1989, p. 18). In the electricity sector, 65% of British local authorities supplied their own power, but these were nationalized at the stroke of a pen when more than 600 power producers were rolled into a single national authority by the Electricity Act of 1947 (Cheshire, 2013). By the 1960s, national-level public expenditures accounted for approximately 60% of gross national product, and a fifth of all goods and services were under national public ownership (Aharoni, 2013, p. 162).

Meanwhile, ostensibly non-essential services such as markets and municipal restaurants disappeared altogether, often vilified for creating unfair competition and stifling entrepreneurship, leaving the field open to private enterprise. In effect, the emergence of national welfare states took the wind out of municipal public service sails, advancing capital accumulation on an increasingly national/global scale while squashing the potential for more radical redistributive initiatives locally.

By the 1970s this nationalization project was hegemonic. The scale and pace of nationalization differed from place to place – as did the character of state welfare spending (Esping-Andersen, 1990) – but the trend towards national public ownership of key services was widespread throughout Western market economies.

The trend was pervasive in newly independent post-colonial states as well. Those not allied to the Soviet bloc invariably introduced some form of welfare service provision via new state-owned enterprises, or nationalized private entities left over from the colonial era, with the aim of accelerating development objectives that the market on its own would not be able to satisfy (with the simultaneous aim of creating a domestic capitalist class) (Sanyal, 2014; Sender & Smith, 2013).

The range and quality of these public services varied dramatically, depending on state capacity, colonial legacies and ideological makeups. Some regions – notably Latin America – initiated the state enterprise project earlier and more enthusiastically, while others – notably Sub-Saharan Africa – suffered from massive skills and infrastructure deficits that made large-scale public service delivery projects difficult (Bernier et al., 2020; Grosh & Mukandala, 1994; Saulniers, 1985). In virtually all cases, however,

public services catered largely to an urban elite, lacking the accumulation incentives to extend state resources to an under-employed and under-consuming mass. As a result, state-owned public services, whether local or national, seldom resulted in universal or equitable provision, although the official justification for state ownership was to make services available to all. Post-colonial goals of “modernization” also played into the agenda. For example,

much of the public health literature of the time was dedicated to the discursive depiction of ‘private’, ‘domestic’, and ‘traditional’ water use practices as ‘backward’ (e.g. the use of open canals for bathing), as opposed to the public, modern forms of government-supplied drinking water treatment and supply through large-scale ‘reticulated’ infrastructure networks.

(Bakker, 2013b, p. 285)

Public services were also used to (re)build a nationalist ethic in many cases. As [Marois and Gungen \(2016\)](#) note of the late 19th and early 20th century formation of public banks in Turkey, including the Municipalities Bank in 1933 (Belediyeler Bank), government efforts were driven largely with the intent of creating a working class in support of national industrialization, mobilizing (local) public capital in the name of (national) private accumulation.

Neoliberal Publics (from the 1980s)

By the 1970s, a simmering backlash against state ownership broke out of its academic confines and into the public realm with the election (and imposition) of neoliberal governments around the world, beginning with Chile and the UK, with the pendulum of public service provision swinging back to the private sector ([Haskel & Szymanski, 1993](#); Parker, 1999; Vickers & Yarrow, 1991). Blocs of capital that had once called for state intervention were now howling for its removal, demanding the right to own or manage virtually any public service on offer (see, for example, Zaifer, 2020).

Neoliberals argued that state ownership of key services had outlived their usefulness and had become a drag on, rather than a stimulant for, economic growth. Lacking financial incentives to perform efficiently or respond to user demands, state employees were deemed to have become sclerotic and unaccountable, creating distant, unimaginative services that were out of touch with local populations, unable to respond to the needs of a dynamic private sector in a rapidly changing and highly competitive global market economy ([Biersteker, 1990](#); [Lieberman, 1993](#); [Williamson, 1990](#)).

(Re)privatizing public services was seen to offer better responsiveness to market demands and improved accountability, by dint of transparent contracts that revealed the “true” costs and benefits of service delivery. The goal was a more efficient use of resources, lower service costs for end users,

better choice for consumers, improved awareness of different service needs and more rapid economic growth by facilitating the expansion of infrastructure required for a mass consumption society. Privatization was also seen to be “pro-poor”, insofar it is ensured cost recovery for sustainable provision and expansion of services to low-income areas by entrepreneurs targeting appropriate affordability levels. This was not a promise of immediate parity, but one of incremental progress that would ignite a virtuous cycle of public growth through the creation of private sector jobs without over-taxing an economy’s potential for development (Komives, 2001; Komives et al., 2005; World Bank, 2002, 2003).

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the (re)introduction of private sector operating principles into the public sector, further distorting the lines between public and private service provision. New Public Management (NPM) is effectively an updated version of the entrepreneurial models of government first articulated by the “goo goos” in the 19th century, requiring the creation of stand-alone, state-owned service corporations which operate much like for-profit private firms. These corporatized entities are managed by the state but function at arm’s length from government, with varying forms of legal status and autonomy. Water and electricity utilities are common examples, but the practice extends to a much wider range of goods and services, including airports, child care, public banks, universities, forests, hospitals, transport and manufacturing (Aivazian et al., 2005; Bilodeau et al., 2007; Fink, 2008; Marois, 2012; Meyer, 2002; Nelson & Nikolakis, 2012; Oum et al., 2006; Preker & Harding, 2003; Sumsion, 2006; Zatti, 2012).

Here we see public provision in name but private operating principles in practice, with many corporatized entities employing market tools such as pricing signals and market-based interest rates as primary factors in their decision making. Corporatized managers are frequently remunerated based on the “surplus” of their public agency, and investment decisions are guided by their potential financial returns. As Gilbert (2013, p. 9) notes, NPM (and its variants over time) is a “programme of deliberate intervention by government to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating a type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behavior”. The result has been a further “broadening and blurring of the ‘frontier’ between the public and private sectors” and a “shift in value priorities away from universalism, equity, security and resilience towards efficiency and individualism” (Pollitt, 2003, p. 474). Not all corporatizations are designed to be neoliberal, but there has been a dramatic increase in the neoliberalization of corporatized entities in market economies over the past three decades (Baron, 2014; Bennis & Verdeil, 2014; Chavez, 2014; Furlong, 2013; McDonald, 2016b; Padfield et al., 2016; Smith, 2004).

Corporatization has been popular with the private sector because it also opens up new possibilities for direct market penetration (such as contracting

out and voucher systems (Lobina & Hall, 2014; Saltman, 2000; Warner & Gradus, 2011) and can force public agencies to compete with private companies for their own public service contracts (Fang & Hill, 2003; Joskow, 1996; Osborne & Hutchinson, 2006). In some cases, corporatization is a mere segue to future privatization, instilling market-oriented management cultures and profitable bottom lines to prepare public services for private buyers. Indeed, corporatization is often seen as a necessary prerequisite for privatization in order to compartmentalize the actual costs and revenues of a stand-alone public agency, to instill a business culture in management, and to allow potential buyers to properly assess their potential for profitability while minimizing potential tensions with new private owners (McDonald, 2016b).

Corporatized utilities have become increasingly international in their operations as well (Chavez & Torres, 2014; Clifton et al., 2007; Furlong, 2015). In some cases, they celebrate their “public” status at home while aggressively seeking for-profit “private” contracts outside their jurisdictions. Rand Water and Eskom (electricity) in South Africa are illustrative of this trend. While declaring their role as public providers in a post-apartheid era they have taken up private sector contracts elsewhere on the continent, where they behave like (and are perceived as) private, profit-seeking multinational corporations (Gentle, 2009; van Rooyen & Hall, 2007). Publicly-owned water and electricity operators in Sweden and Canada have operated on a similar basis, advocating public delivery at home but acting like private companies abroad (Engler, 2016; Högselius, 2009). Little wonder that some critics see neoliberal corporatization as the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing, offering a façade of public ownership while propagating market ideologies. Neoliberal corporatization may be public in name, but not necessarily in character.

Two additional concerns with the neoliberal corporatization model are worth highlighting here. The first is its inherently blinkered model of management. By their very nature corporatized agencies are compartmentalized into silos, making it difficult to coordinate management and finance across units, potentially undermining synergistic planning and economies of scale (Whincop, 2003). Neoliberal corporatization can make this myopia worse, emphasizing a (ringfenced) financial bottom line and promoting monetized forms of performance evaluation, even if these goals come at a cost to their sister units or to the larger public good. Under such conditions cross-subsidization can become difficult, if not impossible. Where incomes from revenue-generating services such as electricity might support non-revenue generating services such as libraries, managers are often disinclined (and disincentivized) to harm their financial situation by sharing resources. At the same time, elected officials may have lost their authority to demand inter-unit transfers (Nor-Aziah & Scapens, 2007; Pollitt, 2006; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004).

The result can be a focus on (full) cost recovery by managers within stand-alone agencies, on the assumption that they are unlikely to receive subsidies

from other units or levels of government. This is an understandable decision by managers hoping to protect the financial sustainability of their public utility, but too much emphasis on recouping costs within a stand-alone public agency can create affordability problems for the poor, with cut-offs in services such as water and electricity potentially undermining public goods such as health and education (Bond & Dugard, 2008; McDonald & Pape, 2002). Monetized incentives can also serve to undermine personal interactions within government, eroding the kinds of “high-trust relationships” that “lower transaction costs within the public sector and make it more efficient than it would be if each action had to be negotiated and costed on a low-trust basis” (Hood, 1995, p. 94). The constant threat of privatization, or having to compete for one’s own contracts, makes the sharing of information within and across corporatized utilities less likely, instilling a heightened sense of privacy and secrecy as information on costs becomes commercially confidential.

The second concern is that corporatization can accelerate and intensify the (at least partial) commodification of public services. Thus, services such as water, with its qualitatively different use values (e.g. religious practice, aesthetic beauty, recreational enjoyment, physiological necessity) becomes a more homogenized commodity in the marketized exchange process of corporatization (Bakker, 2003; Bond, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2005). Service users are increasingly seen (and come to see themselves) as “customers” instead of “citizens”, with public amenities perceived more like private commodities to be bought on the market, dissociated from broader public goods and concealing the complex social and labour arrangements behind their exchange price (Clarke et al., 2007). This commodification process allows public utility managers to argue that the only way to truly “appreciate” a service is to pay for it (ideally at full market cost), side-lining or eradicating non-commodified valuations that may also be associated with a public good (Williams & Windebank, 2003).

Neoliberal conceptions of public have

increasingly blurred [the] division between public and private provision functions, mask[ing] the fact that a good deal of public money is now used not directly, to help the most needy, but indirectly to subsidise market-provision for the not-quite-so-needy [This] blurring of public and private consumption tends to widen the gap between seduced and repressed, whilst simultaneously concealing the division it supports and accentuates in the process.

(Clarke & Bradford, 1998, p. 378)

The Neoclassical Trap

Contemporary theoretical foundations for this exchangeability of public and private can be found in neoclassical economics. Mainstream economists have long argued that the only difference between public goods and

private goods are their market characteristics, and that with the right form of state intervention any good or service can be delivered by the private sector (Holcombe, 1997). As Kaul and Conceição (2006, p. 9) note in their summation of the public/private decision-making process: “What makes a good or service public or private is its consumption properties” (see also Stiglitz, 2006).

In neoclassical theory, private goods are distinguished by the fact that they are “excludable” and “rivalrous”, which means that the seller of a product knows exactly who is buying it and how much revenue they will receive from it (see Figure 3.1) (Samuelson, 1954). Clothing is a good example. If you buy a shirt from a store the owner of that shop knows who to collect the money from. If someone else wants the same shirt they will have to buy a different one for themselves. Under these conditions producers of private goods and services have confidence in the potential to make a profit, allowing them to argue that goods and services such as these are best provided by the private sector because individual business owners will be motivated to respond quickly and efficiently to specific consumer preferences.

Public goods, by contrast, are those deemed “non-excludable” and “non-rival”, because it is difficult/impossible to deny access to an individual that wants to consume them and because one person’s consumption does not take away from another person’s enjoyment of that good or service. Street lighting is a good example. My use of a streetlight does not deny other people the ability to use that light at the same time. Nor does it reduce the

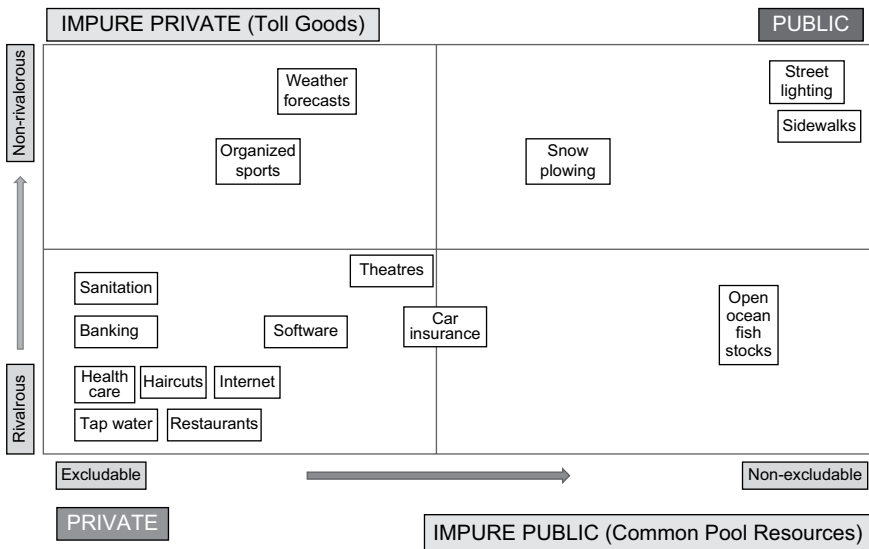


Figure 3.1 Neoclassical Model for Defining Public and Private Services

Source: Compiled by author

amount of light available. In these cases there is no incentive for a profit-seeking private firm to be responsible for the ownership and sale of street lighting because they have no way of tracking who uses it and they cannot easily determine how much to charge each person for the amount of light they have consumed (although the development of new biometric tracking devices could push services such as this into the private consumptive category (Sanders, 2017; Till, 2019)), and many street lighting systems were originally privately owned and operated in relatively wealthy neighbourhoods before being municipalized a century ago (Radford, 2003).

Neoclassical economists refer to these public goods as a form of “market failure”; not because capitalism is prone to failure, but because these types of public goods will not be produced in sufficient volume or quality by private firms if there is no potential for realizable profits (Cowen, 1992). They argue that it would be irrational (even immoral) for a private company to provide such public goods and services at a loss, putting themselves and their employees at risk while at the same time providing inadequate supplies of essential services required by the public as a whole, dragging down the entire economy. Hence the need for state intervention as a rational market response.

There are also “impure” public and private goods which are prone to market failure. Impure public goods are those that are non-excludable but rivalrous (e.g. open-ocean fish stocks, where anyone can catch fish but each boat reduces the number of fish available to others). Impure private goods are those that are excludable but non-rivalrous (e.g. movie theatres, where only those who pay can see the film but one person’s enjoyment of the movie does not reduce the enjoyment of others in the theatre). Private sector provision of these goods and services are also prone to “failure” to varying degrees because market signals are never complete and not all revenues can be predictably captured, resulting in over- or under-production and an inefficient allocation and use of resources.

The neoclassical response to all of these different types of market failures is “collective societal action”, either in the form of direct state provision or via state subsidies to a private company to ensure adequate private production of the good or service in question. Importantly, this is a purely technical matter for neoclassical economists. It is not an ethical choice. Decisions about public versus private delivery of impure goods are informed by “objective” market characteristics and the most effective way to address them. There are heated debates in neoclassical economics about the extent and form of state intervention based on factors such as informational and institutional asymmetries, but these arguments are determined by local market contexts and the specific nature of market distortions (Sheshinski & López-Calva, 2003; Stiglitz, 2004).

The eventual form of government intervention – either direct state provision or subsidization of a private company – is determined by economic calculations around optimal utility outcomes in any given situation.

As the Keynes (1981, p. 695, italics added) quote at the opening of this chapter makes clear about liberal economic policy: “The line of demarcation between the [public sector and the private sector] is constantly changing in accordance with the practical needs of the day. As to where precisely this line should be drawn, *no great question of principle is involved*”. Determining what these “practical needs” are can be contested – and forms the basis of much of the debate over public/private service provision within liberal circles – but the notion that the private sector is capable of satisfying an adequate provision of public goods given the right conditions is never in theoretical doubt.

There are two important conceptual lessons to be drawn from this analysis. The first is that the overwhelming majority of goods and services in the world today can be considered “private” in neoclassical terms, with relatively few falling into the “purely public” category. Many readers may be surprised, for example, to see tap water listed as a purely private good in Figure 3.1. This is because tap water to individual homes is largely excludable and rivalrous – i.e. only those with permission to access it can consume it, usage can be tracked, revenues collected and one person’s consumption reduces the amount available to others – a point that some mainstream economists themselves forget at times, allowing the politics of water provision to discolour their otherwise dispassionate neoclassical framework (Prasad, 2006; Worstall, 2016).

The second conceptual insight is that there is virtually no “public” service that cannot be privatized or commercialized in some way (Shleifer, 1998). As a former Chief of Public Sector Management and Private Sector Development at the World Bank once quipped: “There are virtually no limits on what can be privatized” (Shirley 1991, S25). The only constraint, according to neoclassical theory, is the capacity of a state to oversee private sector interventions, and whether there is a sufficiently robust and competitive market for private providers. As Kaul and Conceição (2006, p. 9) argue:

If regulated and monitored well, and perhaps if subsidized to some extent, public goods and services can be produced by markets while still retaining their public consumption properties. While public support will have to be greater for goods or services destined to serve the poor, even poverty reduction programs can be implemented through public-private partnering and incentive schemes that allow private actors to take the extra step of adjusting their behavior to generate social (public) benefits as well as adequate private returns.

Armed with this logic, neoclassical economists can argue that decisions around public versus private service delivery are purely pragmatic, and that they lie along a seamless public/private spectrum. Market asymmetries require that policy makers think carefully about the type of public or private provision, and the balance between state and private services, but the

underlying neoclassical assumptions around the interchangeability of public and private service providers remains essentially unchanged from the 1950s.

Conclusion

Herein lies the “curse of the continuum”. In liberal ideology, what appears on the surface to be two fundamentally different concepts – public services and private services – are in fact two inter-related points on the same marketized scale. When conditions are right, private capital is deemed capable of producing and selling virtually any good and service imaginable, with varying degrees of state oversight and subsidization. But at times of general economic crisis, or when effective local market conditions do not exist (e.g. a lack of state capacity to regulate or the lack of effective private sector competition for bidding on contracts), neoclassical economists can call on heightened state involvement in the ownership and/or delivery of key services to help weather the storm. Whether public or private, the objective is to maintain the flow of essential services in the interests of capital accumulation, with the long-term aim of expanding the commodification process. As von Weizsäcker et al. note (2005, 3), what matters is “striking a good balance”.

This is not to say that publicly owned and publicly financed services do not result in significantly different outcomes than private ones in market economies. Periods of heightened public ownership and control have, in many instances resulted in more expansive and equitable service delivery than in more private-oriented eras. Welfare experiments of the mid-20th century, for example, provided dramatic increases in quality of life for hundreds of millions of people around the world, including increased democratization of public service decision making in many countries. These are hugely important political and material gains.

However, these advances are necessarily limited by the demands of private capital and constantly prone to reversal by capitalist forces trying to reign in expenses. Expanded public ownership of public services can have positive effects on our social, political and economic lives, but we cannot lose sight of the inherent limits and constraints that private capital has placed on these developments, even in moments of dramatic expansion in public spending, such as those associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (Hermann, 2021b).

This theoretical argument needs to be a significant part of the debates about the future of public services. Local and national governments have begun to experiment with new forms of public control after failed experiences with privatization, spawning fresh deliberations about the aims and objectives of making services “public” once again (Hall et al., 2013; Kishimoto et al., 2020; McDonald, 2016a). Many towns and cities will also be making decisions about whether or not to renew service contracts with

private operators, offering a once-in-a-generation opportunity to (re)build local and international public service networks, potentially in a different mould than the past (of which much more will be said in the second half of this book).

In doing so we must ask ourselves what kind of “public” is being fought for and how extensive the changes are that we want to make. One risk is to revert to neoliberal forms of corporatization, with public services run as stand-alone business units with cost recovery as their primary mandate. A second, more confounding challenge will be how to respond to demands for social democratic reforms. In many such cases proponents are clear about their rejection of commercialized forms of public service, but they are not always explicit about how reclaimed public services fit within a broader capitalist system, and find themselves having to negotiate with entrenched mainstream politicians. Such ideologically-diverse coalitions are unavoidable in many cases, and require strategic trade-offs, but they also run the risk of diluting original ambitions. In Uruguay, for example, where water was re-nationalized in the early 2000s, many of the social democratic movements that pushed for this reform have since been “subsumed under the left government’s political project, which prioritizes international trade and continues the corporatist tradition of the Uruguayan state, thus limiting the scope of reform and restricting participation by civil society and the water sector trade union” (Terhorst et al., 2013, pp. 60–1). A (narrow) victory in national elections in 2019 by the right-wing National Party are likely to erode those gains further (Chavez, 2019; Chavez et al., 2020), with “outsourcing key areas and covert privatization processes” serving to submit water services to a complex combination of “state logic and a privatization logic, where public oversight and community participation are mentioned by some government authorities but excluded in practice” (Santos, 2021).

This is not to say that social democratic and community-led reforms cannot make a significant difference in people’s lives or should not be pursued. It is exactly these kinds of public service reforms that I highlight in [Chapter 5](#) to illustrate how even modest demands can significantly improve people’s lives by expanding access to essential public services, raising awareness of environmental sustainability, incorporating public opinion into decision making and so on. These incremental changes can be used to leverage larger ones, helping to construct new imaginaries of public services and how they might be operationalized in the future.

Nevertheless, the limits of social democratic and community level reform remain, à la [Lenin’s \(1907, np\)](#) aforementioned critique of municipal socialism as one of “class conciliation [that] seeks to divert public attention away from the fundamental questions of the economic system as a whole.” With this in mind, it is important that discussions around the tensions and contradictions of capitalist forms of public service provision remain at the heart of any fight for a more progressive public service future. Mere recognition of these tensions will not resolve the problem. An effective pro-public

movement needs to be frank and explicit about how it intends to engage with the inherent limitations of our bourgeois public sphere. Making services “public” will not, in and of itself, overcome these challenges. Public ownership can actually reinforce the problem if we are not careful, justifying the liberal circularity of a public-private continuum and (unwittingly) feeding into a perpetual cycle of commodification.

What is required for more radical change? I will argue in the remainder of this book that there are four fundamental pillars of thought and action. The first is a new and expanded non-marketized definition of what constitutes public and public services (and how and where it engages with “private”). The second is a critical discussion of what role state and non-state actors play in the delivery of non-marketized public services. The third is the need to develop new ways of defining and measuring the success of a public service that do not reproduce the commoditized norms of today, while at the same time allowing for localized interpretations of what constitutes good practice. And finally, there is a need for uncomfortable discussions about the challenges of developing a more radical pro-public international movement that address the inevitable tensions and disagreements around publicness in a capitalist world, while still accommodating a heterogeneous set of views that can support and encourage different pro-public positions.

Part II

Possibilities



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4 Redefining Public Services

We need to continue to struggle over these meanings because in doing so we articulate more clearly what we want the public and ourselves to be.

(Mansbridge, 1998, p. 12)

Having deconstructed liberal notions of public and public services I now turn to the matter of alternative conceptualizations, starting with the question of whether we should simply abandon the word “public” altogether given how compromised it is by marketized notions of a public sphere and neoclassical conceptions of public goods. I will argue in this chapter that we are better off reconstructing “public” and “public services”. There is nothing *inherently* market-oriented about these words, and we should not be forced to give up such important, evocative and widely recognized expressions, particularly if there is to be a global and inclusive *pro-public* dialogue to unite international movements in favour of effective and accessible public services in the future.

My proposal is to *reclaim* and *remake* these terms, first by reconfiguring the definition of public (infusing it with new universal but flexible meanings), and second by developing alternative indices for what constitutes a public service (in contradistinction to the commodified neoclassical categories outlined in [Chapter 3](#)). The goal is to propose a revised methodology for defining public services in ways that are not captured by market logic, while at the same time being simple enough for anyone to understand and debate (as opposed to being the purview of “experts”).

By removing public services from the constraints of their individualized consumptive properties we can focus instead on questions of how “essential” they are to daily life and their potential benefits from “collective provision”. The result is a new analytical grid that puts *need* and *equity* at the centre of public service definitions. The model also helps establish a clearer ontological distinction between public and private spheres, while at the same time highlighting a more positive and progressive dialectical link between them.

These are necessarily broad and tentative proposals, intended to illustrate the theoretical and practical potential for new definitions of public services

that can be expansive and universal in nature but shaped by local context as well. This argument also sets the stage for a discussion in [Chapter 5](#) about how redefined public services may actually be delivered (with a focus on rescuing and reinventing notions of “the state” while expanding public service delivery options to include non-state, non-profit actors). [Chapter 6](#) then asks how we might evaluate the performance of these new public entities.

These revised definitions and assessments of public services have at their core the principle of universality: *everyone should have equitable and affordable access to all forms of public services*. This means “everyone in the world”, but is necessarily complicated by questions of political boundaries and whether there are obligations to deliver public services beyond local and national jurisdictions. Universality must also account for exclusions beyond class inequalities to include an intersectional understanding of how race, caste, gender and other socially-constructed axes have created and reinforced inequities within existing public services, often obfuscated by liberal notions of universality. The conceptual challenge here, as per Rossi and Táiwò (2020, np), is “how to be anti-capitalist without ignoring the more than residual racial [and other] stratifications in contemporary capitalism”. Their answer, which I align myself with here, is to “tackle both questions at the same time”, highlighting the material contradictions of market economies while at the same time acknowledging that public service inequalities are facilitated by racist, misogynist, homophobic and other biases that are part and parcel of the variegated realities of capitalist markets around the world. As such, anti-racist, anti-homophobic and anti-misogynist policies are constitutive of a broader universalist materialist politics, not add-ons. The discourses and practices of class-based universality must therefore take the multifaceted challenges of inclusivity seriously.

Public Versus Commons

I begin the chapter with a brief review of heated debates around the use of the term “commons” versus “public”, reminding us not only of the need for a new conceptualization of our bourgeois public sphere but also our limited choice in linguistic alternatives. As provocative as the commons literature is in proposing substitute notions of public and public services, I will argue that it does not offer a sufficiently robust conceptual framework to replace notions of public, while potentially splintering the potential for broad-based partnership-building on a pro-public future.

Some of the most vigorous challenges to privatization over the past three decades have come from activists and academics working in the traditions of a commons, typically defined as “the shared resources which people manage by negotiating their own rules through social or customary traditions, norms and practices” (Quilligan, 2012, p. 2). Much of this literature rejects the term public, which it interprets as a form of state governmentality that operates in the interests of a market elite: “In theory, public still means

people; in practice, public means government (as captured by elite interests who regularly impede the people's political rights and capacity to control their common goods)" (Quilligan, 2012, p. 2; see also Bollier, 2003, 2014).

This critique of public applies to its use in socialist states as well, with socialism seen as proxy for a hierarchical, self-serving state, advancing a false sense of inclusivity while enriching a bureaucratic minority in undemocratic and environmentally destructive ways that promote the same productivism and accumulation strategies as the market. As Özgün (2010, p. 377) argues: "Public" has been one of those theoretical devices that defined socialist alternative visions in their opposition to capitalism across all theoretical fields, but which was actually a product of eighteenth-century liberal governmentality. "Public" becomes the master signifier of socialism in its opposition to "private property," but it still carries a reference to "ownership" relations "Public" never denotes "everybody"; it always signifies a limit, set by a certain social, linguistic, or jurisprudential criterion, and refers exclusively to a specific population In this respect, the term "public" does not undo the specific set of social relations around "property" (or dispose the restrictions stemming from ownership) but delegates these relations to an abstract collective body". Özgün insists (2010, 378) that rejecting the word public "is the necessary thing to do, especially at this moment, when all possible uses of the term are already systematically contaminated by neoliberal politics".

In this sense, public is seen as a false alternative to private:

Too often it appears as though our only choices are capitalism or socialism, the rule of private property or that of public property, such that the only cure for the ills of state control is to privatize and for the ills of capital to publicize - that is, to exert state regulation We have been made so stupid that we can only recognize the world as private or public. We have become blind to the common.

(Hardt, 2010, p. 346, 52)

For Holloway (2010, p. 58), "It is often assumed that the only cure for the ills of capitalist society is public regulation[but] the political project of instituting the common ... cuts diagonally across these false alternatives – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist – and opens a new space for politics."

In this view, the commons are seen as the only true alternative to private – distinguished from a public/private binary and offering a qualitatively different project from traditional state services: a form of social interaction that is more inherently collective, equitable and democratic than the public institutions of capitalism and socialism, "offering fairer, more direct access to resources (and thus higher efficiency) than can be gained through distributive enterprises operated as private monopolies or state hierarchies" (Quilligan, 2012, p. 3). A commons, Quilligan (2012, p. 3) maintains, is better

than public because it “conveys the sense of human meaning, being and intersubjectivity that lie at the heart of social engagement [an] expression of social mutuality and collaboration ... providing [the] epistemological and political leverage points for transforming the global economy and creating globally representative governance”. For Özgün (2010, p. 377), commons signify a

collective social form that is different from the ‘public’ – it doesn’t ‘substitute’ the ‘public’ but transcends it ... allowing us to speak a political language that is not structured with the binary opposition imposed by classical liberal and socialist discourses, and thus makes it possible for us to imagine a different form of ‘collectivity.’

Many commons writers also like to note that commons can be used as a verb (“commoning”) emphasizing its dynamic status: “I use [commoning] because I want ... to portray it as an activity, not just an idea or material resource” (Linebaugh, 2008, p. 45). Public, by contrast, is depicted as static and unchanging.

Problems with the Commons

I agree with the spirit of these arguments – and in particular the criticisms of marketized notions of public – but there are tensions and inconsistencies in the commons literature that often go unproblematized. First, the language and idea of a commons is not as self-evident or consistent as its proponents suggest. There is no widely agreed upon definition, and the descriptions that do exist are wildly diverse ideologically (even contradictory), often employed for very different political aims. Indeed, they have become a “ubiquitous presence in the political, economic and even real estate language of our time. Left and Right, neoliberals and neo-Keynesians, conservatives and anarchists use the concept in their political interventions” (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014, i92; see also Caffentzis, 2010; McDermott, 2014).

An explicitly market-oriented commons literature has become particularly popular over the past two decades, with widespread embrace of the commons language by neoliberal policy-making institutions such as the World Bank (2006, p. 1, 5), which aims to “protect and improve the global commons” via the “transfer of financial resources and environmentally friendly technologies, technical assistance, and development of markets for environmental goods and services”. The Bank even argues that “many of the practices that must be changed ... to protect and improve the global commons are in the private sector province” (see also FiC, 2020).

The Global Water Initiative – a partnership of the World Economic Forum, Coca-Cola, Dow Chemicals and other large corporate and multi-lateral agencies – has expressed its desire to manage a “water commons”, using market tools and entrepreneurial incentives to argue that communal

decision-making should not shut the market out but rather assist in finding a middle ground between the state and market forces (see www.weforum.org/projects/global-water-initiative). Barnes (2006, xvi) argues for a “Capitalism 3.0” that “assigns new property rights to commons trusts, builds commons infrastructure, and spawns a new class of genuine co-owners”. In time, he argues, “corporations accept the commons as their business partner ... [and] still make profits” (see also Barnes, 2011).

This is not to suggest that all notions of a commons are inherently market oriented – far from it – but it does highlight the fact that virtually any word that is applied to the collective consumption of goods and services can be captured and co-opted in some way by market interests (just as “public” has). Innumerable expressions once thought to be the sole purview of the left have been embraced and distorted by neoliberalism (such as the notion of a “human right to water”, which has been championed by private water companies as an argument in favour of privatization (Bakker, 2007; Karunanathan, 2019; Sultana & Loftus, 2019)). As such, the term “commons” is no more inherently progressive than “public”.

A second concern with the commons literature is that it tends to grant *a priori* status to a particular form of “community” which it sees as inexorably leading to positive and equitable outcomes, assuming that localized commoning is a natural and innately positive behaviour that all humans can intuitively understand and practice. There are many examples of such commons in practice in different sectors (Holder & Flessas, 2008; Hudson et al., 2019; Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom et al., 2003; Wall, 2014), but there are also commons systems that are highly unequal along gendered, ethnic, class and other lines, often romanticized away in the name of “tradition” (Bakker, 2008; Claessens et al., 2021; Matose et al., 2019; Zwarteveen & Meinzen-Dick, 2001). Commons behaviours change over time as well, but can be ossified in academic and popular literature as ever-present realities (Netting, 1997).

It must also be asked why humans are deemed capable (even destined) to work collaboratively within a “commons” but somehow incapable of working collectively within a “state”? Why does the commons literature grant special ontological status to community-level associations? Why not also acknowledge that humans are capable of constructing intersubjective and social forms of “public” that go beyond the physical, institutional and social boundaries of a local group (on this point see Calhoun, 1998)? In its celebration of localized community as uniquely and intrinsically dynamic and progressive, the commons literature simultaneously demotes notions of a broader “public” to that of a stagnant, state-captured monolith with no potential for transformative social and economic struggle.

It is oddly ironic, then, that much of the commons literature advocates state-like formations to govern their non-hierarchical interactions, with Quilligan (2012, p. 4) for example, arguing for “social charters” that “outline a group’s rights and incentives for a shared resource,” which may

include “a legal entity or fiduciary association of citizen stakeholders which operates as a trust”. Ostrom’s (1990) highly influential work on “Governing the Commons” expands this to include inter-scalar forms of (global) governance, with complex state-like apparatuses to enforce “established rules”. A form of state in everything but name.

A third concern with the commons literature relates to the question of what goods and services are actually included in the notions of a commons and how they interact with each other. For Quilligan (2012, p. 5) the list is fairly long, comprising “water, food, forests, energy, health services, schools, culture, indigenous artifacts, parks, community zoning, knowledge, means of communication, currency, and ecological and genetic resources”. But why end here? What of the (often much less fashionable) services that are left out of most commons discussions, such as sanitation, storm water drainage, waste management and snow ploughing? Why are these services seldom if ever mentioned in the commons literature? Is it because they do not have their own “sense of human meaning, being and intersubjectivity” (Quilligan, 2012, p. 2)? Can a commons only form around services with higher social value, and if so who determines this status? The logistical challenges of who coordinates this complex mix of services and how they interact with each other are seldom explored in the commons literature.

Finally, the term commons is largely academic and not widely employed in popular discourse. It is not as “powerful and broadly recognized” as Quilligan (2012, p. 3) insists, nor readily “apparent to everyone ... in clear and simple terms”. Nor is it easily translatable from English. *Comunalidad* is a neologism coined by indigenous leaders in Oaxaca, Mexico, “to share with others their way of being and thinking” (Esteva, 2014, i152), but the term is not widely used outside the region. *Ubuntu* (an Nguni word with phonological variants in various other African languages), is often mentioned as another potential expression that captures the spirit of a commons, but this too is difficult to translate, and better captured in complicated aphorisms such as the Zulu phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu nga Bantu*” (Ramose, 2002, p. 231). But *ubuntu* has also been coopted by neoliberal ideologues keen to illustrate how “*ubuntu* capitalism” can be harnessed to improve corporate management, and has even been used to re-brand entire countries in a market-friendly direction (McDonald, 2010). If clarity is one of the goals of choosing an alternative terminology to “public”, commons does little to advance that agenda.

Rethinking Public(s)

Given these criticisms, I see little value in replacing the term public with commons. In opting to stay with public we can acknowledge its murky past while committing to changing its future. Rather than “sharing the dismay of political scientists who, faced with the impossibility of pinning down an exact meaning of the public good, fanaticized about abolishing the term

altogether we must learn to live with, even welcome, a concept that remains continually in contest” (Mansbridge, 1998, p. 17).

However, there are few conceptual markers to assist with such a redefinition. Debates about the meaning of public tend to be about public-this or public-that, with public applied as a taken-for-granted adjective, while the substantive subjective debate focuses on the noun (e.g. public values, public space, public planning, public hospitals) (Dahl & Soss, 2014). The word public itself is rarely problematized; reified in ways that are static, binarized and state-ified. As a result, debates about publicness tend to fall along the predictable liberal continuum of state versus private outlined in [Chapter 3](#).

Moving beyond this impasse will require four substantial changes to our conceptualization of the term. The first is a separation of public from its axiomatic association with government (see especially Cumbers, 2012). On this point it is possible to open notions of public to include other actors such as community associations, NGOs and other not-for-profit organizations. These non-state entities may only represent a portion of a population at any given time or place – and therefore may be “private” in some respects – but they can signify a collective sense of being and responsibility beyond the individualized self.

Second, there must be a delinking of public from its structural role in facilitating private capital accumulation. Uncoupling this historical relationship will require deep-seated changes to our notions of a bourgeois public sphere – nothing less than a revolutionary shift in the ways in which states engage with private capital materially and ideologically. These changes will be extraordinarily difficult to bring about, but if we are to extract public from the clutches of market forces, and explore meanings beyond its commercialized and Euro-centric constraints, it is critical that we ask, as per Fraser (1992, p. 115), what “non-liberal, non-bourgeois” notions of public might look like.

Third, it is important to infuse public with a more dynamic and elastic sensibility, while still retaining a universal set of core meanings. In this regard, public can have fixed and relative features, with standardized principles around the meaning of public in *all* contexts (to allow for global dialogue and action), while acknowledging a variegated terrain of expectations and actualizations of what constitutes public on the ground, taking into account different cultural, political and economic practices. In other words, new concepts of public need to be dialectical in their orientation, allowing for universal representation and localized variation, with each mutually constitutive of and shaped by the other.

In this regard it may be more useful theoretically and practically to think in terms of *publics* – in the plural. As Calhoun (1998, p. 22) notes: “public life depends on communities – multiple and diverse – but not on the presumption of or attempt to create a single larger community”. The challenge is finding an appropriate balance. Too universalistic an interpretation and public can become totalizing and unbending. Too relativistic and the result may be so

open-ended as to become meaningless, even restrictive, lending itself to “narrow, stereotypical and nostalgic understandings” of what constitutes differences of identity in the public realm (Eisenberg & Kymlicka, 2011, pp. 5–6).

Finally, new concepts of public necessarily require a redefinition of what is meant by private, as well as relocating the boundaries and nature of engagement between public and private. Here too it is essential to challenge bourgeois constructions of the assumed commodifiability of the private realm. Rather than private being a naturalized form of possessive individualism (Bromley, 2019; Macpherson, 1962), private activity can also be reimagined in dialectical terms as it engages with the collective. The intent here is not to erase or diminish the value of private, but rather to (re)enrich it by infusing private activities with a clearer sense of their independence and relationship with the public, as well as a sense of purpose beyond neoclassical notions of trickle-down benefits for the public good.

On this point, Marx long ago spoke of two types of human individuality. The first is the “private individual” as proprietor and owner of the commodity. The other is the “social individual”, outside of the commodity process: “a personality type that is not less but rather more developed as an individual because of its direct social nature. As opposed to the empty impoverished, restricted individuality of capitalist society, the new human being displays an all-sided, full rich development of needs and capacities, and is universal in character and development” (Amariglio, 2010, p. 336). Any effort to reimagine the private should see it in its historic context. Otherwise, we “run the risk of naturalizing and eternalizing the most recent form of individuality” (Amariglio, 2010, p. 336).

Redefining Public Services

This abstract reconceptualization of public can now be concretized with a discussion of how it manifests itself in a redefinition of “public services”, following the same four principles.

First, it is essential to break from the assumption that public services must be provided by the state, with the addition of non-state, non-profit actors such as community associations and NGOs. This point is taken up at length in [Chapter 5](#) and will not be discussed further here.

Second, it is necessary to uncouple public services from their marketized characteristics and their seemingly inexorable responsibility in facilitating private capital accumulation. Instead of public and private services being defined by their consumptive characteristics of rivalry and exclusion, we can reject these criteria altogether and replace them with non-commodified identifiers. As Altwater (2004, p. 53) notes, “Non-rivalry, and above all non-exclusiveness, are not ‘natural’ or ‘technical’ characteristics of some goods, but rather they are attributed to them”. There is “no way to ‘objectively’ define what is or should be ‘private’ or ‘public.’ Hence, the discussion of public goods is first and foremost a matter of normative decisions”.

The challenge, therefore, is to establish alternative normative frameworks for determining what constitutes a public or private service. What follows is a modest and preliminary attempt to outline one such alternative, using principles that define public services in fundamentally different ways than neoclassical economics. The intent is to extricate public services from their neoclassical trap by establishing an entirely different set of public/private criteria. In doing so, debates about alternatives to privatization can move away from being *against* something captured by the commodity process to being *for* something with its own ontological principles.

My proposal – and it is exactly that, a rough set of ideas intended to contribute to a discussion rather than an attempt to lay down a formal new theory – is to create two categories for determining what constitutes a public or private service. The first is an assessment of how “essential” a service is. The second is an assessment of the benefits of “collective provision”. The intent is to create intuitive, easy to understand criteria for defining public and private services that make their classifications transparent and measurable, while at the same time being open to evaluation and debate. I have also employed broad universal norms with sufficiently flexible characteristics to allow for adaptation across place, time and sector.

Figure 4.1 outlines this proposed new model (note the difference with Figure 3.1). Some public and private services remain the same as they were in the neoclassical model (e.g. restaurants would likely continue to be defined as private in this framework because they are not necessarily “essential” and are unlikely to benefit from “collective provision”, although food services associated with other public institutions like schools and hospitals could be perceived differently, and some state-owned restaurants have been

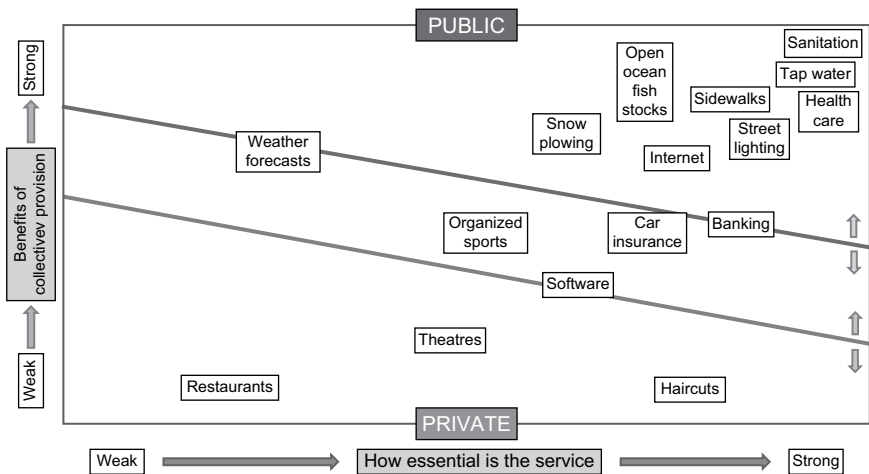


Figure 4.1 Defining a Public or Private Service

Source: Compiled by author

excellent in the past (see Jäggi et al. (1977) on Bologna's experimentations)). Other services would need to be reclassified (e.g. tap water would be considered a public service given how "essential" it is to daily life and the substantial benefits associated with "collective provision").

There would also be a considerable "grey zone" in this model, with services potentially switching between public and private depending on the social, economic, geographic and political realities of a particular place (e.g. organized sports may work best if coordinated privately in some places but better done publicly in others). In short, these are intended as "universal norms" with explicit analytical criteria, but they are also contestable across time, sector and place.

Importantly, this is not a re-tweaking of neoclassical concepts. The latter has been tried many times over, "each of which brings along its own idiosyncratic model and relies on its own set of special assumptions" (Shmanske, 1991, p. 4) but all of which ultimately operate within a marketized, commodified framework. My proposal here is a fundamentally new way of defining what is meant by a public service, unencumbered by commodified market characteristics. The following sections describe why these criteria were chosen and how they can be measured.

Measuring "Essential"

The X-axis of [Figure 4.1](#) measures how "essential" a service is to the people that consume them, referring to the importance of a particular service to a person's ability to lead a healthy and productive life, regardless of the service's market value or its consumptive characteristics. The more essential a service is, the more "public" it becomes.

Measuring this indicator can be done with a combination of universal and subjective factors. An example of a universal factor is biological need. To illustrate, drinking water is necessary to sustain life, and has no substitutes. It is absolutely and universally essential for all people. As such, clean and easily accessible water (such as tap water) would be placed firmly on the public end of the X-axis. Biological necessity could also be claimed for other services such as healthcare, food and housing, pushing them to the right side of the public axis in [Figure 4.1](#). A case can also be made for *social* and *economic* necessity. Access to services such as education and high-speed internet, for example, can be argued to be essential for a healthy and productive life given how important they are to job prospects and social networking.

More subjective criteria could also be employed when measuring how essential a service is. Access to safe sanitation is a good example. Its biological importance is well established, but it is also critical to people's sense of dignity and security, adding to the case for defining it as a public service (particularly for women and girls who face harassment, assault and stigmatization without access to secure and adequate sanitation facilities) (Saleem et al., 2019; Winter & Barchi, 2016). Defining and measuring subjective

criteria is inherently more difficult than evaluating objective ones – and assessments can change across place and time – but subjectivities are important if there is to be a flexible framework for determining what constitutes a public and private service in different contexts.

These are not perfect forms of measurement, but they serve as a starting point for a broader range of non-market factors in determining how essential a service is. Even haircuts could be considered “essential” in this model, if personal appearance is high on the list of a person’s sense of self-esteem. But, as we shall see below, this criterion need not make it a “public” service.

Measuring the Benefits of “Collective Provision”

On the Y-axis of [Figure 4.1](#) is a measurement that evaluates the benefits of providing a service “collectively”, by which I mean a public agency such as a government or democratically accountable non-profit organization (including NGOs, worker co-ops and community groups). The higher the potential benefits of collective provision of a service, the stronger the case for its “public” classification.

Measuring the benefits of collective provision would also be determined by a combination of universal and subjective criteria. An example of universal criteria is once again biological. Collective provision of water and sanitation, for example, has strong and well-documented benefits in terms of general health outcomes (Rosen, 2015). Having a single public provider can help to reduce or eliminate water borne disease by making water services affordable and accessible for all. Similar arguments can be made for the collective provision of waste management (e.g. reduction of disease vectors), primary healthcare (e.g. better prevention of communicable illness) and electricity (e.g. refrigeration of food and medicines) (Giusti, 2009; Rahman & Alam, 2021). In other words, if there are strong objective health and environmental benefits associated with the collective provision of a service there is a strong case for making it public, regardless of its market characteristics.

There can also be strong *social benefits* associated with collective provision, including mutuality, cohesiveness, trust and learning. Collective forms of education, for example, can improve inter-group awareness and empathy, while collectively organized sports can be more inclusive of marginalized households, potentially contributing to the reduction of social tensions (Adams et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2019). On the other hand, some services can have very low social benefits associated with collective provision. Haircuts may be a case in point. Although a stylish cut may be important to one’s self-esteem (making it “essential” at a personal level) there may be few if any society-wide benefits associated with their collective provision, pushing haircuts to the “private” end of the Y-axis spectrum.

Similarly, there can be strong and weak *economic benefits* associated with collective provision. On the strong side, there can be significant efficiency gains linked with natural monopolies such as water and electricity, where

multiple, parallel infrastructure systems make little financial sense. Capital intensive services are particularly predisposed to such collective productivity, but labour-intensive services can benefit as well, such as mail delivery (Panzar & Waterson, 1991). By contrast, some services have very low potential economic benefits from collective provision (with some having potentially negative outcomes). Theatre and music are possible examples. As important as these activities may be to leading a fulfilling life, collectivized production of the arts is unlikely to save money given their geographic dispersal and could serve to stifle inventiveness and local creativity if centralized fiat determine what constitutes good art, weakening the overall benefits to society, and thus placing them towards the “private” end of the production spectrum (although state subsidies for private arts programmes may be required to ensure diversity, highlighting the necessarily dialectical nature of public and private realms).

This revamped conceptualization of public services requires us to live with more subjectivity than we are accustomed to in our marketized public sphere. Universal criteria such as health and self-worth can form the basis of some public/private decisions, but to fully embrace and operationalize a belief in multiple *publics* it will be necessary to accept difference across place, time and sectors, with diverse outcomes as to what constitutes a public service and a (fluctuating) grey zone around where the boundaries between public and private lie. The key is having criteria that are clear to everyone, with decisions made about public and private delivery that are not determined strictly by their market characteristics, and which can be decided upon in democratic and transparent ways (with different democratic processes having their own subjective characteristics).

All of this is in direct contrast to the neoclassical model of assigning public and private labels based on narrow assumptions about individualized utility maximizing behaviour, which, in the end, erases any ontological division between public and private by allowing the private sector to own and provide virtually any public service. Interrupting this logic and replacing it with new normative criteria such as the “essential” nature of a service and the benefits of “collective provision” strips the existing public-private debate of its inherently commodified sensibility, allowing those *in favour of* public provision of certain services to argue for public service delivery using an ontologically independent set of principles rather than being forced to *fight against* privatization using the marketized logic of neoclassical theory.

Public Means “Everyone”

New definitions of public services must also grapple with the question of who gets access to them. In this regard it is worth recalling the Oxford English Dictionary’s (OED, 2007) definition of “public” quoted at the outset of this book: “belongs to, affects, or concerns the *community* or the *nation*” (emphasis added). The OED also notes that public was once defined as “of

or belonging to the human race as a whole”, noting that this interpretation is now “obsolete, rare” – a definitional narrowing of public that parallels the increasingly narrow nature of our bourgeois public sphere.

More progressive definitions of public (and public services) cannot be limited by these geographic and jurisdictional boundaries. Truly “public” services must be universal and global in their aspirations; they cannot be available to some people in some countries and not to others. They must be committed philosophically to comprehensive global access and work practically towards that goal. If not, universal publics become an empty signifier, with subjective boundaries determined by the interests of those with the most relative public power (within and across borders). As a popular saying in health care has it: no one is safe until everyone is safe – a proverb made all the more poignant with the arrival of COVID-19 and the need for universal care and vaccinations against this disease and future pandemics.

This is not to say that public services should never have physical boundaries. There are physical constraints to some services (such as water) and cultural thresholds for others (such as education). Logistical and financial limitations are also very real. It is acceptable, therefore, to celebrate and expand excellent local public service provision based on local resources and capacities, particularly if they can inspire improvements elsewhere. But good quality public services that are available in one location and not in another can only be partial and temporary victories. Universal public health care in Norway, for example, can be lauded for its accomplishments, but with hundreds of millions of people around the world without access to basic forms of public primary healthcare, Norway’s public healthcare success is inherently a limited one.

Achieving universal high-quality public services for everyone in the world will be extremely challenging, of course, and may never be fully realized. Even within clearly demarcated municipal and national boundaries it is remarkably difficult to actualize comprehensive and equitable services for all residents; a task complicated by debates over citizenship and legal status. Extending these principles beyond state boundaries confounds matters exponentially. Who decides what services should be extended beyond a particular jurisdiction? Who pays for them? What if public service delivery practices in one location are not suitable culturally or technologically in another? Should essential public services be “imposed” on a community that may not want them, no matter how “essential” they may be deemed internationally? These are intractable ethical, practical and theoretical questions for which there are no easy answers.

Neoclassical theory certainly does not have satisfactory responses to this challenge of universality, grounded as it is in individualized and inherently restrictive marketized logics. All it can do is scale up theories of national public goods to that of “global public goods”, applying the same concepts “from a global perspective” (Kaul et al., 1999, p. 2, 9; see also Kaul, 2005, 2012). As a result, mainstream debates about constructing globalized public

services remain trapped on the same public/private continuum as national-neoclassical narratives on the topic, with virtually any global public good capable of being provided by private companies (Andonova, 2017; Kremer, 2006; Maskus & Reichman, 2004).

Nor is the commons literature particularly well equipped to manage this global challenge, theoretically or practically. For the most part, commons operate at a hyper-local level, with small-scale services considered to be inherently better than national or regional ones because they are closer to the people that use the service and are therefore more likely to be democratic, accountable and sustainable in their design and operation. When the commons literature does grapple with questions of internationalism, it is typically in terms of a polycentric “network of commons” intended to unite local communities within and across national boundaries (Carlsson & Sandström, 2008; Fritsch et al., 2021; Giest & Howlett, 2014). But it is unclear how this scaling up fits with notions of local forms of autonomy, and it is difficult to imagine how global networks would operate without state agencies facilitating the process. As Harvey (2012, p. 87) notes in his criticism of the autonomous literature, they “have no answer to the problem” of universality, caustically noting that it is “naïve to believe that polycentrism or any other form of decentralization can work without strong hierarchical constraints and active enforcement”. He points to their

vague hope that social groups who have organized their relations to their local commons satisfactorily will do the right thing or converge upon some satisfactory inter-group practices through negotiation and interaction. For this to occur, local groups would have to be untroubled by any externality effects that their actions might have on the rest of the world, and to give up accrued advantages, democratically distributed within the social group, in order to rescue or supplement the well-being of near (let alone distant) others History provides us with very little evidence that such redistributions can work on anything other than an occasional or one-off basis.

What would an alternative model of truly inclusive global public services look like then? I do not have a definitive answer to this question but would argue that the only way to move in a more universalist direction is with an explicit and unequivocal philosophical commitment to the notion that “public” services must be available to everyone in the world, with an associated collective responsibility of ensuring equitable global access.

If we are to address the urgent challenge of scaling up public services at a global level we are left with no option but to work with the “public” mechanisms currently in place (i.e. the state) and the potential for cross-border solidarity in the form of public-public and public-community partnerships. But we will also need to reclaim, rework and expand these tools and processes – extracting them from the ideological and material restrictions of

(neo)liberal capitalism and building new platforms of publicness that are more inclusive in their intent.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that we have little choice but to remake and reclaim notions of public, detaching it from its marketized constraints and applying new analytical frameworks. My proposal is to retain a core sense of universality while at the same time expanding this principle to include contextual subjectivities, captured in part by the pluralization of public to *publics*.

This extended notion of publics can be applied in concrete terms to a rehabilitated definition of what constitutes a public service: first by creating new, non-marketized indices that evaluate how “essential” a service is and to what extent it benefits from “collective provision”; and second by employing objective and subjective criteria to determine whether a service is best provided by a public or private agency in any given context. In other words, some services will always and necessarily be considered public, while others may be deemed best provided by the private sector, with goods and services in between that may vary from place to place. The key argument here is that decisions around public and private services need to be based on use values rather than exchange values, serving to create a more distinct ontological difference between our public and private spheres.

We are now left with the question of how to operationalize this new public service framework. What types of agencies should provide public services and how do we ensure that they advance non-marketized principles of flexible universality? It is to these questions that I turn next.

5 Within, Against and Beyond the State

There is no moment within the social process devoid of the capacity for transformative activity.

(Harvey, 1996, p. 105)

Having proposed a new conceptual framework for what defines a public service in the previous chapter, I turn now to the question of how to operationalize it. The focus in this chapter is on the role of governments in providing public services, examining the potential for working “within, against and beyond” the state, including spaces for non-state actors. The chapter explores different strategies for internal state reform as well as extra-state action, examining actual examples of pro-public change from different sectors and different parts of the world to demonstrate how the building of progressive, non-commercialized forms of state-led public services are possible.

Transforming the state for progressive public services is a massive challenge. As discussed in the first part of this book most governments are captured by the accumulation demands of capital as well as other narrow interest-group claims (be they ethnic nationalisms, institutionalized racism or other forms of socio-economic marginalization that shift the focus of public services away from principles of universality). Many public services have also been heavily commercialized by the practices and ideologies of New Public Management and the organizational structures and constraints of neoliberal forms of corporatization, entrenching private sector operating principles and mechanics in the public sector and creating entrepreneurial silos of activity which make holistic public sector planning and equity-oriented cross-subsidization difficult.

Additionally, most governments have witnessed extensive funding cuts over the past three decades, leaving them with a fraction of the capacity they once had to deal with an increasingly complex array of public responsibilities. Local governments tend to be the most affected by these fiscal constraints, with the push to decentralize resulting in massive un(der)funded mandates, as higher tiers of government move to reduce their own deficits (Beard et al.,

2008; Hackworth, 2002; Newman, 2014). Conflicts between different levels of state, for various reasons, have made matters worse, confounding problems of a lack of transparency, limiting forms of accountability and creating overly bureaucratic processes and frustrated public sector employees.

But that is the good news. In many parts of the world there is no effective state to reform. In large swathes of rural Africa, for example, state structures are so weak and so underfunded as to make them effectively non-existent when it comes to public service delivery. Building state capacity in these situations will require the development of brand-new human resources, physical capital and institutional norms and mechanisms, necessitating vast new investments.

This challenge of building public sector capacity from the ground up holds true in many wealthy parts of the world as well, where services have been in private hands for so long that the state's ability to offer public services has been gutted. In some cases, services have *never* been provided by the state, having been in private hands from their inception. Water services in Barcelona are an example. First formalized as a networked system in 1867, when the city council granted a concession to the private water company *Compañía de Aguas de Barcelona*, water provision has always been private (with the exception of a brief period during the Civil War of the 1930s when the company was collectivized by its workers) (March et al., 2019). Municipalizing water in Barcelona will therefore require the building of a first-ever public water operator – an opportunity to create a new type of public service, but an expensive and complicated process, as cities such as Paris and Berlin have learned in their (re)municipalization experiences (Beveridge et al., 2014; Cumbers & Becker, 2018; Hall et al., 2013).

As daunting as these challenges are, it is hard to imagine a world of universal public services without the state playing a central role. The sheer scale and urgency of public service needs requires capacity on a level that only states (individually and collectively) can provide. There are, for example, 660 million people without access to safe potable water, and more than 2.4 billion without access to sanitation, contributing to some two million deaths a year (mostly children) from water-borne diseases (WHO/UNICEF, 2015). It is expected to cost an estimated US\$150 billion per year to meet SDG targets 6.1 (universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water) and 6.2 (adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all) (World Bank, 2017a, p. 52). Adding in the costs of reducing water pollution, implementing integrated water resources management and protecting water-related ecosystems drives total global water and sanitation infrastructure needs to an estimated US\$6.7 trillion by 2030 and US\$22.6 trillion by 2050 (Ajami et al., 2018, p. 5). The most pressing needs are in the Global South, but high-income countries are also in serious deficit situations (Hutton, 2016); the United States, for example, requires an estimated US\$1 trillion in water and sanitation investment over the next 20 years (Tiemann, 2017, p. 9).

Electricity is another colossal task: close to one billion people are without access to electricity and a further three billion rely on risky and expensive solid fuels and kerosene for cooking and heating, with investment needs for achieving universal access to electricity estimated at \$45 billion a year (World Bank, 2017b, xi, 23). There are also massive gaps in health care, education and other services, with one estimate putting overall infrastructure investment requirements for roads, railways, ports, airports, power, water, and telecoms at \$3.7 trillion a year until 2035 (Woetzel et al., 2017, p. 2). Actual investment requirements can vary depending on assumptions made about the need for particular types of infrastructure and the purposes/people they serve, but the overall picture is one of immense need for investment and service delivery capacity.

Where will this funding and capability for public services come from if not from the state? Non-profit, non-state actors can and should play an important role in service planning and delivery – as we shall see below – but to argue, as much of the commons (and postcolonial) literature does, that we can rely on decentralized forms of community service to meet the urgent life-and-death needs of billions of people scattered around the globe is untenable. “Ordinary folks” can do “extraordinary things” (Esteva, 2014, 1157–58) but to expect small groups of people – especially those living in highly fragmented, transient and desperately poor informal settlements in cities in the South where services are most urgently required – to “spontaneously” improvise their “social collaboration” in the building of “incremental infrastructures” (Silver, 2014, p. 789) fails to account for the scale of service gaps and the improbability of building the necessary social fabric to deliver them in a relatively short space of time. Constructing grassroots organizational capacity and trust can take decades, and may be impossible in many cases given the highly transitory nature of urban populations and the increasing instability resulting from climate change. Informal urban settlements can indeed offer “a frontier for a wide range of diffuse experimentation.... [with] actors from different religious, ethnic, regional or political affiliations collaborating on the basis that no one expects such collaborations to take place or work” (Simone, 2004, p. 2, 9–10), but informal networking with very few resources does not lead to “endless possibilities” for addressing massive backlogs in global basic needs.

This is not to suggest that restyled state-led public services should be bulldozed – literally and figuratively – through the social fabric of society. My point here is that the fetishization of “community” and “spontaneity” steers our attention away from the necessity of rebuilding and democratizing state apparatuses. As problematic as they are, states are the only realistic option for managing the scale of service needs and addressing universality. As Cumbers (2015, p. 74) notes, “The state, with all its warts, remains that mediating space”. Like it or not, we have no choice but to remake, revise and reclaim the state as a central component of any short- or long-term public services programme.

How much change is required? Specifics will differ across place, time and sector, but my generic response to this question is that meaningful state reform will necessitate a shift beyond the confines of our variegated bourgeois public spheres, releasing “public services” from their marketized anchors and moving us towards less commodified and more equity-oriented service delivery. Institutional and legislative reforms can shift things in this direction but must be combined with substantive material change in terms of the surplus captured by the state and the resources available to public service production. The devil is always in the details – as will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#) with regards to measuring the performance of revamped public services – but in general the goal is to create state-led public services that redirect resources towards more universal expenditures prioritized by societal need rather than market demands.

None of the examples provided in this chapter are “perfect”, and many remain overly compromised by market concessions. Nor are they “revolutionary” in the sense of overthrowing capitalism as a whole (socialism is not possible in one sector). But they nevertheless provide concrete evidence of the potential for states to introduce *less* commercialized and *more* democratic and equitable forms of public services, illustrating the potential to move beyond the confines of our liberal public sphere *towards* a less-marketized and less-commodified world.

Within, Against and Beyond the State

In my discussion of state reform, I employ an analytical framework of working “within, against and beyond” the state. Originally associated with writers who sought to “destroy...and replace” the state (LEWRG, 1980, np) – because the state is always the “wrong way of doing things” (Holloway, 2010, p. 58) – my goal is to find theoretical and practical paths for remaking and transforming the state in ways that help to advance more democratic and equitable models of state-led public service provision.

I draw on a (re)emerging literature on the topic (Angel, 2017; Cumbers, 2015; Cumbers & Paul, 2020; Routledge et al., 2018) and employ a “strategic-relational” theory which sees state institutions as a form of social relations in which state power is a product of an ever-changing and ever-evolving condensation of the balance of forces that exist within and beyond its jurisdiction (Jessop, 2002a, 2000b, 2007). The state is not a monolithic, all-powerful, never-changing beast, but rather one moment of – and constitutive of – a broader ensemble of social and economic relationships which are open to struggle, with some state structures being “more open to some types of political strategy than others” (Jessop, 1990, p. 260). Although state actors tend to reproduce dominant social and economic relations,

struggle within and outside of the state can shape its form and function. The interests of managers and employees within the state are contingent

and in tension, while struggle from outside the state's apparatus can, on occasion, compel state institutions to be selective in subversive ways, shifting the balance of power.

As a result, "while state institutions are structurally biased towards the reproduction of prevailing relations, they are rendered as dynamic sites of struggle and contestation" (Angel, 2017, p. 561). State institutions can, in this sense, be "important generative and productive spaces" for challenging the private appropriation of communal resources (Cumbers, 2015, p. 71).

By contrast, much of the anti-state autonomous/commons literature "evacuates completely any responsibility to think about how counter-hegemonic projects can contest the dominance of the state and the public realm by neoliberal forces" (Cumbers, 2015, p. 72). It assumes that any left political movement that engages within the state invariably becomes co-opted into the ruling ethos of capitalistic governance. Rather than self-realization and radical democracy, it is argued that initiatives that involve engaging with the state "are doomed to reproducing existing forms of domination and oppression", disregarding the "continuing existence of public values of care, community and reciprocity, which can, and should, be mobilised into coalitions of democratic municipalism" (Cumbers & Paul, 2020, p. 51).

The capitalist state will not change itself entirely from within, but meaningful reform is possible if done in a strategic, multifaceted and multi-scalar manner, with the understanding that there will be enormous resistance and pushback from vested interests every step of the way. It is also important to acknowledge that state reform on its own does not necessarily mean change to the underlying economic system. Altering the dynamics of public service delivery can be an important step towards improved equity and sustainability, helping to capture a larger share of societal surplus, but ownership of key services will not in and of itself alter the underlying mechanisms of capital accumulation. As such, creating democratic, equitable and sustainable state-led public services is one part of a broad mix of resistance and change when it comes to reconstituting our public sphere. Working within, against and beyond the state must be part of that strategy.

Working within the State

It can be difficult at times to differentiate tactics of working "within the state" from those of working "against the state". This is partly because the two strategies often operate in tandem, with pressure from outside operating concurrently with efforts to change the state from within. In both cases the goal is to capture and revise existing state institutions and behaviours in ways that challenge how the state conceives public services and how they are delivered.

For heuristic purposes I refer to efforts to work "within" the state as those which involve actors and institutions inside the official apparatuses

of government, such as bureaucrats, front-line workers, politicians, political parties and parastatal agencies, as well as the budgetary and legislative powers they encompass. While never static or immune to outside pressure, the internal motions and mechanisms of the state are nevertheless sheltered to varying degrees from external influence, with some points of intervention being more open to change than others, depending on the context.

Although far from exhaustive – conceptually or empirically – what follows is an indication of the types of actors and strategies used to improve public service delivery from within the state, all of which have had some success in altering capacity to deliver public services in a more transparent and equitable manner.

Policy Change from Elected Officials

The first cluster of activities involves policy changes made by elected officials – either those in power or from politicians exerting sufficient pressure while in opposition to effect meaningful reform. Much of the change around basic public services has happened at the local level but national political parties have also had an impact, most notably with the “pink tide” governments of Latin America after 2000 (Castañeda et al., 2020; Chavez & Torres, 2014).

The election of a centre-left coalition party (*Frente Amplio* – Broad Front) in Uruguay in 2004 (and again in 2009 and 2014) is a useful illustration of how a change of government at the national level can significantly alter the ways in which public services are perceived and managed. After several decades of authoritarianism, followed by neoliberal policies of privatization, the new government was able to reclaim public ownership of a wide swathe of public services, from broadband internet to railways and water. Uruguay was also the first country in the world to hold a large-scale referendum to reverse water privatization, leading to a Constitutional amendment in 2004 recognizing the right to water and entrenching the principle of public ownership and management (Moshman, 2011). The government oversaw a massive restructuring of the ways in which public services are run, shifting from highly commercialized corporate silos that focused on their individual bottom lines to a more horizontal and collaborative form of inter-agency dialogue, while at the same time expanding their services vertically into the economy (e.g. offering fast and affordable broadband internet in rural areas and developing upstream manufacturing capacity in the form of telecoms infrastructure) (Chavez & Torres, 2014). These pro-public reforms were never absolute, however, with a private sector logic that remains embedded in Uruguay’s state apparatuses (Santos, 2021). The election of a centre-right national government in 2019 also threatens to roll back these reforms (Chavez, 2019), although widespread support in the general public for post-privatization services, and a significant shift in bureaucratic cultures, may be sufficient to resist these re-marketization pressures.

Similar change at the local level has been brought about by *Barcelona en Comú*, in Spain, a citizen platform launched in 2014 which won minority control of the Barcelona municipality in 2015 and which has introduced a wide range of governance reforms around public services, including efforts to municipalize the city's water services and create a municipally-owned electricity distributor (Charnok 2017, March et al., 2019). As one *en Comú* member noted about the choice to work for change from *within* the state: "We have tried everything. We have tried civil disobedience. We have tried negotiating with banks. Nothing works. We have to join institutions in order to change the way we make policy" (Gessen, 2018, np). The party's hold on power in a minority coalition is fragile, and constantly under attack by corporate interests in the city, but widespread popular support for public service reform may prove durable.

Spain and Uruguay are not alone. There have been at least 1400 cases of (re)municipalization and (re)nationalization of public services since the early 2000s, in countries as diverse as Canada, the United States, France, Germany, Hungary, Guinea, Tanzania, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Malaysia, Argentina and Bolivia (Kishimoto & Petitjean, 2017; Kishimoto et al., 2015; Kishimoto et al., 2020). Not all of these reversals are led by politicians – and not all have been done for democratic reasons (Horváth, 2014, McDonald, 2018a) – but elected officials have often played a key role in moving the remunicipalization agenda forward, either under pressure from, or in collaboration with, community groups, labour unions and non-governmental organizations.

It is also true that political parties can change their ideological stripes, with some using public ownership of essential services as a platform for change. Dramatic policy shifts in the Labour Party in the UK under Jeremy Corbin leading up the 2019 general election was one such example. Under Tony Blair, the party had been at the forefront of advancing the privatization and commercialization of public services. Corbin's Labour Party was committed to reversing these trends, with comprehensive policy positions on how they would renationalize water, railways and other services if elected (Albertson, 2019; Labour Party, 2018). Other electoral issues – notably Brexit – led to the ousting of Corbin and a shift back to (neo)liberalism for the Labour Party, but the party's pro-public policy platforms have helped to revitalize popular discussions about reclaiming state services in the UK and contributed to the building of a robust and ongoing dialogue about a pro-public reforms in the country. Opinion polls in late 2021 suggested that more than half of UK residents support renationalizing energy companies despite repeated attacks on deprivatization mainstream press and the fact that the new Labour Party leader has rejected any renationalization initiatives (Chaplain, 2021).

Similar possibilities (and limitations) apply to the Democratic Party in the United States, where growing interest in a "New Green Deal" with massive spending on public services, and the creation of public banks to

finance a transition to green energy have been gaining ground since 2019, despite centrist Democratic Party stalwarts working aggressively to sideline this movement (Anzilotti, 2019; Koepfel et al., 2019). Elected politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders have helped to expand and revitalize a long-standing tradition of socialized public services in the US, contributing to the building of a broad-based debate on the renewal of public services across a wide and diverse demographic (Hanna & McDonald, 2021), with cities such as New York and Los Angeles courting the possibility of municipally- or state-owned public banks to finance the expansion of equity-oriented public services (see neweconomynyc.org and publicbankla.com).

Bureaucratic Reform

Government bureaucrats can also be a source of pro-public change, although they do present their own challenges. They are often the most conservative of state officials, with a vested interest in the status quo and little in the way of political training or engagement. Growing entrepreneurialism in government has also served to make bureaucrats resistant to radical change, with little power to alter policy even if they wanted to.

Despite these impediments there have been many cases of bureaucrats leading progressive pro-public reforms (Albaladejo & Bel, 2021; Bel & Warner, 2015; Carlström et al., 2021). Many see the effects of privatization and commercialization first-hand and have felt its impact on themselves and their communities. In the city of Paris, for example, municipal bureaucrats worked closely with elected officials to bring water services back in-house when the 25-year contracts with Suez and Veolia came to an end in 2010 (all the more remarkable given that these giant French water multinationals have their headquarters in Paris, with a history of lucrative employment opportunities for city officials) (Valdovinos, 2012). Administrators of the new *Eau de Paris* have since been active in developing progressive upstream water management practices with farmers, developing social tariffs for low-income households, and assisting other municipalities in their efforts to remunicipalize (Le Strat, 2014). In fact, it is at the bureaucratic level that we have seen some of the most progressive and internationally-networked efforts to remunicipalize water services, with organizations such as *Aqua Publica Europea* driving institutional, legislative and ideological change amongst public water operator managers across the continent, including engineers and accountants.

Another example of progressive bureaucrat-led reform is that of Costa Rica's Banco Popular and Germany's Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, public banks that have led the way in funding the transition to renewable energy using public finance (Marois, 2017). Although very different in their structure and management, both public institutions have mandates to promote sustainable environmental initiatives and have been catalytic factors

in each country's move to greener sources of electricity. In Costa Rica this has been augmented by a commitment to gender equity and the inclusion of workers voices in the development of new green infrastructure.

Not all bureaucratic change is done for progressive reasons, however, and in some cases efforts to strengthen public services can result in a deepening of their commercialization. Municipal managers in the United States, for example, have brought dozens of water services back in-house, but their reasons for doing so have been largely pragmatic and commercial, driven by the cost savings associated with internalizing monopoly production, with decision makers regularly swinging back and forth between public and private service delivery, depending on the perceived financial benefits of insourcing versus outsourcing, serving to perpetuate the trap of a public-private continuum rather than disrupting it (Warner & Aldag, 2021; Warner & Hefetz, 2012). Similar dynamics have occurred elsewhere (Lindholst, 2021).

Front-Line Workers and Public Sector Unions

A third major actor working within the state is that of front-line public sector service workers and their unions. While union membership in general has been falling steadily over the past 50 years, public sector unionization has held its ground, and even expanded in some countries (Reder, 1988; Ross & Savage, 2013). In Canada, public sector union density increased from 12% in 1960 to more than 70% in 2010, while in the United States it increased from 11% to 36%, with nearly half of all union members in that country working for various levels of government (Economist, 2011; Hower, 2017; OECD, 2017).

Many public sector workers and their unions see public service reforms as central to the work they do. They experience the impact of privatization and commercialization first-hand (at work and at home), with many pushing for more equitable and transparent forms of public services. Public sector unions have been some of the most active and sophisticated public sector reform advocates in the world, with organizations such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), UNISON in the UK, the Kenya County Government Workers Union (KLGWU), the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Acuavalle SA ESP (SINTRACUAVALLE) in Colombia, and the Philippine Government Employees' Association (PGEA) being just a few examples of those which have both resisted privatization as well as pushed for democratic reforms. There are also regional and global federations of public sector unions, such as the European Public Service Union (EPSU) and Public Services International (PSI), with the latter representing 20 million workers in 700 unions in 163 countries and territories, all of which are able to mobilize for pro-public change to varying degrees, and on a scale that few other organizations can match (see world-psi.org).

Many of these unions and their federations have extensive research programmes, training for members, and campaigns with other (non-union)

organizations to promote and improve public service delivery (such as the effort co-led by EPSU to formalize the human right to water and sanitation in the European Union, collecting more than 1.8 million signatures from EU citizens – see right2water.eu). In some cases unions also coordinate efforts of civil disobedience within the state, encouraging workers to resist efforts to commercialize, or by extending public services to those who might otherwise be denied (such as campaigns in the United States to ensure service delivery to undocumented migrants in “sanctuary cities”). In some cases, public sector unions have worked with communities to create coalitions for service delivery (such as the worker-community coalition for public water provision in a peri-urban neighbourhood in Colombia, described later in this chapter).

Unions are no panacea, of course. They are constantly short on resources, often stretched to their limits, and regularly forced to dedicate most of their time fighting rear-guard battles to protect jobs from privatization and austerity rather than working proactively to promote a new vision of publicness. As a result, some public sector unions have understandably become stuck in anti-privatization mode, protecting existing public services regardless of their flaws. In these instances public sector unions and their workers can be obstacles to progressive public service reform, having become just as rooted in the benefits of the status quo as their white-collar counterparts, entrenching a system of public service delivery that is not as equitable or as universal as it could be.

Nor are public sector unions always opposed to privatization, with some seeing private sector engagement as an opportunity for themselves and their members to benefit from profit-sharing and other commercialized performance incentives (Jalette & Hebdon, 2012; Marois, 2008; Skerrett, 2018; Swift & Stewart, 2005; Warner & Hefetz, 2020). In some cases unions have even resisted the reversal of privatization, such as in Barcelona where the union representing workers at the private water company have been fighting efforts by *Barcelona en Comú* and others to municipalize the service (driven in part by fear mongering around job security on the part of the private firm (March et al., 2019; for similar dynamics in Bulgaria see Medarov & McDonald, 2019)).

These are real-life choices that public sector unions face in terms of pushing for reform versus protecting the status quo, illustrating the inherent tensions associated with any inside strategy for change. As such, working within the state is always insufficient on its own, with vested interests often reluctant to introduce change, and with market-oriented “institutions of the capitalist state...continually seeking to frustrate such endeavours” (Angel, 2017, p. 573).

Working against the State

The second component of a pro-public strategy is that of working against the state, defined here as activity taken by non-state actors outside of official state apparatuses intended to create change with existing state mechanisms

or new systems altogether. Once again, efforts to work “against the state” are often done in conjunction with efforts to work “within the state”, but for heuristic purposes it is important to explore these external activities and strategies separately, starting with protests against governments.

Protests

Mass protests have long been a tool for attempting to change policies of the state, and public services are no different. The most common are protests against privatization, many of which have been effective in forcing governments to terminate private contracts or not to privatize in the first place (Fletcher et al., 2018; Kingstone et al., 2013; Kwon & Kim, 2017; Uba, 2005). Tactics vary across time and place – with “virtual” campaigns overtaking feet-on-the-ground protests in many locales (Poster, 2021; Saura et al., 2017) – but the use of mass protest remains a potent and effective tool for creating pro-public change from outside the state.

A new form of public service protest has also begun to emerge: that of protesting against governments which claim to be promoting “public” services but which have failed to deliver them equitably and transparently. I refer to these as “anti-public public protests”, and they typically occur in locations where governments have opted to keep services in public hands but have implemented commercially-oriented or undemocratic public sector reforms. One example is that of South Africa, where the post-apartheid government resisted World Bank pressures to privatize services when they first came to power in the mid-1990s, but then introduced neoliberal forms of corporatization in the name of staying “public”. The result has been deeply commercialized forms of public services founded on private-sector operating principles, with widespread service cutoffs for nonpayment and poor quality services in low-income neighbourhoods (McDonald & Ruiters, 2005; Miraftab & Wills, 2005). Initially, residents of low-income and largely black communities were reluctant to protest – in no small part due to the moral pressures applied by the newly-elected government of Nelson Mandela in the mid-1990s, which insisted that paying for public services was their moral duty, despite ongoing inequalities. Two and a half decades on, however, most low-income South Africans remain frustrated with the lack of meaningful public service reforms and the country now witnesses the largest number of anti-public public protests of any country in the world (Alexander, 2010; Alexander & Pfaffe, 2014; Breakfast et al., 2021; De Juan & Wegner, 2019; Netswera, 2014). National, regional and local governments in South Africa, meanwhile, continue to insist that they offer progressive and democratic public services.

Similar dynamics have unfolded in Ghana, where the national government awarded a five-year contract in 2006 to Aqua Vitens Rand Ltd (AVRL), a joint venture of the public Dutch company Vitens and the public South African company Rand Water. Notably, the Ghanaian government

had rejected an earlier World Bank-backed bid for a contract with a private American firm (Azurix), in part so it could argue that the contract with AVRIL was not “privatization”. They then actively touted the “public” credentials of the two outside firms. Dramatic rises in prices, failures to meet requirements for new connections and a host of other problems plagued the contract from the start and it was not renewed in 2011, largely because of protests by civil society organizations who saw the reforms as little more than a disguised form of privatization in the name of being public (Agyeman, 2007; Mvulirwenande et al., 2019).

I cite these examples to demonstrate not just the importance of protests against privatization, but the growing need for organized resistance against governments that introduce public service reforms that reproduce the logic of private sector management within the public sector. Anti-public public protests will likely need to become a larger part of the pro-public protest *modus operandi* in the future if we are to develop better awareness of the compromised nature of many “public” services as well as the need to accommodate more diverse and nuanced notions of “publics”.

Legal Action Against the State

There has also been a rise in formal legal action against the state in an effort to force progressive public service reform. The two most common instruments are referenda and litigation, with the water sector once again illustrating how effective these methods can be. Uruguay was the first country in the world to use a referendum to reverse water privatization in 2004 (Moshman, 2011). Success in that country spawned similar efforts elsewhere, including a referendum in Berlin in 2011 which saw residents vote by a margin of more than 98% to force the municipal administration to disclose secret agreements on the partial privatization of the city’s water services, eventually leading to the remunicipalization of that city’s water (Becker et al., 2015). Activists in Italy also employed a referendum in which 96% of voters rejected plans to privatize water, which has helped with remunicipalization campaigns in various Italian cities (Bieler, 2015; Carrozza & Fantini, 2016; for a review of Turkey’s experience see Zaifer, 2020).

There have been successful cases of litigation against governments as well. The remunicipalization of water in Grenoble (France) in 2000, for example, was the result of several court cases over a ten-year period where judges eventually declared the private contract to be illegal due to corruption and false information, with water services being returned to public ownership to avoid related forms of contract bribery (Lobina & Hall, 2007). A similarly long legal battle has been fought in Jakarta, Indonesia, where activists have been attempting to annul a contract with two private water companies on legal grounds, including arguments that the contracts breach a Constitutional right to water. A partial remunicipalization of the service

is possible, but resistance from private companies and factions of the state remain strong (Lobina et al., 2019).

Legal tactics have their limits as well. Individual laws should be seen as part of a larger legal framework that regulates service provision, not all of which is favourable to public options. Ongoing and dedicated reviews of the legal status of public delivery is essential, ideally tied to a larger public education campaign to inform citizens of their rights, without which legal change can be worth little more than the paper it is written on. In Uruguay, for example, foreign private water companies were effectively ousted from the country, and water services are amongst the best in Latin America, but public-private partnerships continue, contravening the hard-fought Constitutional amendment to make it illegal to privatize water in that country (Dugard & Drage, 2012; Chavez, 2019; Santos, 2021).

Finally, it is essential that activists are not lulled into a false sense of accomplishment when working with progressive, but still market-oriented, state regimes. Partial successes should always be celebrated, but the potential for these gains to be clawed back or overwhelmed by broader market forces cannot be forgotten. Unless governments are explicitly committed to confronting the commodification of public services and disrupting the role essential infrastructure plays in the accumulation goals of private capital the threat of ongoing capture in our bourgeoisie public sphere remains. Nowhere is this more true than with market-oriented liberal governments which insist that services are in “public hands” but continue to commercialize through the back door (such as the Canadian government’s so-called “public infrastructure bank” who’s actual mandate is to invest in “revenue-generating infrastructure projects... that attract private capital” in public services (see cib-bic.ca)). In some respects, these are the most treacherous of “public” reforms, creating an illusion of pro-public change while deepening the penetration of private capital and undermining the potential for more meaningful public service transformation.

Working Beyond the State

A third cluster of activities relates to working “beyond the state”, by which I mean actions taken by non-state actors to develop (relatively) autonomous non-state mechanisms, practices and ideologies for public service delivery. I place *relatively* in brackets here because some of these activities are a form of co-production with the state, while others are done at arm’s length with little or no state involvement. The rationale and outcomes of these two strategies are dissimilar and demand separate discussions.

Co-production

A popular term for public services that involve the collaboration of state and non-state actors is “co-production”, and refers to regularized, long-term

arrangements between state agencies and groups of citizens, NGOs and other formal or informal non-profit groups, where both make substantial contributions to decision making or delivery (Bovaird, 2007; Nabatchi et al., 2017). The rationale for this model is that top-down centralized state-driven services operating on their own become detached from the people they serve – failing to perform as well as they could – while service users become docile consumers, unconnected to and uninformed about the services provided to them. Direct involvement of citizens therefore has a double benefit: it “transforms the service, but [citizens] are themselves transformed by the service.... Some aspects or components of the system rub off on one another through the production process. This means we must go beyond the perspective of a one-way relationship between state and third sector as principal and agent, or provider and recipient” (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006, p. 496).

Co-production is not a new idea, with roots in the corporatist models of welfare development in northern Europe in the 19th century, although it has been more recently associated with the growth of outsourcing and New Public Management from the 1990s (a point we return to below) (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006). As such, there is no singular ideological or institutional model of co-production, with definitions as diverse as its practices. I would argue, however, that we can categorize co-production activities into two broad groups: those that are done out of necessity (where the state is either unable or unwilling to provide a service to a particular location/group), and those done by choice (where non-state organizations have deliberately chosen to engage with governments, and vice versa, in an effort to create a hybrid model of delivery).

The first category is not uncommon in low-income neighbourhoods, particularly in countries in the South, where state failure has obligated citizen engagement. Examples include self-help sanitation programmes in Pakistan, community water projects in Cameroon, electricity extension in Egypt, and solid waste management in Thailand (Hasan, 2006; Ibrahim, 2006; Mongkolnchaiarunya, 2005; Njoh, 2003). It is tempting to dismiss these models of co-production as either a false example of collaboration (given that people have been *forced* to co-produce rather than having done so of their own volition), or as a neoliberal celebration of entrepreneurialism and a quasi-privatization of service delivery (Adams & Boateng, 2018; Johnston, 2016). Both criticisms can be valid, with many co-produced services being exploitative of the most marginalized groups of society or simply leading to more extensive forms of privatization, with the citizen co-producer taking over from the state and operating on a for-profit basis. Nevertheless, many forms of co-production have no pre-determined outcome, being simply a politics of desperation rather than any coherent political strategy. Some have proved to be relatively democratic and equitable in practice due to the social pressures of community engagement and their proximity to end consumers (Jakobsen & Andersen, 2013; McMillan et al., 2014; Xu & Tang, 2020).

Good or bad, these involuntary forms of co-production are so widespread and so essential to the survival of hundreds of millions of people that they cannot be dismissed from our public service lexicon simply because they are not “pure” or inherently “progressive” forms of publicness. One illustrative example is that of faith-based health care in Uganda (Dambisya et al., 2014). Originally introduced as a Christian missionary project during the colonial era, faith-based health care in the country now includes Islamic institutions and provides a full range of health services in more than 300 facilities, predominantly in poor rural areas, with limited financial support from the state. While critics argue that reliance on these non-state organizations allows the state to ignore its responsibility for health care provision (morally and financially), Dambisya et al found positive co-production outcomes that are arguably better than state-run health facilities. They identified effective multi-stakeholder engagement, cross-subsidization schemes that protect users against catastrophic health expenditure, and equitable access to health services without discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnic group or place of origin. Faith-based organizations were also involved in facilitating the extension of amenities such as electricity and water. Although “in principle it remains inherently unfair for government not to establish its own facilities in all parts of the country ... and in some cases anti-liberal positions on questions such as contraception, homosexuality and divorce” have negatively impacted health outcomes, faith-based provision is deeply “integrated in the health system [of Uganda], and is embedded in the national psyche It is our view that the [faith-based] model can be replicated in other African countries due to the strong religious attachments of many communities on the continent, and should be promoted to complement government efforts as an alternative to privatization” (Dambisya et al., 2014, pp. 2–3).

The second category of co-production are cases where governments and non-state actors collaborate *by choice* in locations where governance capacity is relatively strong. User cooperatives are one such example – i.e. agencies owned and operated by consumers of a service, and managed for their benefit on a non-profit basis, tied into broader state infrastructures. Energy cooperatives are a popular example, and although they date back to the early 20th century, the push for renewable forms of electricity has seen a rapid rise in their formation in the past few decades (Capellán-Pérez et al., 2018; Klagge & Meister, 2018). The GoiEner Cooperative in northern Spain is one such case, formed as a response to the oligopolistic nature of electricity provision in the country, as well as growing energy poverty in the region. Since 2012 the cooperative has grown to include nearly 9000 members, with the aim of providing affordable energy, increasing democratic engagement, and ensuring equal representation of women and men in the governance of the organization.¹ The cooperative does not replace a failed state, but works with existing government institutions to create a hybridized public service on a non-commercial, democratic and transparent basis.

Participatory budgeting is another popular co-production activity, where community members are able to participate in certain spending decisions on government budgets (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Sintomer et al., 2016). First established in Brazil in the late 1980s, participatory budgeting has spread to thousands of cities around the world and has been used to allocate spending priorities in services as diverse as education, housing and transportation, with tens of thousands of people often engaged in the process (Wampler, 2010). Critics have pointed to the limited authority of their budget decisions, and cooptation of the process by state forces and other powerful interests, but participatory budgeting nevertheless illustrates the *potential* for non-state actors to work outside formal state institutions while still engaging with them to make a difference in the way public services are operationalized (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014).

Semi-autonomous Production

A very different approach to working beyond the state is that of semi-autonomous production, with non-state entities working with a significant degree of independence from government. As Frenk (2018, p. 5) explains with respect to water provision in rural parts of Mexico, many residents feel that municipal government procedures “rule out participation by local residents and instead foster clientelism and corruption”. As such they are opposed to putting public water entirely into state hands, demanding considerable control over how services are provided.

I am not speaking here of demands for *fully autonomous* forms of production of the kinds outlined by Esteva (2014, i157) – “No leaders, No parties” – where there is no formal state engagement at all. I am referring to quasi autonomous systems that operate intentionally with, but largely outside of, formal state apparatuses. One such example is a worker-community collective that provides water to low-income residents in a peri-urban area of Cali, Colombia, where there is a rich tradition of community-owned water services (*acueductos comunitarios*) (Bélanger et al., 2014). In this case the community system was under threat of privatization, which resulted in a coalition of workers from the municipally owned water operator, representatives from the state environmental agency, and local citizens. It took years to build the trust necessary to come to a formal agreement between the groups but eventually they were able to stave off privatization and expand the community-run service. In the process, the community’s aqueduct staff “found that learning about laws and norms was an especially valuable payoff from the partnership because they had no formal training in managing water systems” (Bélanger et al., 2014, 3). They received information from the municipal workers on how to improve metering and tariff structures for more equitable pricing, which also served to create a more socially and financially sustainable community aqueduct. Since the creation of the alliance, “the service network has expanded, leaks have been fixed, and there has been no water

rationing (formerly a common problem in summer months). On the environmental front, staff from the community association have learned to monitor the watersheds regularly and to report violations; they are now collaborating with neighbouring aqueducts in recognition of their shared responsibility to protect the watersheds they all rely on” (Bélanger et al., 2014, 3).

Water activists in Colombia see this project as a promising alternative to both marketized public management as well as top-down state-centric systems, demonstrating that democratic, non-profit, community-run and locally controlled public services are viable. Nevertheless, coordinating groups with very different organizational forms, capacities, ideologies and histories is never guaranteed, requiring sustained effort and trust on all sides. Nor is it a model that can be easily reproduced elsewhere. In Bolivia, for example, peri-urban indigenous communities were an important part of the fight to reclaim public water in Cochabamba after a private contractor was ousted in 2001, but these groups then rejected municipal control because they wanted to reclaim their usufruct rights to water, a form of collective management based on social agreements negotiated and renegotiated over time known as *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs) (Boelens et al., 2010; Marston, 2015; Terhorst et al., 2013). There have been some efforts to integrate this semi-autonomous model of water management within the larger restructuring of the new public water agency, but it continues to be a major stumbling block in finding a broadly acceptable new public service model in that city (Marston, 2014; Razavi, 2021).

There are also limits to what is possible from non-state actors. Most people have limited energy to commit to activities outside work and family – particularly in marginalize low-income neighbourhoods – and with so many important public services to contend with it is not clear how much or how long people can participate in the co-production of services. As Mansbridge (1998, p. 12) notes: “Most of us...cannot wage this struggle everyday”; a point reinforced by Angel’s (2016, 31) observation that “Few of us have the time to take part in complex decision-making when we spend so much time at work”. Just how much citizen energy and capacity is available “beyond the state” will vary across place and sector, but the potential for non-paid, non-state actors to sustain their commitments to public service delivery across a wide range of sector in perpetuity is necessarily limited and must be factored into any long-term pro-public advocacy strategy.

Scaling Up (Again)

Working within, against and beyond the state to reclaim and remake state-led public services will be difficult at the local level where people are most able to engage. Implementing such a strategy at a global level will be exponentially more challenging. And yet international state-led action is essential if we are to address public service challenges and reforms on a global scale.

The most immediate obstacle in this regard is a lack of effective (and progressive) global state institutions. Many UN agencies have a global presence but none have the resources or the political authority to provide services at scale or to operate freely within the boundaries of sovereign states (with the exception of Security Council orders for armed interventions or economic sanctions, which do little to advance progressive public service reforms). Nor is there evidence that the UN would be inclined to introduce pro-public market reforms of the type being discussed in this book, given the organization's general neoliberal drift over the past few decades, including overt support for privatization in many of its agencies and in its Sustainable Development Goals (Joshi & O'Dell, 2013; Martens, 2020; Utting & Zammit, 2009).

Other multilateral organizations are even more problematic, with mainstream international financial institutions such as the World Bank having been at the forefront of pushing for private sector participation in service delivery. Although many of these organizations have begun to question their zealous support for privatization most remain committed to commercialized forms of public management and, in particular, the private funding of public services through mechanisms such as blended finance (Dimakou et al., 2021; Murray & Spronk, 2019). The potential for progressive pro-public change driven by these agencies is remote. Extensive interviews with a broad cross-section of powerful international agencies on the question of remunicipalization in the water sector, for example, found little in the way of awareness of the trend and virtually no support for it (McDonald, 2019).

Nevertheless, we cannot abandon efforts to work "within" these global organizations. There are agencies in the UN system which are actively pushing for progressive public service reforms. One such example is the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, which has become increasingly critical of the privatization agenda of other multilateral agencies (e.g. UNCTAD, 2019). The Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (Gwopa) is another illustration of this potential. Founded by UN-Habitat in 2009, Gwopa is a platform for bringing together public water operators from around the world to build public-public partnerships with the aim of creating "solidarity, learning, friendship, cultural experience, career development and integrity". Many innovative north-south and south-south linkages have emerged, and Gwopa has contributed to a growing international awareness of progressive public water practices, including hosting important networking initiatives amongst public water operators during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis (Laird & Bernal, 2020). Participation in Gwopa is open to organized labour, NGOs, community groups and academics. It is a relatively small but important institution that has the potential to create meaningful networks, conduct critical research, and build links between pro-public state institutions, unions, researchers and communities.

Gwopa has its internal tensions, however. From the outset, the association has been open to private water companies (represented by Aquafed,

the largest federation of private water multinationals in the world). Gwopa documentation also refers to the need for “commercially viable” water services, and its water operator members tend to use the same narrow financial performance indicators as private companies, encouraging market-based operating principles (Boag & McDonald, 2010). The bilateral and multilateral aid agencies that fund Gwopa can reinforce these trends, with one senior bilateral aid representative claiming that she “does not care if the water providers [in Gwopa] are public or private, as long as they get the job done” (McDonald, 2013).

The most effective way to engage with multilateral public agencies may therefore be to work *against* them, particularly those that actively promote privatized or commercialized forms of public services. It will also be important to watch for newly emerging multilateral actors such as the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which employs the language of public financing for public services, and is often viewed as a challenge to the neoliberal hegemony of the Bretton Woods institutions, but in many respects reproduces and reinforces the push for various forms of privatization (Pandita, 2015). There are also large sovereign wealth funds and public pension funds which have been investing in public infrastructure on an international scale, and although they are less well-known and less transparent than multilateral banks, they have begun to play a significant role in financing and investing equity in key public service sectors such as electricity and transportation (Skerrett, 2018). For the most part, their aim is to maximize their returns, often promoting commercialization and privatization. One such example (discussed in more detail later in the book) is the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Fund, which represents public sector teachers in Canada and is the majority owner of privatized water and sanitation services in Chile (OTPP, 2011). Attempts have been made by public sector unions to challenge these investment strategies, but aggressive counter-campaigns by pension fund managers, and the fact that many public pension funds have been effectively privatized and now operate independently from their members, make it difficult to change (Orenstein, 2013). Working *against* these multilateral public finance institutions in the form of “anti-public public protests” will become increasingly necessary in the future.

Finally, it is also important to go *beyond* the state when engaging with multilateral agencies. International NGOs such as the Transnational Institute and Focus on the Global South have been enormously effective in creating global alliances of civil society organizations, unions, academics and others to promote pro-public agendas and propose alternative institutions. So have global union umbrella organizations such as Public Services International, often working with NGOs and community organizations to create powerful pro-public coalitions demanding global change outside formalized international networks. One such example is Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), whose goal is to “Connect the energy democracy agenda to union struggles and campaigns in ways that build broad membership engagement,

increase worker power, and facilitate solidarity across movements that share similar goals”.² Another example is energy-democracy.net, a coalition of activists, academics and practitioners “taking back power over the energy sector, kicking-back against the rule of the market and reimagining how energy might be produced, distributed and used”. In some cases these networks operate collaboratively with progressive multilateral institutions, but for the most part they work outside and against these global apparatuses in an effort to create a new type of dialogue on non-commercialized public service reform.

Conclusion

A strategy of working “within, against and beyond” the state helps moves us beyond the neoclassical trap of “state versus private”, but we are nevertheless left with a series of tensions: What is the right balance between state and non-state actors? Can private groups such as NGOs and local community associations be expected to work towards universal goals when their interests are necessarily bound up by geographic constraints and particular social interests? Is co-production merely a form of exploitation in the name of participation, offloading costs on to communities, or can it drive substantial public service transformation? Have these public service reforms moved us sufficiently beyond the narrow logic of the market to less commodified systems of production and consumption, or have they served to obfuscate ongoing dynamics of private capital accumulation?

The examples of pro-public state reforms outlined in this chapter all suffer from these pressures and contradictions to varying degrees. There are no “perfect” examples of pro-public reforms, and all require intensive empirical investigation to gauge the degree of change taking place on the ground. Some of the examples highlighted here may ultimately serve to entrench commodification rather than dissolve it.

My goal, however, has been to demonstrate the *potential for* and *necessity of* remodelling the state for improved public services, arguing that the state should be framed as an institutionalized form of malleable social relations open to struggle and re-assembly. Remaking the state is both constitutive of and vital to the remaking of our public spheres. In fighting for new state formations we are creating both the potential for renewed forms of public services as well as building new norms and expectations for what constitutes a public process. There is no guarantee of positive change, and any effort to (re)capture the state must be multifaceted and creative in its approach, but for those on the left who think that state power has no role to play in political transformations I once again quote David Harvey, who insists that “they’re crazy. Incredible power is located there and you can’t walk away from it as though it doesn’t matter” (as cited in [Berlinguer & Wainwright, 2009](#)).

Calling out *inadequate* models of state capture and public reform will be an important part of this pro-public process. But for this to happen there

must also be a shared model of measuring pro-public change, as well as comparable indicators across sectors and locations. It is only with some form of flexibilized universal measurement that we can determine if a particular set of public service reforms offer us an alternative to marketized public service provision, or not. It is to this question of public service performance measurement that I now turn.

Notes

1. See www.energy-democracy.net/?p=1190
2. <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/about/about-the-initiative/>

6 Measuring Success

We are all benchmarkers now.

Jacques Santer, former President of the European Commission (quoted in [Sisson et al., 2003](#), p. 16)

In the struggle to create better forms of public services it is important to remember that there will never be “perfect” models of service delivery. Nor will public services look exactly the same across time, place or sector, with public preferences and priorities shaped by their social, economic and geographic contexts.

And yet, it is essential that we are able to measure the performance of public services across these different dimensions to assess the degree to which they are meeting their stated goals of reform – particularly the extent to which they have moved beyond the logic of marketization. Without some widely agreed upon form of measurement it is difficult to learn from and share “good practices” in the building of a global pro-public movement.

Unlike some critics of performance evaluation, I will argue in this chapter that the benchmarking of public services is an important and productive component of pro-public reform. It is also unavoidable, given that standardized benchmarking systems already exist in virtually every service sector in every corner of the world, with well-established and powerful adjudicating agencies determining what constitutes success and failure. In other words, performance evaluation is already being done, much of which measures, celebrates and reproduces commercialization tendencies, necessitating some form of engagement with this enormously influential trend in public services. Relatively little critical attention has been paid to the origins of these benchmarking systems, their lack of suitability for assessing progressive pro-public reforms, and what can be done to change them.

My goals in this chapter are threefold. First, to demonstrate the growing influence of benchmarking in public services and its bias towards top-down, market-oriented and Eurocentric indicators. Second, to impress upon readers the value of benchmarking despite these problems. And third, to outline a proposed new model of public services performance evaluation that could

be adopted in different sectors in different locations in ways that are more democratic and less commercial than the benchmarking systems currently in place. This proposed model follows the same principles outlined in previous chapters as they relate to developing new conceptual frameworks of publicness – i.e. a core set of universal normative values that are broadly progressive and less-commodified than existing “public” norms, while at the same time allowing for flexibility in terms of how new standards are assessed and weighted in different contexts. My focus here will be on the water sector (which I am most familiar with) but the arguments are relevant to other public services, all of which could (and should) develop progressive new forms of benchmarking with similar principles of universality and flexibility.

As with all of the changes proposed in this book, altering existing forms of performance evaluation systems in public services will not be easy. There will be stiff resistance from agencies that have invested heavily in current benchmarking systems (including the World Bank and the International Organization for Standardization). There will also be resistance from public service managers who have devoted considerable time and energy into developing these models and adopting them into their daily routines (particularly managers who benefit from marketized indicators and whose salaries are increasingly tied to achieving or maintaining certain performance standards). Even managers and policy makers who do not like existing benchmarking systems, and who may be committed to the idea of new, pro-public performance measurement systems, will find it difficult to shift gears given the enormous time and energy required to develop and implement new models, particularly if they include the sort of contextualized flexibility I am proposing here. The fact that most performance evaluations are conducted by technical staff (such as accountants and engineers with little qualitative or political training) exacerbates the challenge.

The Rise (and Rise) of Benchmarking

Modern benchmarking originated with private industry in the 1950s and was popularized by the Xerox Corporation in the 1970s in the United States in response to what the company saw as a rising competitive threat from Japanese technological firms (Camp, 1989; Levy & Ronco, 2012; Sisson et al., 2003). Benchmarking is grounded in the use of quantifiable performance indicators for analyzing the internal activities of individual organizations, but takes on comparative yardstick characteristics when used to compare performance across organizations as well as across place and time (Pidd, 2012). For benchmarking to work, therefore, organizations must all (and always) use the same performance metrics. By the mid-1990s “almost four out of five companies in Europe, North America and South East Asia were reported to be using benchmarking”, prompting then-president of the European Commission, Jacques Santer, to claim that “we are all benchmarkers now” (Sisson et al., 2003, p. 16).

Enthusiasm for benchmarking in the public sector developed soon after, concurrent with (not coincidentally) the rise of New Public Management and the push for privatization. In fact, it was the privatization of public services in the United Kingdom during the 1980s that was arguably the single most important catalyst in the adoption of benchmarking by public agencies, with the creation of the Water Services Regulation Authority for England and Wales (OFWAT) in 1989, for example, intended to quantitatively track the effects of privatization over time. Regulators and policy makers in other countries took note, with the benchmarking process quickly spreading around the world. In the United States, the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act “precipitated a virtual orgy of measurement” in the public sector (Pollitt, 2000, p. 120).

So too did academics jump on the bandwagon, with an associated proliferation of scholarly work on the topic. Dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and entire academic and managerial journals are now dedicated to performance evaluation and benchmarking in a wide range of sectors (although remarkably little of it engages critically with the theoretical presumptions or institutional foundations of mainstream benchmarking systems (Francis & Holloway, 2007)).

Benchmarking has now been adopted in virtually every major public service. It is “widespread” in the energy sector, for example, with electricity distribution having “witnessed a wave of regulatory reforms aimed at improving efficiency through benchmarking ... namely measuring a company’s efficiency and rewarding them accordingly” (Farsi et al., 2007, p. 1). Similar dynamics have unfolded in health care, waste management, and a host of other services, most of which employ similar statistical evaluative methodologies recommended by centralized agencies (Resnick et al., 1995; Jamasb and Pollitt 2000; Ettorchi-Tardy et al., 2012; Leal Filho et al., 2016; Sharma & Balachandra, 2015).

The water sector has one of the most advanced and widespread benchmarking networks. After OFWAT’s adoption of performance tracking in the UK there was a flurry of activity to establish international benchmarking systems, including the creation of the International Benchmarking Network for Water and Sanitation Utilities (IBNET) by the World Bank in 1996, the formation of task groups within the International Water Association (IWA) to explore “best practices” in the late 1990s, the publication of the International Organization for Standardization’s (ISO) 24510 series on “Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services” in 2007, and the establishment of an annual IWA-sponsored international conference on performance measurements in 2008 (Alegre et al., 2008; Bowerman et al., 2002; Cabrera et al., 2010; Cabrera et al., 2011; Danilenko et al., 2014; Parena et al., 2002).

There are now dozens of national water benchmarking associations and a growing number of regional groups. European water operators have been particularly active in this regard, with several established regional

benchmarking programmes in place (e.g. the European Benchmarking Cooperation, EBC (largely Dutch and Scandinavian) and Aquabench (largely German)). Additional programmes are being developed by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European umbrella association for national water federations (Eureau), and the European Commission (which, unlike other models mentioned here could become mandatory since the Commission has full legislative powers).

Notably, there are very few benchmarking associations dedicated to water services in Asia, Africa or Latin America (Berg, 2013; Berg & Corton, 2007; Corton & Berg, 2009; GWOPA, 2009). Performance evaluation is widely practiced in these regions, but benchmarking systems are generally imported (some would say imposed) from organizations based in the North, often at the request of international financial institutions, and sometimes as part of loan conditionalities. The World Bank, for example, makes its IBNET evaluation system available to national and local governments that want to “receive financing for capital improvements” (Van den Berg & Danilenko, 2011, p. 4; see also WSP, 2010).

There also appears to be an (unstated) race to expand these Northern-based benchmarking systems to countries in the South. IBNET has declared itself to be “the first global benchmarking standard ... providing a global yardstick against which utilities and policy makers can measure their performance” (Van den Berg & Danilenko, 2011, p. 2). Not to be outdone, AquaRating (a proprietary, for-profit benchmarking agency developed by the Inter-American Development Bank) claims to be “the only international system that facilitates an objective and comprehensive assessment of a utility’s performance, making it a pioneering tool in the global water sector.”¹ EBC meanwhile is piloting its benchmarking model in East Africa (on a not-for-profit basis).²

In short, performance measurement in the water sector is growing, and benchmarking frameworks are multiplying: “Performance measurement is here to stay” (Poister, 2003, p. 21) and “we will be hearing many new benchmarking stories in the future” (Cabrera, 2008, p. 7).

Benchmarking Consensus

Despite rivalry in the benchmarking community there is broad consensus amongst its advocates as to how and why it should be done. Most importantly, it is seen to enhance (and enforce) transparency and accountability amongst water operators by making performance data available to the public and allowing people to compare their water operator with utilities in other jurisdictions. It is also seen to create opportunities for public participation in decision making by allowing “customer groups and NGOs to exercise “voice” in an informed way”³, as well as contributing to “consensus-based global solutions” for achieving the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (ISO, 2012, 2). Finally, benchmarking is seen to provide a common language

and system for identifying and understanding “best practice”, offering water operators the quantitative targets and concrete tools for getting there.

There is also broad consensus as to what gets measured. Although every benchmarking system in the water sector has its own unique features, most draw heavily (if not entirely) on the performance metrics established by the ISO 24500 series, with more than 260 standards for water quality, and another 550 related to water services more broadly (ISO, 2012, 3–4). The IWA, meanwhile, acts as a *de facto* gatekeeper of performance criteria by dint of its role as a global umbrella organization for water operators (public and private), especially since the creation of its “Specialist Group on Benchmarking and Performance Assessment” in 2010.⁴ As a case in point, the EBC claims to be “fully aligned” with IWA and ISO benchmarking protocol, using these indicators as “repositories” of performance criteria “for reasons of standardisation” (EBC, 2014, 5). In other words, there may be a growing number of benchmarking organizations, and they appear to be in some form of competition with one another, but they operate on essentially the same principles and use mostly the same performance criteria.

It is not possible to list the 260+ plus indicators that commonly make up water service evaluation systems here, but the following are indicative of the type and range of measurements that take place: number of water and sanitation workers per 1,000 connections; length of transmission and distribution mains renovated; percentages of unaccounted-for water; number of complaints due to water supply interruptions; book value of fixed assets; number of microbiological tests carried out for various chemicals; volume of electricity consumed; total capitalized cost of self-constructed assets; per capita consumption of water; number of mains failures; average time to complete repairs; and average water charges for non-residential consumption.

Measuring Is Difficult

Consensus on how and why to do benchmarking aside, the actual collection of data is anything but straightforward. Even the best-trained and well-resourced of water operators find it difficult to stay on top of what has become an onerous process of data collection. The situation is much worse for under-capacitated utilities in low-income countries where it can be a challenge to gather even the most basic of statistics (Alegre et al., 2000, 2006, 2008; Berg & Corton, 2007).

Once collected, analyses and comparisons of data are no simple matter either. There are intense debates within the benchmarking community – albeit largely impenetrable to non-specialists – about the use of metric versus process benchmarking (Cabrera, 2008), partial indicators versus total or combined factor analysis, and differentiated statistical methods for analyzing complex information with linear programming methods such as data envelope analysis and stochastic frontier analysis (Abbott & Cohen, 2009;

Parsons, 2002). Different clusters of indicators are also used, with EBC, for example, employing five key “performance areas” (EBC, 2014, 7), IBNET using 13 categories⁵ and AquaRating (2014a) using an entirely different set of eight “rating areas”, ironically making a comparison of different benchmarking frameworks difficult.

As a result, abstract and highly technical forms of measurement take on a life of their own, often disconnected from larger utility objectives, yet shaping policy and practice. Externally-defined performance indicators can thereby skew in-house priorities, stifling local identity and resulting in an abstract fixation on outside procedural norms: “At its worst, instead of being a force for change, benchmarking can put a stop to serious analysis of problems and/or experimentation with [locally-defined] innovative solutions” (Sisson et al., 2003, p. 23). It can also result in an anxious feeling of “keeping up with the Joneses” (Valcik et al., 2012), even when high-level benchmarking may not be feasible or appropriate for a local water operator. In some cases, benchmarking can result in a situation where water operators are measuring for measuring’s sake, with benchmarking becoming an end, rather than a means, to improved water services (Pidd, 2012).

The truism that “What gets measured gets done” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 146) can aggravate the situation further, focusing attention on criteria that may not be the most relevant to a particular water operator or its end users. As Francis and Holloway (2007, p. 177) note, “[b]enchmarking is no more immune to the GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) principle than any other performance management system”.

Criticisms of Benchmarking

Most proponents of benchmarking recognize these challenges but do not consider them to be fatal to the measurement enterprise. For the most part they are seen simply as another technical challenge to be overcome in the pursuit of standardized performance evaluations.

More radical criticisms of benchmarking do exist, but the literature is surprisingly thin and under-theorized given how pervasive the practice has become (Francis & Holloway, 2007, p. 172). I outline three critiques below, drawing as much on the work of those who celebrate benchmarking as I do on its detractors, weaving together an admittedly eclectic set of theoretical concerns related to commercialization, a lack of democratic process, and the belief that all forms of benchmarking necessarily impose a singular worldview on a diverse set of international beliefs and practices.

Promoting Commercialization

For proof that benchmarking promotes commercialization one need look no further than the literature from benchmarking advocates themselves. For many proponents of benchmarking in the water sector it is an intentional

and explicit tool for commercialization, introducing competitive pressures to an inherently monopolized sector by offering an “alternative to market forces” (van Helden & Tillema, 2005, p. 339). With little or no possibility of direct competition, benchmarking is seen to simulate and stimulate market behaviour, pushing water operators to lower costs and improve services. According to IBNET:

Inter-utility performance comparison is needed in the water and sanitation sector because the sector offers limited scope for direct competition. Firms operating in competitive markets are under constant pressure to outperform each other. Water utilities are often sheltered from this pressure, and it frequently shows: some utilities are on a sustained improvement track, but many others keep falling further behind best practice. ... Only the most efficient, financially viable utilities are able to respond to urban growth, connect the poor, and improve wastewater disposal practices.⁶

“Financial viability” is key here – a metric that many see as “the ultimate value of utility benchmarking” (Van den Berg & Danilenko, 2011, p. 8). Improving cost recovery and reducing per unit expenses have become the gold standard of measurement in the water sector, with financial indicators such as “percentage of unpaid-for water” or “number of employees per 1,000 connections” often being used as proxy for overall performance (see e.g. World Bank, 2014, p. 129). Financial criteria are not the only measurement standards but they constitute a large proportion of benchmarking indicators and attract a disproportionate share of attention from policy-makers and funders, reflected in part by the massive literature on financial outcomes in the water sector and support from development institutions such as the World Bank for improving cost recovery (Alexander, 2005; Breen & Doyle, 2013).

Some benchmarking advocates even see it as a way to promote privatization, forcing public water utilities to make their fiscal data available for corporate review and helping to identify markets for potential private investment. According to IBNET, “[p]rivate investors interested in expanding their interests in the water and wastewater sector can use [benchmarking] to carry out an initial screening of potential target utilities”, helping them to “pinpoint those with revenue-generating potential”⁷ and to “identify viable markets and opportunities for creating value” (Van den Berg & Danilenko, 2011, p. 4).

As such, involvement in the development and implementation of benchmarking criteria is often touted as an opportunity to be at the cutting edge of competitive water markets. The ISO encourages firms to “get involved” in the development of benchmarking because it “can bring significant advantages to your business” via the establishment of standards that fit with an organization’s strengths or by giving advance notice of what the market

will expect. By creating market-friendly indicators, benchmarking can help firms “access new markets” and “facilitate free and fair global trade”.⁸

Not surprisingly, many international benchmarking organizations are composed heavily of multinational corporations keen to shape global standards across a wide range of sectors, from environmental sustainability to corporate governance (Acuto et al., 2021; Bruno, 2009; Clapp, 1998; Nadvi & Waltring, 2004; Prakash & Potoski, 2006; Stevenson & Barnes, 2001). The ISO has come under particular fire in this regard, with critics arguing that most of its committee work is conducted in a handful of countries in the North and dominated by large private firms, making it little more than a “corporate private regime” (Haufler, 2004, p. 126). Proposals by the European Commission to develop an EU-wide benchmarking system for water have received similar criticism, with Aqua Publica Europea noting “the unbalanced nature of [the planning group’s] membership” and the fact that “the public sector is scarcely represented, if at all” (APE, 2014, 6).

The result is performance evaluation systems in the water sector that “strongly motivate [operators] to be efficient and innovative, mitigating their operating costs and expenses” (Marques & Simões, 2010, p. 15; see also Bowerman & Ball, 2000). In this respect, it can be argued that benchmarking has contributed to the naturalization of financial efficiency in the water sector, converting economic goals into “neutral facts” that validate and reproduce otherwise contestable and diverse aims (Boelens & Vos, 2012, p. 18). Benchmarking can, as with any other “absolutized efficiency calculus”, be used “as a weapon to suppress contending social groups, their social analyses, and their programs for social change” (Wolff, 2002, p. 3).

None of this is to say that benchmarking is inherently commercial. Nor does it automatically bind water operators to their financial bottom line. Many public sector water managers and policy makers are intensely aware of – and often opposed to – its commercializing influences. There is also little evidence that benchmarking actually results in improved financial discipline (Braadbaart, 2007). But given the influence of organizations such as the World Bank in promoting financialization and marketization in water (and other) services (Bayliss, 2014; Hunter & Murray, 2019; Loftus & March, 2015, 2016; Loftus et al., 2019), and their stated intent of using benchmarking as a market substitute, there are ample grounds for concern around the impacts of this growing trend on water operator behaviours and outcomes. The fact that none of the major water benchmarking systems mentioned above make any distinction between public and private water operators only serves to heighten these apprehensions.

Undemocratic Processes

A second concern with benchmarking is that it tends to happen in a top-down, undemocratic manner, excluding service users and lower-level employees. Because of the highly technical nature of performance evaluation most

benchmarking systems make little (if any) effort to involve non-experts. Most water users are completely unaware of benchmarking processes and the 260+ performance indicators that can go into them (let alone the advanced statistical analyses that accompany their assessment), essentially rendering the benchmarking process opaque. Nor is the average water user likely to be tempted to participate in such a highly specialized and mechanical procedure.

Large benchmarking organizations have done little to make these processes more transparent or inclusive of the broader public. Benchmarking reports are technocratic in method, difficult to decipher, and seldom available to the general public, although “simply publishing the results does not necessarily equate to more transparency” either (APE, 2014, 2). Access to IWA and ISO benchmarking models requires an expensive membership, while AquaRating is a proprietary framework (Krause et al., 2012). Little wonder that benchmarking is the domain of a relative few.

Some critics see in these actions a form of neoliberal governmentality, with monopoly control over a “governing technology that seeks to facilitate the self-governing capacities of individuals and/or organizations through the production of a normalizing knowledge” (Triantafyllou, 2007, p. 836). Insofar as benchmarking is an attempt to create an “international consensus on solutions to water issues” (ISO 2012, 4), it is seen by some as a mechanism for “producing truth ... steering social behavior and giving normative meaning to particular water practices of particular water user groups ... convincing not only the actors who have to apply these concepts but also the creators themselves” (Boelens & Vos, 2012, p. 18; see also Vos & Boelens, 2014).

Benchmarking systems, critics argue, must be seen within the “social and power relationships” in which they are embedded, with planners and managers “often not aware of their value-loadedness, convinced that they provide objective advice that should be adopted by policy-makers and politicians” (Boelens & Vos, 2012, p. 24). In this regard, benchmarking can validate concepts of success and reinforce “best practices” that advance particular agendas. The truism cited earlier – “What gets measured gets done” – can result in an unremitting cycle of investment and policy emphasis that advances the commodification of water and justifies inequities, particularly in countries in the South where opportunities for democratic input and alternative voices are often very limited.

Once again, this neoliberal governmentality need not be an inherent feature of benchmarking. Nor is it always an intentional outcome on the part of public water managers or benchmarking designers – some of whom express concern with benchmarking’s exclusive nature but have no other options to employ (APE, 2014). Nevertheless, the reality of current performance evaluations is that they are largely impenetrable to the general public, while the lack of robust debate on the topic is itself indicative of the enigmatic nature of benchmarking in practice.

Imposing Universality

A third criticism of benchmarking is that universal performance criteria essentialize and homogenize public services and the people that use them, running roughshod over cultural and political difference by imposing generalized standards on the world. The argument here is partly an epistemological one, questioning the validity of objectivity and universal standards in comparative performance evaluations. Critics argue that there are no constant, universal truths: “Democratic conceptions of the common good will always be partial and provisional, never universal or static ... the common good can never be specified *a priori* as an input for the political system or as a static measure for the quality of governance” (Dahl & Soss, 2012, p. 31). For Zwartveen and Boelens (2014, pp. 151–2), “knowledge about water will always and necessarily be uncertain and provisional,” reminding us that we must “remain vigilant about the temptation to unequivocally use “science” and the objectification it entails in dealing with water’s complexity.” For these critics, it is simply not possible to measure and compare performance in public services across place and time because no two communities are ever alike, while public conceptions of water, education, health care and other services are constantly changing.

The implication here is that benchmarking can smother the very improvements it seeks to promote. In attempting to impose standardized measures of value, measurement serves to “fix the public in place, rendering it static in a manner that contradicts the promise of an evolving constitutive democratic process” (Dahl & Soss, 2012, p. 22). What is required instead, critics argue, is a focus on the creation of space and resources for “deliberative processes that ... allow new conceptions of public identities and interests to emerge” (Dahl & Soss, 2012, pp. 22–3). Rather than relying on a notion of a public that is “always a pre-existing collectivity ... that can be identified, addressed and moved to action,” it is argued that we should see values as “entities that are always mediated and always emergent” (Mahoney & Clarke, 2013, p. 932). Relaxing the demand for universal standards “usefully opens the door to accepting diverse and plural knowledges about processes of water-related change – including those based on the experiences and knowledge of people who live in changing environments” (Zwartveen & Boelens, 2014, pp. 151–2). Benchmarking is seen to disqualify and marginalize alternative forms of public service management and valuation (particularly “pre-modern” forms), taking on the hue of colonial practice “imposed from an outside position as a way to bound or police governance” (Dahl & Soss, 2012, p. 31).

These critics are particularly concerned that benchmarking standards have been developed by institutions in Europe and North America, with insufficient attention being paid to the realities of public needs and expectations in the global South. Cultural, political, economic and environmental differences may make some performance criteria irrelevant or inappropriate,

while the sheer cost of benchmarking can make it impossible or irresponsible to do in full. Even within the European Union there are concerns about the suitability and feasibility of universal benchmarking models, with Aqua Publica Europea arguing that “many operators in rural or less favoured areas face cultural and economic difficulties in participating in benchmarking exercises” (APE 2014, 6). This concern is magnified many times over in lower-income regions in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Down with Benchmarking?

Given these critiques, should benchmarking of public services be abandoned? Yes and no. To the extent that benchmarking intensifies market pressures, excludes the general public and imposes inappropriate goals on diverse practices it can be argued that it is not suitable for many places. If nothing else, it is crucial that there be more research and a more robust debate on how benchmarking plays itself out in practice, particularly in countries in the South.

But I am equally convinced that benchmarking of some kind is essential to the advancement of “good” (as opposed to “best”) public services. It may be problematic to develop universal standards, but it is not necessary to throw out the measurement baby with the bath water. It is possible to develop alternative forms of measurement and comparison that mitigate (if not resolve) the tensions outlined above and which allow for more democratic, less commodified and more explicitly *public* forms of service provision which can be used to compare and learn across place and time.

This will not be an easy political or technical task given the authority and resources of mainstream benchmarking organizations and their vested interests in existing models. So too will many public service providers resist change, particularly those that have sunk resources and political capital into current benchmarking frameworks. Even managers and policy makers who share the concerns raised in this paper may find it difficult to change directions given the inertia of existing benchmarking systems and the resources required to shift analytical and operational gears. It has taken decades of intense funding, lobbying and institutional support from major international organizations to get benchmarking systems to where they are today. It may take equally long to change them.

Nor will it be easy to sell the idea of revised benchmarking to those who are inherently sceptical of standardized, centralized evaluations (most notably those pushing for more autonomous forms of service provision). But a rejection of performance comparison vacates the possibility of more progressive and flexible notions of universality. Without some commonly agreed upon performance criteria how are we to know if a public service is “successful” and whether it should be celebrated? How do we articulate concrete demands for improvements on “equity” for example? How can we share “good” practice across different places? Rejecting benchmarking

altogether risks leaving this powerful organizational and discursive tool in the hands of those who may, intentionally or not, seek to advance the commercialization of public services.

These questions do not relieve us of the deep-seated philosophical and practical tensions between the universal and the particular, but they do force us to ask whether it is necessary to develop standardized criteria for public services. On this point I take my cue from [Harvey \(2000, p. 94\)](#) who notes, with reference to analogous debates around the development of standardized codes for international human rights, that “To turn our backs on such universals at this stage in our history ... is to turn our backs on all manner of prospects for political action.” In other words, rejecting universal standards for public services as important as water, health care, education and transportation runs the risk of not developing effective, concerted actions to deal with the hundreds of millions of people around the world with inadequate access to these basic amenities, possibly entrenching inequalities.

These debates also raise questions as to *whose* universalisms or particularisms matter. On this point I take my cue from [Timmermans and Berg \(1997, p. 275\)](#) who – writing about universalized medical protocols – argue that standardization efforts need not require a monolithic approach. Rather, universality should be seen as a “distributed activity” leading to “local universality ... an ambiguous and precarious status [that] emerges from localized processes of negotiations and pre-existing institutional, infrastructural, and material relations”. In other words, universality can be a used in “non-transcendental” ways, “no longer implying a rupture with the “local” but transforming and emerging in and through it”.

My proposals for new forms of performance evaluation are therefore driven by the need for standardized measurement principles that are supple enough to encourage local interpretation of “diverse goals, such as equity, stabilization, and social and environmental sustainability” ([Lefeber & Victorisz, 2007, pp. 139–140](#)). The objective is to construct a dialectical bridge between these universalisms and particularisms, while recognizing that generalizations are inherently fraught with cultural and political tensions that disallow easy comparisons and may be irreconcilable at times. In this respect, the proposal for flexible forms of benchmarking in this chapter are consistent with, and complimentary to, the proposal for flexible notions of *publics* and public services outlined in [Chapters 4 and 5](#).

This is not to suggest that mainstream benchmarking has ignored the tension between universal norms and local realities. Much of the mainstream benchmarking literature is at pains to highlight the need for “flexibility” and “local difference” ([Baietti & Ginneken, 2006](#); [Cabrera, 2008](#); [Corton & Berg, 2009](#); [Crotty 2004](#)). The problem with these efforts, as I have argued above, is that they tend to be couched in an efficiency calculus that overwhelms all other factors, marginalizing questions of equity and promoting commercialization.

Alternative evaluation methods can never resolve these tensions of universality and particularity. Nevertheless, it is possible to be more explicit

about social, political and economic variability than mainstream benchmarking has been, particularly when it comes to market-oriented operating principles. Recognizing radically different cultural interpretations of services such as housing and waste management while prioritizing equity is possible but will require much more flexible systems of evaluation than those offered by current benchmarking models.

So too must alternative forms of benchmarking be more inclusive, “promoting participatory governance mechanisms which, when coupled with transparency, empower citizens when it comes to decisions on the management” of public services (APE, 2014, 2). Benchmarking processes and reporting will also need to take better account of technical issues such as literacy, numeracy and analytical skills as well as barriers to participation along socio-economic lines.

In Search of an Alternative

So where to begin? My proposal is to start with what already exists. There are many useful – and I would argue essential – indicators already in place in current benchmarking models that should be retained. In water services, for example, there are important metrics developed for water quality, infrastructure repairs, frequency of emergency breakdowns and a host of other relatively objective criteria which can be easily and usefully reproduced in new evaluation models.

What needs to change is (1) the ways in which we analyze some of these existing criteria, and (2) the addition of new indicators that better promote equity and explicitly promote a service’s *public* nature. An example of the former is unaccounted-for water. Instead of simply tracking the number of leaky pipes and levels of non-payment, performance indicators should ask whether water services are affordable for low-income households and whether adequate investments are being made in bulk infrastructure in low-income neighbourhoods to prevent breakages. A more nuanced understanding of unaccounted-for water metrics could reduce harmful water cutoffs, improve the progressivity of tariffs and promote a more spatially equitable and transparent pattern of infrastructure investment.

On the second point, brand new indicators could be added to benchmarking systems, such as evaluations of worker health and safety, the scope of participatory decision-making mechanisms, and opportunities for female employees to move up the skills ladder. Such indicators could shed light on gender barriers to career progress in the public sector, provide insights into opportunities for improved community engagement, and improve the quality of work for labourers – important criteria that are virtually ignored in mainstream benchmarking systems.

The aim of these additional indicators is to evaluate the extent to which public service operators are offering change from marketized forms of public services, without which it is difficult (if not impossible)

to determine whether sufficient reforms have been made and whether a particular public service should be celebrated or not. As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the goal of restructuring public services is to shift our frameworks beyond the confines of a bourgeois public sphere to move towards less commodified and more equity-oriented service delivery. Non-marketized performance indicators are a concrete step towards developing objective yet flexible forms of evaluation that can help shape and entrench progressive policy directions.

It may also be wise to consider a much-reduced number of indicators than current benchmarking systems employ – already a topic of debate in the benchmarking literature. [Van der Steen \(2011, p. 33\)](#), for example, suggests that the number of performance indicators in the water sector should be in the 15-30 range. The City Blueprints for Water initiative uses 24 indicators: “a method that is practical, relatively simple, transparent, easy to communicate and understandable for decision-makers and the public in general”, taking about a week to conduct ([van Leeuwen et al., 2012, p. 2180](#)).

[Pidd \(2009\)](#) promotes the principle of “model simple, think complicated” (drawing on [Little, 1970](#)), arguing that benchmarking systems should be easy to understand, robust enough to allow counterintuitive results to emerge, simple to manage, adaptive to different situations, and easy to communicate. The challenge is to find a balance between the complex reality of water systems and the need for simplification in ways that “helps focus people’s minds” ([Pidd, 2012, pp. 75–6](#)).

There are, of course, good reasons why performance evaluation has grown in complexity over the years, and my proposals for more progressive metrics would only compound this. However, *more* measurement does not necessarily mean *better* measurement. Just how many indicators are optimal is not clear, but the enormous volume of measurement indicators promoted by the ISO, and the byzantine statistical analyses that accompany them, are too complex and too opaque for meaningful public debate, overwhelming even the best-resourced of public service providers. An alternative benchmarking framework may therefore benefit from a more streamlined and popularly accessible approach.

I would, however, warn against false simplicity. [AquaRating \(2013, p. 5\)](#), for example, has developed a benchmarking model that provides a single evaluation score (a number between 1 and 100), but the calculations required to arrive at this figure are as complex as ever: “eight assessment areas, 27 assessment sub-areas, 113 assessment elements, 61 indicators, 99 variables, 52 practices groups, [and] 348 individual practices.” This “simple” benchmarking system still requires experts and enormous time and resources while its results remain impenetrable to the average front-line worker and water user – presumably one of the reasons that they charge between US\$25,000 and US\$65,000 for an audit ([AquaRating, 2014b, p. 6](#)).

A Spider Web Evaluation

The alternative evaluation framework I am proposing here (in very broad and preliminary terms) attempts to find a middle ground between the need for simplicity and the reality of complexity on the ground, while at the same time employing new and old evaluation methods. My intent is not to suggest a final, polished product, but rather to concretely demonstrate the possibility of a more user-friendly form of data collection and analysis that also visually represents results in ways that promote public engagement and accessibility. In doing so I draw on the existing practice of clustering benchmarking categories (such as EBC’s performance areas of “water quality, reliability, sustainability, service, and finance/efficiency” (EBC,2014, 7)) and efforts by groups such as City Blueprints for Water to simplify and pictorialize their benchmarking system (van Leeuwen et al., 2012, p. 2180). The latter employs “spider diagrams”, which I have adopted here, although other visual representations could be equally effective.

Figure 6.1 is an example of such a benchmarking representation, once again using water services as an illustrative example, comparing two hypothetical public water operators. It employs nine overarching performance categories, each with a series of easily understandable indicators. Visually, the longer the shaded area on each strand the better the service for that criterion, and the larger the overall shading on the web the better the overall performance of the operator.

Table 6.1 outlines the proposed indicators and metrics that could make up these valuations. Once again, these are not necessarily the best or the

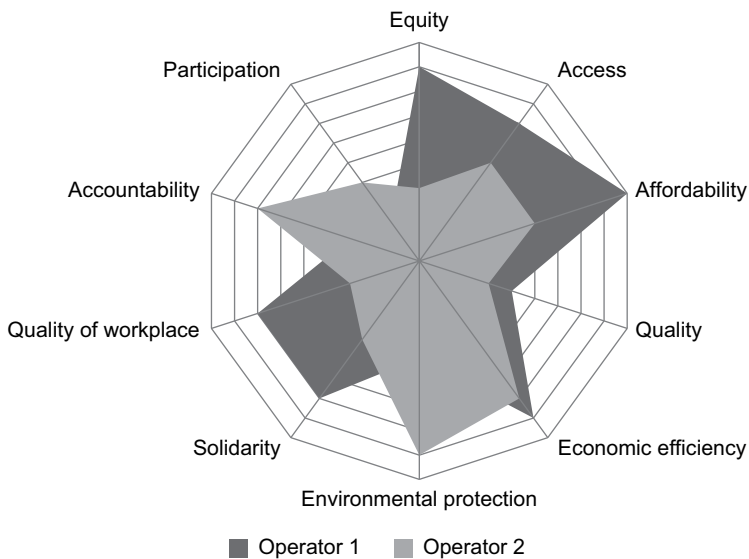


Figure 6.1 Spider Diagram Comparing Public Water Operators

Table 6.1 Normative Criteria for Evaluating Public Service Providers

<i>Normative category</i>	<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Examples of possible sub-criteria questions</i>	<i>Examples of possible measurement indicators</i>
Universality	Access	Physical availability of the service at a convenient distance from user's dwelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural/urban divide? • Sufficient quantity? • Culturally acceptable service? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of population with adequate access • Time-distance to service location • Hours/day that service is available
	Affordability	Prices that ensure economic accessibility for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are poorer households disproportionately burdened? • Are programs in place for cross-subsidy pricing? • Is affordability a legal obligation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost as percentage of household income • Disconnection rates • Levels of subsidization by region
	Quality	Reliable, satisfactory services that create positive relations with end users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe for all users? • Responsive to user needs? • Ongoing improvement mechanisms in place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary health outcomes • Level of service interruptions • Complaints by region
	Equity	Equality of opportunity to access quality services for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equitable quantity of service across user groups? • Equitable quality of service across user groups? • Is equity formalized, legalized or institutionalized? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget allocations by region • Levels of access by socially disadvantaged groups • Per capita consumption by region

(Continued)

Table 6.1 Normative Criteria for Evaluating Public Service Providers (Continued)

Normative category	Criteria	Definition	Examples of possible sub-criteria questions	Examples of possible measurement indicators
Sustainability	Efficiency	Cost-effective use of resources to meet service mandates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are current infrastructure investments helping to meet the social goals of the service? • Is the capital intensity of investments appropriate? • Do short-term cost reductions undermine long-term efficiency gains? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing as a proportion of overall operating costs • Cost per unit of service delivered by region • Employee turnover rates
	Environmental protection	Meeting current service mandates without compromising future resource needs or undermining current environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are programs in place to reduce demand on natural resources? • Does the service provider respect different cultural understandings of resources? • Are climate change mitigation plans in place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Levels of renewable energy use • Quality of wastewater treatment • Rates of respiratory infection
	Solidarity	Cohesion among various producer and user groups and across sectors that builds economic, social and political commitment to a public service model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the model help to build a stronger “public ethos” around services? • Is the service contributing to improvements in other sectors and at other levels of service delivery? • Does the service model explicitly oppose privatization and commercialization, with sufficient political support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal cooperation agreements between different levels of government and sectors • Measurements of inter-sectoral impacts (e.g. sanitation extension reducing diarrheal burden)? • Legal mechanisms to prevent privatization

(Continued)

Table 6.1 Normative Criteria for Evaluating Public Service Providers (Continued)

Normative category	Criteria	Definition	Examples of possible sub-criteria questions	Examples of possible measurement indicators
Governance	Accountability	Obligation to account for activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner, readily available to the public, and understandable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there clear operational mandates and policy positions? • Are there transparent capital and operating budgets? • Are mechanisms of accountability available at appropriate scales (local, national, regional)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency of hiring processes • Access to mechanisms of accountability by region • percent of documentation openly available and verifiable, in suitable languages and formats for all users
	Participation	Citizen involvement in policy making and implementation of service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is participation at appropriate scales and sufficiently representative? • Are there adequate resources for participation by a diverse range of society (transportation, time off work, etc.)? • Is participation conducted in culturally appropriate ways? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of people participating in formalized mechanisms of participation • Number of different processes of participation open to participation (policy making, budget decisions, etc.) • Availability of participation by region
	Quality of Workplace	A place of work that provides a safe environment, trust between employees and management, fairness, and a sensible workload that contributes to quality service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there adequate numbers of workers to ensure service quality? • Are there mechanisms for workers/ unions to participate in the operation, management or policy-making of the service? • Are there good feedback loops between front-line workers, managers and end-users of the service? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay equity (job type, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) • Availability of health and safety equipment • Access to training opportunities

only benchmarking criteria – or the correct number of categories – but they serve to demonstrate what an alternative system might look like. Overall, the aim of these indicators is to prioritize what a colleague and I have previously described as cornerstones of a public service – universality, sustainability and democratic governance (McDonald & Ruiters, 2012b). Financial resources are important, but they should not overshadow other priorities, and should not be confined to a single sector. Water services, for example, are intricately linked to health and well-being across a range of services, requiring a multi-sectoral, multi-scalar and even multi-jurisdictional perspective.

The criteria and indicators proposed in Table 6.1 are suggestive of the kinds of evaluation questions and techniques that are aimed at equity and which go beyond the confines of water to look more broadly at the public goods that are produced (or not) from the provision of water services. The intent is to make more “public” the otherwise narrow institutional and commercialized evaluation criteria found in existing benchmarking models. I have also introduced a category for solidarity, defined here as cohesion among various producer and user groups and across sectors that build economic, social and political commitment to a public service model. Evaluation of this category could include such questions as: Does the model help to build a stronger “public ethos” around services? Is the service contributing to improvements in other sectors and at other levels of service delivery?

The questions outlined in Table 6.1 are not the only or the most exhaustive ones that could be asked about the “publicness” of a water (or other service) operator. They do, however, serve as a counterpoint to the commercial bias of existing benchmarking models. They also make explicit the need to evaluate a service provider’s ability to address broad public good outcomes. In this respect, it would be interesting to see how *private* water operators perform using this *public* scorecard – an inverse of current benchmarking realities!

These proposed criteria are not without their limitations or potential abuses of course. It is possible for assessors to impose alternative performance indicators in crudely universalistic ways, with little interest in local variation or cultural diversity. These new criteria would, however, force public service operators to grapple more explicitly with provocative questions of inequality, accountability and sustainability in ways that could force more meaningful and contextualized change. A revised benchmarking system such as this could also be used to promote better engagement with service users, contributing to a spirit of local ownership of performance indicators that is largely absent from the highly centralized, top-down and expert-driven benchmarking models in use today.

Conclusion

As a technical exercise, benchmarking may seem objective, but in practice the selection of measurement criteria used for public services, and the ways in which they are employed, are anything but. Dominant forms

of benchmarking valorize the commodity value of public services, exclude the public from participation, and marginalize alternative worldviews. Deliberately or not, a handful of powerful international actors have designed monopoly-like forms of performance evaluation that emerged from private sector practice and which are growing in influence and scope in public services.

If we are to change the ways in which we operationalize public services and move away from commercialization it is essential to change the ways in which they are evaluated. If new public operators are appraised by the same marketized criteria as their predecessors it will be impossible to change outcomes on the ground as old performance evaluation systems reward and reproduce themselves.

Developing substitutes will not be straightforward, particularly if they are seen as a challenge to market norms. Nor will it be easy to convince public managers and policy makers to adopt new frameworks given the time and resources required, even if they are ideologically inclined to do so. The practical and political reality of building alternative benchmarking frameworks is an admittedly daunting one, but it is a challenge that cannot be ignored.

Notes

1. http://www.iwapublishing.com/template.cfm?name=m2477&utm_source=I-WA+Publishing+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=e3de7ca958-GND_9_September_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_49a7734030-e3de7ca958-90138637 accessed September 9 2014.
2. See www.waterbenchmark.org/news/EBCcontributesMDG-proje.html
3. IBNET – http://www.ib-net.org/en/texts.php?folder_id=78, accessed August 2 2014.
4. See www.iwabenchmarking.com/site/documents/
5. See http://www.ib-net.org/en/texts.php?folder_id=91&mat_id=72&L=0&S=0&ss=0, accessed August 7 2014.
6. http://www.ib-net.org/en/texts.php?folder_id=78 accessed August 5 2014.
7. http://www.ib-net.org/en/texts.php?folder_id=78
8. http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards_development/standardsdevelopment_gettinginvolved.htm and <http://www.iso.org/iso/home/about.htm>

7 Building a Global Pro-Public Movement

There really is no substitute for participation!

(Henri Lefebvre. 2014)

This final chapter explores the question of how to build a global pro-public movement focused on redefining and remaking the ways in which public services are conceived and delivered. Although the anti-privatization movement has been remarkably effective at raising awareness about the problems of privatization there is not yet a correspondingly successful and coordinated pro-public counterpart. There are a growing number of effective and energetic pro-public actors across a wide range of sectors in many parts of the world, but this loose network is still developing into a global movement focused on building new forms of non-marketized public services with coordinated forms of messaging.

Perhaps this is to be expected. Criticisms of privatization are relatively easy to articulate and broadly consistent across place and sector, lending the anti-privatization movement a relatively stable platform upon which to build global coalitions. Concepts of public, by contrast, are fraught with tensions and contradictions, making it deceptively challenging to develop consistent narratives and demands for what constitutes a progressive public service. There is also a reluctance on the part of many anti-privatization advocates to be critical of existing public services for fear of contributing to their demise, while a lack of funding for pro-public campaigning and a dearth of critical academic work on the topic makes it all the more difficult to coordinate activities, logistically and intellectually.

And yet, building an effective global pro-public movement is essential to breaking away from the constraints of liberal notions of publicness that tie us to marketized state institutions and commercialized patterns of infrastructure investment. This chapter provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities of building such a movement, starting with a summary of where anti-privatization struggles fit (or not) within the development of pro-public actions and visions. It then examines concrete initiatives that have been undertaken in different parts of the world to advance pro-public

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narratives, the challenges they face and potential ways to expand these pro-public activities in the future.

This chapter paints a critical but optimistic picture of the potential for a global pro-public initiative. It is written out of deep respect for the hundreds of thousands of people who have struggled to build and maintain public services in the past but is also infused with recognition that many existing public services need radical reform, including the words and actions required to change them.

Status of the Anti-Privatization Movement

Opposition to the privatization and commercialization of services such as water, healthcare and electricity has grown dramatically over the past few decades. There are countless examples of communities, unions, social movements, politicians and bureaucrats working to stop, and sometimes reverse, privatization in virtually every sector and every corner of the world. There has also been considerable coordination of anti-privatization activities amongst different groups, in and across countries, with international NGOs and public sector labour unions in particular organizing effective transnational opposition to privatization and raising awareness about the global reach of large for-profit multinational corporations. This campaigning has attracted massive media attention, generated millions of dollars in donations from progressive donors, inspired grassroots activists and contributed to a mounting belief that privatization can be beaten.

Academic work on privatization has also grown significantly and contributed substantially to this anti-privatization movement, with increasingly sophisticated theoretical understandings of what privatization is and why it happens, along with a substantial pool of empirical data. Research on privatization continues to attract considerable attention and funding, with academics keeping a keen eye on new forms of private sector penetration into public services, such as financialization (Aalbers, 2020; Bresnihan, 2016; Loftus et al., 2019).

There are, however, two forms of market penetration into public services that have been relatively under-studied (and under-protected) by the anti-privatization movement, both of which have important implications for building a pro-public counterpart. The first is corporatization. Despite a dramatic growth in commercialized forms of public services over the past three decades – many of which are virtually indistinguishable from private companies – arm's-length public agencies are often spared reproach by anti-privatization activists. This may be due in part to a reluctance to criticize these organizations in an effort to save what is left of public ownership, but it can also be the result of a conceptual blind spot, given that the service is owned and operated by the state. Such is the trap set by a liberal discourse on what constitutes public and private, with many corporatized entities serving to entrench (and even deepen) the commodification process, with

little in the way of critical backlash from otherwise anti-commercialization advocates.

This blind spot has been made worse by the fact that many corporatized utilities use their “public” status to fight off privatization at home (often with the support of anti-privatization organizations) while aggressively privatizing services outside their own jurisdictions. One example is Manitoba Hydro, in Canada. Management at this electricity utility had been resisting efforts by their provincial government to privatize the utility in Manitoba, while at the same time signing a multi-year contract to oversee the privatization of electricity transmission in Nigeria. There was virtually no discussion of this contradiction in the Canadian press, or amongst Canadian anti-privatization organizations, despite heavy controversy and media coverage of the topic in Nigeria (Engler, 2016). Sweden’s state-owned electricity utility Vattenfall has come in for similar criticism as it aggressively expands beyond its national borders (Becker et al., 2015; Högselius, 2009).

A second topic that the anti-privatization movement has been relatively slow to respond to is the dramatic increase in public pension fund investments in privatized public services, even where pension fund members are unionized workers officially opposed to privatization. The Ontario Teachers’ Pension Fund’s majority ownership of the fully privatized water and sanitation services in Chile (initially divested under Pinochet) is a paradigmatic example (OTPP, 2011; Skerrett, 2018). In fact, Canadian public pension funds are considered world leaders in investing in public infrastructure as an asset class, and are sought after as Board Members and advisors in this rapidly growing “public” investment field (exemplified by the disproportionate representation of Canadian pension funds on the initial Management Board of the Global Infrastructure Investor Association – whose mandate it is to “Promote Private Investment in Infrastructure” – including the OTPP, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Quebec and the Public Sector Pension Investment Board (see <http://giia.net>). Some of these public pension funds have even formed joint ventures with profit-seeking service providers, such as the Quebec-based Caisse de Dépôt’s partnership with French water multinational Suez to purchase GE Water & Process Technologies (De Clerq, 2017).

Some public sector unions have made efforts to expose and challenge these privatization strategies (Skerrett, 2018) but aggressive counter-campaigns by fund managers (and the fact that some pension funds have been effectively privatized and now operate independently from their members) have made it difficult to generate significant anti-privatization momentum on this topic. The fact that union members themselves are often divided on the question of investing in privatized services makes this task even more problematic. As Kerr (2006, p. 191) notes with regards to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation’s response to OTPP’s investments, there is an internal ideological struggle between “bureaucratic business unionism” and “radical grassroots unionism”: the former being “concerned with growth of

membership and formal standing with the rest of the labour movement, but is not opposed to privatization or corporate partnerships”, while the latter “favours not only affiliation with the labour movement but also broad-based public education alliances with parent groups and other teachers unions, and it is opposed to privatization and corporate sponsorships”. Pension fund investments also have direct impacts on the material lives of union members, which may contribute to dampening opposition, particularly if investing in privatization is seen to improve retirement options.

The upshot of all this is that privatization is being done in increasingly obscure and murky ways, making it difficult for the average person (as well as full-time anti-privatization advocates and scholars) to fully appreciate the scope and scale of its impact. As a result, anti-privatization campaigners can sometimes hold on to a false sense of victory, when in reality there continues to be a creeping erosion of all forms of public control, with new private financial instruments and a growing hegemony of market-oriented operating principles continuing to commercialize public services. Neoliberalism is still with us (Peck & Theodore, 2019), but it is constantly morphing into new shapes, meaning that the actions and dialogues that were effective 10-15 years ago may not be as relevant today. In other words, the anti-privatization movement cannot rest on its laurels.

An Emerging Pro-Public Movement

Such is the complex and somewhat conflicted terrain upon which a global pro-public movement will need to be built. Ongoing struggles to fight privatization will invariably be mixed with efforts to develop alternative pro-public service visions, and most organizations will continue to wear both hats (anti-private and pro-public). But the pro-public movement will also need autonomy from anti-privatization organizations if we are to break from the discursive, institutional and ideological limitations of our bourgeois public sphere. A more self-determining pro-public movement will require its own intellectual foundations and funding and must be willing to be critical of existing public services, working independently of anti-privatization organizations if need be.

This pro-public movement has begun to emerge but is still relatively small and under-resourced. It is also still wrestling with how to deal with the inevitable tensions around the meaning of public and what they mean logistically and institutionally. The pro-public movement is arguably strongest in the water, electricity and healthcare sectors, but there is a growing pro-public dialogue in transportation, waste management, postal services and other sectors as well (Kishimoto et al., 2020; Paul & Cumbers, 2021; Voorn, 2021). It is strongest in Europe and Latin America, with pockets of activism in Asia and North America, but there is relatively little pro-public debate in Africa, due in part to the ongoing dominance of neoliberal institutions such as the World Bank, as well as corrupt governments that tend to quickly

shut down any form of dissent against the state, and a chronic lack of funding for grassroots organizations and researchers.

Ironically, pro-public advocacy tends to be weak in locations with relatively low levels of privatization. Once again Canada is illustrative. Despite selling-off many high-profile public assets in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Air Canada and Petro-Canada) most essential services in the country remain largely in public hands (although heavily corporatized) (Brownlee et al., 2018). Further privatization remains an ever-present threat, with a well-established network of anti-privatization organizations ready to fight it off, but there is little in the way of explicit pro-public organizing. The default position of most organizations opposed to privatization in Canada tends to be that of protecting the status quo (with many good public services worth defending, it should be noted) instead of proposing radical alternatives (McDonald, 2018b).

A handful of Canadian organizations have developed explicit pro-public campaigns (e.g. OPSEU's "We Own It" campaign, and the Canadian Health Coalition's "Pro-Public Health Care" messaging), but these have been regionally or sectorally limited and have not garnered much attention in the media or amongst the general public. The situation is similar in the United States, with only a handful of organizations having developed explicitly pro-public narratives and actions (including In the Public Interest, Democracy Collaborative, Corporate Accountability and Food and Water Watch) (Hanna & McDonald, 2021). By contrast, countries such as France, Spain, Germany, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina and the UK, which have all experienced extensive privatization, all have much more extensive and active pro-public movements (Kishimoto et al., 2020).

Challenges Ahead

Building local and international pro-public movements will therefore take time and face many obstacles. This section expands on the three challenges outlined above and how they might be overcome: the lack of a clear vision for what constitutes public; a reluctance to be critical of existing public services and an absence of resources and research.

No Singular Vision

The lack of a singular vision for what constitutes a public service is the pro-public movement's greatest strength but also its Achilles heel. Strength comes from excitement around breaking down long-held orthodoxies of publicness (both on the left and the right) and the freedom to explore new models of public delivery that are not necessarily circumscribed by past experience. Weakness emanates from the inherent difficulty in constructing new public service narratives that are easy to convey to policy makers, activists and service users. Explaining the problems of privatization has

proven to be relatively easy over the years, with considerable coverage in the popular media. Elucidating novel and flexible visions for alternative forms of public service delivery is inherently more difficult and prone to criticism and in-fighting within the pro-public movement.

Pro-public organizations must be prepared to work across these uncertainties. They will need to embrace difference and encourage debate amongst themselves while at the same time holding on to universal principles such as equity and transparency. Uneasy coalitions and compromises will be necessary. But coalitions for the sake of coalitions can also be self-defeating. Organizations must decide where they draw their lines in the sand to determine the points beyond which they are unwilling to negotiate. Where, for example, should an organization stand on the question of publicly owned corporatized public services that take for-profit contracts in other locations? Should unionization be considered a mandatory feature of public services? Can community organizations involved in co-production be allowed to develop services tailored to their own cultural needs even if it conflicts with those of other community members? These are difficult, conflict-generating questions that can either strengthen or weaken a pro-public initiative. Even *within* organizations it can be difficult to find a shared vision. Some public sector unions, for example, are highly decentralized and operate in multiple services, making it challenging to develop and organize a consistent form of messaging on any topic, let alone one as complicated as pro-public visioning (Ross, 2007).

A concrete illustration of the difficulties in building pro-public coalitions can be seen in the growing trend towards water remunicipalization. As noted earlier in this book there has been a dramatic rise in water services being brought back under public control over the past 20 years, and although generally lumped under the same terminological rubric, remunicipalizations can arise from profoundly different philosophical impulses, with drastically different outcomes. In some cases, remunicipalization is driven by fiscally conservative bureaucrats hoping to do little more than save money (Warner & Hefetz, 2012). In others it is “state capitalists” seeking control of key sectors of the economy for social and political reasons (Bao & Fang, 2012; Bremmer, 2009; Teo, 2014). Additional rationales include social-democratic governments pushing for a more equitable distribution of resources within a market framework (Heller et al., 2007; Spronk et al., 2014; Tankha & Fuller, 2010), anti-capitalist civil society movements seeking non-commodified forms of water delivery (Spronk & Webber, 2007; Terhorst et al., 2013) and autonomist movements attempting to build water services controlled by local communities (Driessen, 2008; Gorostiza et al., 2013; Marston, 2015; Bélanger et al 2016). The differences could not be more stark, with similarly complex dynamics unfolding around remunicipalization efforts in the electricity sector (Cumbers & Becker, 2018; Lindholst, 2021).

One strategy could be to overlook these differences in the hopes that a coalition of pro-public actors across a broad political spectrum might bring

public services back into public control. In Bulgaria, for example, there are a diverse range of organizations pushing for the remunicipalization of water in Sofia, but the list of pro-public advocates includes progressive NGOs and unions as well as far-right political parties and community groups that openly blame the city's Roma minority for creating the city's water problems (Medarov & McDonald, 2019). Does it make sense to sustain such a coalition on a temporary basis in an effort to force the state to bring water services back into public ownership, or are some viewpoints too objectionable to be included in a pro-public advocacy group? Similar conundrums apply to the inclusion of market-oriented organizations that want to see public services operated in-house because it is cheaper to do so, but which have no concerns with the commercialization of public services. Pro-public coalitions will inevitably be forced to deal with these internal tensions.

There are also important limitations to the ways in which the media covers pro-public initiatives. Anti-privatization struggles have received substantial mainstream media attention – in part because of the consistency and simplicity of anti-privatization messaging – but there has been relatively little reporting on pro-public movements. The limited media coverage that does exist tends to focus on site-specific debates for short periods of time rather than looking at long-term global perspectives or engaging with complex theoretical and organizational questions of pro-public movement building. The inherently complicated and contradictory nature of new forms of 'public' does not lend itself easily to digestible media soundbites.

The rebuilding of public services can also be remarkably mundane, seldom offering up the same explosive storylines as fights against privatization. Cochabamba, in Bolivia, is a case in point. Having attracted widespread international media attention with its anti-privatization Water Wars in the early 2000s, there has been a virtual media blackout ever since, despite a fascinating (although largely unsuccessful) effort to rebuild a progressive public water system since then (Razavi, 2021). Even in Europe, where hundreds of towns and cities have remunicipalized water and electricity over the past 15 years, the topic remains marginal in the press, despite ground-breaking efforts by political parties such as *En Comú Podem* in Spain to develop innovative state institutions and new forms of community engagement around public service delivery.

A Reluctance to be Critical

A second major obstacle to building an effective global pro-public movement is an unwillingness on the part of some organizations to be critical of existing public services. This is understandable in locations where welfare-era amenities have been relatively equitable and effective, in which case criticisms of public services could backfire and provide support for proponents of privatization ("Look, even people in favour of public services are critical of what we have!"). But a defence of the status quo is inadequate

on its own and can lead to complacency. Worse still, it can contribute to resistance to change. By contrast, regions where welfare-era systems were weak, or were so heavily biased toward elite and corporate interests as to deny them widespread popular support, have seen more willingness on the part of pro-public organizations to be critical of the public status quo (most notably in Latin America).

A related concern is that pro-public messaging can send out the (incorrect) signal that privatization is no longer a threat, possibly drawing resources and attention away from important anti-privatization struggles. On this point I would once again re-iterate that simultaneous campaigns on both fronts are necessary and unavoidable, with a good pro-public *offense* benefiting from, and complementing, an equally important anti-privatization *defence*. These contemporaneous actions are particularly important for public sector unions, given their need to fight the bread-and-butter battles of privatization on behalf of their members while at the same time attempting to develop a new agenda for public service alternatives that may help to mitigate privatization in the future and improve working conditions. Fighting two campaigns concurrently is not easy, or cheap. Indeed, it is a luxury for many organizations, with limited energy and resources being prioritized for the more immediate crises of privatization, particularly in countries in the South.

Having pro-public movements emerge out of anti-privatization campaigns is therefore both a blessing and a curse. It can help draw on existing networks of people and organizations that have achieved success in challenging for-profit service delivery, but at the same time it can act as a check on forward movement, exposing tensions around the nature of existing public services and how they may need to change.

Lack of Resources and Research

A third constraint is that of resources. Funding for anti-privatization work has never been enormous (particularly when compared to the massive flows of money that have gone into supporting pro-privatization initiatives), but even these funds overwhelm that which has been available for the development of pro-public programming. Most pro-public campaigning is financed with the limited resources of NGOs and public sector unions, with much of the local community work being done on a volunteer basis. Some funding for pro-public initiatives has been provided by progressive donors (such as the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation) but large bilateral and multilateral agencies that work on public services have been largely silent on issues such as remunicipalization while continuing to fund pro-privatization initiatives (McDonald, 2019).

Funding shortages have also limited the amount of research being done on pro-public work, much of which relies on the shoestring research budgets of NGOs, community groups and labour unions. Public sector unions

have been the most active in this regard – with the impressive work of the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) being a standout illustration of what can be accomplished with relatively little money – but these are comparatively small research programmes when compared to the enormous funding that has gone into pro-privatization studies over the years, including the seemingly endless stream of research material in favour of privatization by mainstream multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the OECD.

There also tends to be a research bias in favour of ‘successful’ examples of public service reforms in the pro-public community, particularly cases with a social democratic flavour. Future research will need to focus on more problematic forms of rebuilding public services, as well as cases where pro-public initiatives have failed, to better learn from these experiences (on this point see McDonald & Swyngedouw, 2019).

And what of academia? Once again, the majority of work continues to focus on anti-privatization, not its alternatives. Much of this academic literature is also rear-guard in its orientation, lending credence to Starr’s (1988, p. 40) still-pertinent observation that “[t]he privatization debate puts the advocates of more generous public programs entirely on the defensive”. This anti-privatization bias stems in part from the fact that most scholarship relies on precedence to verify its credentials, with the existence of a well-established anti-privatization literature begetting more literature on the topic, with peer-reviewed scholarly venues more likely to publish findings that incrementally advance understandings of a known entity.

By contrast, pro-public research has relatively few conceptual and empirical reference points, making it a far riskier intellectual venture, particularly for new academics needing to publish. Finding one’s footing in an uncertain intellectual terrain can be an unsettling and risky career move. There are no dedicated pro-public academic journals, and pro-public articles rarely feature as stand-alone themes in academic publications or at conferences. There is a growing body of work on the topic, but still little in the way of uniformity, with inconsistent research methods and often ill-defined theoretical frameworks. The research also tends to be highly compartmentalized by sector and academic discipline, with relatively little cross-referencing. A pro-public scholar working on water governance from a public administration background, for example, is more likely to be familiar with what is happening in that sector or in that discipline than they are with pro-public reforms in health, electricity or waste management, or in academic fields or journals outside their own.

Finally, there is an unease that many academics feel – myself included – with the more prescriptive nature of pro-public debates. It is one thing to declare what is wrong with privatization (academics are trained to deconstruct, after all). It is quite another to endorse and promote an alternative path of action, even when developed in collaboration with local stakeholders. There is no easy solution to this intellectual and moral conundrum, but

in moving forward with pro-public campaigning it will be necessary to be bolder (yet still humble) in recommending alternatives to privatization and commercialization.

Given this complexity it is important that academics work collaboratively with unions, community groups and other frontline organizations to co-develop pro-public research agendas in as cooperative a manner as possible. Fortunately, there is a rich tradition of such scholar-activism in the anti-privatization field which can transfer over to a pro-public research agenda (Couture, 2017; Smeltzer & Cantillon, 2015).

Moving Forward

Constraints aside, progress is being made with pro-public dialogue and action, much of which involves a combination of bottom-up mobilization from citizens and top-down engagement from state officials. In some locations pro-public coalitions have emerged quickly. Elections of left-leaning municipal governments in Spain in 2015–2016, for example, led to a rapid change in local public awareness of and organizing around remunicipalization, while also stimulating a vigorous national debate about how re-publicized services should be run in Spain as a whole (Sánchez, 2016).

In other places change will take longer. In Germany, the shift towards a pro-public agenda has been slow in coming, taking decades to build. In the 1990s, the privatization of services was broadly accepted by the public, but “since then there has been a conspicuous shift in public values”, with media discourse on privatization becoming “more sceptical”. Recent surveys in Germany indicate “a clear popular preference for public provision of more or less all forms of technical infrastructure” (Bönker et al., 2016, p. 79). These grassroots demands have also led to a radical rethink of technological choices, resulting in a phasing out of nuclear power and a dramatic increase in public investments in renewable energy (Morris & Jungjohann, 2016).

Labour-community-NGO coalitions have been another effective way of expanding public awareness of, and generating support for, a pro-public movement. One example is the European Public Service Unions’ (EPSU) campaign on energy democracy which has worked in concert with NGOs and community organizations across the European Union to raise awareness around how changes to public energy provision can be improved to address energy poverty while at the same time creating more democratic decision making (EPSU, 2017). Public-public partnerships (PUPs) are also on the increase, with peer-to-peer exchanges taking place between pro-public service operators sharing their experiences with each other, mostly on a North-South basis but increasingly South-South as well (Hall et al., 2009; McDonald & Ruiters, 2012a). PUPs are also becoming institutionalized through front-line public service organizations such as *Aqua Public Europea*, learning as they go while building trust and resources for future collaboration.

None of this coalition building will resolve the ideological tensions that inevitably lie at the heart of any future efforts to build pro-public movements, but they show the potential to move forward in concrete and constructive ways. In all cases, people and organizations must be prepared to embrace difference and expect tensions rather than rejecting or avoiding them, with heterogeneity acting as a catalyst for knowledge sharing and a platform for shaking-up conventional wisdoms. The inevitability of ideological variation is not always fully acknowledged by pro-public movements, but is essential to vigorous debate, dynamic engagement, and innovative experimentation.

Conclusion

Reversing three decades of institutionalized privatization and creeping commercialization will take a long time. Deep-seated neoliberal ideological and institutional biases could persist for decades more, stifling efforts to build alliances and develop new forms of messaging. Even Germany's much-vaunted shift back to public control of essential services remains constrained. Despite having radically altered the sources and ownership of public services systems in the country over the past 20 years, the "emphasis on commercial enterprises and business practices remains much stronger than in the 1960s and 1970s Thus, it should be interpreted as a partial rebalancing rather than a fundamental rollback of market reforms. The pendulum might have swung back, but the pendulum has halted far from its original position" (Bönker et al., 2016, p. 82).

But then again, getting back to the "original position" is not the objective of a pro-public movement. Innovative public service models must consider new environmental concerns, an increasingly diverse demographic, and the need to shed our public service systems of their top-down corporate trappings. In this respect, there is no end-date for completion. Democratic public services will, by definition, *constantly* be under review and modification, responding to shifting needs and changing forms of democratic engagement across time and place.

Building pro-public coalitions therefore requires us to embrace instability. Pro-public movements should be as global as possible, multi-sectoral in their focus, and include a range of community groups, unions, NGOs, scholars and progress government officials. But they must also acknowledge and respect the diverse and contradictory ways in which public services are being (re)built in different locations and sectors, and attempt to learn from this terrain of difference, while at the same time holding on to important kernels of universalism. Marketized forms of public services are not yet dead, but new more progressive forms of public services are surely on the rise.

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Appendix 1

Global Manifesto for Public Services

This Manifesto was developed collectively by organizations working towards progressive public services under the umbrella of “The Future Is Public”. It is re-printed here as a concrete illustration of the demands being made by a growing international pro-public movement. As of November 2021 the Manifesto was signed by 175 groups. It can be found online at <https://futureispublic.org/global-manifesto/>

Section I. The What: The Public Services We Want

Universal quality public services are the foundation of a fair and just society. They constitute a social pact that implements the core values of solidarity, equality and human dignity. Public services are also an effective way to pool resources to confront collective challenges and meet shared needs.

Public Services Enable Human Rights, Fulfil Shared Needs and, Being Socially Defined, Their Scope can Increase Over Time

What constitutes public services is a historic and social construct. Societies determine what they are, and decide how to organize and finance their production and delivery, and how to exercise democratic public control over their operation. As they are not just technically but also socially and politically defined, the scope of public services may vary and change in different times and places and in different societies.

Public services encompass a range of services that are vital and necessary to live a dignified life. These include education, energy, food, health and care services, housing, social security, telecommunications, transportation, waste collection and disposal, and water and sanitation. They are either recognized as human rights or deeply intertwined with their enjoyment. Equitable access to these services is crucial to reduce inequalities and to realize social justice. A wider range of public services can be seen in the classification used by the United Nations Classification of the Functions of Government.

Public Services Are Owned by People, for People

Public services are collectively and democratically determined and developed to produce and deliver public, common and collective goods; to realize human, individual and collective rights; to enable a dignified life and socially inclusive, just societies; and to protect the commons, including the environment and a sustainable planet.

Public services are a collective social commitment, for which the State and/or other public authorities have the main or ultimate responsibility and obligations. They may be organized and delivered in various ways, through local, regional or central governments or a mix of their competences, or through a public body, which is a body that is democratically and publicly controlled and is recognized and trusted by people.

Universal Quality Public Services Are Structured and Financed to Meet Individual and Collective Needs, to Reduce Inequalities and to Protect Everyone's Dignity

Public services constitute a common pooling of resources among all members of society, contributing fairly according to their capacities and ability to pay, in order to meet everyone's needs and fulfil their rights. They are not a benevolent or charitable endeavour, but a collective public system for redistribution, to address multiple inequalities and historical exclusion, to realize solidarity, and to ensure the fulfilment of States' human rights obligations.

Our Principles for Universal Quality Public Services in the 21st Century

There are many misconceptions regarding public services, which have been driven by, and are part of, the neoliberal narrative pushed by powerful private interests. Public services have in practice not always been developed and governed as true public services. Instead, they have at many times served the interests of the wealthy and powerful, rather than the public, contributing to the oppression or exclusion of certain groups. We reject these practices, which reflect a privatization of the public, for the interest of a particular individual, corporation or group.

Quality public services meet the following principles:

- 1 **Universal and accessible to all.** This includes both economic and physical accessibility. Everyone can access services to live in dignity and realize their rights, irrespective of social or economic status and geographic location. All services are accessible to all irrespective of their income and are located as close as possible to users. Some services, including for example education and essential healthcare, should be provided for free to all users at the point of use.

- 2 **Participatory, transparent, trusted and democratically accountable.** All members of the community or society can participate in the design, organization, governance, financing, delivery and monitoring of public services. They are transparent and comprehensive information about them is publicly available. They are accountable to the public, and, as a result, they are built on and encourage trust and respect in society.
- 3 **Improving and adaptable, responsive and transformative to those they serve.** They are evolutionary, adjusting to technical changes and peoples' unfolding needs, and they may expand into new areas. They adapt to different needs and are non-discriminatory. They improve in quality over time, and never lower their standards, in accordance with the obligation of non-retrogression, meaning that there should never be any reduction in the reach or quality of services.
- 4 **Built on a solid foundation of long-term public financing.** This is reflective of their nature as the fulfilment of the State's redistributive function, and ensures continuity of provision in the long-term, primarily based on progressive taxation.
- 5 **Founded on solidarity.** They feature or embed solidarity-based redistributive mechanisms between those who can contribute to the system proportionally to their means and those who cannot.
- 6 **Committed to equality, including gender equality, and social justice.** This applies at all levels of organization, management and operations. Universal quality public services recognize and actively challenge power imbalances, structural and systemic discrimination, and systems of oppression. This includes a commitment to promoting equality in their organization, including gender equality in their leadership, management and delivery.
- 7 **Environmentally and ecologically conscious.** They work to care for both people and the planet, and contribute to building a more sustainable future. All aspects of their management, including governance mechanisms, their cost structure, and the organization of their operations, decisively contribute to addressing the ecological crisis. They have a long-term vision, placing present and future generations' best interests at the core of decision-making and integrating wider social, cultural and ecological concerns.
- 8 **In proximity.** Universal quality public services are accessible locally and are managed, delivered, and monitored at the closest point of use to those they serve, backed by funds provided by all relevant levels of government, at the local, regional, national or international level as appropriate, based on a fair and effective distribution of resources. They are available when and where needed, in order to truly realize universal access in practice.
- 9 **Just, secure and safe, both for those who use the services and those who provide them.** Workers feel physically safe and mentally safe while at work or on their way to and from work. Universal quality public

services value the people who work for them as well as the people who use them, including by providing decent employment, pay and working conditions. They are staffed and funded at an appropriate level to ensure quality service can be delivered to all.

- 10 **Protected from the market economy, commercialization and financialization.** Universal quality public services are accessible to everyone as a right, to fulfil life's needs, and not as commercial, commodified products or services to consume. Decisions about public services are not made on the basis of profit making, but are entirely guided by the realization of human dignity and the fulfilment of collective needs.

Section II. The Why: Public Services Matter

Building the Just Society We Want

Universal access to quality public services, without any marginalization, discrimination or exclusion, is fundamental to the realization of human rights and the fulfilment of life's needs. Public services improve everyone's quality of life, strengthen our communities and bind us together as a society. By ensuring for everyone crucial services, they enable a dignified life, ensure socio-economic inclusion and promote rights assertion.

Public services are an expression of democracy, embodying a collective social commitment to solve the economic, social and ecological challenges of our time. They can serve as an example of meaningful work by providing opportunities to participate in the collective project of building a more equal and just society.

Universal quality public services play a pivotal role in redistributing the burden of unpaid care and domestic work that, due to social norms and structural barriers, otherwise falls disproportionately on women. They are an essential tool in the efforts to realize true gender equality in practice and transition to a gender-just society.

Responding to the World's Crises: Inequality and the Ecological Breakdown

Public services are critical to address multiple, often intersecting, inequalities and the other crises of our time. By using progressive financing to provide equally to all what would otherwise be available only to those able to pay, they have the power to correct a skewed income and wealth distribution and lay the foundation for a just society where wealth and power are fairly shared.

Universal quality public services are crucial in achieving inclusive equality between groups, as they can help rebalance asymmetrical, unjust and often intersecting power relations, including those based on race, gender, ethnicity, caste, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, and any other

ground of discrimination. For example, turning care into a collective social responsibility can help advance equality between genders.

Because they have the ability to manage and protect natural resources for future generations, public services are decisive in tackling the ongoing climate and broader ecological crisis while respecting people's dignity. While States must implement robust policies and regulations to address the ecological crisis, they must ensure that access to public services is not undermined as they do so. Public services should be at the core of the transition to build communities' resilience to climate impacts and environmental degradation. Guaranteeing collective protection of the environment and sustainable governance, public services are therefore an essential component in achieving intergenerational peace and justice. Universal quality public services are also critical to building resilience and ensuring fully inclusive and resilient societies that are able to respond with dignity to the tensions that will arise from the social and physical changes resulting from the ecological crisis.

Section III. The How: Funding Universal Quality Public Services Is Possible

Fiscal and Policy Space to Fund Quality Public Services

Domestic mobilization of public resources is essential for States to provide financing for universal quality public services. However, for many countries, efforts to mobilize sufficient resources are undermined by systemic and international issues, including: unfair trade agreements, unsustainable and illegitimate debt, tax abuse by multinational corporations, tax havens, loan conditionalities and coercive policy advice leading to austerity measures, and a lack of democratic and inclusive decision-making on global economic and tax governance.

Fair and progressive taxation is the most reliable and sustainable source of financing for public services, while also strengthening the social contract between the government and the people. Progressive taxation of capital, profit companies, wealth, assets, property and labour should be the primary source of funding quality public services. It is important to reduce unfair tax burdens on women and adopt progressive, redistributive taxation that is free of implicit and explicit gender bias – including new forms of taxation of wealth, corporate profits and property or assets – to ensure adequate financing of gender-transformative public services. An effective, reliable tax collection system that is adequately staffed and funded is a prerequisite to ensure sustainable funding. Tax transparency is needed to reclaim the billions flowing into offshore bank accounts, with this funding being used to rebuild public services.

Sovereign debt cancellation should also be used as a tool to help finance public services, as unsustainable and illegitimate debt burdens and

obligations often lead to vital public financial resources being allocated to debt repayments at the expense of funding domestic public services. A new fair and transparent debt workout mechanism is essential to support universal quality public services.

Governments must make all efforts to fund universal quality public services, using all adequate means such as: the expansion of the revenue base; adequate inter-governmental transfers to fund public services mandates; the elimination of illicit financial flows, corruption and tax abuse by multinational corporations and ultra-wealthy individuals; the use of fiscal and foreign exchange reserves; the management of debt; and the development and adoption of an accommodating macroeconomic framework. Prioritizing budget allocations for public services and the reallocation of public expenditure to public services, matching at least the minimum international standards, is in many contexts a key action that governments can take immediately.

Public Funding Is a State Obligation to Ensure Universal Access to Quality Public Services

States must ensure the provision of universal quality public services that fulfil human rights. This is realized through predictable, accountable and sustainable funding mechanisms. A direct connection exists between the reliability and adequacy of public service funding and public service quality, equity and access.

Where they exist, supranational unions of States must commit to supporting the development of universal quality public services through their actions and budgets.

Public resources fairly and progressively collected and (re)distributed are indispensable to funding public services, as this is the only way to ensure that everyone can access quality services irrespective of their ability to pay.

Public Funding with Democratic Public Control

Public services can neither be left to the market nor subject to austerity. Unlike a commodity, their value is determined by the role they play in fulfilling people's inherent dignity, rather than their market position or the opportunity for profit. They therefore demand democratic public control and collective forms of financing, to ensure they meet the shared needs of all.

Philanthropy and private finance are increasingly present in public services financing. While philanthropic and private financing may, in certain contexts, contribute to the resourcing of public services, they may only be subsidiary to the role of revenues raised through taxation, and must avoid creating or amplifying power dynamics that benefit the

wealthiest and undermining democratic decision-making, oversight and accountability.

24 Governments must make it possible for civil society to meaningfully participate in budget debates and decision-making, through participatory and gender-transformative budget mechanisms and notably by increasing access to information.

International Cooperation to Enable Domestic Resource Mobilization

Scaling up of international cooperation in fiscal matters is required – based especially on donor countries complying with their extraterritorial obligations – to ensure equal taxing rights among States and stop all forms of tax abuse by multinational corporations and the ultra-wealthy, which particularly affects developing countries. States must avoid a global race to the bottom on corporate taxation, which limits investment in public services.

Donor States should increase the quantity and the quality of official development assistance for universal quality public services. This should respect national ownership, be predictable, transparent, harmonised with national priorities, and in line with internationally agreed commitments and legal obligations. This should be done by directly supporting countries' public spending through budget support, instead of through donor-defined projects or actively encouraging the use of public resources to leverage more private finance. In the long-term, countries need to be able to mobilise enough domestic resources to ensure reliable and resilient funding for public service systems that can cater to their people's needs.

Public-Private Partnerships Are Failing Public Services

Mechanisms that are increasingly promoted as solutions to limited public services funding, such as blended finance and public-private partnerships, are expensive, opaque, short-term, and unreliable financing models that escape transparency and democratic accountability mechanisms, pose liabilities to the public purse, risk undermining democratic public control and do not generate the funding required for public services.

Valuing and Paying Public Services Workers

The value of public service work needs to be acknowledged and adequately remunerated. States must ensure just and favourable conditions of work, including safe and healthy working conditions, reasonably limited working hours and paid annual leave. Public sector workers must have access to social security and their remuneration must be fair, allowing for a decent living for them and their families. Equal remuneration for work of equal value must also be ensured without discrimination of any kind, with value being

redefined to recognize social contributions, not market-based rewards. Public authorities should not make savings on public services costs by using untrained cheap or unpaid labour such as underpaid workers.

Section IV. The Who: Ensuring Democratic Public Control

States Have an Obligation to Ensure the Provision of Universal Quality Public Services

As the duty-bearer under human rights law, the State holds the obligation to ensure the provision of universal quality public services in accordance with human rights standards and the principles outlined above.

Towards a Truly Public and Non-commercial Approach to Public Services

Public services are developed, organized, managed, and delivered publicly and are not provided by commercial actors. A public body is able to take a long-term perspective, and is subject to democratic public control, public accountability and participation from the public.

While there are many ways in which universal quality public services can be organized, they are always owned, governed, financed and provided in a transparent, participatory and democratic way in the public interest. They are accountable to the public and subject to democratic public control and ongoing evaluation.

Commercial actors such as for-profit private companies and private equity firms view public services as commodities to be produced and sold, which results in a motivation to compete with public institutions and maximize profits. Protection of their own interest(s) is one of their primary goals or incentives, and they operate according to the market logic, which is incompatible with the fundamental nature of public services and their delivery as a public good. In contrast, quality public services do not make profit and any surplus, where applicable, is reinvested in the service or in other related public services for the public good, to improve the services' quality and access, pay workers a decent wage, provide training, and protect the environment.

Enabling Communities' Efforts

Community provision, which is radically different in its objectives and operations from commercial provision, often plays a critical role in ensuring necessary services in many parts of the world. Governments and other public authorities can work together with local communities and community-based organizations, upholding their obligations to regulate and supervise community provision in order to realize universal quality public services,

while respecting communities' contributions, as well as ensuring communities have the resources to carry out the work.

Maintaining Democratic Public Control over Digitalization, Procurement and Data Management

Digitalization and artificial intelligence have been changing the way public services work for both users and workers who deliver public services. While digital technologies can play, in the right circumstances and with adequate regulation and oversight, a positive role, new digital technologies in public services should not exacerbate the existing digital divide, which deepens the discrimination of marginalized groups and individuals, or increase negative environmental impacts, in particular as a result of data storage and transfer, but help to improve the service. Digital technologies should be led and controlled by the public at all times and should not be a vehicle or provide incentives to privatize services and to externalize essential elements of public services.

Digital technologies and tools should only be used where they improve the provision of public services, in line with this manifesto, and where they are, this should be with democratic public control, regulation and oversight, ensuring equal democratic management of the content of the service, and guaranteeing security and privacy and rights over the data. Moreover, States must ensure that the infrastructure used to collect, store, process and use data as well as to provide services is placed under public control.

There should be transparency in procurement and contracting of the goods and services necessary to run public services. All public data should be stored safely, responsibly and in protection of the privacy and human rights of the data subjects.

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