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).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003293002-1

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).

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

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 decommodify 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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