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-protested) 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* benefitting 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.