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CONSUMER CHOICE: RHETORIC AND REALITY

The figure of the consumer occupies a prominent place in contemporary social life, economic analysis, and political rhetoric. Within economic analysis consumption has long been presented as the end or point of production and the interest of the consumer promoted as taking precedence over that of the producer (Smith 1976[1776]). As J.K. Galbraith noted, within 'virtually all economic analysis and instruction, the initiative is assumed to lie with the consumer' (1969: 216). The growth in productive capacity that accompanied the development of industrial capitalist economies in the late nineteenth century and through the twentieth century led to understandable concern being expressed about the need to generate effective consumer demand for the rapidly increasing range and volume of goods and services becoming available. As productive capacity increased and consumer culture grew in intensity and reach, within economic analysis and political rhetoric, increasing reference began to be made to the importance of the consumer being able to exercise choice and pursue his or her interest in and through the market.

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS AND THE SOVEREIGN CONSUMER SUBJECT

In some formulations within economics the consumer has been represented as 'sovereign'. The notion of consumer 'sovereignty', drawn from the political realm, was employed initially within neo-classical economics but returned to prominence late in the twentieth century in neo-liberal

economic and political thought when renewed emphasis was placed on the importance of adhering to free market principles and keeping state intervention to a minimum (Harvey, 2005: 20–2). The concept, originally introduced in the 1930s by William Hutt, attributed a dominant economic role to the consumer and served to legitimate the idea of the ‘free market’, within which unimpaired choice could be exercised by ‘sovereign’ consumers. Within economics it has continued to be assumed that ‘power lies with the consumer’, that there is a ‘unidirectional flow of instruction from consumer to market to producer’, indeed it has been suggested that in the market economy there is ‘always a presumption of consumer sovereignty’ (Galbraith, 1969: 216). Alongside the idea of consumer sovereignty, two related notions, of ‘consumer choice’ and ‘consumer confidence’, have increasingly become the focus of social and political comment and economic analysis. Lending further weight to the significance that has been accorded to consumption and the figure of the consumer, in the closing decade of the century within sociological discourse it was being argued that identity, status, and social inclusion were increasingly bound up with participation in consumer activity rather than involvement in production, occupation, or work, and that in our ‘society of individualized consumers’ freedom was increasingly ‘grounded in consumer choice’ (Bauman, 1998, 2000: 82–4).

Consumer choice is now regarded as an unquestionable virtue, an indisputably beneficial product of the market economy, and an exemplification of the freedom that is considered to be a corollary of modern capitalism (Friedman, 1982). Although the origin of the term is generally attributed to William Hutt’s 1936 book *Economists and the Public: A Study of Competition and Opinion* (Hutt, 1940; Persky, 1993), it is in the work of the ‘neo-Austrian school’ economist, Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973), that the notion of consumer sovereignty receives its most explicit formulation. Mises was categorical about the economic significance of consumers: it was not entrepreneurs or producers who ultimately determined the course of economic affairs but consumers. As he remarked in characteristic fashion:

Neither the entrepreneurs nor the farmers nor the capitalists determine what has to be produced. The consumers do that ... The consumers patronize those shops in which they can buy what they want at the cheapest price. Their buying and their abstention from buying decide who should own and run the plants and the farms. They make poor people rich and rich people poor. They determine precisely what should be produced, in what quality, and in what quantities ... The consumer is in a position to give free rein to his caprices and fancies. The entrepreneurs, capitalists, and farmers have their hands tied; they are bound to comply in their operations with the orders of the buying public. (1996[1949]: 270–1)

From this neo-classical standpoint it is the interests expressed, influences exerted, and wishes articulated by consumers that predominate in the market, it is they who ‘determine the direction of all production processes and the details of the organization of all business activities’ (1996[1949]: 270–1). For Mises entrepreneurs and owners of the means of production are ‘virtually ... trustees of the consumers’, they do not rule consumers or have power over them, but to the contrary serve them (1996: 273). Producers are portrayed as dependent on the ‘supremacy of consumers’, as needing to comply with ‘the wants of the consumers’ and accommodate to ‘the sovereignty of the consumers’ (1996: 287). In direct contrast to the view of economic life that presents producers, entrepreneurs, and the owners of property as in possession of economic or market power Mises comments:

All market phenomena are ultimately determined by the choices of the consumers. If one wants to apply the notion of power to phenomena of the market, one ought to say: *in the market all power is vested in the consumers* ... Ownership of material factors of production as well as entrepreneurial or technological skill do not – in the market economy – bestow power in the coercive sense. All they grant is the privilege to serve the real masters of the market, the consumers, in a more exalted position than other people. Ownership of capital is a mandate entrusted to the owners, under the condition that it should be employed for the best possible satisfaction of the consumers. (1996: 648, emphasis added)

While Mises did briefly acknowledge that ‘an infringement of the supremacy of ... consumers’ might arise from ‘monopoly prices’ (1996: 358), ultimately he regarded this as an empirically rare eventuality and he was far more concerned about what he saw as the negative impact on consumers of growing government interference in the market economy.

The notion of consumer sovereignty outlined is controversial on at least two counts. To begin with it suggests that consumers, through the exercise of choice, possess a power and influence to coerce in the marketplace that is comparable to the power possessed and exercised by sovereign political agents within the polity. This comparison is at the very least overstated and ultimately hard to sustain, as Murray Rothbard acknowledges in the course of a lengthy endorsement of the market and the significant part played by consumers:

The term ‘consumers’ sovereignty’ is a typical example of the abuse, in economics, of a term ... appropriate only to the *political* realm and is thus an illustration of the dangers of the application of

metaphors taken from other disciplines. 'Sovereignty' is the quality of ultimate political power; it is the power resting on the use of violence. In a purely free society, each individual is sovereign over his own person and property, and it is therefore this self-sovereignty which obtains on the free market. No one is 'sovereign' over anyone else's actions or exchanges. Since the consumers do not have the power to coerce producers into various occupations and work, the former are not 'sovereign' over the latter. (2001: 561, emphasis in original).

In addition to sovereignty being an inappropriate metaphor there is a more significant substantive objection to the influence attributed to consumers. While consumers routinely do exercise choice and decisions to buy or not to buy particular goods and services undoubtedly have significant implications for producers and commercial enterprises, choices made by consumers are in respect of given ranges of goods and services produced within economic circumstances and market conditions and subject to cultural processes and influences which consumers have not chosen. As a critic of nineteenth-century economic liberalism noted of the structural constraints on human agency, people make history, but 'they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances, existing already' (Marx, 1963 [1852]: 15). What is produced does not derive from consumers' needs rather consumers are drawn into a 'circle of manipulation' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 121) in which products are 'tailored for consumption ... and ... to a great extent determine the nature of consumption' (Adorno, 1991: 85). Consumers do exercise choice and make decisions about purchasing goods and services, but do so subject to a variety of influences, including manufacturing, retailing, and marketing strategies, as well as fair trade and environmental campaigns, and not under conditions of their own choosing (Gabriel and Lang, 2006). As Adorno remarked in a series of critical reflections on consumer culture, '[t]he customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject, but its object' (1991: 85).

Today's consumers encounter a consumer culture that is highly individualistic, very materialistic, and continually subject to transformation through the perpetual generation of new fashions and styles and the relentless development of new product lines and services, which are enticingly promoted through increasingly innovative advertising, marketing, and branding campaigns, frequently fronted by celebrities from the iconic worlds of entertainment and sport. It is a highly stratified consumer culture, one that is differentiated according to inequitably distributed access to a variety of essential resources, including not only income, wealth, and credit, but also information about consumer products, their

potential benefits, and attendant risks. Furthermore, the circumstances in which consumers now exercise their choices include a range of concerns expressed about the potentially damaging impact of consumerism on individuals and communities, as well as worries about the environmental sustainability of an increasingly materialistic way of life which has been producing increasing quantities of waste, rapidly depleting scarce resources, and contributing significantly to global climate change (Simms et al., 2006; Jackson, 2009).

The primacy accorded to the consumer is a fundamental feature of neo-classical economics and the account of social and economic life it has generated generally has constituted the reality 'for legislators, civil servants, journalists, television commentators ... indeed all who must speak, write or act on economic questions' (Galbraith, 1975: 23). Indeed, insofar as social scientific discourses reflexively transform the contexts they analyze, the concepts, theories and findings generated within the discourse of economics 'could not, and did not, remain separated from the activities and events to which they related ... [but] have become integral to what "modern economic life" actually is and inseparable from it' (Giddens, 1990: 41). When the Fordist–Keynesian configuration that had been formed in response to the 1930s crisis of capitalism, a crisis precipitated by economic depression and lack of effective demand for goods and services, itself ran into difficulty in the 1970s as economic stagnation and rising inflation took hold, political administrations in the USA, the UK, and New Zealand, and subsequently elsewhere around the world, (re)turned to neo-classical policies and associate assumptions about social and economic life. Once again the emphasis in economic policy and political rhetoric was placed on the benefits of 'free' markets, the virtues of consumer freedom and consumer choice, and the need to address problems that were considered to derive from 'inappropriate' or 'excessive' forms of state intervention through the introduction of various 'privatization' initiatives and a range of other quasi-market measures. In due course, such policy measures achieved consolidation as 'neo-liberalism' which became 'a new economic orthodoxy regulating public policy at the state level in the advanced capitalist world' (Harvey, 2005: 22; see also Bourdieu, 1998: 2003).

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON NEO-CLASSICAL AND NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMICS

In a series of critical reflections on economics J.K. Galbraith notes that it was another, radically different, era when the discipline was establishing its place within the field of knowledge. In the nineteenth century a

substantial number of people were still employed in agricultural work, business organizations were small and more responsive to changing market prices, indeed could be considered 'subordinate to the instruction of the market' (1975: 24). Galbraith comments that it could be argued that, to a degree, economic theorizing at the time accurately reflected the realities of economic life. While acknowledging that subsequently there has been a necessary recognition within the discipline of the significance of some later economic transformations, including the impact of the development of 'monopoly – or, more precisely, oligopoly' on markets in particular, Galbraith contends that economics has 'remained the captive of its origins' (1975: 24). A significant number of the established, yet increasingly questionable, assumptions of economic inquiry have remained in place, notably 'the consumer [has] remained sovereign', 'consumer choice [has] continued to control all', and in consequence the discipline of economics is described by Galbraith as having 'slipped imperceptibly into its role as the cloak over corporate power' (1975: 24).

In Galbraith's account of the realities of economic life in the 1970s a sense is conveyed of growing social disquiet and political dissent, with universities, represented as 'increased greatly in size and complexity' and operating as an 'increasingly independent force', being identified as a potentially significant factor (1975: 25). The impression given is of growing public awareness of the unduly excessive power and influence exercised by large commercial organizations, paralleled by increasing public recognition that what may be promoted as an expression of consumer choice, as reflecting need, desire, or fantasy, may well satisfy private corporate commercial interest, but does not necessarily correspond to, or represent, the public will, or serve the public interest, or for that matter, as we now know, lead individual consumer subjects to achieve a greater sense of satisfaction, contentment, or happiness (Schwartz, 2005). As Galbraith commented at the time:

People can be persuaded and scholars can persuade themselves that General Dynamics or General Motors is responding to the public will so long as the exercise of its power does not threaten public existence. When ability to survive the resulting arms competition or breathe the resulting air is in doubt, persuasion is less successful. Similarly when houses and health care are unavailable and male deodorants are abundant, the notion of a benign response to public wants begins to buckle under the strain. (1975: 25)

The signs identified are of a growing social imbalance in respect of resource allocation and associated attribution of value between private

and public goods and services. Emphasis is placed increasingly on the interest of the private consumer pursuing satisfaction and seeking to experience pleasure through participation in consumerism, generally to the detriment of the quality of public sphere provision.

Galbraith is critical of the emphasis placed on ever-increasing production of goods and services for private consumption both within the economic system and in the discourse of economics. A corollary of the prominence accorded to economic growth and ever-increasing production of goods and services, of which Galbraith is critical, is the continual growth in the resources devoted to advertising, marketing, and salesmanship to cultivate appropriate increases in consumer wants and desires. With increasing affluence consumer needs, wants, and desires for a substantial number of goods become contrived, are in effect 'dependent on production ... depend on the process by which they are satisfied' (Galbraith, 1963: 134, 136). Furthermore, the preoccupation with achieving increases in production for private consumption, and the allocation of resources that involves, proves especially costly as far as the provision of public services is concerned. In Galbraith's view, when public services fail 'to keep abreast of private consumption' within a community and 'private goods have full sway ... [then an] atmosphere of private opulence and public squalor' prevails. (1963: 211)¹

If there was a degree of public disquiet about signs of social imbalance associated with the growth of corporate power in the period in question discussed by Galbraith, it was effectively neutralized – distracted, deflected, and/or dissolved – by the turn, following the mid-1970s economic crisis of 'stagflation', to neo-liberal, free-market economic policies, which emphasized the virtues of market forces and deregulation, further valorized the pursuit of private interest, and promoted a consumerist vision of the good life, within which 'consumer choice' constituted the supreme value, while simultaneously proceeding to introduce radical reductions in the public sector and public provision through the implementation of expenditure cuts and privatization measures represented as 'modernization' that would deliver greater 'efficiency' and value for money (Gorz, 1985; Bourdieu, 1998, 2003; Harvey, 1989, 2005). In these circumstances, and in response to what has been described as 'industrial need', the character of universities did indeed change, but not as anticipated. A rather different transformation of teaching and research institutions occurred and the production, status, and value of knowledge changed accordingly (Lyotard, 1984; Smart, 2002).

Within the field of higher learning increased emphasis began to be placed upon 'improving the system's performance'. This led to a redirection of institutions of higher learning, primarily towards provision of the skills and training considered to be necessary to optimize national economic performance within an increasingly competitive global capitalist economy.

Universities were transformed into more vocationally orientated training establishments serving student ‘consumers’ and a burgeoning commercial corporate world (Lyotard, 1984: 49–51). Rather than becoming ‘independent forces’ the critical role of educational and teaching institutions has been compromised as they have become more and more subservient to governmental vocational policy measures and commercial corporate and military-defense interests and required to contribute to ‘the increased reproduction of capital’ (Lyotard, 1993[1970]: 47; Smart, 2002; Giroux, 2007).

Consumer representations

The representation of the consumer within neo-classical economics, as ‘in ultimate command’ in the economic system, is paralleled by the representation of the citizen within democratic political theory, as in ‘ultimate authority over the production of public goods – over the decision to have more expenditures for education or for weapons or for space travel’ (Galbraith, 1975: 29). The impression conveyed by both representations is that it is consumer-citizens who make informed and authoritative choices and that their expressions of choice are effective. However, in economic life, and arguably political life too, it is increasingly a global ‘moneyed oligarchy’ that in practice exerts most influence, contrary to the idea promoted through constitutional theory that ‘the people exercise sovereign power’ (Baran and Sweezy, 1970: 159). Recognition that oligopoly, the prominence of a few firms or commercial organizations exercising influence over prices, was an increasingly common if not ‘normal form of market organization’, did lead to a minor modification of the neo-classical model, but not to any significant amendment of understandings of the structure, motivation, or operation of the business firm, or for that matter to any reconsideration of the ‘sovereign’ role attributed to the consumer. To the contrary, as Galbraith notes, the misleading notion that the consumer has ‘sovereign’ status has continued to prevail and it is assumed that:

The message of the consumer in the form of increased or diminished purchases is still transmitted to the market; this is still the instruction, the only instruction, to which the firm and industry respond. This instruction tells them where they can find the greatest possible profit, which is their sole interest. So the consumer is still in control. (1975: 32, emphasis added)

While the 1930s ‘Great Depression’ did lead to a minor amendment of the ‘subsidiary role’ accorded to the state within the neo-classical model of the self-regulating market economy, recognition of the need for

greater overall management of the economy and an increased role for the state that was a significant feature of Keynesian economic policy did not significantly change the view of the importance of the market, or the necessity of firms responding to 'the sovereignty of the user'. Ultimately, as Galbraith notes, the 'Keynesian and neo-classical faith are one; both depend on the same view of the power of the market' and the significance of the consumer (1975: 39).

A number of criticisms of the neo-classical system are expressed by Galbraith, including that it is 'not a description of reality' and that it serves to guide 'attention away from inconvenient fact', but he adds that while it remains 'the available doctrine' its hold is not secure (1975: 42–3). Galbraith's work was directed towards overturning what he designated as the 'accepted sequence' outlined in established economic thought, in particular explanations of economic processes in which the figure of the 'sovereign' consumer, exercising freedom of choice and orientated towards maximizing satisfactions, is represented as pivotal. Notwithstanding the eagerness with which some observers have embraced an almost celebratory notion of consumerism, recognizing consumers as empowered, as liberated, as deriving pleasure and enjoyment, and as generating meaning and identity through consumer activity, the criticisms outlined by Galbraith in the course of his discussion of the complex relations of power in which consumers actually exercise choice retain considerable contemporary relevance. Indeed many of the critical observations he outlines in his 'revised sequence' are shared, if not explicitly endorsed, by later analysts who have developed comparable criticisms of the global neo-liberal consumer economy which emerged in the closing decades of the twentieth century (Bourdieu, 1998, 2003; Chomsky, 1999; Klein, 2001; Dawson, 2005; Harvey, 2005).

For example, in the 1990s Pierre Bourdieu presented a series of critical analyses of neo-liberalism, of the renewed emphasis placed within economic policy on the alleged benefits of promoting free market forces, private enterprise, financial deregulation, flexible – 'insecure' – labor markets, and consumer choice. Neo-liberal policies assumed, and sought to further promote, 'the undivided reign of the market and the consumer, the commercial substitute for the citizen', and simultaneously introduced measures to reduce the role of the welfare state (Bourdieu, 1998: 25). The economic regime established through these policies was one in which the primary goal, maximizing profitability, was pursued by means of the increasing deployment of information technology and the simultaneous subjection of employees to processes of labor-force downsizing, deregulation, casualization, and unemployment, producing what has been termed a 'political economy of insecurity' (Beck, 2000). Reflecting on the implementation of such neo-liberal policy measures Bourdieu comments that:

The companies, which offer no security to their employees and contribute to instituting a *consumerist vision of the world*, herald an economic reality akin to the social philosophy inherent in neo-classical theory. It is as if the ... individualistic, ultra-subjectivist philosophy of neoclassical economics had found in neo-liberal policy the means of its own realization ... the conditions for its own verification. (2003: 30, emphasis added)

It is to an analysis of this 'consumerist vision of the world' that discussion below is directed, a vision that effectively elevates the consumer to sovereign status, possessing freedom and exercising unimpaired choice, not only in the commercial marketplace, where the pursuit of private interest has long held sway, but increasingly within the public sector, where privatization policies and the imposition of internal markets or quasi-market mechanisms, misleadingly represented as 'modernization', have been accompanied by political rhetoric extolling the presumed benefits to be gained by an extension of 'consumer choice' to health and education provision in particular (Clarke, 2006). In his critical analysis of neo-liberalism and global order Noam Chomsky comments that 'we have to begin by separating doctrine from reality' (1999: 19), as we do if we are to give effective critical consideration to the pivotal notion of consumer choice.

CONSUMER CHOICE

It has been argued that our society now warrants the designation 'consumer society' in so far as identity and status are acquired and social inclusion or integration is achieved primarily through participation in consumer activity (Bauman, 1998). As noted earlier the suggestion is that whereas the work-based modern industrial capitalist society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 'engaged its members *primarily* as producers' later twentieth century 'liquid' modern societies have increasingly engaged their members primarily 'in their capacity as consumers' (Bauman, 1998: 24, emphasis in original). The controversial implication is that there has been a relative shift of emphasis from production to consumption, a 'passage from producer to consumer society' (Bauman, 1998: 24), and that this is exemplified by the increasing prominence accorded to consumer activity and consumer choice. It is also argued that this shift of emphasis is reflected in the ways in which individual identity and satisfaction now appear to be less and less bound up with job, work, and career and more and more with lifestyle, consumption, and shopping (Sennett, 2001).

The passage from producer to consumer society is considered to be marked by a diminution of the significance of the work ethic and a

corresponding valorization of consumption. It is consumer spending rather than waged work that is now considered a 'duty', the 'spending-happy consumer' (Bauman, 1992: 50), rather than the disciplined worker for whom work or labor constituted a calling, who is now a necessity, whose 'confidence' to spend is deemed so vital to economic wellbeing. Where economic deregulation, competition, and market forces are widely promoted, it is consumer choice that is accorded a special significance as 'the consumer society's meta-value, the value with which to evaluate and rank all other values' (Bauman, 1998: 58). Consumerism, a 'market-mediated mode of life', a form of life that recognizes no limits and now encompasses public as well as the most personal and private domains of everyday life, trades on and continually promotes the value of consumer choice, exercise or expression of which by individuals, under conditions that have tended to receive less critical analytic consideration, is generally represented as an exemplification of freedom (Bauman, interview; Rojek, 2004: 304).

In a wide-ranging analysis of the figure of the consumer Gabriel and Lang list some of the positive features that have been attributed to the idea of consumer choice. These include: (1) its assumed value to consumers – 'all choice is good', the more the better, and that consumer capitalism delivers 'more choice for everyone'; (2) its instrumental value to the economy – 'it is the driving force for efficiency, growth and diversity'; as well as (3) its implied political value, 'a social system based on choice is better than one without; choice is the supreme value' (2006: 26). Consumers are continually making choices, routinely so in the course of trivial, mundane, everyday consumption, but as a number of analysts have remarked what is expressed as 'choice' is shaped and influenced by a variety of factors and processes (Galbraith, 1969: 1975; Dawson, 2005; Gabriel and Lang, 2006). In particular analysts have drawn attention to the beguiling activities of cultural intermediaries in advertising, marketing, and branding who have sought to encourage individuals to conceive of themselves primarily as consumers and have attempted to stimulate them in their flights of fantasy to literally buy into the notion that a sense of self-worth, self-identity, and happiness can best be achieved in and through the consumption of an endless chain of things (Galbraith, 1975; Gorz, 1989; Klein, 2001; Dawson, 2005).

At times in the closing decades of the twentieth century it seemed as though policymakers were at a loss to imagine much else beyond the vagaries of market forces driving a globally extensive neo-liberal capitalism and stoking the 'infernal' dynamism of its 'culture of consumption' (Jameson, 1991: 206). The inability to imagine anything else has not been helped by an analytic tendency to marginalize matters of production, including the production of consumer subjects and the cultural value system within

which priority is accorded to the figure of the consumer expressing choice. In contrast, an analytic focus that situates consumption in the context of production offers the prospect of exposing the limitations of market rhetoric, in particular the notion at the heart of the neo-liberal position that the 'free' or deregulated market effectively coordinates and organizes the activities of large numbers of individuals pursuing their economic interests in a manner beneficial to all the parties involved, and the inadequacies of consumer orientated models of contemporary social life which are a corollary (Jameson, 1991; Princen et al., 2002; Harvey, 2005; Schor, 2002, 2005).

Reflecting on neo-liberal economic rhetoric in the closing decade of the twentieth century Frederic Jameson commented that 'no free market exists today in the realm of oligopolies and multinationals', that the reality of economic life is radically different (1991: 266). Generally the parties involved in market exchange relations are, on the one hand, individual consumers, miscast as sovereign figures in the myths propagated within economic analysis, and, on the other, large and powerful corporations with the capacity to invest substantial sums of capital not only in the design, planning, and manufacture of goods or provision of services, but also in respect of the intermediary practices of marketing, advertising, branding, and celebrity endorsement deemed necessary to cultivate an appropriate level of demand by stimulating desires and wishes and promoting flights of fantasy on the part of consumers. The equation frequently drawn of the free market promoting increases in consumer choice and consumer freedom has always been contentious for, as Jameson argues:

the market as a concept rarely has anything to do with choice or freedom since those are all determined for us in advance, whether we are talking about new model cars, toys, or television programmes: we select among those, no doubt, but we can scarcely be said to have a say in actually choosing any of them. (1991: 266)

An increasing number of people around the world now experience a proliferating range of choices in their everyday lives, but equally a significant number of people are bearing the costs of what can only be described as over-consumption in North America, Europe, Australasia, and increasingly in some parts of Asia (Worldwatch Institute, 2004, 2006). As the twentieth century drew to a close there were substantial global inequalities in the consumption of all manner of commodities with the wealthiest one-fifth of the world's population, who accounted for 86% of total private consumption expenditures, consuming 45% of all meat and fish, 58% of total energy, and 84% of all paper, while owning 87% of the

world's vehicles. In contrast the poorest fifth of the world's population were responsible for a mere 1.3% of total private consumption expenditure, consuming 5% of all meat and fish, 4% of total energy, 1.1% of all paper, and less than 1% of all vehicles (United Nations Development Programme, 1998: Summary).

With the seemingly limitless extension of the commodity form more and more areas of people's lives have become subject, either directly or indirectly, to the logic of the market, to the enticements of an associated culture of consumption and, as a corollary, to the necessity of choosing, of exercising consumer choice. However, it is important not to forget that the mooted 'passage from producer to consumer society' is not experienced by, or accessible to, all people and that in many parts of our economically globalized world a *necessary* corollary for a substantial number of working people, one involving little if any choice, has been an increasingly rough passage from forms of subsistence, yet relatively independent, agricultural and/or craft work, to extremely poorly paid wage labor in frequently oppressive, unregulated, urban workshops, or export processing zones (Klein, 2001; Labour Behind the Label, n.d.). In short, the experience of people living, for the most part, in late modern, wealthy, cosmopolitan societies, those socially engaged primarily as consumers, is to a significant degree predicated on the largely enforced engagement of men, women, and indeed a good many children, as low-paid producers in the less wealthy countries that still account for the majority of the world's population, one example being Bangladesh where garment workers making clothes for popular retail stores in the UK were found to be working for 5p an hour and doing 80-hour weeks (War on Want, 2006a, 2007).

There is a very high premium placed on consumer choice in wealthy, late modern, neo-liberal 'consumer societies', but the value consumption is accorded is in substantial part economic, as is demonstrated by the significance attributed to the figure of the consumer, whose continuing 'confidence' to exercise choice by spending income or running up debt through credit has been proclaimed to be far more important to the well-being of the economy than a readiness to save or invest, as the response to the global economic recession that began in 2008 and the pervasive panic to do 'whatever it takes' to get consumers shopping to excess once again, served to confirm, simultaneously illustrating Jameson's point about the inability of politicians and policymakers to 'imagine anything else' beyond a return to the 'infernal' dynamism of consumer capitalism.

In Japan in the 1990s and early 2000s when consumer worries about the health of the economy, unemployment, and taxes were regarded as having eroded 'consumer confidence', the consequent weakness of consumption, that is people's apparent reluctance to spend, was identified

as a major factor in the country's economic stagnation (Lopez, 2000). In a broadly comparable manner it was reported in 2003 that in the UK and USA consumer confidence had reached new lows and as a result fears were expressed concerning the likelihood of a global economic recession (O'Mahony, 2003). In 2008 in the wake of the sub-prime mortgage crisis in America and the ensuing global 'credit crunch' and associated economic recession, consumer confidence in the UK was reported to have reached its lowest ever recorded level and in the USA it was reported that 'consumers remain extremely grim about short-term prospects' (Hopkins, 2008; The Conference Board, 2008). The downward trend continued in the first few months of 2009 with consumer confidence in the UK being recorded as falling yet again to a new low while in the USA in February an all-time low of 25 (1985 = 100) was recorded (Nationwide, 2009; The Conference Board, 2009). What emerges from reports on the volatile phenomenon 'consumer confidence' is that consumer expectations – unfounded, irrational, speculative, or soundly grounded as they might be – are represented as pivotal to the modern capitalist economy, geared as it is to economic growth and the continually increasing (over)production and (over)consumption of goods and services. Consumer confidence is deemed of paramount economic importance for the fate of the current organization of the global economy hangs on a continuing growth in the consumer activity it promotes. In a radically different and even more fundamental sense the fate of global ecology is also bound up with consumer activity, but in this instance it is with its transformation, its reorientation, redirection and moderation, at least in the over-consuming societies, rather than with its continuing growth.

IDENTITY

Exercising consumer choice is deemed to have social and psychological value for consumers insofar as it constitutes a means for pursuing 'pleasurable sensations'. It is considered to provide a way of coping with, and to an extent is experienced as compensation for, the uncertainties and insecurities of everyday life, and perhaps above all, for a number of sociological and cultural studies observers, serves as the medium through which a sense of self-identity can be 'fashioned' and 'lifestyled'. Bauman (1998) identifies a striking correspondence between individual identity, unstable, fragmented, and continually in the process of 'becoming' as it is deemed to be, and the qualities intrinsic to what he has described as a 'postmodern' consumer society, in particular the temporary and transitory character of consumer commodities. The correspondence in

the qualities increasingly associated with consumerism (temporary and transitory) and identity (flexible and provisional) in late modern societies, as well as the prominence accorded to consumer activity, flow from the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies and the associated generation of a political economy of insecurity.

Neo-liberal economic policies have: (1) radically transformed the world of work and the place and meaningfulness of a job in the lives of many working people, particularly those who find themselves in poorly paid, insecure, part-time forms of employment, often designated as 'McJobs' (Beck, 2000); (2) contributed to dramatic reductions in commodity turnover time through programmed product obsolescence or 'retirement'; and (3) significantly increased the volume and range of commodities and services produced and available for consumption. While a semblance of identity may now be purchased through individualized consumption, any sense of self-achieved in this manner is destined to be temporary, for the consumer process, and advertising, marketing, fashion, and popular culture lifestyling in particular, effectively contribute to the instability of identity through the perpetual generation and relentless promotion of new products, images, and values suggestive of further possible new identities and lifestyle choices. In short, the prominence of neo-liberal capitalist commodity production and associated 'market segmentation of multiple ad campaigns and appeals reproduces and intensifies fragmentation and destabilizes identity which new products and identifications are attempting to restabilize' (Kellner, 1992: 172).

Increasingly the resources employed in the process of identity formation – shaping what we think, or imagine, we might want to become and how we might want to represent ourselves – derive from the consumer marketplace. But while a degree of choice may be exercised in relation to the purchase of consumer goods and services, the range of things in respect of which choice is exercised are largely predetermined and the financial, informational, and other resources such as time required to make a free and informed choice are, for the majority of people, subject to significant limitations. Even the uses to which chosen commodities are put, and the place or meaning they may be accorded in people's lives, are continually exposed to the seductive influences and suggestive powers of advertising, marketing, and branding to which continual increases in corporate financial resources have been directed, reflecting the persisting systemic necessity of continually stimulating fantasies, arousing desires, and reproducing a willingness in people to consume at an increasing rate, which is vital to the well-being of an economy perpetually dependent upon a logic of growth (Ewen and Ewen, 1992; Ewen, 2001; Klein, 2001; ZenithOptimedia, 2008b).

ADVERTISING AND THE MOBILIZATION OF YOUNG CONSUMERS

As one analyst of the conditioning of consumer activity has observed, in the USA people are exposed on average to 3000 advertisements each day, the purpose of which is to promote and sell brands, generally by associating products with exciting and socially attractive lifestyles and/or prominent celebrity figures (Schwartz, 2005: 53–4). It has been estimated that across the world in excess of \$US400 billion is spent on advertising each year to try to influence consumer choices. The inference is not that the consumer is a mindless moron or a cultural dope, but rather that advertising frequently does have a significant impact on consumption, on the choices consumers make by mobilizing them in particular ways (Galbraith, 1969; Baran and Sweezy, 1970; Ewen and Ewen, 1992; Miller and Rose, 1997; Sutherland and Sylvester, 2000; Klein, 2001; Ewen, 2001; Dawson, 2005).

For example, research conducted in the USA on young adults and alcohol advertising indicates that there is a strong positive link between exposure to alcohol advertisements and choices made by teenagers and young consumers to increase their levels of drinking (Snyder et al., 2006) and Juliet Schor's (2004) study of the commercialization of childhood reveals the impact of increased advertising of a variety of consumer products and services, including promotion of alcohol and tobacco products and restricted rated films, specifically targeted at children and young people. Children are an important market segment because they possess considerable immediate spending power, exercise a significant influence over household expenditure choices, and finally their status as future potential 'brand loyal' adult consumers makes them an appropriate target for corporate market building, which goes some way towards explaining the significant growth in advertising industry expenditure directed at children, with estimates ranging from US\$100 million in 1983 to US\$12 billion in 2000 rising to between US\$15–17 billion by 2007 (Shah, 2008a).

In the UK and across Europe as a whole research has revealed a growing range of media and sophisticated marketing methods and techniques employed by corporations in sales strategies directed towards children, the objective of which is to attempt to influence their consumer choices in general and their eating choices in particular. The latter constitutes a particularly controversial issue because considerable resources have been directed to the promotion of consumption of foods that are high in fat, sugar, and salt (Matthews et al., 2004; Which?, 2006). New technologies and marketing techniques have led to children being exposed each day to an increasing number of messages promoting unhealthy foods – 'We've identified more than 40 different ways that food companies market their products

to children. Some marketing is clear to parents ... but many techniques are more hidden or underhand' (Which?, 2006). One report describes 12 particular marketing ploys involving text messages, Internet, computer games, websites, screen-savers, toys and puzzles, adventure playgrounds, product placement, and stars and celebrities, who are increasingly being employed to cultivate tastes and stimulate appetites for particular foods in children (Which?, 2006). The success of these food marketing techniques in influencing consumer choices has been argued to have contributed towards, if not produced, significant social consequences in the form of rising levels of obesity and associated health problems in children and adults who have acquired a taste for food containing unhealthy levels of fat, sugar, and salt (Schlosser, 2001; Shah, 2006).

The evidence of the impact of advertising on consumers suggests that the 'freedom' expressed in consumption often amounts to little more than a choice between brands, that caught up in 'the frenzy of buying and acquisitiveness to which the ... profusion of commodities gives rise' (Baudrillard, 1998: 27) 'choice' merely means that the dutiful consumer might have chosen to consume otherwise. The available range from which a choice is made, the potential uses, and the meanings that might be accorded to commodities, are powerfully influenced by the 'entire process of the production, distribution, [and] retailing ... of goods' (Philo and Miller, 2001: 66). From a very early age children are constituted as consumers, they are socialized to consume through targeted advertising that is designed to promote the achievement of a sense of selfhood and status through the ownership of things, instill brand loyalty to secure future consumer sales, and generate 'pester power', that is a significant influence over levels of parental expenditure (Hansen et al., 2002; Williams, 2006; Shah, 2008a). Immersed within a dynamic culture of consumption which has become part of the fabric of everyday life, consumers may experience their 'distinctive behaviours as freedom, as aspiration, as choice' (Baudrillard, 1998: 61), but in practice we consumers are being perpetually mobilized by an array of persuasive commercial techniques and seductive images conveyed through sophisticated media that continually stimulate and regenerate the wish to consume and we remain ever-dependent on the market for the necessary means to do so, the endless procession of attractive 'new' commodities, rapidly proliferating range of appealing services, and available streams of credit on which we have come to depend.

PRIVATE CONSUMPTION, PUBLIC SERVICES, AND CHOICE

Reconciling the interests and rising consumer appetites of private economic subjects with demands for higher public expenditures to improve

the provision of public services was identified by Schumpeter (1954[1918]), early in the twentieth century, to present a fiscal challenge to the 'tax state'. A deteriorating social imbalance between private consumption and public services (Galbraith, 1963: 1985) has presented contemporary societies with a recurring dilemma, namely how to reconcile consumer 'appetites which resist curbs on acquisitiveness either morally or by taxation; a democratic polity which increasingly demands more and more social services as entitlements; and an individualist ethos which at best defends the idea of personal liberty, and at worst evades the necessary social responsibilities' (Bell, 1976: 248–9). From the late 1970s the deployment of neo-liberal economic policies led to a series of interventions, represented as 'progressive' and promoted as necessary 'reform' and essential 'modernization', to transform the public sector by introducing market forces and principles along with a variety of costly auditing mechanisms, which were presented as the means for delivering efficiency and value for money. The logic of the marketplace and the figure of the consumer, exercising what has been presented as 'freedom of choice', are no longer confined to the commercial sector or the private sphere of the economy, they are now increasingly being invoked in respect of the public sector. As formerly non-market spheres of public life such as education, health, and welfare services have become subject to quasi-market mechanisms, so, in turn, students, patients, and welfare clients have been reconstituted in political discourse and media reporting as consumers or customers.

The choice agenda has served to legitimate the introduction of quasi-market forces within the public sector. Choice and market forces have been presented as innovations that will deliver a modernization of the public sector as a consequence of providers of education, healthcare, and welfare being required to respond to the demands of public service 'consumers'. Modernization in respect of the public sector is generally depicted in terms of greater efficiency, equated with reduced costs and selected measures of improvement in performance, which, in turn, are considered to signify enhanced levels of productivity and an improvement in standards achieved (Winters, 2006). Choice seems now to intrude into virtually every aspect of peoples' lives as a variety of lifestyles, products, and services are made available and aspects of peoples' lives that were insulated from market forces and entrusted to public sector professionals have been exposed to the market and, as the political rhetoric suggests, transformed into consumer choices.

The New Labour rationale for foregrounding the figure of the consumer in public sector 'modernization' programs was that the development of a more diverse society and a vibrant consumer culture had so transformed people's expectations, that the centralized and standardized 'one size fits all' provision associated with the public services was no longer fit for purpose and compared poorly with the more flexible

and consumer orientated operation of the private sector of the economy which promoted consumer choice as a self-evident virtue (Clarke, 2006). While there was recognition that the public services needed increased funding it was argued that people wanted to be able to exercise choice and that by giving them the capacity to do so public services would be improved. As Prime Minister Blair remarked:

In reality, I believe people do want choice, in public services as in other services ... It is one important mechanism to ensure that citizens can indeed secure good schools and health services in their communities ... Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services ... We are proposing to put an entirely different dynamic in place to drive our public services; one where the service will be driven not by the government or by the manager but by the user –/the patient, the parent, the pupil and the law-abiding citizen. (Cited in White and Wintour, 2004)

Increasingly within the public sphere individuals are being promised 'choice' and are exhorted to welcome the prospect of being able to exercise their consumer sovereignty by registering their preferences for this or that service, although no guarantee is given of preferences being met. For example, in respect of health and medical services it has been argued that patients should be offered a choice of hospitals at which they might receive treatment and in education that parents should be given a choice of schools for their child or children. Frequently the notion of choice invoked in these contexts by politicians represents little more than a rhetorical device serving to legitimate the introduction of a range of policy measures designed to introduce market forces and mechanisms into public sector institutions. It is far from clear what patient or parental 'choice' amounts to in practice in the case of public sector provision, or for that matter whether choice is actually desired or being sought in regard to public services (Clarke, 2006). Indeed one critic has commented that the 'overabundance' of options which now confronts individuals in contemporary societies is more likely to be experienced as a 'tyranny of choice' than as freedom (Schwartz, 2005).

Within education schools, colleges, and universities are now routinely audited and ranked in terms of various criteria, as in the health sector are hospitals, ostensibly to allow former citizens of a welfare state now recast as consumers in a market society to have information that will allow them to choose the particular provider and/or provision which they feel might more effectively meet their specific needs and requirements. But behind the mantra of choice there lie a number of significant matters that need to be considered further.

Health

In response to the creeping privatization of the National Health Service which became an increasing feature of New Labour health policy in the UK from the late 1990s, one critical observer, drawing attention to research undertaken by the Consumer Council, argued that:

people don't want a choice of hospitals, any more than they want a choice of fire brigades. What they want is a hospital near them that is as good as any other in the country. The real reason for the focus on choice ... is that you can't have a market without choice-making consumers. The truth is ... we are not being given a market in healthcare to satisfy our wish to choose between hospitals, we are being induced to choose between hospitals in order to make them compete with each other, instead of cooperating as they did in the past. (Ley, 2006a)

This view has received support from other surveys of patients which indicate that 'choice is not seen by the public as the greatest NHS priority and [that] the vast majority put a good local hospital ahead of choice of provider' (Winters, 2006: 14).

While there is, on the one hand, strong political rhetoric about patients as consumers and of the need to give 'choice' in respect of health provision and NHS services in the UK, exemplified by political discourse that transforms patients from citizens who are 'treated' into consumers or customers who are 'served' in hospital wards, there are, on the other hand, a number of examples where policy measures and associated differences in resource allocation between organizations responsible for delivery of medical and health services have served to reduce or prohibit 'consumer' choices. For example, in 1999 in the UK the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) was established by the New Labour administration ostensibly to drive up clinical standards in the NHS, its specific terms of reference being to review the clinical and cost effectiveness of treatments. However, in a number of critical instances its judgments about clinical effectiveness have been heavily influenced by assessment of the cost-effectiveness of treatments, their value for money according to relatively arbitrary financial criteria (i.e. withholding of approval for drugs that cost more than £30,000–48,000 for a year of good quality life), and in consequence NICE increasingly has come to resemble an economizing mechanism, a medical treatment rationing organization, with the choice agenda and potential benefit to patient well-being being considered very much secondary to cost, if not relegated from consideration altogether.

Because the NHS will not make a treatment available until it has received NICE approval, which may take a considerable length of time,

if it is forthcoming at all, a number of cases arose where patients were advised by clinicians that their conditions would be alleviated, quality of life enhanced, and/or length of life potentially increased, by use of a non-approved drug. Where patients exercised choice to pay privately for the cost of clinically recommended non-approved treatment in many instances they found that they were subsequently heavily penalized for their expression of choice by the withdrawal of any NHS treatment they were currently receiving at no cost and confronted with the requirement in future to pay full cost for all their treatment. In response to growing public concern about the matter and following a commissioned report on improving access of NHS patients to medicines, the Health Secretary announced a number of policy changes, including that in future patients would be allowed to pay privately for treatment with drugs which had not been approved for use within the NHS without losing their entitlement to continuing free NHS care. This represented an acceptance of a key report recommendation, namely that 'no patient should lose their entitlement to NHS care they would have otherwise received, simply because they opt to purchase additional treatment for their condition' (Richards, 2008: 5, recommendation 8). It was also accepted that greater flexibility should be exercised by NICE in appraising more expensive drugs for terminally ill patients and that the 'timeliness' of the NICE appraisal process should be improved.

In the UK, the context in which the notion of the patient as consumer and the associated choice agenda exist is one marked by significant differences in spending priorities between primary care trusts (PCTs). In 2006, analysis of Department of Health data on spending on individual disease areas by individual PCTs revealed 'very large variations in the amount spent per head of population and the proportion of each PCT budget devoted to each disease area' (The Kings Fund, 2006: 3). Furthermore, in 2007 and 2008 there were a number of examples of fiscally driven forms of restructuring and reorganization by PCTs, involving hospital unit closures and cuts in services, including in some instances loss of local accidents and emergency (A&E), maternity, and pediatric services, leading thousands of affected people, who were reliant on their local hospital services, to demonstrate, sign petitions, write to their MPs, and lobby the PCTs responsible. With financially driven decisions of this kind, taken in the face of local community opposition, decisions that are not only reducing the choices of existing patients, but also represent a limitation of choice for future patients, political rhetoric or spin is generally employed to try to convince disenfranchised consumer-citizens that their health prospects and choices are actually being enhanced by hospital unit closures, mergers, and associated consolidations of service provision in pursuit of financial economies.

The promotion of a market in health care in the UK led in 2006 to NHS hospitals being given the green light to advertise for patients. The introduction of marketing was justified on the grounds that to make choices patients needed reliable information. The chief executive of the NHS Confederation, Dr Gill Morton, commented that 'publicizing information on everything from operation results to car parking was a vital part of giving patients choice', but the British Medical Association (BMA) and UNISON (the Public Service Union) expressed criticism of the idea of hospitals spending taxpayers' money advertising for patients when such resources might have been directed to increasing provision of front line healthcare. The policy was introduced without any meaningful consultation with taxpayer-patient-consumers who were given no opportunity to exercise choice as to whether they wanted precious NHS funds spent on advertising budgets rather than on front line patient care (BBC, 2006; Hawkes, 2008).

Choose and Book

Although 'Choose and Book' was formally launched in January 2006 it was not until April 2008 that the 'free choice' project came fully into effect, making it possible for 'patients referred by GPs for planned, non-emergency treatment ... [to] choose to have that treatment in any hospital or clinic that can provide NHS standard care, at NHS prices' and to assist patient choice an NHS Choices website was established (NHS Direct). In addition to being able to mount advertising campaigns to compete for patients NHS hospitals were granted permission to pursue sponsorship deals providing that any companies involved were unable to gain 'commercial advantage' from any deal, thereby ruling out Nike sponsorship of a hospital health and fitness program, or Durex sponsoring a hospital sexual health campaign. Entering fully into the marketing ethos a Department of Health director of 'system management and new enterprise' stated 'The NHS brand is very powerful and we are not going to let any commercial activity damage that. It's too important to the public' (Hawkes, N., 2008). However, no limit was placed on the advertising expenditure hospitals might make to attract patients.

For the free choice project to work effectively in its own terms patients need to be in a position to make informed choices and for this they need to have appropriate, up to date, and understandable information on which to base their choices. The role of GPs is crucial in the choice project too, they need to devote time to research the appropriate information required by patients and assist them in making a choice, should they wish to do so. In particular GPs need to be attentive to resource differences between patients.

But whether they are in a position to empower disadvantaged patients, in particular those who are poor or have low income, the old, and those with lower levels of educational attainment, or significant limiting family commitments, to make a considered and informed choice is questionable. Indeed, it has been argued that there is a significant risk that any gains in efficiency and responsiveness achieved through reforms associated with the choice agenda may well be 'at the expense of equity' (Winters, 2006: 11; see also Clarke, 2006: 436). In addition, as research has established, the ability to be able to exercise choice in respect of location for medical treatment and/or care is affected by availability of suitable transport and time and cost constraints. The affordability of the cost of travel between home and a non-local or distant hospital has an impact on the possibility of exercising patient choice and differentiates more affluent from poorer patients, with the former being less affected by time and cost constraints and more able to choose to travel further to receive their treatment (Propper et al., 2006). As John Clarke states, 'Choice mechanisms carry the risk of reproducing economic inequality (as people spend to 'trade up' within or beyond public services), or they may produce choices shaped by the unequal distribution of ... social and cultural capital' (2006: 436).

The 'Choose and Book' referral system, the primary vehicle for the introduction of choice within the NHS in the UK, started slowly and initially had a very disappointing take-up rate. In a membership magazine published by the British Medical Association on 17 February 2006 it was reported that data collected from Strategic Health Authorities across England revealed that 'only 67,820 referrals have been made by GPs in England out of an estimated yearly total of 10 million', that is a take-up rate of 0.007% (*The Register*, 2006). While usage subsequently increased, particularly in the period covered by the national GP incentive payment scheme for Choose and Book – the Directed Enhanced Services (DES) scheme for choice and booking ran from 2005 until 31 March 2007 – it fell back again when the incentive scheme ended as GPs felt they were not being compensated for the extra burdensome workload involved and in any event they considered the benefits of Choose and Book to be limited (*Health Insider*, 2007). An assessment of the system conducted in the period May–August 2006 and involving 104 patients at a London hospital concluded that 'Choose and Book did not deliver choice as portrayed in UK government policy to this patient community' (Green et al., 2008). Further research conducted on the scheme by the BMA in 2009 revealed very mixed responses with some GPs very positive, proclaiming that they would be 'unwilling to revert to paper-based referrals', while others protested that it was unreliable and slow, that they had 'insufficient time to use it', were 'unable to find clinics on the system', and that it was effectively 'completely unworkable' (*Medical News Today*, 2009).

The assumption on which New Labour public sector ‘modernization’ policy was based was that creating quasi-markets within the public sector inevitably would serve to improve services, because resources would follow demand and those institutions that came to be regarded as ‘unpopular’ or ‘failing’ public sector providers would be effectively coerced by market forces to get their act together. However, there is a very real possibility that creating a market within the NHS will prove detrimental to patients and do little to enhance choice. The introduction of a healthcare market will expose hospital trusts to considerable financial uncertainty. The introduction of ‘patient choice’ and a system of payment for procedures conducted, or treatments carried out, will mean hospital trust income is necessarily going to be uncertain, particularly with the growing privatization of NHS provision. Following the establishment in 2003 of private-sector owned Independent Sector Treatment Centres (ISTCs) contracted to treat NHS patients the transfer of funds from public to private sector was expected to increase. In 2006, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair expressing support for an increase in private provision in the NHS anticipated that by the end of 2008 up to 40% of the work carried out by private hospitals would be for NHS patients and funded out of the NHS budget (Hall, 2006; Leys, 2006b). The transfer of funds from hospital budgets to the private sector, plus the costs arising from the imposition of private finance initiatives and the employment of the auditing personnel that are an inevitable corollary of the introduction of quasi-market mechanisms into the public sector, had been expected to increase financial difficulties in the NHS (Monbiot, 2000). As one convinced critic commented, ‘the government’s idea that marketising the NHS will improve it is not based on evidence, but on ideology’ (Leys, 2006b).

Education

As with the health sector the attempted extension of consumer choice to education and schooling has given rise to problems and criticisms. Reports on the early experience of the introduction of parental choice in respect of schooling in particular areas of the UK was at best mixed and in one instance it was suggested that ‘choice ... is largely illusory [and] that people would be much happier with a better local school and less “choice”’ (Seaton, 2006: 8). Given schools have limits on the number of pupils they can accept the idea of attempting to allocate school places on the basis of expressions of parental choice is a recipe for discontent and dissatisfaction for those missing out at over-subscribed schools. It is not something that can be remedied by quickly re-ordering to increase ‘supply’ to meet an unanticipated high ‘demand’ for places. Children and parents

become winners and losers through a process that promises choice and raises expectations, but cannot avoid delivering disappointment and dissatisfaction to those whose wishes are not met. For those with sufficient financial resources one response has been to 'shop elsewhere' and purchase education from the independent sector, but this constitutes a choice that has always been unavailable to the great majority of parents and with the economic downturn that increased in gravity in 2008 it became so for a number of middle-class families in the UK who were forced to contemplate withdrawing their children from private education as their economic resources declined in value (Tweedie, 2008).

Reflecting on significant differences between experiences in England and Scotland, one critical observer notes that in the latter there is far less diversity in secondary education and the 'great majority of parents simply accept the local council's choice of school', which tends to be based on allocation of places according to residence in a designated geographical area proximate to the school. The data on parents taking their cases to appeal in 2004/5 reveal significant differences with only 0.6% of all applicants pursuing this course in Scotland in comparison to 9.3% in England lodging an appeal and 7% proceeding all the way through the appeal hearing process, demonstrating that 'the level of dissatisfaction is much higher in England, the country with the more developed school 'choice' system', and further, that 'the more choice you offer, the greater the level of dissatisfaction' (Baker, 2007). In one area of England, Brighton and Hove, school admissions policy was changed ostensibly to increase the choice of all parents living in the area. Parents living nearest the two most sought after schools were no longer guaranteed places for their children after catchment areas were redrawn. Where expressions of parental choice led to schools being oversubscribed an electronic ballot or 'lottery' system was introduced to resolve any remaining selection problems after other considerations had been taken into account, for example exceptional circumstances such as special educational needs and the 'sibling rule', that is whether a brother or sister already attends a chosen school. The change in policy and introduction of a lottery system element led to demonstrations, allegations of gerrymandering, and threats of High Court legal action and a judicial review (Laville and Smithers, 2007). In 2007, the first year in which Brighton City Council employed a random allocation method to determine places at oversubscribed schools, 16% of parents failed to get their children into their first choice school, by 2008 this the figure had risen to 22%.

Reported data from other local authorities in the UK revealed a comparable trend, namely that in 2008 fewer parents were succeeding in being offered their first choice of school for their children's education and in the spring of 2009 a survey of 43 local authorities told a comparable tale with

an estimated 20% of children failing to get into their first-choice school (Curtis and Lipsett, 2008; Frean, 2009). Government data confirmed that the raised expectations of a significant number of parents and children were failing to be met and that not only were fewer children able to attend their first choice school but the number who were unsuccessful in being offered a place at any of their preferred schools had also increased (Shepherd, 2009).

CHOICE: LIMITS AND COSTS

There are political benefits to be derived from the promotion of consumer choice-based systems, from allowing individuals to feel that they are exercising their will-to-consume, not least that in the public sector it may serve to legitimate the introduction of quasi-market mechanisms and simultaneously make patients, students and their families, and welfare clients feel in some part responsible for the service provision they are receiving in some areas of their lives because they have had an opportunity to express 'choice'. However, the tendency within neo-liberal policy to conflate range of consumer choice with degree of human freedom is unwarranted (McChesney, 1999). It is a mistake to equate human freedom with range of consumer choice as Marcuse observed in a series of critical reflections:

The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what *is* chosen by the individual. The criterion for free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it entirely relative ... Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear ... And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls.

The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced. (1968: 23–4, emphasis in original).

It is important to consider what can and cannot be chosen and what is chosen. In respect of the first point, what can be chosen, or what it is possible to choose, in particular areas of the public sector, such as health and

education, consumer choice-based systems have been introduced with mixed results to date. However, there are a variety of other strategically important ‘public sector services’, representing a very substantial element of public expenditure, where notions of choice are rarely, if ever, entertained. For example, decisions are taken and choices are made about exceptionally large expenditures in significant areas of the public sector concerned with military, defense, and security provision, yet rarely, if ever, are the potential alternative options presented to democratic electorates as matters in respect of which they might genuinely exercise their sovereign right to choose how public resources are disbursed.

The issue of choice is very relevant here for there is an important matter of ‘opportunity cost’, as the 34th US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, frankly acknowledged in a revealing speech given in 1953 to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Eisenhower gave a series of examples of the respects in which policy choices in respect of public expenditure on military-defense procurement necessarily meant significant trade-offs with material implications for the quantity and quality of public services available to sovereign subjects, the citizens, in whose names such decisions were taken:

the cost of one modern heavy bomber is ... a modern brick school in more than 30 cities ...[or] two electric power plants each serving a town of 60,000 population ... [or] two, fine fully equipped hospitals ... [and the cost of] a single destroyer [is] new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. (Quoted in Parker, 2005: 414)

How many hospitals and schools might be constructed for the cost of a renewed Trident nuclear weapons system? How many drugs currently not considered ‘cost-effective’ enough by NICE’S fiscal rationing regime might be available for clinicians to treat patients and improve their quality of life and in many cases extend their lives? What increases in the state pension might have been possible if an illegal war had not been waged in Iraq? What choices would the citizen-consumer electorate have made in respect of such matters had they been given the opportunity of engaging in a genuinely participatory democracy? Would it have been £25 billion to be spent on a regenerated nuclear deterrent, which contravenes Article VI of the 1968 treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, to which an earlier UK government was a signatory, or the same sum invested in medical treatments, drugs, and health facilities and staffing that would genuinely protect and improve the survival and well-being of citizens? Currently this type of civic choice is off the agenda; it is *not* what can be chosen, even in democratic states that extol the virtues of choice and promote its extension to strategically delimited regions of the public sector.

Choice is often represented as an unquestionable good for consumers, the economy, and society as a whole, but there are circumstances where restricted or edited choice may prove to be advantageous for communities and individuals. While a consumer culture promoting the value of increasing choice prevails in the USA and the UK, and is proving increasingly influential around the world as others are led to consume in a similar way (Ritzer, 2005), there are some circumstances in which individuals are electing to limit choice, where choice is being deliberately restricted to achieve beneficial outcomes for consumers, communities, and the environment. For example, Japan has a number of consumer cooperatives with around one in six of the population as members. One of these, the Seikatsu Club Consumers' Cooperative Union (SSCU), has 25 branches and provides its 260,000 members with an edited or restricted range of around 600 goods, which it considers to be the best to meet consumer needs, rather than the wider range of around 15,000 goods available at supermarkets (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 129). Since 1994 the SSCU has given priority to 'the selection of returnable bottles as packaging media for culinary seasonings, soft drinks, and ... [other products, including] soy sauce and jams', as well as other resource recycling initiatives (http://www.seikatsuclub.coop/english/3r_appeal.html 2/5/09). Such measures led to substantial annual reductions in packaging waste (approximately 7700 tons), as well as financial savings in refuse collection costs (about 690 million yen) and a reduction in emission of greenhouse gas (estimated at 2200 tons). The benefits of the neo-liberal era of 'endless consumer individualization' are increasingly being called into question and this raises the possibility, Gabriel and Lang suggest, that increasing ecological problems may lead to more collective, cooperative, and shared forms of consumption, although this would necessitate a radical change in contemporary consumer culture (2006: 129–30).

Rising rates of consumption and the promotion and expression of consumer choice have costs as well as benefits, with costs ranging from personal feelings of stress and anxiety, disappointment and frustration about choices made, opportunities spurned, directions not taken, products and services not selected, as well as the harmful effect of some chosen commodities and services on the health and well-being of consumers, to feelings of fatigue aroused by the recognition of a growing range of respects (e.g. education, health, pension provision) in which making choices has become, if not a necessity, certainly something that increasingly has to be taken seriously if welfare and material interests are to be protected, and other unintended and unwanted consequences of consumerism such as light, noise, water, air and soil pollution are to be alleviated, if not avoided (Soper, 2009: 1–2; de Geus, 2009: 121–2). To which problematic and/or unwanted consequences might be added evidence of

significantly reduced levels of personal savings and a rapid escalation in levels of indebtedness following the rise of a consumer society promoting increasing choice of goods and services and a 'live now pay later' lifestyle (Schor, 1998; Offer, 2006).

Reflecting on the fact that rising levels of wealth and consumption of goods and services have been accompanied by a decline in recorded levels of contentment and happiness 'Schwartz comments that the "success" of modernity turns out to be bittersweet, and everywhere we look it appears that a significant contributing factor is the *overabundance of choice*' (2005: 221, emphasis added). Happiness, mental wellbeing, and contentment are not it seems inevitably, if at all, enhanced by increasing the scope for expressions of choice in a corporate-driven consumer culture (Jackson, 2009). Rather the civilization that has succeeded in rapidly accelerating the rate and the scale of consumption appears also to have presided over an increase in forms of personal discontent and depression rather than an enhancement of feelings of well-being (DeAngelis, 2004; Schwartz, 2005; Offer, 2006).

Psychological distress, depression, and anxiety provoked by worries about comparative social standing, the endlessness of the circuits of consumption in which participation is necessary if 'the desire to have the best of everything – to maximize' (Schwartz, 2005: 221) is to be sustained and, no less important, displayed for others, and the rapidly upward spiraling of consumer credit indebtedness, are some of the more problematic outcomes of the accelerating proliferation of choices to which consumers are increasingly treated, exposed, and vulnerable, and to which there have been a range of anti-consumerist and anti-shopping responses (Klein, 2001; Schor, 2004; Levine, 2007). Other consequences that are attracting critical concern include the ways in which the growth in production of consumer goods and services and increase in levels of consumption and expression of consumer choice have led to increasing quantities of waste, a squandering of, in many instances, relatively scarce resources, and a range of other serious environmental problems, including concerns over climate change (Princen et al., 2002; Gardner et al., 2004; Renner, 2004; Jackson, 2008b).

There is accumulating evidence of the problematic consequences of a way of life that relentlessly pursues economic growth, strives to increasingly raise levels of consumption, and celebrates consumer choice as its core value. Appreciation of the damaging and irreversible environmental impact of current levels of consumption and a growing awareness of the speed with which any personal pleasure derived from the experience of consumption may be transformed into feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and frustration suggest that late modern lifestyles need to change (Brown, 2006; Schwartz, 2005). The goal of continually working to extend choice and

maximize private consumption has proven detrimental to the provision of public goods, collective forms of consumption, and the environment (Schor, 2004). The increased emphasis placed upon the consumer's freedom of choice and the provision of an ever-growing range of goods and services have been accompanied by a decline in the proportion of people declaring that they are happy or contented with their consumption-driven way of life, by an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression, and most significant of all, by a growing body of scientific research which demonstrates the world is consuming goods and services at an unsustainable pace (Princen et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2004; Starke, 2004; Simms et al., 2006).

Notes

1. The problem of funding the public sector, to which Galbraith makes reference, was identified early in the twentieth century by Schumpeter (1954[1918]), addressed later by Bell (1976), and duly became the focus of a number of neo-liberal economic policy initiatives (Smart 2003). However, while for the most part 'civilian' public expenditure has been subject to close regulation, being relatively restrained and at times subject to significant reductions, a frequent exception has been military and defense expenditure which has been 'meticulously excluded ... from all pleas for public economy' (Galbraith, 1969[1967]: 234; 1975: 312; see also Baran and Sweezy, 1970[1966]: 177, ch. 7; Shah, 2008c).
2. To give but one example, the rising quantity of consumer waste being produced and the problems associated with its disposal have led to calls for alternatives to landfill dumping to be introduced. Many existing landfill sites in the UK, USA, and Japan are approaching full capacity (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3086405.stm>-http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/20020528000102.html; <http://www.planetark.com/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=20190&newsdate=17-Mar-2003>).