

CHOICE

[ESPECIALLY IN PUBLIC SERVICES]

Choice, as a political mantra, is a dangerous chimera which generally means a qualification of the principle that public services should be available equally and freely to all. My principle problem with it is that it smacks too much of “*consumerism*” which in itself suggests that it is not a person’s innate humanity which entitles her to the service or right under consideration. The language of consumerism grows out of *individualisation* – the process by which we have come to expect that we will be treated as individuals rather than just a number or a unit – and has benefits in that it requires a better standard of service for the individual, but such a raising of service standards ought to be possible even if they are offered on the welfare state model.

The issue of “choice” is one which plays out questions of individualisation and community in a particular context: those root terms are considered elsewhere on this site.

Choice in general terms

Choosing is what shoppers do: they stand in shops, looking left to right across the huge range of goods available to them, they try on clothes, they press buttons on electrical goods, they evaluate colour and design. Then they choose. This is how we are encouraged to think about our politics, as well as our non-working lives (see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*).

We choose identities in the same way that we choose clothes: indeed we often choose our identities in the process of choosing clothes from the range of lifestyles offered to us in the advertising of those clothes. When we shop we live out the lives we want for ourselves, often we use credit facilities rather than real money, and we expect to be treated with politeness and with an unswerving attention to our wants. It is in this sense that we might think that our politics is coming closer to our shopping. For we live in the age of focus groups and a sort of politics in which politicians do not simply stand on soapboxes and tell us what to think but rather in which those politicians ask us what we want and tailor-make their policies to fit our aspirations. In consequence, leafleting and speeches are cut to fit their audience rather than relying on the eloquence of the speaker simply to brow-beat the audience into agreement.

As considered in [New Labour](#), this has been the crisis of the Blair administration. It began by displacing a corrupt and intellectually-bankrupt series of Conservative administrations with a promise of national renewal and of listening to the people’s needs for social justice. Over time the cynicism which marks British political commentary and the attitude of its citizens latched on rapidly to the manner in which the Labour administration kept asking the people what they thought over and over again, seemingly content to drop any belief in the search for popularity. Blair’s greatest mistake is likely to turn out to be one volte-face too far: that is, by failing to listen to the crowd of more than

a million people who demanded that he did not invade Iraq in the US-led coalition. (At the time of reviewing this file, the airports are effectively closed due, it is said, to another terrorist cell motivated by the war in Iraq.)

Choice, then, may have been the policy of the Blair and the Clinton administrations but it cuts against socialist dogma. Socialism typically requires that the State make choices about the manner in which public services will be provided to the populace. The Stalinist five-year plans are a good example of that sort of scientism which proposes to plan state provision down to the finest detail. Those whose interest in socialism is with the welfare state or with the central provision of equality find this sort of central control, and the bureaucracy which necessarily comes with it as being a positive thing. A relic of the age of Althusser perhaps. Bureaucracy, rather than being an evil of the State, can be seen by such people as being an engine for equality and social justice – provided that the bureaucrats remain impartial.

An alternative form of socialism, in the form of libertarian socialism, suspects the State (and who would not be nervous after the evident injustices of the Soviet Union's experience?) and prefers to prioritise the protection of individual liberties from arbitrary interference from either the state, other corporate entities or other individuals. This form of socialism caught hold during that period in the second half of the twentieth century in which social democratic parties had trouble winning electoral mandates from right-wing, monetarist governments. It brings these libertarian socialists closer in their philosophies to those right-wing thinkers (see, for example, Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*) who prioritise individual freedom over all other goods and who therefore advocate a minimal state restricted to protecting the populace from force or fraud.

As is said elsewhere on this site in *System*, the principal goal of any school of philosophical inquiry is into the extent of human freedom – whether under the guise of an investigation into reason, social justice, human knowledge, human rights or whatever else. The concern is with freedom in the sense that human beings are conceived of in a Kantian sense as being of equal value and not as being ends in themselves. For those interested in reason, freedom is the result of removing any focus on god-given rights or sovereign-granted rights and replacing them with an understanding of the intrinsic value of human beings. Even left-wing interest in social justice is concerned with the possibilities of the freedom to live good lives of those who are disfavoured by current social relations.

But does choice constitute freedom? This is one of the key questions in relation to autonomy. Is freedom concerned with designing one's own biography and so concerned with being able to make entirely free choices?

Or is freedom concerned with being able to act outwith a notion of choice? Choice suggests that there is a list of items from which a choice can be made: that is, choice suggests selection from a list as opposed to an entirely free hand in designing our own lives. So, when we go shopping for clothes, we can choose whatever we like from within the shop but we are not free to have clothes which the shop does not sell. Therefore our freedom, if limited to a notion of choice, is more restricted than if our freedom is conceived of as being unbounded.

Choice also suggests consumption rather than production. An older form of social theory considered citizens as being producers of our social relations – and in a more literal sense saw a larger part of the population as being producers of tangible goods than

is the case now. In the postmodern world we are considered to be consumers rather than producers of the goods which society generates.

To talk of citizens as having consumer-type rights then is to grant them rights as participants in a bargain. However, this is the wrong register in which to speak: consumer contracts depend on the consumer's ability to pay and does not cater for their needs if they have no ability to pay. Do human beings consume their inalienable, civil or political rights, or do they inhabit them?

Choice and public services

The latest political mantra – as I write this in July 2004 – is that of choice in public services. Parents are to have choice over their children's schools, patients are to have choice over healthcare services, and so on. That battle line are obvious: if public services are provided according to choice then provision through a centrally-organised welfare state may be weakened.

This process of the acquisition of public services may be by means of private payment or alternatively by means of one of the many obscure forms of "choice" which political discourse uses to describe the provision of such services by public bodies today. The use of consumerist jargon is important: everyone expects to have rights, to be able to exercise those rights and to be entitled to be listened to when they complain about any perceived infraction of those rights. Even though it is not supposed that all healthcare (and this is just an example of general access to public services available to all citizens) is bought privately, nevertheless the metaphor used is that of consumerism – in itself a dangerous development which encourages individuals to think of themselves as having entitlement through acquisition rather than through status: that is, their very status as human beings, nothing more. It is the negation of human rights, for example, because it suggests that entitlement is not innate in a person's humanity or alternatively (in the case of civil liberties) in their status as a citizen, but rather those entitlements are acquired only as a result of some mooted exchange or bargain. Whether or not payment is required, consumerism nevertheless supposes a form of autonomy which can be considered to be a contract – with features characteristic of a contract such as the limitation of liability, the allocation of risk by the stronger bargaining party, and the formalising of any moral responsibility between actors by subsuming such moral obligations to the precise terms of the contract – rather than one which attaches to a person.

I do not want to make a choice about which hospital will treat me while I lie bleeding in the ambulance. I cannot make an informed choice in such a situation. I am necessarily fragile and in a position of weakness which requires that the healthcare experts make those decisions for me. I want to have the burdens of choice taken away from me. All I ask of the system of healthcare provision is that the standard of care provided wherever I might be taken ill is the same and that I will fare neither better nor worse as a result of my geography or my wealth at any given time.

Choice does not equal freedom. When your choices are transmitted to you and the things about which you are required to spend so much time choosing are unimportant, choice equals enslavement.

