1 Contesting publicness: decline and proliferation

In the Introduction we identified three keywords – ambiguity, articulation and assemblage – as the resources for helping is to think about the paradox of decline and proliferation. In this chapter we begin to put these concepts to work in exploring the complexity of both ideas and institutionalizations of the public, and in teasing out different ways of trying to make sense of its transitions. We begin by outlining our approach to defining what we mean by publics and publicness, examining how this meaning was 'fixed' – albeit conditionally and temporarily – in specific discursive chains. Much of the work of this book focuses on how these chains have been disrupted, heralding the decline of these historically embedded associations between public, nation and state. These processes of disruption – the taking apart of earlier assemblages – have produced the sense of the 'decline' of the public (Marquand, 2004). However alongside this story of decline we can, as we argued in the Introduction, trace a proliferation of sites and practices in which publics and publicness are being remade. Discourses of public governance, public value, public participation, public action, public responsibility, and many others contribute to this sense of proliferation. Particular publics – faith based publics, active citizens, local communities – are being summoned to participate in governmental projects or decision-making bodies. Specific kinds of policy intervention – on responsible parenthood, civil behaviour, healthy diet and other lifestyle choices – disrupt established boundaries between what is considered to be private or personal and what is a public matter. At the same time the revitalisation of ideas of citizenship, community and civil society in current policy agendas offers new inflections of what it means to be part of a public or to act publicly.

This points to the question of how the processes of decline and proliferation are related to each other. Is what we are witnessing a 'progressive' moment, in which, after decades in which business values and NPM strategies have been dominant, public services are being humanised, democratised and opened up to new forms of public involvement? Or is it politically regressive, with emergent spaces of public engagement and action immediately captured in the roll out of neo-liberal, globalising pressures? We distinguish our approach from 'epochal' narratives – especially narratives that privilege neo-liberalism as an overarching force sweeping all before it. Instead our focus on assemblage and articulation brings with it attention to processes and agents involved in

'translating' forces, pressures and ideas across multiple boundaries. In the final section we turn to the questions of politics and power that are posed in the remaking of the public.

Contesting the meaning of 'public'

Let us begin from the elusive character of the word itself: what do we mean by public? Is it a noun (the public as a collectivity) or an adjective (public interest)? Does it identify groups of people (publics); locations (public spaces, realms, spheres); or institutions (public authorities; public services)? Does it mark a sphere of collective belongings and solidarities that promotes 'public' action in the interests of the whole – and if so how is the whole to be circumscribed (the nation, the community, the global)? Is it a domain of citizenship rights and responsibilities that can be demarcated from the private domains of household, family and intimate relationships? Is there something we might call a public domain in which cultural values are contested and cultural legacies remade through the circulation of images, ideas, representations and signs?

It is, of course, all of these – and more. Indeed, Charles Taylor (2004) argues that the term is a central organising concept of what he calls 'modern social imaginaries' – a key to the mapping of aspects, domains and areas of social life. In recent years there have been debates about what the 'public' in public services, public policy, public administration, public culture and so on might actually mean. Some have attempted to get back to conceptual roots. For example, Weintraub (1997) notes how the public/private distinction figures as a central descriptive and ideological conceptualization in political and social theory. The public, here, tends to be defined in relation to its shadow opposites: it is not the private, not the family, not the market, not the personal, not the individual. These shadows have marked a series of debates about the decline of the public – the shift from state to market, the demise of collective solidarities in the face of individuation and consumerism, the critique of public institutions and corruption of public culture, and so on. But the meaning of the public and private in such narratives of decline is not clear cut. This is because the public is what Benn and Gaus (1983) term 'a complexly structured' concept that contains descriptive, ideological and normative associations. This has led some to suggest that the public is not only too conceptually ambiguous to be useful, but also has problematic ideological associations. Matthews, for example, talks of its 'pinkish tinge of collectivism' and suggests that the idea of the public good is a 'hopelessly romantic concept of uniformity and consensus that is incompatible with our pluralist pragmatism' (Matthews, 1984: 121).

But meanings of the public and private are not merely descriptive and normative; they are cultural categories that help shape social identities and relationships. As Warner notes,

> Public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other, and sometimes are merely part of a larger series of classifications that include, say, local, domestic, personal, political, economic or intimate. Almost every cultural change – from Christianity to printing to psychoanalysis – has left a new sedimentary layer in the meaning of the public and the private. (Warner, 2002: 28)

This means that it is important to transcend treatments of the public as abstract categories: the domains of law, politics and economics. Warner argues that publics are rooted in the self understandings of their participants, and as such 'the idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental. It is constitutive of a social imaginary' (2002: 12). The reference to 'participants' here opens up questions about publics as subjects: not the citizen-subjects of a state, but actors who shape – and sustain – spaces and sites of publicness and public action. Defining the boundaries of who is and who is not a public in these terms is not simple, precisely because publics are fluid and mobile, being assembled at particular moments for particular projects. And, as Calhoun argues, they are plural, with cross-cutting identifications and forms of agency:

> The idea of a single, uniquely authoritative public sphere needs to be questioned, and the manner of relations among multiple, intersecting, and heterogenous publics needs to be considered. … Recognising a multiplicity of publics, none of which can claim a completely superordinate status to the others, is thus a first step. Crucially, however, it depends on breaking with core assumptions that join liberal political thought to nationalism … we should understand the public sphere to be a sphere of publics. (Calhoun, 1997: 84, 100)

Defining the public, then, is not just a question of delineating different groups of people, models of thought or spheres of action. It is about trying to understand why and how notions of the public have taken on such a degree of cultural significance in Western thought; how they help constitute identity and social action; and how they are the focus of contestation and struggle in contemporary politics and culture. Such questions have become increasingly significant as strategies for the reform and modernisation of states and public services have moved to the centre of the political programmes of governments in many nations (Clarke, 2004a; Leibfried and Zürn 2005; Newman, 2001; Pollitt and Bouckeart, 2004, 2nd edn; Seeleib-Kaiser, forthcoming). Strategies for reform have not only re-aligned the boundary between state and market and the relationships that traverse them, but have also brought public and personal, family and state, business and government, individual and social into new alignments.

Disrupting the public

In this book we want to try to capture ways in which publicness has become the object of contestation as its meaning is reworked in the context of new social and political formations. How are Warner's 'new sedimentary layers' being laid down as strategies of governing across Europe and beyond remake publicness? But identifying shifting, contested and emergent meanings is not to say that the definition of what is and is not public is infinitely flexible. Abstract conceptions of the polysemic character of language need to be set alongside investigations of how specific meanings are inscribed or become sedimented in apparatuses, policies, people and practices. This takes us back to notions of articulation, and the specific discursive chains in which meanings and practices of publicness have been – temporarily and conditionally – fixed. There are many such chains, including those concerned with public space, public culture, public feeling or sentiment, public opinion and so on. But in this book we have chosen to focus on three chains that have 'fixed' the meaning of the public in twentieth-century discourses in many nation-states, and which have become disrupted in the recent remaking of publics and public services. The first centres on ideas of the nation – a category often missing from debates about a public sphere or domain:

Public = citizens = the people = Nation

Here the notion of a people united in a shared national citizenship forms the basis for collective belongings and identifications that give a rationale for the public provision of goods and services. The associations in this chain produce, however, not an emphasis on a public sector but on a population united in a shared public domain of citizenship. In Britain – and elsewhere – such notions of a people sharing national citizenship underpinned the social and political settlements of welfare states in the post-war years (Clarke, 2004a; Hughes and Lewis, 1998). This produced a national conception of social citizenship that was expressed in conceptions of citizens as 'members of the public' with entitlements to benefit from public services.

The chain of connections here has always been an 'unstable equilibrium' (Gramsci, 1971). Each of the terms has been vulnerable to challenges and contestation – whether around the implicitly racialised conception of the 'people'; the conditional and exclusive systems of citizenship; or the assumed geographical, political and cultural unity of the nation. As nations have become subject to post-colonial and globalising pressures that loosen boundaries and dislocate the sense of a coherently controlled national space, so questions of inclusion in, and exclusion from, the membership of the national public have intensified. In the following chapters we look at some of the ways in which publicness has been displaced. In Chapter 2 we examine the contested landscape of the nation, national identity and the territorial basis of governing, while Chapter 3 turns

to some of the forms in which publicness has been displaced from the nation-state as civil society, community and non governmental bodies come to be viewed as the places in which 'ordinary people' come to govern themselves. In these processes of dislocation publics are being remade in new territorial, social and organisational forms that displace – or transform – the meanings and practices of publicness.

The nation is of course deeply entangled with and institutions of the state (Gupta, 1998). As well as embodying the nation, the state forms the institutional base for the provision of public goods and the regulation of private (commercial) actions. Through its policies and practices, the state inscribes the appropriate boundary between public and personal responsibilities for care, welfare and other socially valued goods such as the 'work-life balance'. In the 'modern social imaginary', the state is viewed as both the repository and guarantor of public values (such as equality, tolerance and justice) and as the defender of a collective conception of a public interest. This equivalence of the state and publicness is articulated through the following discursive chain:

$$Public = public \; sector = State$$

The association – in Britain and elsewhere - between public and state (in the form of public policy delivered through state institutions and a state-centred public sector) brought enormous benefits, but also had its costs. These were not only the financial costs linked to charges of 'waste' and 'inefficiency' but also social costs represented in charges of paternalism, discrimination, oppression and unresponsiveness. The institutionalisation of the public in the state had particular consequences in terms of its association with bureaucracy, hierarchy and professional power, making it vulnerable to challenges from both the political left and right, as well as from a range of social movements. The mobilisation of such challenges in the political projects of the New Right in the 1990s led to the rise of the New Public Management, the introduction of market mechanisms and contracts, the privatisation of some public bodies and services, and the incursion of business values into public management, all of which, we have argued, constituted a 'managerial state' (Clarke and Newman, 1997). The subsequent extension and enlargement of such processes, with a particular emphasis on promoting hybrid arrangements (such as public/private partnerships) have reworked forms of public and private authority in a multiplicity of ways, making it more difficult to trace their 'public' character. Is it a question of links to the state, to public finance, to publicly trained professionals, or of being subject to public accountability or regulation?

We examine such questions in Chapters 4 and 5. Underpinning our analysis is a concern with the proliferation of sites in which forms of public and private authority are entangled. With Foucault's work in mind, we can, perhaps, theorise this not as a decline but an expansion of governmental power: the power to

constitute individuals, households, communities, social entrepreneurs, NGOs, public organisations, businesses, voluntary organisations as active partners in addressing many of the critical policy agendas that confront governments in the twenty-first century.

The entanglements between public, state and nation do not, however, exhaust the terrains of publicness that engage us. The dismantling of the public in the nation and in the state is also associated with the conceptions of liberalism that were inscribed in ideas of a public sphere. This takes us to a third discursive chain:

Public = liberalism = legal and democratic values = Public Sphere

This discursive chain offers a view of the public sphere of modern Western nations as a secular domain that can be clearly differentiated from private beliefs and interests and from the commercialised relationships of the market (see for example Gamble, 2004; Taylor, 2004; and the critique in Brown, 2006). The public sphere is associated with values and norms that shape the possibility of democracy. Values such as openness, rationality, transparency, tolerance, equality and justice were inscribed in legal and democratic institutions and bureaucratic forms of rule that, in principle at least, insulated public bodies from private interests and that guaranteed formal equality. Such values underpin the idea that public actors – including politicians – will behave impartially, defend the public from corruption and promote the public interest. Although well established as normative principles, much political conflict has been associated with contesting their failures in practice (corruption, discrimination, collusion, maladministration) and challenging their inherent limitations (e.g., the limitations of formal equality in delivering substantive social justice; or the cultural inscriptions of who counts as members of the public).

Much recent concern about the transformations of public services invokes such questions of value. For example, how can a public ethos based on principles such as impartiality, fairness and equality survive when the bureaucratic norms and rules that sustained it has become subordinated to business logics? Or how will a common public sphere of citizenship and democratic participation be maintained in the face of deepening social differentiation and inequality, and the increasingly embattled antagonisms around culture, faith and identity? Underpinning such questions of value is a challenge to liberal notions of progress, posing the problem of redefining the 'good society' to which public policy is directed.

Such issues are the focus of Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this book. Chapter 6 traces attempts to re-inscribe publicness in public services through new norms of professional or management practice, and through concepts of public governance, public leadership and public value. Chapter 7 explores the turn to more participatory forms of governance and raises questions about the politics of

public engagement. Finally, Chapter 8 addresses struggles over citizenship and its reconfiguration, and how these bear the marks of diverse and divergent political and governmental projects. In each, we pay particular attention to the dilemmas and conflicts produced by these transformations for those working for the public and for citizens engaging in struggles to bring about change.

These three discursive chains fixed notions of publics and publicness into particular assemblages and institutional formations. They are heavily sedimented, such that publicness has become lodged deep in the institutions and norms of liberal democracies. They were constructed in the face of complex social and political conflicts and have subsequently been the focus of other challenges: about exclusions and subordinations; about failures of principle and practice; and about the forms of power that they support and enable. These formations of publicness were, then, deeply contested long before current dislocations, suggesting their unreliability as a philosophical, normative or political reference point. Nostalgia for the 'good old days' when publicness meant something – a national public, sustained by a nation state delivering services according to liberal principles – is not a reliable vantage point from which to judge current changes. On the contrary, liberal principles were problematic; states could be oppressive and divisive; and in Britain at least the national public sphere was inextricably interwoven with colonialism and racialised thinking.

For us, then, the problem of publicness is always a double one – the vicissitudes, inequalities and conflicts associated with the old formations of publicness are being both overlaid with, and transformed by, new inequalities and conflicts. They are complexly interwoven and create problems of publicness that cannot be resolved by a sort of restorationist nostalgia. For example, the rise, in some European countries, of 'faith' in policy discourse as a means of rearticulating diversity – an issue we discuss in Chapter 2 – demonstrates a means of further dislocating the idea of a universal public bounded by the nation-state. It opens up new lines of antagonism as well as signalling the continuing presence – partly hidden in secular societies – of older lines of division within and beyond the nation. But the new categorisations of publics around 'faith' are also aligned with the transformations of states. An increasing number of faith-based schools, care and welfare organisations have taken their place in the newly opened-up marketplace of public service provision, offering consumer choice but also challenging the boundaries of state regulation and control. This is significant, not least since faith based provision may challenge the secular norms of the liberal public sphere. The recognition of faith based publics, then, is neither a story of the gradual success of social movements and groups claiming recognition, nor of the growing acceptance of diversity as a core value of liberal, progressive societies. However, nor is it a story of neo-liberal triumph in which notions of faith are smoothly incorporated into market dynamics, with diverse claims being settled through a choice of providers. The different ways in which faith is framed – and its capacity to be enrolled into multiple and divergent strategies – suggests some-

thing of the tensions, contradictions and ambivalences at stake in this particular remaking of publicness; and why we need to look across the three discursive framings of the public we have addressed here rather than settling for simple binaries between states and markets or public and private.

Assembling new formations of the public

Our argument in the previous section was that the disruptions to publics and publicness are played out around a number of different struggles. There is not one logic driving such changes, but a plurality of potentially conflicting logics that produce strange confluences, alliances, antagonisms and paradoxes. Making sense of these is problematic, in part because this landscape is already extensively surveyed, discussed and accounted for. Too often, however, these surveys tend to provide epochal, mono-causal and uni-directional accounts of change – accounts that identify the dominant tendency and marginalise others. So, for example, we might consider the more or less triumphalist accounts of the 'liberation' of individuals, organisations and markets from the shackles of state control, the dead hand of bureaucratic regulation, or the narrow interests of 'producer power'. Such accounts are dominated by the global imperatives for the reform of public services that point to the inexorable force of market logics, understood as the triumph of market society over state socialism; as the globalising dynamic of individualism against collectivism; or as the cultural logic of the 'consumer revolution' (see, for example, Bobbitt, 2003; Le Grand, 2007). In such views, the process is an unfolding one. Countries may be positioned in more or less advanced locations on this path, but all are moving steadily in the same direction – and there can be no going back. This is an epochal shift, sometimes described as the rise of market society, as post-welfarism, as the emergence of the market-state or the competition-state (see Chapter 4). Paradoxes, tensions and contradictions tend to be treated as historical lags – the residues of earlier formations that will eventually be swept away on the tide of historical change, or are a consequence of the project of change not being prosecuted fiercely enough by tentative politicians and governments.

Such celebratory epochal accounts are echoed in more critical analyses of the global 'roll back' of publicness under pressure from political and economic forces committed to expanding the scope of the market and the power of corporate capital. Recently, this has been predominantly theorised as the spread of neo-liberalism. However, this simple term has been the focus of intense development and it may be worth distinguishing three different approaches to the term (for more extended discussions see, Barnett, 2007a, Clarke, 2007d and Larner, 2000). The first of these centres on political economy and treats neo-liberalism as the political and ideological project of a capitalist class seeking to break constraints on its power and creating new conditions of capital accumulation (see, for example, Harvey, 2005). The second takes a more regulationist view of the forms of capitalism and emphasises

the role of states in creating the societal conditions of capital accumulation (e.g, Peck, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Where the first has tended to stress the anti-statism of neo-liberalism; the second distinguishes more between the 'roll back' rhetoric and early politics of neo-liberalism and its later 'roll out phase' in which states are re-tooled as means of extending possibilities for capital accumulation (Peck and Tickell, 2002; see also Hartmann, 2005).

The third approach to neo-liberalism derives from Foucault's work on governmentality rather than from Marxist political economy, and points to the processes of economising social and political realms, subjecting them to economic logics and constructing people as economic subjects – buyers, sellers, consumers, entrepreneurs and so on. Such processes form part of liberal governmentality's construction of 'governing at a distance' in which subjects are invited to regulate themselves rather than being directed, forced or coerced (see, for example, Brown, 2005; Rose, 1999). This is a perspective that we have found helpful in thinking about the de-centring of the state (e.g. Cooper, 1998; Dean, 1999, 2007; Petersen et al., 1999; McDonald and Marston, 2006; Rose, 1999). It has helped shape our approach to the remaking of publics and publicness, enabling us to highlight multiple reworkings of power rather than focusing exclusively on the dynamic intersections of states and market; and bringing gender and other lines of social differentiation into view.

For the moment, though, we need to establish a degree of sceptical distance between ourselves and these diverse accounts of the present as neo-liberal. Despite their many differences, they share two features that trouble us. First, they tend to have an overly integrated or coherent account of neo-liberalism as a project, ideology or governmentality. Everything in the present – or at least everything that matters – turns out to be an effect of neo-liberalism, making neo-liberalism seem both omnipresent and omnipotent (Clarke, 2008). As we have indicated, we see the present as formed by more heterogeneous currents, forces, tendencies and possibilities than can be accounted for by a singular motive force. Secondly, we fear that the attention to grand designs – whether class project or new governmentality – tends to presume that such designs are effective. On the contrary, we think it may be important to look at how grand designs get translated into politics, policies and practices. In such processes we may begin to see the contradictory and antagonistic effects of different social forces, different problems to be overcome or accommodated, different national or local contexts that bend strategies into new forms – and even divergent projects that steal ideas, images, languages and techniques and put them to other uses.

Governing, governance and governmentality

In exploring changing configurations of public and publicness, we encounter a set of terms that centre around the idea of governing. *Governing* denotes a troubled

and turbulent set of relationships, processes and practices that were once rather more comfortably identified as the state (as in the concept of welfare states, for example). Declining political enthusiasm for states, the proliferation of agencies and apparatuses performing governmental work within and beyond the nation-state, the fragmentation of the monolithic image of the state and the concurrent rise of markets, communities and civil societies as the sites of engagement and coordination have all brought states – and state-centric theorising – into question. As with many other epochal statements, the 'death of the state' has been overstated and rather misses the point of some of the re-alignments and refurbishing of states (Sharma and Gupta, 2006). Nevertheless, this unsettling of the institutional, discursive and conceptual centrality of the state has been associated with a proliferation of concepts involving the word 'govern'. Concepts of *governance* have been central to shifts in political science and studies of public policy, administration and management. The dominant theme has been the shift from 'government' (the practice of politics, policy and administration within the state-form) to 'governance' (the co-production of many agents and agencies). Governance implies, at least, the permeability of states as institutions; the plurality of agencies involved in governing; and a shift from hierarchical, authoritative or bureaucratic forms of social coordination, typically towards the modes of markets and networks (see, for example, Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1997; Pierre, 2000 and the discussions in Daly, 2002; Newman, 2001; 2005b; and Walters, 2004). To the extent that social welfare increasingly engages non-state agencies (private and voluntary sector 'delivery' organisations) or summons individuals, households and communities to 'take responsibility' for their own well-being, governance points to significant tendencies. There are, however, some conceptual difficulties associated with governance. It retains an institutionalist view of agencies and practices and has some problems with the persistence of the state (not least as a site of what Jessop, 2000, calls 'meta-governance'). Finally, reflecting its political science and public administration origins, it typically operates with a 'thin' conception of the social (Newman, 2007d), a point to which we will return.

As we noted above, the rise of *governmentality* as a key concept also denotes a de-centring of the state. Drawing on Foucault's fascination with 'the conduct of conduct', governmentality studies have opened up the analysis of policy in profound ways – simultaneously proliferating the sites and forms of agency involved in governing and linking the micro-politics and practices of such agencies to the larger 'mentalities' of governing, primarily those of liberalism and its variations (classic, expansive and advanced). But govenmentality is also not without its problems. Its association with 'epochal' analyses of the transformations of liberalism is uneasily aligned with attention to the micro-politics of specific sites and spaces: There is a tendency to see a coherent, if not totalising, governmentality, of which specific instances are merely examples or illustrations rather than specific sites of contested construction. The analysis of liberal

governmentality tends to occlude the colonial conditions and dynamics of its formation and development. It also leaves unanswered critical questions about the 'success' of governmentalising strategies (Clarke 2004b; Clarke et al., 2007c). We have attempted, in this book, to take account of these problems, both in our own analyses and by drawing on the work of others who have used 'governmentality' as a way of framing the study of states (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Sharma and Gupta, 2006); of neo-liberalism as a distinctive rationality and form of governing (Brown, 2005; Kingfisher, 2002; Larner, 2000); of formations of global governmentality (Larner and Walters, 2004); and of the practices, strategies and potential failure of governmental projects (Li, 2007a; Smart, 2006).

We have opted here for the rather more agnostic term 'governing'. In part, this is an accommodation of our own theoretical diversity – the pieces here draw on different conceptual resources (ranging from Michel Foucault to Raymond Williams). In part, it reflects the potential richness of dealing with governing as an assemblage of processes and practices, rather than merely institutions, discourses or strategies. In this orientation, we have been influenced by Davina Cooper's innovative use of the concept to explore situated struggles over governing, involving heterogeneous forces, directions and conceptions of the right to govern (1998). In her terms, 'governing' is less subject to existing ownership claims and conceptual belongingness than either governance or governmentality. In this context, it allows us an engagement with different sites, institutional formations, policies, practices and, not least, contested conceptions of the social (Clarke, 2007a; 2007b).

We see the social as an unruly and demanding field of forces that is subject to diverse and contested efforts to map it, discipline it, regulate it, and develop it. These efforts include the whole range of governmental institutions and apparatuses, not just those conventionally understood as social policy. For example, the distinctions between social policy, cultural policy and crime control need to be seen as governmental distinctions (between institutions, agencies and strategies) rather than expressing pre-given differences between types of behaviour or types of person. More importantly, the distribution of responsibilities, power, resources and scope shifts over time between different agencies – with some commentators arguing that strategies of crime control and criminalisation have displaced 'welfarist' institutions as the primary mode of social regulation (Garland, 2001; Stenson, 2000). Burney (2005) points to how the UK has developed a policing and criminal law centred approaches to 'making people behave' organised around the image of 'anti-social behaviour'.

In this book we use several concepts to analyse the multiplicity of forces, projects, discourses and possibilities associated with governing the social. We have already indicated the importance of *articulation* as a central feature of political work – the hard labour of assembling a political project, creating both its direction, its relationship to the field of discourses and its ability to mobilise

social groups in support of it (while marginalising or de-mobilising other dis-
courses and other groups). We have also found the concept of *assemblage* help-
ful in thinking about these ambiguous spaces in which diverse elements may
be mobilised, combined and made effective - or not (Latour, 2005; Li, 2007a;
Ong, 2006; Ong and Collier, 2005). For us this points to the practices that bring
together multiple sets of ideas, apparatuses, personnel and practices into appar-
ently coherent entities that function as ways of governing. Sharma, writing about
empowerment as a vital assemblage in the attempted reconfiguration of relations
between government and people in India, defines assemblage as 'an evolving
formation and flexible technology of government that potentially encompasses
different meanings and methods, rather than a singularly coherent discourse and
method' (2008 ms: 35). She argues that dominant ideas and hierarchies are
contested; maintaining them requires work, and such work entails assembling
features of hegemonic and counter hegemonic ideas and practices into new
ensembles:

> The story I tell is not so much about hegemonic development but one
> about counter hegemonic moves and ruptures; it underscores the point
> that the process of maintaining the hegemony of dominant development
> ideas and hierarchies is bitterly contested and so requires an enormous
> amount of work. My point is not to replace a critical narrative … with a
> celebratory one, but to tease out ethnographically the tensions, contradic-
> tions, the suppressions and indeed the enabling possibilities that ideas and
> practices of development engender on the ground. (Sharmams: 12)

We share this orientation to the incomplete and contested character of domi-
nant or hegemonic projects and practices. Assemblage offers some conceptual
leverage by pointing to both the work of assembling (the building of assem-
blages) and their vulnerability to coming apart (under the strain of maintaining
their internal connectedness and under pressure from counter-movements).

We want to suggest how emergent sites and spaces may themselves constitute
new spaces of public action, producing contradictions, tensions and ambiguities.
There is a growing literature about the ambiguity of new governing technologies.
Some highlights the processes of constitution and incorporation associated with
strategies directed towards the 'empowerment' of civil society actors, citizens
and service users (Cruikshank, 1999; Elyachar, 2002, 2005; Sharma, 2008).
Other literature highlights the ambiguities and instabilities associated with
'partnerships' (Andersen, 2008; Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Glendinning et al.,
2002; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002) or with the expansion of 'public participation'
in the design and delivery of services or the governance of communities (Barnes
et al., 2007; Cornwall and Coehlo 2007; McKee and Cooper, 2007). Researchers
examining the micro-politics of such encounters have tried to make visible the
double dynamics of such spaces, bringing counter hegemonic perspectives

to voice and action alongside their capacity for incorporation, deflection and silencing.

Such ambiguities bring to attention the work of social actors – publics, professionals, social entrepreneurs, managers, policy-makers, civil society organisations and many others – as mediators and translators of change. Processes of translation denote the creative and dynamic ways in which actors seek out, interpret and enrol ideas in new settings. Even where changes are experienced as imposed 'from above', actors have to find ways of translating them that are more or less congruent with 'local' contexts. Translation, then, forms a valuable counter to notions of the diffusion of ideas, usually assumed to be outward from a single source of Anglo-American New Public Management or neo-liberalism (see also Ong, 2006, who uses the term 'assemblage' to discuss such processes in relation to the mobility and flexibility of neo-liberal governmentality). Attention shifts to the local settings in which ideas are received, translated, mediated and adapted into new practices (e.g., Czarniawska-Jeorges and Sevon, 1996, Czarniawska and Sevon, 2005a; Hansen and Salskov-Iversen, 2005, 2007; Lendvai, 2005; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Salskov-Iversen et al., 2000).

But as well as translating ideas across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries, translation also helps us to think about the active work of construction that goes on in what is usually described as the movement from policy-making to implementation. Rather than policy descending from its strategic conception to its execution by 'front line practitioners', the idea of translation requires us to consider how it is multiply re-interpreted, re-inflected and re-assembled in specific settings: as it moves from central government to local governments or provider organisations; or from the realm of senior managers to the offices, wards and stations where it is practised. Each of these is shaped by the 'text' from the preceding stage, but that text comes to be worked upon, brought to life, suffused with meaning in specific local conditions. Lendvai and Stubbs' work on policy as translation links these questions of place and level. They argue

> The multiplicity of languages, representations, claims, and norms in the transnational social policy space raises important questions around translation practices. … . We have argued that policy transfers are complex cultural, political and social practices, and as such, are far from mechanistic, top-down, and exclusively formal processes. Instead critical issues of distortions, displacement, negotiations and as a result transformation need to be addressed. Translation practices are always plural and multiple, and since our vignettes are as much about puzzling as about domination and resistance, we contest the complete closure that grand narratives of neo-liberal hegemony often seems to suggest. The trope of translation is to emphasise the alternatives, and processes of re-transcription, which produces very

> diverse stories and voices in policy processes. Translation is also a dynamic
> framework to capture the fluidity of policy processes, with an emphasis on
> the constantly (re)-construction of issues, discourses, and actor networks,
> as a part of real human agency. (2007: 188–9)

Translation, then, is a critical term for helping us to explore what happens as
actors engage in the processes of working with the ambiguities associated with
new and emerging assemblages. We make extensive use of it in the work that fol-
lows, not least because, as Lendvai and Stubbs indicate, attention to translation
can return us to central concerns with politics and power.

Politics and power

Politics and power are both critically important, but neither of them is exactly
simple. If we turn first to the question of politics, there are at least five aspects
that we need to distinguish in thinking about the significance of politics for
changing publicness. The first is the view that 'everything is political'. This is a
basis tenet of much critical social science and it is one that we share. The claim
that everything is political establishes an orientation to contestation and conflict:
all issues and aspects of social life are political in the sense that they are open to
contestation, to divergent or conflicting perspectives. It is also a claim that
everything is political in terms of being consequential for how people live
together – involving arrangements of power, material and symbolic and inequal-
ities, and forms of social relationship (affinities and antagonisms).

The second, by contrast, takes a narrower view of politics, treating it as what
we might call 'institutional politics': the apparatuses and practices of represen-
tation, rule and government. Although there are clearly different forms of poli-
tics in this sense – from dictators or one party states through to different forms
of multi-party electoral system – this is a view of politics as a limited set of
activities associated with processes of governing and with state institutions.
Politics in this sense involve politicians and their diverse means of relating to
their populations.

The third aspect is closely and perversely linked to this narrower sense of pol-
itics as the process of government. This is a view of politics as fundamentally
'dirty': a set of unpleasant processes and people. In this view politics involves
the construction of a degree of sceptical distance from these processes and
people, often based on a cynical view that 'they would do anything to stay in
power'. Politics is 'dirty' because it involves cynical calculation, instrumental
manipulation, spin and corruption. Given many of the practices of actually exist-
ing politics, such cynicism or scepticism is hardly surprising, but this view often
exists in tension with desires or aspirations that politics should 'make a differ-
ence' – either in the claim that 'they should do something' or that 'things could
be different'.

Fourthly, we need to consider what takes place between aspects 1 and 2 above: the relationship between the view that everything is political and the confines of institutional politics. In this book, we will be suggesting that the two are linked – or mediated – by *political projects* (Dagnino, 2007). These are more than political parties, involving more or less coherent efforts to bring ideas, interests, people and power together. Such projects seek to remake the world (or part of it) in a different way: to give power to the people; to concentrate it in the hands of a deserving elite; to create social justice or to spread market efficiency. Political projects may involve parties, changing them to make them carriers of the vision or mission (e.g., the Thatcherite transformation of the Conservative Party in the 1970s) or even creating new ones to build new alliances or engage new political subjects. But political projects may also transcend party allegiances: for example the project of turning unemployed citizens into active labour market participants is not confined to one party, nor indeed to one country. Finally political projects do not just involve politicians: they are elaborated in and carried through by groupings of policy actors that transcend the administrative/political boundary, and that enrol the energies and resources of public service managers, civil society groups, NGOs (nongovernmental organisations), local authorities, think tanks, academics, private sector stakeholders and many others.

Fifthly, and finally, we need to address the question of how things become seen or recognised as political. This is itself the result of political struggles. To insist that something – the decision to close a hospital, for example – is political is to make it contestable and to insist that it is open to different points of view, or to arguments about value. This perspective is reflected in its obverse: there are many strategies for trying to 'take things out of politics', or to take the 'politics out of things'. This is the process of de-politicisation which

> involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious or cultural on the other … . Although depoliticisation sometimes personalizes, sometimes culturalizes, and sometimes naturalizes conflict, these tactical variations are tethered to a common mechanics, which is what makes it possible to speak of depoliticisation as a coherent phenomenon. Depoliticisation involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it, No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticisation always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject. (Brown, 2006: 15; emphasis in original)

Power here refers to two interrelated aspects of social relations and political processes. The first involves the 'powers that produce and contour' a phenomenon of inequality, subordination, marginalisation or social conflict. The second

involves the power to shape the meaning of representation of this phenomenon: the power to depoliticize it, to insist on its individual, natural, religious or cultural character. These are critical issues for this book because we will come across diverse attempts to depoliticise public issues, publics and publicness. We will also encounter many attempts to reassert their political character – to politicise or repoliticise issues. In the process we will be attentive to how power is at work in remaking publicness – what sorts of power, producing what sorts of effects, enabling what sorts of agents?

In doing so, we have to consider power and 'its disguises' (Gledhill, 2000) in very different forms. Let us take as an example the current enthusiasm for empowerment. Reformers constantly seek to empower people in many roles: as 'front line staff' in public services or as their consumers, as 'expert patients' or self-directing service users, as communities invited to take charge of their regeneration or safety, as would-be workers acquiring new skills and capacities or as participants in public planning processes. Such views see power as an easily transferable object; giving 'power to the people' (rather than states or their agents) is a principle that might unite many different political orientations. Others might view this enthusiasm for empowerment in different ways. Those oriented to a more political economic view of power as rooted in the exploitative relations between labour and capital might well take a more sceptical view of empowerment, treating it as merely rhetorical or as an ideological smokescreen that conceals real power-plays. Empowerment – especially through choice or consumerist innovations – conceals real movements of economic and political power to capital, not least through the process of accumulation by dispossession involved in the privatisation of public resources (Harvey, 2005). But it might also conceal the greater role of business or the 'business community' in the processes and networks of social and public policy (Farnsworth, 2004; Ball, 2007).

Alternatively, govermentality scholars might view such empowering moves as part of the process of constructing self-regulating subjects who are part of the move to 'governing at a distance' characteristic of neo-liberal or advanced liberal governmentality (Rose, 1999; Cruikshank, 2003; Maasen and Sutter, 2007). Here power is embedded in the field of relations between authorities and subjects with subjects being 'empowered' to govern themselves (in approved ways). Such subjects may be calculating (the prudential selves who manage risks, insurance and investments); entrepreneurial (producing value through putting resources – including themselves – to work); participative (reflecting on the public good and how it might be achieved); competitive (learning the 'skills' and 'rules' of many different life games) or self managing (acquiring the skills and confidence necessary to care for oneself and others). In all these ways, people are both 'set free' and 'empowered' to act on their own behalf (rather than being 'dependent'). Such empowerment is both more governmental and more conditional than its enthusiasts would contemplate.

Our own orientation to articulation and assemblage directs us to three other features of empowerment. One addresses the different ideas, projects and commitments that might be captured or enrolled into the politics of empowerment: to whom does it speak? More accurately, who finds that it 'speaks their language' in translating them into a governmental project? As we hinted above, empowerment is a strategy that calls on diverse histories and politics (Sharma, 2008). A second insists that 'empowerment' might take significantly different forms in different sites – as specific sets of forces, orientations and demands mobilise, coalesce and contest. Empowerment, in our view, cannot have any single pre-given political character or birthmark because the conditions of its enactment vary. Thirdly, we think it may be difficult to read off the consequences of empowerment from its dominant political tendency. Strategies are not the same as results and programmes of empowerment may fail to produce their intended effects. People may listen past rhetoric or see through smokescreens; they may be doubtful or sceptical about the blessings being offered in the act of empowerment; or they may take power all too seriously and begin to act in ways that go beyond the polite constraints of empowerment. Taken together, these define the problems and possibiltiies of looking for politics and power in the remaking of publicness.

This points us back to the question of assemblage. Empowerment – as rhetorical device, as governmental strategy, as principled commitment – moves from the abstract to the concrete by being enacted in specific assemblages: from community regeneration to parental choice of schools; from being co-producers of services to participating in citizens' juries. Assemblages bring together people (as specific sorts of agents), policies, discourses, texts, technologies and techniques, sites or locations, forms of power or authority, as if they form an integrated and coherent whole that will deliver the imagined or desired outcomes. Li argues that assemblage involves six distinctive practices:

- *Forging alignments*: the work of linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage, both those who aspire to govern conduct and those whose conduct is to be conducted.
- *Rendering technical*: extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run through it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result.
- *Authorizing knowledge*: specifying the requisite body of knowledge; confirming enabling assumptions; containing critiques.
- *Managing failures and contradictions*: presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies; smoothing out contradictions so that they seem superficial rather than fundamental; devising compromises.
- *Anti-politics*: reposing political questions as matters of technique; closing down debate about how and what to govern and the distributive effects

of particular arrangements by reference to expertise; encouraging citizens to engage in debate while limiting the agenda.
– *Reassembling*: grafting on new elements and reworking old ones; deploying existing discourses to new ends; transposing the meanings of key terms. (Li, 2007a)

Each of these involves work that is clearly political: changing meanings, containing (managing) critiques, legitimising certain forms of knowledge and so on. Each is implicated in the production of some forms of power and the de-legitimisation of others; and the empowerment of some actors and the marginalisation of others in the process of forging new alignments. As we argued earlier, even the work of making some things technical rather than political is political work. 'Technical' may be added to Brown's list of individual, natural and cultural as a device that de-politicises by obscuring the historical routes and powers at stake in forming the present issue. One recent example is the prevalence of 'what works' as an assemblage of forms of expertise, authority and policy technologies (standards, targets, funding mechanisms and many others). Such assemblages may be incomplete – there may be professional disagreements about what works, organisations may interpret policy guidance in terms of local understandings of context, technologies may fail and produce unintended – and unfortunate – consequences, and so on. But the rationality of what works is one that takes the politics out of public policy issues by rendering them not the site of contestation over competing values, or between different interests, but making them instead the focus of technical judgements about the efficiency or efficacy of different solutions. Not only does this render them non-political, it also detaches them from the contexts in which particular solutions were developed (a precondition for the 'policy transfer' model of translation). And it privileges a particular form of authority - the technical or scientific expert. Increasingly, such forms of authority are being challenged by perspectives which claim that ordinary people should be entitled to voices and views. In some public services, users operate as 'experts' – being either 'experts of their own condition' (as disabled peoples movements insisted) or bringing to bear the experience of being a user of the service, inhabitant of the locality, or member of a community. There are multiple forms of authority involved in the world of public services, and we will encounter many of them (and the conflicts between them) in the course of the book.

Decline and proliferation?

We end this chapter by returning to the puzzle with which we began: how to account for concurrent processes of the decline and proliferation of publics and forms of publicness. Narratives of both decline and proliferation tend to be based on a series of binary distinctions – states and markets, state and civil

society, citizens and consumers, public and private, empowerment and incorporation, care and control, expert and 'lay' actors, and many more. Each of these, we think, tends to occlude, rather than illuminate, the dynamics of change with which we are concerned in this book. Not only do we want to transcend these binaries, but we also want to avoid recent attempts to collapse then in rather unstable new formations – the public–private partnership, the citizen-consumer, the partnership between state and civil society, the process of 'co-production' and so on. In subsequent chapters we will be trying to show how the three key concepts – articulation, assemblage and ambiguity – can be put to work in addressing these new formations of publicness, showing not only the multiplicity of places and sites in which its meanings and practices are being reworked, but also the different forms of power, authority and agency that are assembled, and their potentially ambiguous outcomes.

This attention to the process of assembly suggests the incompleteness of political projects. Such projects may be based on technologies, practices, agents and forms of authority that may not be coherent – or that may fail to cohere because of contradictions within the political project itself. But even it they are coherent in intention, they have to be mediated, interpreted and translated. The spaces of assembly, then, tend to be ambiguous spaces where the outcomes cannot necessarily be anticipated in advance. This does not, of course, dissolve questions of power – as we will see in later chapters, elements of a particular assemblage are likely be structured in dominance – but it does highlight the need to transcend grand narratives of decline (the story of neo-liberal triumph) or the proliferation of emergent spaces of publicness and public action (the 'progressive' story). Our aim is to highlight the range of political debates and struggles with which the remaking of publics and publicness is being conducted, and to argue for a positive – and public - engagement with them.