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**Cowden, Stephen ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2549-8760> and Singh, Gurnam (2007) The "User": Friend, Foe or Fetish? A Critical Exploration of User Involvement in Health and Social Care. *Critical Social Policy*, 27 (1). pp. 5-23. doi:10.1177/0261018307072205**

Official URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0261018307072205>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0261018307072205>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/10321>

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## The 'User': Friend, foe or fetish? A critical exploration of user involvement in health and social care

### Abstract

'User Involvement' has become the new mantra in Public Services with professionals constantly being reminded that 'user knows best'. The purpose of this paper is to ask where the preoccupation with 'the User' comes from and to pose some questions about what 'User Involvement' actually means. Within our paper we see three issues as central within this. The first is a consideration of the historical antecedents of the dis- course of 'User Involvement', focusing in on the struggles over British welfare that took place around the late 1970s-early 1980s. This forms the context from which we seek to understand and critique the New Labour project in relation to the massive expansion of regulatory frameworks. We argue that, far from enabling the delivery of high quality integrated services that truly reflect the interests of current and future users, these policies represent the further commodification of basic human needs and welfare. Finally, it has become apparent the current 'User' discourse has assumed contradictory manifestations, in particular the emergence of groupings of 'professional users' who participate in the formation of state policy as 'expert consultants'. We conclude by arguing for an approach in which user perspectives are neither privileged nor subjugated, but are situated in a process of creative critical dialogue with professionals, which is linked to the development of a concept of welfare driven by emancipatory rather than regulatory imperatives.

### Introduction

*I am personally suspicious of a monolithic approach to user involvement . . . we need to consider user involvement . . . more carefully and critically. We need to consider how and why it is undertaken. We need to consider both the progressive and regressive potential of such user involvement.* (Beresford, 2003: para. 11)

'User Involvement' is one of the central concepts in the strategy of 'reform' and 'modernization' of Public Services currently being led by New Labour. Whether one is talking about 'parent power' in education, the new 'patient-led' National Health Service, or the requirement that Social Care services place 'service users' at the centre of service provision, every government department is determined to remind those working across the public sector that the bad old days of statist paternalism are out - it is now the 'user who knows best'. In a speech directed specifically at the Social Work profession in 2002, Jacqui Smith, then Minister of State with responsibility for Social Care, said 'a fundamental shift' needed

to take place in the delivery of services to 'shift power toward service users'; service users need 'more power and that of course means more choice' (Smith, 2002). In current New Labour parlance, 'the User' is king. Whilst in no way seeking to diminish the importance of user led/informed welfare, in this discussion we seek to ask a series of critical questions about where the current vogue for 'the User' comes from, and to consider, practically and theoretically, what 'User Involvement' actually means. It is worth noting the way Jacqui Smith's understanding of 'power' becomes reduced to an issue of 'choice', and a key theme of this paper will be the problems associated with this supermarketized vision of service user involvement. We argue by contrast that it is by engaging in a critical historical analysis of the development of the discourse of user involvement, that light can be shed on whether the 'User' is best understood as a friend, foe or fetish.

Our discussion is divided into two sections. Firstly, we establish the historical antecedents of the discourse of 'User Involvement', particularly focusing in on those crucial struggles over British welfare that took place around the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, a central feature of our argument is that the key challenge and demands presented by user movements reflect an important legacy of political struggle initiated by New Social Movements and the cultural politics of difference (Rutherford, 1990). Through this historical understanding, of liberation struggles, on the one hand and the restructuring and privatization of welfare, initially under the aegis of the New Right, and more recently New Labour, on the other, we seek to argue against a view of welfare as reducible to managerial imperatives and 'User' orientation alone. Our concern here is that, far from enabling the delivery of high quality integrated services that truly reflect the interests of current and future users, these shifts in public policies represent a continuing means for promoting the commodification of welfare.

In this brave new world professionals are exhorted by New Labour ministers to focus on 'what works'; in Social Work for example, 'ideology' is viewed with suspicion, whereas 'evidence-based practice' is posited as a panacea. We seek to offer a critique of this view, arguing that the way we think of and understand how society works, what has been called the 'social imaginary', is at least as important to the quality and responsiveness of public services, as is evaluation of such provision. In this sense, as 'service providers', or more accurately, as educational professionals, we refuse to accept that our capacity to comment on these issues is simply our role as 'deliverers' of services; we also see ourselves as guardians of the underlying principles of Social Welfare, and it is on this basis that we offer this critique.

## The historical background

During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s a series of struggles took place around welfare in Britain, and we see this period as crucial in setting the context for what took place in relation to the form and direction of the Welfare State, and the emergence of the user discourse. In thinking about the origins and basis of the Welfare State in the post-war Britain, Gail Lewis has importantly noted that the 'old' Welfare State was never 'a single homogenous entity' but rather 'a series of overlapping and negotiated positions through which relations between a number of actors were articulated' (1988: 40). These positions developed essentially from 'the context of a particular set of international and political and

economic relations which followed on from the Second World War' (1988: 40). The most significant implication of this is the idea that the post-war Welfare State was based essentially on a series of assumptions about entitlements.

These assumptions need to be understood structurally as expressions of relations between genders, classes and 'racial'/ethnic groups. For example, the assumption that the male wage was a 'family wage' was crucially an assumption about the nature of the political relationship between men and women in society. It was this assumption that was being challenged when women in the trade union movement fought a political battle to obtain the same pay for the same work as men.

Similarly, one of the early political campaigns waged by the black community in Britain concerned the disproportionate number of children from African-Caribbean backgrounds who were classified 'educationally subnormal', and placed in separate educational institutions, known popularly as 'sin-bins' (Bryan et al., 1985; CCCS, 1982). The struggle against these was central to contesting the idea that people from these communities had no right to make demands about what education was meant to be about. Alongside this, the Welfare State was also a key site for the articulation of the power of professional groups. For example, it was the power of the medical profession which determined the decision to place groups, such as the learning disabled and those with mental health problems, in institutionalized care.

Throughout the 1970s then, we begin to see a disjuncture emerging between on the one hand professionals and non-professionals (citizens, clients, users, activists etc.), and on the other assumptions about the kind of society Britain was becoming - the assumptions that had underpinned the post-war world came to be challenged (Lewis, 1998: 45-8). In this sense, the emergence of New Social Movements - black and anti-racist movements, feminist movements, lesbian and gay movements, survivors etc. as well as the awakening of the 'old' social movement, working class trade unionism - were a sure sign that the assumptions that had underpinned the post-war world were coming unstuck. Although all of these movements had broad agendas for social change, as well as international dimensions in terms of their emergence and development, questions of welfare provision were invariably central to their early demands and frequently acted as the focal point for political mobilization. For example, this is true of West Indian parents concerned about their children's education, as well as being true of feminist campaigns about reproductive rights. While the latter were waged in opposition to certain conservative forces (e.g. churches), these campaigns also sought to challenge the power of doctors, arguing that this voice of women, as the primary person concerned, needed to be heard. Indeed, in general terms this was a period in which the power of professionals was being both questioned and challenged. The popularity of R. D. Laing's work, which argued for a radically new understanding of mental illness, was another sign of this process, and one that contributed directly to the emergence of mental health 'survivors' as an organized social movement, in opposition to traditional psychiatry, whose power base lay in the NHS.

Alongside this sense of the assumptions of the Welfare State no longer having the 'fit' with those of the wider society which they had previously had, a crisis emerged in parallel amongst the ruling classes concerning the long-term decline of Britain's economic

competitiveness. This was one of the most important themes in the regrouping of the New Right, which in Britain during the 1970s specifically became allied to this anxiety about 'national decline'; the idea that Britain, the country that once ruled half the world, was no longer a world power, no longer 'Great'. During this period, most crucially, critiques of welfare can be understood as having emerged from two sources: the centre and the margins (Lewis, 1998). The critique from the centre is that developed by the New Right, at that stage grouped around the Conservative Party and various right-wing think tanks. A central concern within this grouping was the fear of the decline of the long-term profitability of the British economy, and the desire to re-establish Britain's international competitiveness through welfare retrenchment and dramatic curtailing of trade union influence.

The critique from the margins came from the user groups, campaign groups, community groups, the New Social Movements. These groups were very critical of existing state provision, but the context of this criticism was not the undermining of welfare as such, but making it more accountable to the people who used it, and less dominated by professionals who decided what was best for the service user. The book *In and Against the State* (CSE, 1980) can be seen as a classic statement of this position. In the introduction to this book the authors argued that: 'It is not just that state provision is under-resourced, inadequate, and on the cheap. The way it is resourced and administered to us doesn't seem to reflect our real needs' (p. 9). It is in this sense of being assailed by critiques from both the 'centre' and 'margins' that Lewis describes the Welfare State in the 1970s as 'coming apart at the seams' (1998: 62-72).

One may well ask what the point is of going back to these debates. For us the central value in re-visiting this material is because so many of the initiatives that form the context of how we understand and work in the sphere of social care are ones that come to us from that period. Related to this is the need to understand what both Thatcherism and New Labour were and are trying to achieve. We would argue, following Hall and Jacques (1983), that just as Thatcherism was understood as a 'hegemonic project', so should New Labour be understood in these terms. Our attempt to understand the issue of 'User Involvement' is thus situated within a broader attempt to understand the nature of New Labour as such a 'hegemonic project'.

## New Labour

Crucial to understanding New Labour is to understand its relationship with Thatcherism. The crucial features of the New Labour project are the repudiation of 'old Labour' style attachment to the Welfare State, the Trade Unions and collective social provision in a way that appears to take on and accept the critiques from the margins. However, the answer to these problems in collective provision lies in an embrace of the 'market' and neo-liberal economics; indeed central to Tony Blair's political beliefs is that there is no alternative to global capitalism. As Blair said in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry Conference in 2001:

*We have a minimum wage and fair rights at work. But there will be no dilution of our essentially flexible labour market. There will be no new ramp of employment legislation*

*taking us back to the 1970s. The basic settlement in the last parliament will remain.*  
(Guardian, 6 November 2001)

Under the Conservatives the reduction of the Welfare State in the interests of economic efficiency was emphasized, New Labour emphasizes 'modernization', though the difference in rhetoric conceals important continuities between New Labour and Thatcherism. The dominant theme of social policy in health and welfare provision continues to be defined in terms of a public policy agenda designed to reduce the role of the state through a strategy of commodification and privatization (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996). Just as the endless reorganizations of public services, begun in earnest in the 1990s, have come to constitute a 'permanent managerial revolution', so the need to win both the public at large, as well as the staff working within welfare to 'the Cause' continues. It is in this sense that one has to understand the Blairite project of 'modernization' is directed at 'the meanings of welfare and the state as well as to the policy and organizational structures to which they refer' (Clarke et al., 2000: 3).

One of the most interesting and revealing examples of the coherence between the New Right and New Labour is the development of the policy of Care in the Community. The emergence of this shift was significant not just because of the material changes it brought about to the structure of the Welfare State, by, for example, closing down large psychiatric institutions, but also for the way it initiated a new way of thinking and 'imagining' the intentions and purpose of the Welfare State. We would suggest that the political and ideological discourse around Care in the Community cannot be understood simply as the New Right imposing their understanding on a popular Welfare State. Rather, we would argue that the strategy, which was determined by the critique of welfare from 'above' or the 'centre', was also designed to absorb those critiques of welfare that were being made from 'below' or the 'margins'. In other words, central to the whole process was the way progressive critiques of the Welfare State became incorporated and used as the basis for advancing what was essentially a neo-liberal programme. Through a sophisticated sleight of hand strategy, demands for an expansive and humane collective Welfare State became transformed into a policy aimed at privatizing care, resulting in increasing burdens being placed on families, on the one hand, and a notable expansion of commercial/private sector providers on the other.

These tensions have not gone unnoticed by professionals, users, carers and commentators. For example, the 1989 White Paper Caring for People, argued simultaneously for greater independence for formerly institutionalized groups, at the same time as calling for better value for money. Levick (1992) has described this as the 'Janus face of Community Care', which:

*. . . for the left . . . has been grasped as a vehicle for user empowerment and the demystification of professionalism. For the right it has been seized upon as an opportunity for low-cost solutions to social problems through utilising caring networks. (p. 79)*

Similarly, Braye and Preston-Shoot have argued that:

*This easy transition in rhetoric from cost-cutting to improving the quality of life is made possible by the chameleon nature of some of the core concepts underpinning the policy. Independence can be construed as better for people's self-esteem and respect; its other advantage is that it costs less to have people doing things for themselves. Normalisation requires people's integration into ordinary living networks; it is also convenient that promoting and prioritising informal caring networks produces less reliance on statutory services . . . It is thus not difficult to see how community care came to be construed as both the best and the cheapest, although it is also apparent that the consensus hides deep ideological conflicts. (1995: 12)*

In this sense Community Care became a term that could float semiotically free, meaning something to everyone, with its vaguely progressive aura never needing to be defined concretely. Hence the triumph of the Griffith Report and the subsequent NHS and Community Care Act of 1990 concerned the development of a model that was able to on the one hand appropriate progressive demands for democratization of services, at the same time as presenting market efficiency and the private sector as the vehicles that would deliver this. The Care in the Community legislation as it was developed under the Conservatives was particularly significant for the way it foregrounded 'care' in the 'community', which meant that the concept of 'community' that was being implied never needed to be addressed. A result of this policy orientation was that the burden of care became posited on the family, and usually disproportionately on the female members of those families (Alldred et al., 2001). Looking at the ideological implications of the Community Care legislation under Thatcher, George and Wilding noted that if:

*the key theme in Thatcherism is a dislike of the state, then the idea of a mixed economy of welfare offers a window of opportunity for change acceptable to public opinion. The state is redefining its responsibilities rather than abandoning them, but statism and indirectly the idea of public responsibility is being weakened. (1994: 21, our emphasis)*

While both Thatcherism and New Labour have accepted a sense of community as an essentially private and gated space, New Labour has differed from the Conservatives in seeking to flesh out some of these concepts at an ideological level. This is illustrated in the idea of the state not as the entity which seeks to embody 'public responsibility', but rather as one which acts to facilitate private citizens 'running their own affairs'; in current New Labour rhetoric the state is described, in a rather bizarre non-sequitur, as the 'partner' to the 'local community'. Recent pronouncements by David Miliband, Minister for Communities and Local Government, illustrate the importance of this conceptualization of 'community' within the New Labour project. Miliband's philosophy is underpinned by the idea that community empowerment is best facilitated not through the building up of the localized democratic institutions, but rather through the withdrawal of the state. Rather than local government, 'civic pride' is seen by Miliband as the basis of community regeneration. Associated with this policy, as Peter Hetherington has noted in a recent article, is a devolution of powers 'from addressing anti-social behaviour to caring for the local environment, parks and other amenities'. Miliband cites as his inspiration the Victorian model in which 'city government, in coalition with the local business, unions and community organisations, led national, social and economic progress' (Miliband in Hetherington, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Miliband's arguments need to be understood as an illustration of the sophistication of the New Labour hegemonic project. While the rhetoric of 'community empowerment' and 'user involvement' sounds on the face of it progressive, it leaves many questions unanswered. We would argue that these rhetorically progressive measures need to be understood alongside other quite authoritarian measures which illustrate an underlying anxiety about what happens when behaviour in the community fails to measure up to the New Labour model of engaged good citizenship or service user. What happens to the 'un-deserving' citizen or user, and most crucially, who represents the interests of those significant proportions of the population that are denied the status of citizen, such as asylum seekers or individuals with severe mental health difficulties? Having conceptualized its role as the facilitator and empowerer of essentially privatized communities, what happens when people in those communities fail to demonstrate 'appropriate' understandings of their role? It is here that we would argue that the other side of the New Labour conception of community is informed by an equally Victorian notion of moral authoritarianism. The flagship of repressive measures developed accordingly is the legislation on Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), within which individuals can be sent to prison on what is effectively hearsay evidence, and according to recent research, almost half of the young people who breach ASBOs end up in prison (Community Care, 1 July 2005).

We would observe the same spirit within the new mental health legislation, where the answers to a series of policy and institutional failures are a new range of measures imposing compulsory treatment. The impact of having to carry and display the proposed new identity cards will also be felt disproportionately on the most socially marginalized communities. These repressive policies, running alongside aspirations for 'community empowerment', illustrate the New Labour dilemma: having pro-claimed its brave new world of communities running their own affairs, it finds itself haunted by those recalcitrant members of the community who fail to accept their responsibilities as citizens. Its position is analogous to a frustrated parent who is desperate for their children to go to sleep without further intervention, but keeps finding themselves having to adopt more and more authoritarian strategies to deal with their unruliness. Parents having some modicum of honesty may be able to realize that what their children are doing is challenging the boundaries of their authority; New Labour by contrast sees not resistance, but pathology, as new groups of folk devils - 'hoodies' are merely the latest - are singled out for the threat they pose to the New Labour ideal of good citizenship. Whilst Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) in a previous era identified this as a process of 'moral panic' what is new about this is the way the state comes to adopt ever more sophisticated hegemonic strategies in which social and political realities, such as the poverty, low pay, substandard housing not to mention the anger and despair associated with these conditions of life, are conjured away with technical solutions - 'what works'. It is in this context that we now seek to analyse the construction of 'the User'.

## What is 'User Involvement'?

We want to move to looking at the question of User Involvement and the way it works in both practical and ideological terms. One of the problems noted in much of the literature is that, rhetoric aside, there is very little clear sense about what the context for User Involvement was to be. As Simon Heyes notes:



*This lack of clear guidelines on user involvement has been seen as allowing professional opinions on involvement to dominate. One problem is trying to agree what is up for debate when one talks of user involvement. Is it simply about involving users as 'consumers' in their treatment, or in planning or evaluating services? Or is it something more than that? Is there a real transfer of power to the service user? Does it include them running services themselves? (1993: para. 6)*

Heyes goes on to argue that the notion of User Involvement really starts to come apart when it is looked at in relation to the concrete example of mental health services. Should users be able to decide whether or not they are to have ECT (electroconvulsive therapy)? The point is that the notion of 'consumer' becomes increasingly meaningless in the areas of mental health where the treatment is forced upon the User. As a former patient of one mental hospital acerbically put it 'I consume mental health services like cockroaches consume Rentokil' (in Barker and Peck, 1996: 6). The off-the-shelf high street conception of consumer choice privileges high visibility and high take-up without any serious consideration of the underlying social relations involved, which are much more difficult to audit and measure.

It is also significant to note that, as in the earlier discussion around 'community', progressive rhetoric about the value of the service user's perspective sits uncomfortably alongside the expectation that Social Workers will impose their own professional understandings when the time is right to do so. This is not to suggest that they should not do this, but rather to note the incoherence of the importation of a business/consumer model into a complex profession like Social Work. The Department of Health now requires all Social Work students to be assessed by Users as part of the process of meeting competencies, but which Users? Will the parents of the children whom Social Services recommend to be placed in Local Authority care be asked to do this? We would welcome a much greater and more genuine dialogue being opened up with Social Workers and parents whose children have been placed in care; yet the legal framework and lack of resources have pushed the whole agenda in child protection toward risk management; there is for most practitioners simply not the time and space for work like this to be meaningfully engaged in. The crucial question here is the issue of power, yet without a context in which this can be addressed the voice of the User becomes a fetish - something which can be held up as a representative of authenticity and truth, but which at the same time has no real influence over decision making. In the absence of the kind of democratization that has been historically demanded by community based users' groups, it will after all be Service Managers who decide on those instances in which Users are to be consulted, and what weight is put on these.

Within his work on User Involvement in research, Peter Beresford has noted that within the dominant 'managerialist-consumerist' model, User Involvement is presented essentially as

*. . . a non-political neutral technique for information gathering from service users, to provide a fuller picture on which to base policy and provision. Its role has never been framed in terms of altering the distribution of power or who makes the decisions. (Beresford, 2003: para. 16)*

We would argue that the conception of 'User Involvement' through this managerial lens raises further issues of concern. At a number of forums we have attended which have been held by local Social Services Departments and Health Authorities, virtually all of those users who have been invited were professional consultants. For these users the aim of a critique of the oppressiveness of the institution is not to mobilize politically to bring about change, but for those institutions to employ them as trainers and consultants. This is not to say that this process could not be potentially valuable; but it also points to the way in which it is easy for institutions to define 'User Involvement' through an essentially collaborative arrangement between themselves and groups of 'professional users'. Having established a commodified basis on which to interact with users, those institutions again continue to be in control of the process of which users they listen to and which they decide to be 'too difficult' to incorporate. In this sense, while it is perceived as 'non-political', managerially driven User Involvement is actually highly political.

Simon Heyes' earlier point about the undefined nature of User Involvement is also apposite in terms of posing the question about who/what actually constitutes a 'User'. Gupta and Blewett's research into involvement of families living in poverty is instructive in this respect. The families they worked with actually rejected the term 'User' entirely, firstly because they felt it had implications of someone who used illegal drugs, and secondly because they wanted to be seen as people who 'give something back' rather than people who just 'use' (Gupta and Blewett, 2005). Additionally the essentialization of the category 'service user' in much of the way the term is used sets up 'service user' as a binary other to 'service provider' which fails to recognize the fluidity that exists between these categories. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any professional who is not also a user of services; which again points to the fetishization of the 'service user'. Moreover, the ontological primacy given to 'service user perspectives' within the context of a consumerist model obscures the important insights provided by theorists such as Paulo Freire and Franz Fanon. Their work points to the way in which sustained conditions of subjugation can make it difficult for the subaltern or oppressed individual to identify both the reasons for their oppression and what they should do about it. It has always been those with the greatest amount of what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'cultural capital' (meaning the knowledge which individuals from more educated and privileged backgrounds have of how 'the system' works and how to get what they want most effectively from that<sup>2</sup>) who have historically obtained the best quality services from the Welfare State. Bourdieu's work underlines the arguments made by Fanon and Friere concerning the way the experience of impoverishment and social marginalization itself militates against individuals from those communities challenging the circumstances in which they exist:

*If it is fitting to recall that the dominated always contribute to their own domination, it is necessary to be reminded the dispositions which incline them to this complicity are also the effect, embodied, of domination. (Bourdieu, 1992: 24)*

It is this painful reality within the experience of social marginalization that New Labour is least interested in. And in practice the airbrushing out of those realities means that the consumerist model of 'User Involvement' they have adopted so enthusiastically effectively empowers those who expect to get the most in the first place, at the same time as it disempowers those with the lowest expectations.

## 'User Involvement' and ideology

The rhetoric of User Involvement as it is presented to the public continues to evoke far loftier purpose than that referred to here. And it is in this context that we would seek to look further about why this project appears to have such ideological resonance. We have argued so far that the power of this notion resides in an ongoing process where the language of progressive social movements has been appropriated and become a passenger on the vehicle of 'welfare retrenchment'.

In this sense we can understand the idea of 'User Involvement' through Louis Althusser's conceptualization of the concept of ideology. Althusser was a Marxist but he broke away from what he saw as simplistic Marxist understandings of ideology as 'false ideas'. He argued that ideologies aren't so passive - they work by telling a story of how things are. He presented two theses about ideology. The first thesis was that ideology wasn't just false ideas; rather it was 'a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' Althusser (1971: 241). In other words, ideology doesn't represent the real world per se, but human beings' relation to that real world, to their perceptions of the real conditions of existence. In fact, we probably can't know the real world directly; what we know are always representations of that world, or representations of our relation to that world. Ideology then is the imaginary version, the represented version, the stories we tell ourselves about our relation to the real world.

In relation to User Involvement as an ideology, the story we are being told here is that in the bad old days Users would simply be told what to do by Professionals, whereas now there are all sorts of opportunities Users have for being involved in the services which are after all, run in their interest. This story is in fact imaginary because the decisions about how users can and should be involved are all controlled by professionals on one hand, and by the government and welfare bureaucracy on the other; the latter in particular have control over finance, which is crucial in all of these situations.

This brings us to the second point that Althusser (1971) makes about ideology: that 'Ideology has a material existence'. It isn't just about things people think, but about the actions, both individual and institutional, which result from that way of thinking. Hence for Althusser to say that 'ideology is material' is to say that ideology always exists in two places - in an apparatus or practice (such as a ritual, or other forms of behaviour dictated by the specific ideology) and in a subject, in a person - who is, by definition, material.

In the 1970s and 1980s recipients of social services were referred to as 'clients'. This term we were told was patronizing and stigmatizing ([Jones, 1983]). With the ascendancy of the 'New Right' and commercialization of public services, 'customer' and 'consumer' became seen as the most appropriate description. It was seen as the most effective way of making public servants both accountable for the large amounts of money spent on services and more responsive to the needs of those on the receiving end. With the emergence of New Labour, and a commitment to end the marketization of public services, we saw the advent of 'User'. This represents the most recent attempt (not the first and certainly not the last) by

those in power to mask the true nature of the power relations that exist within society and the historical regulatory function of the state (Foucault, 1977).

The practice which, in the absence of a serious attempt to genuinely democratize services, is likely to be most associated with User Involvement is that of Managerialism. One of the things that weaken managerial control is the sense that they do not know what things are like on the front line - hence the ideology of User Involvement can be used by managers to shore up the sense that they are really on the side of the User. User Involvement comes to be very important to managers because the 'User' comes to be seen as embodying a truth, a truth that is simultaneously not available to front-line staff, who are seen as inherently constrained by rules and bureaucracy. This ideology allows managers, and by extension government ministers to appeal directly to Users, over the heads of front-line workers, who in their petty and bureaucratic way do not really understand what Users really want. Yet as we have noted earlier the majority of the so-called Users of services have little or no choice over the matter of how services become organized, resourced or managed.

There is also a much bigger story that needs to be articulated, that is the establishment of a new social, political and economic order, under the conditions of late or advanced capitalism; of the power of the market and the hunger of capital over all aspects of our lives. The result being the gradual dismantling of the three key elements of the post-war settlement, namely, the Welfare State, free education for all and a national health service. A new politics of welfare whilst retaining some of the key rhetorical notions of the post-war settlement, social justice, citizenship, human rights, pluralism, ethical foreign policies etc., in practice means something radically different. Take for example the key notion of citizenship. Bill Jordan has argued that this has been refocused from individual rights to the activities, qualities and obligations of members (1999: 220) leading to the creation of ideas about deserving and undeserving citizens, that we are currently seeing. Similarly while the rhetoric around governmental programmes of 'social inclusion' is positive, what these seemed to amount to in practice is that the most important precursor of 'good citizenship' is participation in the economy. The problem, most crucially for Social Work is that the people that we may be concerned with (the young, homeless, elderly etc.) are the very people excluded as a consequence of the headlong embrace of the business-friendly model of 'flexible working' that New Labour have championed. Others, such as asylum seekers, are disqualified both from working and from benefits.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to engage in an analysis of the notion of 'User Involvement' and have argued that the establishment of this discourse represents two opposing stories. There is an important story to be told about the user movement, particularly in the arenas of disability and mental health, and its success in giving service users a voice in decision-making spaces and places that would have been unimaginable in the 1970s. Moreover, one cannot ignore the impact that service users' perspectives have had on research and education, by, for example, drawing on their lived experience to take on roles as researchers, educators and consultants (Beresford and Holden, 2000). The other story is one where we are seeing the construction of a new hegemony in which progressive critiques have been incorporated into a system driven by managerial rather than democratizing

imperatives. What this has done is moved the agenda away from ways in which welfare might be developed and expanded, in ways that service users have demanded, to an agenda of how to 'best target' existing or diminishing resources. In this context it is easy for service user critiques of professional practice to be simply incorporated into an agenda dominated by performance management, audit and evaluation. It is thus far easier to frame service users as consultants rather than activists. The consensual approach employed here elides and obscures issues of power relations, which become reduced to consumer notions of 'choice' and managerial 'listening', the truth of which are exemplified by the meeting situation in which the 'pause button' is subtly deployed whenever a service user speaks. Under conditions such as these, the rhetoric of 'User Involvement' and other related ideas such as 'empowerment' and 'managing diversity' become meaningless, other than to function as legitimisation devices for new managerial elites.

This shift to managerial control in Social Welfare has been accompanied by a mood in which analysis and practice have been gradually decoupled. This has meant that many practitioners have become uncertain and confused about their relationship with service users. For those unable to stomach managerial rhetoric the typical response becomes the disillusionment and cynicism of 'the front line' (see Jones, 2001). In spite of this, we would argue that there are important issues worth fighting for in the User Involvement agenda. Rather than allowing this to become another item for managers to tick off, front-line staff should reclaim the agenda of critical practice and argue for this not just as a vehicle for social inclusion, but most critically, in the longer term, as a means by which new insights into power and powerlessness can be gained and new emancipatory policies constructed.

## Notes

1. Miliband cites Asa Briggs's famous work *Victorian Cities* as a major influence.
2. Bourdieu argues that 'cultural capital' could be redescribed as 'informational capital' or the forms of knowledge that carry the weight of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1992: 119).

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