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Dis/ability and austerity: beyond work and slow death

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CURRENT ISSUES

Dis/ability and austerity: beyond work and slow death

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The forthcoming book *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* argues that we are living in an historical epoch which might be described as neoliberal-ableism, in which we are all subjected to slow death, increased precarity and growing debility. In this paper we apply this analysis to a consideration of austerity with further reference to disability studies and politics.

Keywords: disability; austerity; slow death; neoliberal-ableism

Austerity

By 2008 the world knew: the reckless nature of capitalism had led to economic meltdown. We had simply spent and borrowed too much. To overcome this we were, and still are, expected to ‘make do and mend’ (Tosh 2013). Rather than contest the system (capitalism), we should, well, work it more responsibly – be more prudent in our spending and more committed in our labour. We are, of course, ‘all in this together’, so the British Chancellor told us, and his government remains committed to ‘the makers, doers and savers’.¹ Indeed, it would appear that we are all equal, although some are more equal than others. This is evidenced by the impact of austerity measures in Britain since the 2010 emergency budget. In 2012 the Disability in Austerity Study led by Demos estimated losses of £2000–3000 (in families’ household income) over the course of the current parliament, with disabled people losing £9 billion in welfare support and one-third losing their Disability Living Allowance (Wood 2012). This had resulted in disabled people and their families experiencing:

An ever-diminishing level of civic and social engagement – our households are becoming socially more isolated, and reducing the amount of activities they engage in – from essentials such as work and medical appointments to ‘luxuries’ such as volunteering and training. This is at odds with the Government’s vision of stronger and active communities.

Retrenchment of services – both statutory services and third sector services are being cut, leaving disabled people with nowhere else to turn. The concept of the safety net no longer resonates with people experiencing serious crises before help is provided.

Declining mental health – our households are increasingly experiencing anxiety, depression and fear for the future, with some relying on increased medication. (Wood 2012: 7)

This experience is nowhere more evident than today in the midst of neoliberal capitalism. Soldatic and Chapman (2010) depict this as a time of flexibility,

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casualisation, work readiness and productivity. The rationality of market rule, they say, demands an adaptable worker; albeit one caught up in the insecurities associated with the global economy and the winding back of welfare benefits and entitlements. For Cooley (2011), while at the beginnings of neoliberalism there was talk of free enterprise, the ‘American way’ and working for one’s family, latter iterations of neoliberal discourse would suggest we are entering a cultural epoch where such a vision of human development automatically inducts each and everyone into what Jakobsen (2009, 224) describes as ‘a relational structure that provides for privatised resource-provision’. The way we would like to think of this relational structure is as follows: neoliberalism provides an ecosystem for the nourishment of ableism, which we can define as neoliberal-ableism. We are all expected to overcome economic downturn and respond to austerity through adhering to ableism’s ideals, its narrow conceptions of personhood, its arrogance and its propensity to buddy-up with other fascistic ideologies that celebrate the minority over the majority means that it is a world-view, an ontology and a methodology for the making human-kinds that will eventually, if left unchallenged, bulldoze the disparate variegated nature of human kind (Goodley 2014). A key principle of ‘body management within neoliberalism’, as Mitchell observes, is that:

those who don’t adequately maintain their bodies are held personally responsible for their descent into the chaos of ill health and non-well-being profiting from the misfortunes of another; a parasitism of privilege allowed only to those who embody the normative capacities of neoliberal identities. (Mitchell 2014, 3)

‘The truth is that all this work is debilitating’ (Puar 2012).

Labour/slow death

Work, for Lauren Berlant (2007, 2010, 2011), is best epitomised as a practice of slow death, a concept that refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population, which is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. We are, she suggests, exhausted by neoliberal capitalism: we are all in slow death, but for some this is more apparent. This includes:

the bodies of US waged workers will be more fatigued, in more pain, less capable of ordinary breathing and working, and die earlier than the average for higher-income workers, who are also getting fatter, but at a slower rate and with relatively more opportunity for exercise. (Berlant 2007, 775)

To this collective we would add disabled people and many of their close allies. Neoliberal-ableism displays, to borrow the words of Robert McRuer (2012c), a ‘special genius’ at making lopsided growth, wealth for a few, and immiseration for many more, seem sexy, and – well – progressive and modern.

Disabled people have to become, in the words of David Mitchell (2014), ‘able-disabled’; or, as Goodley (2014) notes, disabled people have to embrace ableism to overcome their disabling conditions; or as Goodley and Runswick-Cole (*in press*) have argued, individuals need to embolden the ability side of the dis/ability complex in order to survive, hopefully thrive, but definitely make do and mend. This is what Mitchell (2014) and McRuer (2012a, 2012b) have in mind around neoliberal tolerance:

- (1) if you are prepared to work hard then you are in;
- (2) don't forget now: we are all in this together as workers and consumers; and
- (3) in these austere times we will get ourselves 'back on our feet' – work will set us free.

Crip alternatives (slowing the death down)

The politics of disability permit us to think again (and differently) about living through (and being recognised by) neoliberal-ableism. Here are two thoughts. Firstly, why all this talk of austerity when we should be talking about poverty? In Britain the 'bedroom tax', the recent reduction of Disabled Student Allowance, and the reduction of numbers judged to be disabled (and therefore eligible to welfare benefits) put disabled people yet again amongst the poorest of the poor. If labour is slow death, living as a disabled person in 2014 might mean a quick one:

A disabled man died penniless when he lost his benefits after being judged fit to work – despite being so ill doctors said he needed a new heart. Robert Barlow died last November aged 47 while suffering from a heart defect and brain tumour. The classically trained pianist – who worked for years as a microbiologist in Cambridge – was deemed fit to work by benefits assessors Atos, even though doctors at the time urged him to have a heart transplant. He passed away less than two years later.

Now Mr Barlow's Cambridge family and Labour MP Luciana Berger want the Government to learn lessons from this tragic case.

His aunt Joan Westland, 85, of Cherry Hinton, said: 'I don't know how they expected him to work. Nobody would have loved to work more than him, but he simply couldn't.'²

It is absolutely essential that we consider the ways in which poverty and disability are once again being cast together as inseparable categories. Disabled People Against the Cuts³ remind us that freedom can rarely be found in capitalism. Disability politics lead the way, yet again, in thinking about alternatives to neoliberal-ableist capitalism.

Secondly, what alternatives does disability offer to the slow death of neoliberal-ableism and false promises of austerity? For David Mitchell (2014, 1–2): 'disability subjectivities create new forms of embodied knowledge and collective consciousness. Queer and disabled people's interdependencies provide alternative ethical maps for living together outside of, even in opposition to, the dictates of normalcy'. This resonates with stories emerging from our current ESRC project 'Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society' (grant reference: ES/K004883/1). The research team, from The University of Sheffield, Manchester Metropolitan University, Northumbria University and The University of Bristol, are working with organisations of/for disabled people, activists and allies to discover how disabled people with learning disabilities are participating in their communities, in public services and in social action. The team is exploring disabled people with learning disabilities access to social capital and networks of interdependence as well as their social emotional well-being in a context of austerity. Here is a story from our project:

An account from our Inclusive Living colleagues: Pete and Wendy Crane, along with colleagues including person-centred planning coordinator Max Neil, have developed

the Circles of Support approach to community living. This involves individuals such as Matt (a pseudonym) using their welfare benefits to recruit a network of advocates and support staff to support him 24/7 in his own home which is located a couple of streets down from his parents. (Goodley 2014, 128)

Disability, then, offers opportunities for reconsidering our relationships with life, labour and slow death. Could care, rather than work, be a place to find identity and recognition? Why wear yourself out? Disability provides a moment to intervene in slow death: why work yourself to death? Why (just) work? How do we support one another in a time of austerity? Why sweat to improve one's embodied and cognitive lot? How else might we live together to support, care and enable one another? What do we gain when we fail to meet neoliberalism's normative labouring standards? For Kolárová :

crippness *is* rich with failure; crippness *is* infused with negativity; yet we do not always see it as such. The rich archive of the labour of crip failure is here and at hand ... but do we, as the crip community celebrate those as crip failures that can sustain our visions of utopia and whose negative energies move us towards the crip horizon? (Kolárová *in press*, n.p.)

These crip horizons might be found as disability is, simultaneously for and against slow death. And this appears to be a worn out place that all occupy and can, via our collectivities and assemblages, recuperate our possibilities. What alternatives do we see for our worn-out bodies? Ones, we would assume, far beyond work and slow death.

Notes

1. See <http://disabilitynow.org.uk/blog/budget-bleaker-future>
2. See <http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/News/Cambridge-microbiologist-Robert-Barlow-dies-penniless-in-Liverpool-after-his-benefits-were-withdrawn-despite-him-needing-a-new-heart-20140409063051.htm>
3. See <http://dpac.uk.net/>

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