

Lifting the Lid on Disabled People Against Cuts

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Introduction

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In May, 2010 Britain saw the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats form a coalition government. This government immediately announced that the nation was facing an unprecedented economic crisis due to the previous regime's economic mismanagement, including reckless borrowing with high interest charges. The nation's debt therefore required severe austerity measures. This picture plays down the positioning of the UK in the global economic crisis of capitalist financial markets and the role played by the International Banks. It also distorts the time-lines as well because Lang et al (2008) were able to write:

Notwithstanding the increasing profile of disability issues within the international development community, the global economic crisis has the potential to have a significant detrimental impact on people with disabilities in developing countries.

Disabled people in Britain had already become a target under the Labour Government's welfare reform programme and its chief advisor crossed over to the Conservatives shortly before the General Election. Arguably the economic down turn and financial crisis simply hastened the move away from post-war Social Democratic welfarist policies and the changing relationships between the state and society. Nevertheless the Coalition Government's Spending Review announced in October 2010 went much further in terms changing the welfare state than Labour planned with massive changes to the National Health Service and cuts totalling £9.2bn in disability welfare over the next five years. Since last October further cuts have been announced. Neil Coyle, Director of Policy at Disability Alliance, which works to relieve the poverty and improve the living standards of disabled people claimed:

Cutting disabled people off ESA after one year despite a lack of employment opportunities and reduced support to

get jobs will impoverish thousands of disabled people and their families. This cut will additionally affect many of the 360,000 disabled people no longer able to access essential DLA and the combined effect will mean some disabled people are cut adrift from the entire welfare state.

It is equally important to recognise that the austerity measures will also hit mainstream service provision and this will have a knock on effect in terms of the disabling barriers disabled people experience in the UK.

Disabled People Against Cuts

Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) was formed by a small group of disabled people after the first mass protest against the austerity cuts and their impact on disabled people held on the 3rd October in Birmingham, England. At first glance our campaign name: *Disabled People Against Cuts* seems fairly straight forward – just like that famous label on the tin – but the co-founders of DPAC have a deep distrust of labels and believe it is dangerous to simply take things at face value. I thought it might be interesting to take the lid off DPAC and explore the possible meanings that can be attached to our name.

There's no agreement within society as to what "disability" is and subsequently who it affects. There are dominant set of ideologies and practices which Mike Oliver has presented as 'the individual model of disability' and there is a radical alternative known as 'the social model' which has come through the Disabled People's Movement. I work largely from within the social model, but recognise there are a host of hybrids which employ aspects of both models. My starting point is the crucial question: who and what are *disabled people*?

Who and what are *disabled people*?

Given the dominant ideologies and practices associated with being classed as "disabled" we shouldn't be surprised that many people seek to avoid being 'written off' in this way or simply can't see themselves within the stereotyped imagery which stems from this articulation of disability and therefore they 'reject' the label of being "disabled".

Stereotyped imagery plays a major role in how society views who is and who isn't 'a disabled person'. It's important to recognise that whilst an individual might reject the ownership of 'disabled' as an oppressive label, it doesn't mean that the State nor the rest of society isn't prepared to use

this label in relation to them. There are also other factors which influence how disabled people are seen and treated. Marxist Economist, Ernest Mandel by going back to Marx's theory of absolute impoverishment, clarified Marx's observation that capitalism "throws out of the production process a section of the proletariat: unemployed, old people, disabled persons, the sick, etc." Marx described these groups as part of the poorest stratum "bearing the stigmata of wage labor." Mandel reminded us, "...this analysis retains its full value, even under the 'welfare' capitalism of... [the post-war era]." Disabled people are often viewed as part of an 'underclass' and coupled with dominant views as to what defines someone as "disabled" this will sometimes be used to include them in the notion of "the disabled" (sic) whereas at other times it will be to deny them the use of the label if it's decided they haven't matched the eligibility status being applied, for example, within the field of benefits or social care services. Historically, disabled people have found themselves thrust between 'the deserving' and 'the undeserving' poor as socially policy defines and re-defines who are or aren't part of 'the disabled'.

Let's take a closer look at this label: 'the disabled'. The usual criticism of the label is that it's dehumanising and a denial of the diversity among 'disabled people', but this underplays the politically oppressive nature of this label. Within dominant culture 'the disabled' are *not* a social group bound by a defined identity, but rather a 'collection of individuals defined by their perceived abnormality'. They become a pathologised "Other" – where the public gaze sets them apart from the rest of society – this is how it acts as a form of objectification.

Just as the State and society makes assumptions about who is and who isn't a disabled person – I believe sections of the Disabled People's Movement are guilty of doing a similar thing. We have tended to conflate into one 'identity' people with impairments who fall into the dominant definition of 'disabled people' and those who embrace the political identity of being a disabled people. It's often assumed that by having an impairment or the label 'disabled' thrust upon you, you become part of a specific community with a distinct culture – this is far from the case. Many people with impairments have never had an opportunity to see themselves as anything other than through the dominant perspectives; with others rejecting the alternative perspectives for a variety of reasons.

The 'disabled' identity

How then should we view our 'disabled' identity? Individuals can have a multitude of identities depending upon their relationships within specific

social environments, however, for many disabled people their 'identities' can be denied, lost and distorted as a result of how they experience their lives as 'disabled' people. Using the social model of disability Mike Oliver argued that our 'disabled' identity stems from understanding that as people with impairments we experience oppressive social relationships created by the *nature* of the society in which we live.

Within the Disabled People's Movement over the years there has been a watering down of the ideas expressed by UPIAS, Finkelstein and Oliver to the extent that 'disabism' is simply reduced to the experience of discriminatory attitudes and practices found *within* society; lost has been our ability to question the actual fabric of society itself and the implications this has for disabled people. I would argue this de-politicisation has weakened our ability to address the current attacks upon disabled people.

The social model of disability broke new ground, but it is only a model not a complete explanation of *all things* to do with people with impairments. There are areas of the model I would suggest that need further discussion, however, I often cringe at the crude criticisms coming from both disabled people in the community and more seriously from academic circles. Many of the debates are unprincipled, employ oppressive power relationships, for example, inaccessible language and deny ordinary disabled people access to a myriad of resources. My biggest criticism is the fact that since the 1990s the social model has been attacked via "countless interpretations" of what it is and its application rather than honest appraisals of the actual texts it is based upon. Many 'post-modernist' "interpretations" are so selective that they often accuse the social model of ignoring the very fabric it was designed to address. If the social model *ignores* impairment, why does it argue "disability is something imposed *on top of our impairments*"? Watson and Shakespeare (2002), for example, assert:

The unsustainable distinction between impairment (bodily difference) and disability (social creation) can be demonstrated by asking 'where does impairment end and disability start?'

According to Watson and Shakespeare, the complexities involved the impairment-disability relationships, means that "only experts" can pick over the threads, discourses, narratives, histories, etc. Meanwhile the World Health Organisation (2001) has produced a hybrid of the

individual-social models called the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, known as the ICF. It is argued that:

disability is a product of an interaction between characteristics (e.g., conditions or impairments, functional status, or personal and social qualities) of the individual and characteristics of the natural, built, cultural, and social environments.

DPAC believes this new “inclusive” approach has opened the back door to medical disability assessments designed by Atos Healthcare that arguably reinforces the individual model of disability culture with the Department of Works and Pensions. Critics of the current benefit reviews have suggested that the systematic ‘re-defining’ who is and who isn’t ‘disabled’ is part of the process of reducing the benefit headcount.

Huge numbers of disabled people have been wrongly assessed and targeted leading to 40% appeals successes, but despite this, the Government’s attacks have been relentless. In disability academic circles in the UK there has been little or no appraisal of the political implications of post-social model discourses in relation to disability assessment medicine.

It is without a doubt true that disabled people come from a myriad of backgrounds, however the brunt of the cuts are falling on people who are unable to work for a variety of reasons and/or are dependent on state benefits. This perception however masks a group of disabled people who are often overlooked. There are disabled people, despite the encountered barriers, who manage to survive – just about – within the mainstream by being economically active. This group I would argue is being particularly squeezed by the reduction in jobs within the labour market, high prices (especially fuel and travel costs), and specifically because they aren’t seen as part of the ‘deserving poor’. One benefit they can claim is Disability Living Allowance because it’s not means tested, however, the Government plans to reform the benefit and it is likely that many within this social group will find themselves “medicalised” out of the new benefit. If that were to happen a sizeable number would become severely *disabled* as a result; but nevertheless discounted by the oppressive measurements that will define people as being “disabled” or “not”.

Disabled people under attack

The needs of western capitalism are changing and this in turn impacts upon all social relations within society. Not only that; the changing relationship between State and society require an alteration of the positioning of the majority of disabled people within society. The externally imposed identity of being seen as 'disabled' is being re-moulded through language, definitions and practice. It's for this reason I believe greater attention needs to be paid to the socio-political identity of being *disabled people*. Instead of addressing the *nature* of the social relations specific groups of people with impairments have within society; the impact these relations upon their lives, there has been a tendency to focus upon *dismantling specific* disabling barriers and then proclaiming some people with impairments are *more* 'disabled' or *more* 'deserving' than others. This divisive approach prevents us from developing strategies to **change** the nature of society and people with impairments' social relationships within it.

Against cuts

The co-founders of DPAC believe disabled people are currently *disabled* by systems, structures and services which either fail to meet or inadequately meet our needs, but the reduction in public expenditure at national and local levels, the removal of services, the destruction of jobs and communities will only result in greater hardship and social exclusion. We oppose **all cuts** because they impact upon disabled and non-disabled people's ability to bring about a just and inclusive society.

There are services run by local authorities which are not run in the best interests of communities – including disabled people – but simply taking an axe to them does not provide us with an opportunity to change the service or provide a better one. The cuts will take us away from and not towards building a more inclusive society; cuts will reduce our ability to expose the disabling nature of the society in which we live. Cuts right across the board will hamper ordinary people's ability to take control over their lives and for some disabled people, though marginalised within the mainstream now, they will find the cuts bringing about their exclusion from all mainstream social activities. For others the cuts will result in premature death caused by worry, increased poor health and inadequate support arrangements.

The austerity measures introduced by the Coalition Government are ideologically based and DPAC would support the view that they've little to do with the national debt. DPAC is about defending disabled people against the savage measures, but we also recognise our campaigning

has to be understood also within the context of disabled people taking control over their lives and determining who and what they are. Unlike traditional DPOs, DPAC works across alliances which involve both disabled and non-disabled people. We question the ability of the old Disabled People's Movement – a social movement in decline – to best serve the interests of disabled people. In our view only a rump remains and this has arguably compromised its principles in order to obtain funding and support from disability charities.

DPAC believes the attack upon disabled people stems from a crisis within both global and national capitalism and has nothing to do with the national debt. This is a life or death struggle and disabled people must force their issues onto the public agenda by engaging in mainstream politics as collective groups of disabled people. We have begun to employ new social media and have challenged the disabling barriers that currently exist in traditional trade union and labour politics. DPAC sees the social model of disability as a cornerstone in building a new, diverse anti-capitalist movement. By taking the lid of DPAC I hope I've demonstrated that the struggle we're engaged in has profound implications for the future lives of disabled people in the UK. Our campaign could never simply be about protecting the status quo – for that would be an act of betrayal.

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