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"From Each According to Ability"? Capitalism, Poverty, and Disability

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"From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Karl Marx (1875/1978) wrote these words in the "Critique of the Gotha Program" in 1875 with the sexist usage of language of the time. But does the exclusionary language discredit the thrust of the statement? Much disability scholarship and political activism focuses on social inclusion – particularly in the labour force – and on promoting disability as a positive identity. At the same time, disproportionately large numbers of people with disabilities worldwide in rich, middle-income, and poor countries live in deep and widespread poverty (Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2003; OECD, 2009; World Health Organization, 2011). Would an economy based on Marx's ethos be an ideal approach to social inclusion that could end this poverty? Or does this ethos, which undoubtedly implies a healthy dose of accommodation and social welfare (at least in the short term) merely serve to undermine our aspirations for equality and dignity? Such is the dilemma of disability politics, and much of the motivation for this special issue on the political economy of disability.

Not surprisingly, the articles in this special issue of *the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* offer perspectives on waged work and unwaged work, austerity measures and the welfare state, and some potentially uncomfortable (re)considerations regarding the role of identity and class in disability politics – particularly, as Kelly Fritsch points out, when the source of disability is violence or social injustice. The articles in this issue debate our notions of disability as both a category and social relation, the political underpinnings and implications of a focus on identity in the context of an increasingly neoliberal environment, and both theoretical and practical

considerations on the nature and role of the welfare state (or lack thereof) in advancing the dignity and well-being of people with disabilities.

Amy Sorensen, based in the United States, provides a review article, "Inequality Made Flesh: Disability and the Political Economy of the Body" offering a theoretical overview of various sociological theories to situate "the body as the primary component of a complex political economy that encompasses both material and cultural production and consumption" (p. 153). She argues that the disabled body offers "an excellent vantage point from which to explore these processes" and urges scholars to find "transcendence from competing models of disability and body theory" (p. 168).

Canadian Kelly Fritsch also focuses on the disabled body, but in the specific context that she calls "neoliberalized biocapitalism". Her article, "Gradations of Debility and Capacity: Biocapitalism and the Neoliberalization of Disability Relations" interrogates the link between changing notions of disability and recent neoliberal promises for "post-industrial" economic growth and human development through advancement in the life sciences and biotechnology. She argues that disability should not be understood as "a uniformly oppressed category of being" (p. 116) because developments in the life sciences have blurred the "distinction between disabled and non-disabled" (p. 129). Thus these distinctions are more accurately understood as "gradations of capacity and debility" (p. 129). She urges greater attention to how these gradations influence "differential inclusion" and "who gets to have grievances" and who capitalizes and profits from those "grievances" (p. 143).

Certainly S.B Barak's insightful review of Keith Wailoo's *Pain: A Political History* lends credence to the reality of a "biocapitalism" in which disability, politics, and science are inextricably enmeshed. Originally from the United States, and now based in Canada, Barak is

quick to point out that this book "would have been more aptly subtitled 'An American political history', as it depicts the ongoing battle between liberalism and conservatism in the United States from World War II onward," including familiar arguments about putative dependencies created by the welfare state (p. 203). Barak describes how that the book chronicles debates as they circle around "the question of whose pain matters" as various players "alternate centre-stage, from veterans to workers to women to African Americans, correlating with other headlining events taking place historically in terms of rights advocacy" (p. 203).

Though currently based in the United States, Eugenio di Stefano provides a majority world perspective in his contribution, "Disability and Latin American Cultural Studies: A Critique of Corporeal Difference, Identity, and Social Exclusion". This article more directly tackles the issue of exclusion versus exploitation as foundations for our understanding of disability and oppression. He explores the shift from "the class-based 'social model' that defined [disability politics] in the 1970s toward a social-constructivist identitarian model" as they are represented "in Latin American literature and culture beginning in the 1980s" (pp. 59-60). With the backdrop of various Latin American countries who experienced the original neoliberal experiment (e.g., Chile's brutal regime under Augusto Pinochet), di Stefano makes the argument that "the social-constructivist model's emphasis on 'exclusion' over exploitation reproduces neoliberal's efforts to mask what exploits all workers by focusing on the different experiences that distinguish them... effectively evacuat[ing] an anti-capitalist position" (p. 73).

But the social model does not, nor has it ever, offered an understanding of disability primarily based on class. Certainly disability scholars, including the foundational work of British sociologist Mike Oliver (1990), recognize the impact of capitalism's particular commodification of labour on the social construction of disability and the disadvantages that competitive market

relations create for the economic situation of people living with disabilities (Barnes, 1991; Gleeson, 1999; Oliver, 1990; Oliver, 1999; Russell, 1998). Having rooted the source of exclusion and poverty in the political economy of capitalism, however, Oliver and colleague Colin Barnes then emphasized the divide between disabled and non-disabled people as much, or perhaps more, than divisions between social classes. In their substantial and influential contributions the decades-long struggle against the "institutional discrimination" they identified, one of the chief goals has been to ensure people with disabilities enter paid work as equals. And one of the chief strategies to achieve this has been promoting the human rights of people with disabilities (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1990; Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Barnes, 1993). The early social model emphasized paid work as the best route out of poverty and towards social inclusion because "[w]ork is central in industrial society not simply because it produces the goods to sustain life but also because it creates particular forms of social relations" (Oliver, 1989, p. 51).

The emphasis on inclusion and paid work as means of liberation, and a concomitant wariness of the welfare state, are well placed. As Harvey (2014) puts it, "To be a ward of the welfare state was more often than not unpleasant and inhuman, even as some state benefits (like social security and old age pensions) brought more security to everyone" (p. 165) One paradox, however, is that "this was the kind of state that was criticised by the progressive left and then later obligingly abolished during the Thatcherite neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1980s" (Harvey, 2014, p. 165)

In their analysis of changes and outcomes in the Quebec welfare state, Lucie Dumais and Leonie Archambault depict this paradox for people with disabilities as occupying the space "Between Protection and Activation". Their article analyzes Quebec's experience with the worldwide policy thrust towards "active" social protection (activation towards employment), as

opposed to "passive" social protection (benefits and social assistance). They explore a "social investment" state framework for policy-making, which "involves activation of the entire working-age population, including those traditionally excluded from the labour market, such as people with disabilities" (p. 32). Although their analysis largely supports the notion of the social investment state, they note that this approach has produced "moderate, but tangible results in terms of both reducing the number of members of a household living below the low-income threshold and increasing the employment rate" (p. 51) Thus, they caution that "social protection is still a paramount benchmark in disability social policy" – particularly for those whose disabilities may be such that they will never realistically be part of the labour market (p. 50).

With this caveat, Dumais and Archambault speak to a discernible shift in the social model in recent years. The social model, Barnes (2003) in particular, has called for "a radical re-appraisal of the meaning of work for disabled people that goes beyond the rigid confines of paid employment..." (Barnes & Roulstone, 2005). British authors Katherine Runswick-Cole and Daniel Goodley highlight these issues with the stories of real people with learning disabilities in "Disability, Austerity, and Cruel Optimism in Big Society: Resistance and 'The Disability Commons'". Drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism", these authors call out the flaws in the neoliberal "Big Society" narrative of the outgoing Coalition Government in Britain. This narrative trumpets the familiar neoliberal call for greater personal and community responsibility for mutual care and services that were once the purview of the (big) state. The concept of cruel optimism in this context offers perhaps the most nuanced and human characterization of the dilemmas and contradictions discussed in this issue: "the relation of cruel optimism is a double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, as cited in Runswick-

Cole & Goodley). The authors argue that fulfillment of Big Society's promises for a way out of, or at least protection, from poverty "remain tantalizingly out of reach" particularly for those with learning disabilities (p. 18). Despite this cruel optimism, Runswick-Cole and Goodley draw from their ethnographic research to offer the stories of Henry, Chris, Jodie, which illuminate "acts of both resistance and agency being worked at in the spaces of neoliberalism" (p. 21).

The early aversion to the welfare state and the right *not* to work in disability studies, however, has reaped a certain underdevelopment of understanding the possibilities for the *decommodification* of labour power as a site of resistance to the oppression of people with disabilities. Two papers, also from our ever-prolific British colleagues, provide a thorough and provocative take on this issue.

Chris Grover, in "Commodification, Disabled People, and Wage Work in Britain" also analyses the push to "active labour market" policy approaches, but as they are unfolding in Britain, where the government is attempting to privatize employment services and reduce access to unemployment benefits. In addition to providing good explanations of key concepts (commodification, re-commodification, proletarianization, and the "reserve army of labour"), Grover analyzes these changes with regard to the state's role in creating "effective labour supply" for the capitalist economy. As others have observed (Harvey, 2005; Navarro, 2009), despite neoliberalism's cry for smaller government, policy changes such as those ongoing in Britain and elsewhere can be understood not as *less* government intervention in the economy, but as a *redirection* of government intervention. Grover argues that while governments extol the benefits of activation policies for individuals, these policies are actually "designed to make disabled people compete more effectively for wage work, thus contributing to the downward pressure on wage levels" for all workers (p. 97). As such, Grover also analyzes the perils of the

space between "activation and protection", contending that an "approach that attempts to (re)commodify the labour power of disabled people via market mechanisms is likely to fail because it is those mechanisms that are responsible for the labour market disadvantage of disabled people" (p. 103).

With this analysis, Grover is, of course, describing a real-life manifestation of what Harvey calls "'the contradictory unity of production and realization' that underpins capitalism as highlighted by Alexis Buettgen in her review of David Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. As Buettgen points out, Harvey's (2014) latest work also emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature and role of the commodification and decommodification of labour, because "'reform movement[s] around reducing social inequality can become the cutting edge for revolutionary transformation' " (p. 181) through the "gradual decommodification of basic needs provision...." (p. 81).

Steven Graby, in "Access to work or Liberation from Work" also points out "the paradox of disabled people desiring to be included in the same economic system which is responsible for their exclusion in the first place, and whose values fundamentally privilege the 'more able'" (p. 171). Gathering perspectives from anarchist, autonomist, and feminist writers, Graby also argues "the Disabled People's Movement needs to let go of its focus on paid work as a route to liberation for disabled people, and needs instead to challenge the entire concept, as suggested by anarchist and autonomist analyses" (p. 190). Situating autonomism in a "libertarian Marxist milieu", Graby points to the theory's distinction between "autonomous and heteronomous activity" (p. 182). Echoing Marx on use value and exchange value, activity is autonomous if it creates a product that is needed or otherwise serves a need; activity is heteronomous "if it is performed as a means to an end that is not inherent in the activity itself, as when someone has

been 'employed' to do it by someone else...." (182). With this, Graby perhaps make the strongest argument for the "the right not to work" (Taylor, 2004) because under capitalism, "heteronomous work is something that is effectively forced on people for whom selling their labour is the only alternative to starvation, and as a result is fundamentally authoritarian and disciplinary in structure" (p. 183). Graby makes the case for "an unconditional basic income" that would decommodify the labour of people with disabilities, giving them more choices and meeting basic needs, while addressing Barnes' (2012) call for an "expanded definition of 'work', such as 'biographical work' and the activities involved in managing impairment..." (p. 188). Recalling the debates during the early days of the Disabled People's Movement in Britain regarding the struggle for a "disability income" versus better access to the labour market, Graby points out that an "unconditional basic income would also differ significantly from the 'disability incomes' [proposed at that time]... because it would be given to everyone, both disabled and non-disabled, and thus would not stigmatise or segregate disabled people as a class considered uniquely dependent or 'incapable'" (p. 189).

Of course, even setting up these dilemmas of exclusion versus exploitation, activation versus protection, waged work and unwaged work – indeed setting up a dilemma at all – rankles those disability scholars suspicious of dualisms and binaries. But if, as Sorensen urges, we are to transcend our theoretical differences – and particularly if the goal to create an effective praxis – we first need a fulsome understanding of those differences. We hope this special issue contributes that process.

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