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**Disability and Latin American Cultural Studies: A Critique of Corporeal Difference,
Identity and Social Exclusion**

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Abstract

This essay explores the shift from a social model to social-constructivist model in the burgeoning field of disability studies within Latin American cultural studies. It does so by examining Latin American literature and culture beginning in the 1980s and its increasing focus on theories of exclusion within the particular framework of human rights. The first part of this essay centers on the experience of the disabled body, and corporeal difference more broadly, in Susan Antebi's *Carnal Inscriptions* (2009), the first text in Latin American cultural studies dedicated solely to disability. The second part of this essay looks at Argentina's Disability Rights Network (REDI, *Red por los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad*), which defines disability primarily through disabled people's exclusion from the workforce. Both of these conversations, I argue, ultimately fold into each other by reconceptualizing disability as an issue of human rights exclusion, and not necessarily one of class exploitation. In this way, this essay suggests that this focus on the human rights model obfuscates a clearer reading of the intersection between disability and exploitation in Latin America. The last part of the essay points to some potential directions the field might take with respect to Latin America in order to overcome the limitations of this human rights model, limitations that include not only the increasing emphasis on the social construction of disability but also the widespread disregard for challenging a system that produces economic exploitation for disabled and able-bodied alike.

Keywords

Latin American Literature; Anti-capitalist Disability Studies; Susan Antebi; Argentina's Disability Rights Network; REDI

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Introduction

In his essay "When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation," Daniel Zamora suggests that the 1980s present a critical moment in the global transition into a neoliberal system where the "'exploited' become redefined 'by their exclusion,' by their increasingly precarious relationship to work" ("Exclusion"). What Zamora means here is that beginning in this period, a conversation emerges from the Left (and Right) that disconnects the idea of the worker from the system that exploits him or her. Zamora outlines two ways in which this redefinition from exploitation to exclusion occurs. The first is by the increasing emphasis on the unique experience of different groups, for instance subalterns, women, immigrants, and African-Americans; and the second, is by the expanding belief that those who are underpaid or temporary labor are not workers, which, in turn, according to Zamora, pits workers against each other. The outcome of this semantic and ideological shift is detrimental to all workers, since it creates a politics that is "no longer at odds with the class system" ("Exclusion").

Although Zamora does not take up the question of disability, we can clearly see this move from exploitation to exclusion at work in disability studies, especially as disability discourse moves away from the class-based "social model" that defined its aims in the 1970s toward a social-constructivist identitarian model. This paper is not meant to be an overview of either the social model or social constructivism; nor is meant to ignore the diversity and complexity within each model. Rather, the purpose here is to gain political insights by

juxtaposing these models.¹ According to Roddy Slorach, the social model is a “materialist understanding of disability as a form of oppression that could be fought against and overcome” (“Marxism”); that is, the social model centered primarily on a class critique. The social-constructivist model, on the other hand, while certainly acknowledging how capitalism constructs disability, does very little to undermine the system that disproportionately exploits people with disabilities. Indeed, as I will argue, the latter model is deeply compatible with neoliberalism. This does not mean that social-constructivism is a complete break with the social model. In fact, it does maintain two important features from the social model: the first, as we will see below, is the distancing from the “medical model” that scrutinizes how public and private institutions define, and discriminate against, disabled people (Massiah 63); and the second, and closely connected to the first, is a distancing from essentialist claims that imagine that disability is something inherent.

This essay explores this shift from a social model to a social-constructivist model in the burgeoning field of disability studies within Latin American cultural studies. It does so by examining Latin American literature and culture beginning in the 1980s and its increasing focus on theories of exclusion within the particular framework of human rights. Paralleling Zamora's outline, the first part of this essay centers on the experience of the disabled body, and corporeal difference more broadly, in Susan Antebi's *Carnal Inscriptions* (2009), the first text in Latin American cultural studies dedicated solely to disability. The second part of this essay looks at Argentina's Disability Rights Network (REDI, Red por los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad), which defines disability primarily through disabled people's exclusion from the

¹ For excellent examples of this diversity and complexity, see Oliver's historical reading of the social model in *The Politics of Disablement*; and Salamon's insightful analysis of the various approaches to social constructivism in “Boys of the Lex.”

workforce.² Both of these conversations, I argue, ultimately fold into each other by reconceptualizing disability as an issue of human rights exclusion, and not necessarily one of class exploitation. In this way, this essay suggests that this focus on the human rights model obfuscates a clearer reading of the intersection between disability and exploitation in Latin America. The last part of the essay points to some potential directions the field might take with respect to Latin America in order to overcome the limitations of this human rights model, limitations that include not only the increasing emphasis on the social construction of disability but also the widespread disregard for challenging a system that produces economic exploitation for disabled and able-bodied alike.

Disability, Experience and Corporeal Difference

As we suggested above, the social model seeks to radically transform the capitalist system by addressing its relationship to exploitation and labor.³ Slorach notes that the social model was first articulated by a group of "disabled socialists in 1976, including anti-apartheid activist Vic Finkelstein through the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS)". What the social model insisted on was that "disability, far from being biologically determined, was a

² REDI is a Latin American human rights network that began in Buenos Aires in 1998, with a particular focus on the active participation of people with disabilities within the network. See Joly and Venturiello for an overview. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

³ A similar logic is at the center of John D'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity" when he suggests that "gay men and lesbians have not always existed. Instead, they are a product of history and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism; it has been the historical development of capitalism – more specifically, its free labor system – that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity" (102). From this position, D'Emilio's essay also serves to show how contemporary criticism has distanced itself from a conversation on exploitation. That is, if part of his essay is the attempt to map out how a liberation politics emerges, criticism has responded primarily by deploying his essay to liberate gay identity from history. Salamon's critique of theories of social construction in "The Boys of the Lex" presents an important corrective to this tendency insofar as her reading notes that one doesn't have to deny the body to historicize it (581). What this means regarding disability studies, according to a reading I develop below, is that impairment can be at the center of a historical materialist critique of disability.

social creation that could be challenged and eliminated". By rejecting this medical model approach based on biological determinism, the social model sought to address a system that discriminated against them. At the same time, however, this discrimination was always understood as symptomatic of a system of exploitation; that is, the solution to discrimination involved undermining a system that produces exploitation. In this way, the social model becomes a tool that makes disability not only historically legible but also central to critique of political economy and capitalism more generally. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, this social model gives way to a "rights" based model "centered on achieving legislative change" (Sorlach).

Disability movements in Latin America, while less established than in other regions, nevertheless helped advance the plight of workers. In Argentina, for example, and like in Great Britain, these movements emerged through labor unions in the 1970s as seen with the Crippled Peronist Front (FLP/Frente de Lisiados Peronistas) and also to the National Socioeconomic Union of the Crippled (UNSEL/Unión Nacional Socioeconómica del Lisiado), both of which echoed UPIAS's objectives in England. Nevertheless, as Eduardo Joly and Maria Pia Venturiello note, in Argentina, "The military regime succeeded [...] in annihilating the disability rights movement [...]" (Ayer y Hoy).⁴ It is only in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the dictatorships, that disability movements become more visible. In many ways, these movements are a direct outgrowth of human rights mobilization against state-sponsored terror. As Ernest Massiah suggests, beginning in the 1980s, disability movements develop a "human rights perspective [...] promoting social inclusion" which insists on the "right of people with disabilities to the same political and civil rights as the nondisabled" (62).⁵ Since the 1980s, disability movements both

⁴ It is important to stress that disability movements in Argentina, like UNSEL, were primarily labor movements. In other words, the military was annihilating all labor movements, not just a disability rights movement.

⁵ There have been great strides made in disability rights in the last thirty years in Latin America. This has been achieved, in part, by the rise of more international initiatives, such as UN's declaration in 1981 of the International

inside and outside of Latin America have worked within this framework to gain more rights for disabled people. In academia, and within the humanities, the emergence of disability studies in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the United States, has also endorsed this human rights vision of disability by not only analyzing the representations of "corporeal difference" that remain excluded from texts, but also by challenging and deconstructing the medical model's essentialist claims.⁶ In the field of Latin American cultural studies that conversation is now taking place, which continues the emphasis on corporeal difference and the social construction of disability — often at the expense of a conversation about the exploitation of disabled people.⁷

The emphasis on corporeal difference and the social construction of disability is evident, for instance, in Susan Antebi's *Carnal Inscriptions*, the first book to be published on representations of disability in Latin American literature. According to Antebi, disability in Latin American literature "plays a significant role in narrative, even when readers have failed to notice it" (1). While her book examines a century of representations of disability, what is of interest here is Antebi's focus on the late 1970s and early 1980s, a focus which provides a glimpse into the intersection between the body and the discourse of exclusion. Antebi's chapter brings together Rigoberta Menchú and Gaby Brimmer through the notion of "corporeal difference" (181). The able-bodied Menchú is a Maya-Quiché woman whose *testimonio* depicts the atrocities that were taking place in the 1970s and early 1980s during Guatemalan civil war. Gaby Brimmer

Year of Disabled People and the adoption of Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities in 1999. Within Latin America, these strides have been uneven due, in large part, to economic limitations. For example, wealthier countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay have the strongest disability movements. For a good summary of this history, including the transition from a welfare model to human rights model of disability, see Massiah.

⁶ This corresponds to the 'second wave' in disability studies, characterized by "the search for collective identity and creation of a disability culture" (Adams 496).

⁷ Within the Latin American context, see my essay "Cuerpo, crisis y discapacidad"; see also Brogna's collection. There are several recent books also published on Spanish literature and film, see Marr and Fraser. See also a soon-to-be published collection on disability in the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 2015.

is a Mexican writer who has cerebral palsy and can communicate only through her left leg and foot. Both of these women have *testimonios* written about their lives, which ultimately reveal the significance of "the body in [the] Latin American *testimonio*" (202).⁸ Undoubtedly, the disabled Brimmer's middle class existence in Mexico is unlike the able-bodied Menchú's experience as a poor indigenous woman in war-torn Guatemala. Despite these respective differences, for Antebi, what both women share is a sense in which their bodies "speak" not only through their corporeal representations but also through their marginalization (181):

Menchú's body "speaks" because of her relative illiteracy in Spanish, and the body's message becomes one of ethnic and class marginalization. Brimmer's communicative system is similarly rooted in her impairment, hence in a corporeal difference that is immediately apparent to readers of the text or viewers of the film. Juxtaposing these two bodies therefore underscores the way in which corporeal manifestations of class and ethnicity parallel the textual role of corporeal difference as impairment. According to this intercorporeal model, impairment and ethnicity collapse into one another, each becoming markers of corporeal difference and each contributing explicitly to the perceived truth-value of the document in question. (181)

To be sure, Antebi does not mean to suggest that the political content of Menchú's and Brimmer's *testimonios* are the same. Indeed, according to her argument, those politics still remain historically specific. Yet, by insisting that "impairment and ethnicity collapse into one another," her reading does reveal that there is a conceptual and political framework that overshadows these individual *testimonios*. Antebi believes that these bodies are joined together by their exclusion, Menchú, by her ethnicity, and Brimmer by her impairment. Moreover, there is something about "corporeal manifestations" of difference —what the disability critics Mitchell

⁸ Brimmer also has a film based on her life, *Gaby: A True Story*. The *testimonio* is a type of text intimately connected to leftist politics in Latin America, defined as an "authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.)" (Yudice 44). It is also a narrative that has been at the center of many theoretical debates surrounding the access to truth through representation, debates that are also paramount to disability studies, including Antebi's "intercorporeal" reading. The question of truth in relation to Menchú's *testimonio* has been frequently debated. See Arias's collection for a good summary of these critical positions.

and Snyder, following Slavoj Žižek, call a "hard kernel" (49) and the Latinamericanist John Beverley, following Jacques Lacan, calls "the Real" ("Real" 70) — that can be neither deconstructed nor reduced solely to a representation. This incommensurability, according to Antebi, draws us closer to the "perceived truth-value of the document in question" (181). What this means is that "corporeal difference" is somehow unlike any other aspect of the text. Indeed, it is understood as somehow transcending the text into a politics proper; in brief, "corporeal difference" moves beyond the textual plane to an ethical one.⁹

But what politics does "corporeal difference" embody? We should note that Antebi's account, and disability studies more generally, parallels race, gender, and queer studies' conceptual and political distinction between essentialism and constructionism.¹⁰ Here the opposition takes place between "impairment" endorsed by the medical model and "disability" endorsed by social model. The medical model identifies disabled people primarily through the idea of "impairment" as an "individual deficit," which also seeks "to reduce the complex problems of disabled people to issues of medical prevention, cure or rehabilitation" (Shakespeare 199). Importantly, the Argentine disability activist, Facundo Chávez Penillas, notes that the medical model is widespread throughout Latin America (Schrader). It is a model that sees disability as radically individual, personal, and apolitical. Thus, like the essentialist justifications

⁹ Quayson makes a similar argument about an intrinsic textual ethics of disability. According to Quayson:
The first aspect of aesthetic nervousness that I want to specify is that it is triggered by the implicit disruption of the frames within which the disabled are located as subjects of symbolic notions of wholeness and normativity. Disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation. Read from a perspective of disability studies, this active ethical core becomes manifest because the disability representation is seen as having a direct effect on social views of people with disability in a way that representations of their literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer. In other words, the representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it (19).

¹⁰ There has been a 'third wave' of disability theory that makes the intersections between disability theory and other identitarian theories, especially queer theory, more explicit. See, for example, McRuer's *Crip Theory*, Puar's "Coda: The Cost of Getting Better," and Mitchell's recent "Gay Pasts and Disability Future(s) Tense."

of sexism, racism and heteronormativity, the medical model approaches disability as biological, fixed and one-dimensional. The social model, on the other hand, focuses less on impairment than on how society perceives and responds to impairment. More specifically, it relies on the social construction of disability, underscoring the manner in which disabled people's exclusion is determined, in part, by society, and, thus, is something that can be changed through social awareness and political mobilization. In short, by drawing attention to the question of disability as a construction, one can make the claim that disabled people's exclusion depends on something other than one's impairment. For Chávez Penillas, learning about this social model was a turning point in his life, as he realized that "it was not me who had to change to fit into the world—it was the world that had to change to include me" (Schrader). Or, to return to Antebi's reading of Brimmer, it signals "challenging the notion that the representation of disability generates apolitical, individual stories of struggle and triumph rather than political action and solidarity" (186).

The advantage of the social model, unlike the social constructivist model, is that it provides a way to read disability through political economy and capitalism more generally. Yet, for Antebi, and increasingly for theorists in the humanities, the objective is less about this class project than problematizing fixed identitarian claims made against different bodies. Thus, according to Antebi, the disabled body is not simply a product of impairment, but rather "an open site, a space for the construction and negotiation of individual or collective identities" and "open to practices through which new and shifting identifies may be articulated" (5, 8).

Borrowing from Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Antebi conceives of the investigation of disability as offering a means by which to destabilize fixed identities. From this perspective, identities are imagined, altered, and performed. Thus, the point of this performative approach to

the body, and disabled body in particular, is not to focus on their exploitation, but rather to produce a "broad-based" politics that can radically equalize Brimmer's and Menchú's excluded bodies. In sum, the social construction of identities functions primarily to challenge and eliminate discrimination not exploitation.

The politics of exclusion become clear when Antebi reads Menchú's *testimonios* through Brimmer's *testimonio* about disability rights (178).

Menchú relates a personal account of violence and resistance, yet her story also resonates with a broad-based political struggle, as well as with international solidarity with many struggles similar to [Brimmer's]. In this sense too, Menchú's narrative corresponds with [John] Beverley's understanding of *testimonio* as typically suggesting resistance and the representation of subjects that historically have been marginalized or excluded from literature and society (178).

In order to imagine a "broad-based political struggle" Antebi has to demonstrate how Menchú's ethnicity "speaks" in a way that, say, her poverty doesn't. In Antebi's reading, in fact, the "perceived truth-value" of these two bodies becomes visible insofar as the economic division that divides them vanishes. In other words, Antebi's analysis must downplay Menchú's class project in order to join her ethnic body with Brimmer's disabled body.

Antebi, of course, is not the only critic who reads Menchú's *testimonio* principally through her ethnicity; in fact, it is perhaps the most common reading of her *testimonio*. For example, John Beverley, who has written extensively on Menchú, also sees the *testimonio* primarily through the lens of ethnicity, making it easier to frame her *testimonio* and *testimonios* like hers into a project of "international human rights and solidarity" (*Testimonio* 37).

Nevertheless, as we will see below, this common human rights reading of *testimonio* has replaced a more radical reading based on efforts to eliminate exploitation—which is just to say, Menchú's and Brimmer's bodies become central to Antebi's reading insofar as a reading about exploitation gets pushed aside.

Beginning in the 1980s, the cultural logic of human rights becomes the primary lens through which to see and understand disability, along with race and ethnicity. Yet, Menchú's *testimonio* provides another form of justice that, in fact, is downplayed in Antebi's human rights reading: one that problematizes this emphasis on the body and the social construction of identity. Menchú's *testimonio*, which begins in her childhood and concludes as a 22-year-old activist, is structured around this awakening; that is, her life experience from childhood to adulthood leads her to understand the political foundation for the violence in Guatemala. It is crucial to remember that the situation in Guatemala in the 1980s was a continuation of larger Cold War politics that began 30 years earlier with the overthrow of the left-leaning president Jacobo Árbenz. In the years that followed, as the violence intensified, so did the politics of different groups in Guatemala, including Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (ORPA).

Menchú's political position was not as radical as other groups in Guatemala, or even as other members within her family. This political awakening, however, is fundamentally grounded in a materialist understanding of exploitation, even as it is further complicated by issues of indigeneity. Thus, toward the end of her *testimonio*, Menchú declares that, "Being indigenous, I felt an added condition, because in addition to being exploited, I was also discriminated against" (193).¹¹ Menchú is not simply drawing a clear conceptual distinction between exploitation and discrimination, but also stressing that exploitation is the foundation of her condition since her discrimination is added on to her exploitation. For Menchú, that is, class condition precedes her ethnic identity. Antebi, however, deemphasizes the clear primacy of class as the foundation of Menchú's declaration by precisely focusing on discrimination and exclusion. Like Antebi, many

¹¹ "Yo sentía como una condición más el ser indígena, porque además de ser explotada, era discriminada" (193).

choose to envision and later remember Menchú, as mistreated because of her corporeal difference and not because she wanted to condemn a system of class exploitation that produces poverty. In short, people want to remember Menchú as an indigenous woman, not as an exploited worker.

The question of remembering is significant, especially in its relationship to the dictatorships of the 1970s in Latin America. As we saw above, disability movements coalesced with human rights activism against state-sponsored terror that began in the late 1970s. This human rights discourse, however, was not only a new phenomenon in Latin America in the 1970s, but was also strongly rejected by many leftists who were fighting against the state in this period. For example, Vania Markarian notes that in Uruguay many revolutionaries refused to appropriate human rights terminology such as the term "victim" since it depoliticized their anti-capitalist project.¹² In this way, it might be opportune to explore further the 1970s in order to gain a better understanding of Menchú's *testimonio*, and by extension this shift from discourses of exploitation to exclusion.

The military regimes that came to power in the 1970s were a reaction to anti-capitalist, populist, and socialist movements that first appeared in Guatemala and Cuba in the 1950s, and then in the rest of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, military regimes in Argentina (1976-1983), Chile (1973-1989), and Uruguay (1973-1985) sought to destroy armed guerrilla revolutionary groups such as the Montoneros in Argentina, the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) in Chile and the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement (MLN-Tupamaros) in Uruguay. Of course, what these revolutionary groups wanted in the 1960s and 1970s was to create a socialist system that would eliminate the economic gap between rich and

¹² See, for example, Markarian, who focuses on this transition in Uruguay.

poor. As I've argued elsewhere, unlike the human rights discourse of the late 1970s and 1980s, which centered on the integrity of the body, the revolutionary discourse of the 1960s and 1970s saw the body as secondary, and the difference of bodies as completely irrelevant.¹³ For example, the MLN-Tupamaros in Uruguay had no interest in protecting or incorporating bodies into the state, but rather aimed to destroy the state all together; this is because they understood the state as a primary agent in maintaining class divisions. In other words, the Tupamaros wanted to destroy the class system that produced economic exploitation, not to be incorporated into it. To say this differently, and to return to Menchú, this form of resistance in many ways challenges the human rights model by insisting on this anti-capitalist vision. In this way, we can see an insistence that Brimmer's disabled body parallels Menchú's racialized body becomes a primary way of not talking about exploitation. It becomes, instead, a primary way in which exploitation turns into a conversation about exclusion.

Disability and Work

As we noted in the introduction, Zamora points out that this redefinition of exploitation into exclusion occurs in conversations about different bodies and identities; it also occurs in conversations about unpaid labor in relation to work. More specifically, Zamora notes that since in the 1980s, the Left has increasingly divided the working class into two factions: a "working army of labour" and "the unemployed reserve;" that is, those who work in paid employment and those who do not. The problem with this division between a "growing mass of the permanently unemployed" and "an aristocracy of tenured workers" is that the conflict turns into a rift between

¹³ For detailed analysis of the absence of discourse on the body in Tupamaro propaganda, see my essay "From Revolution to Human Rights in Mario Benedetti's *Pedro y el Capitán*"

the working class, rather than rift between labor and capital. The division between two factions of the working class leaves the class system untouched (Zamora).

Disability theory has another version of this division, which imagines a split between a disabled faction of "permanently unemployed" and an able-bodied faction of the "active working class". To be sure, a higher percentage of disabled people in Latin America are poor and out of work (Massiah 64).¹⁴ Nevertheless, this insistence on two factions in many ways keeps us from critiquing the system that exploits all workers. We get an example of this imagined division in the human rights movement Network for the Rights of Persons with Disability (REDI, Red por los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad) in Argentina and their coinage of the slogan "Right to be Exploited" ("El derecho de ser explotados"). For REDI, according to the disability activist Chávez Penillas, the major problem with both the Left and Right in Latin America is that they believe "disability means being nonproductive"(Schrader).

We persons with disability have historically been considered nonproductive. This is not a capricious concept. With capitalism developed normalcy as the "normal productive person." Under this ideology, "normal" means the most productive, the most efficient, the most exploitable. We, however, are not the most exploitable as laborers. The "ideology of normality" says we are to be exploited—but not as workers. We are to be exploited as objects that provide never-ending profits for the health industry. (Schrader)

This approach creates a division between able-bodied, paid and "productive" workers and disabled, unemployed and "unproductive" "objects." More specifically, Chávez Penillas locates the primary problem in the discrimination by the medical model that not only sees disability through an impairment, but also through a "health industry" that generates profit from disabled people; for this reason he says that disabled people are exploited as "objects" not as "laborers." Framing the problem as primarily one of discrimination by a medical model, Chavez Penillas

¹⁴ Scarcity of data parallels the scarcity of resources; for this reason, it is essential to note that in wealthier Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Chile, data are more accurate. Despite these differences, data still point to disabled people making less money than non-disabled people. For specific data see "The World Bank".

argues that eliminating this medical model would allow disabled people to be treated like a "normative productive person." Disabled people first need to be exploited as workers in order to achieve a more inclusive society: "Therefore, the right to be exploited is the right to be considered persons instead of objects. The right to be exploited—as workers—is the only way capitalism can recognize our existence, our human dignity" (Schrader). While, on the hand, REDI understands that exploitation is foundational, and even the connection to the worker is crucial, the concept of the "right to be exploited" is still grounded in the notion that disabled people are somehow not workers. That is, the "right to be exploited" insists on the conception that disabled people are not workers because they are not productive.

The disability critic Colin Barnes, however, has insightfully argued that disabled people, even when they are not paid, are still workers; for this reason Barnes urges that we need to reconfigure the idea of work that "must include the everyday tasks that non-disabled people take for granted such as getting out of bed, washing, dressing and so on" (*Futures* 323). What is key about this reconfiguration is that it understands that disabled people are laborers. This idea, of course, still recognizes that a higher percentage of disabled people are unemployed, but it does not assert a division between able-bodied workers and disabled "objects." This insistence on the category of worker also echoes what Marx meant by the term "surplus population," which understands that those who do not work as essential to "the structure of the system" (Joly and Venturiello 332), regardless of whether they generate direct payment. As the activist, Eduardo Joly and scholar, María Pía Venturiello put it:

This surplus population is structural to the system, its size responds to the cycles of economic expansion and retraction, and it grows with the technical development of the conditions of production, that on the one hand expels labor power replacing it with increasingly advanced machinery/technology, and on the other, occupies the employed workforce during more hours per day (today this is known as job flexibility). (332)

As Michael Denning has also noted, echoing Marx, there are not "two kinds of workers, employed and unemployed, or two sectors of the economy, formal and informal; rather, there is a process in which greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion [. . .] the workers are sometimes repelled, sometimes attracted again in greater masses."¹⁵

As we will see later, this temporal and dialectical component of Marx's theory of a "surplus population" should be kept in mind especially when mapping out the connection between disability and technology, where a "surplus population" of, for example, visually impaired individuals in one moment turn into paid workers in another. For now what must be stressed is that, for Marx, one is labor regardless of whether they are paid labor. Marx insists that the rift is between labor and capital, and so, the problem with redefining the social question as a conflict between the division within the working class — that is, by pitting "active" workers against a "surplus population" — is that "both sides end up accepting, to the detriment of all 'workers,' the centrality of the category of the 'excluded' (Zamora). Exclusion, in short, eliminates a critique of exploitation. The shift from exploitation to exclusion reproduces neoliberal efforts to mask what exploits all workers by focusing on the different experiences that distinguishes them. In other words, the split between two factions of the working class effectively evacuates an anti-capitalist position.

This evacuation, of course, doesn't mean that the Left has disappeared. Indeed, since the late 1990s, the Left has increased its presence and power throughout Latin America.

¹⁵ For further elaboration on how the logic of capital plays out on a global scale, see David Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*.

Furthermore, the Left does a better job of arguing for the rights of excluded people.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the Left in power today has done little to change significantly the neoliberal policies that were first put in place by the Right during the 1970s. This inability to propose an anti-capitalist project signals that the Left has discarded "a belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present," which was not only vital to the Tupamaros, but also the utopian horizon of the Left more generally (Jacoby 13). Today, Russell Jacoby continues, "Instead of championing a radical idea of a new society the left ineluctably retreats to smaller ideas, seeking to expand the options within the existing society" (13). Thus, what REDI's slogan "Right to be Exploited" reflects, in essence, is one of the most common appeals of the Left in the neoliberal period, which essentially argues for a more pragmatic agenda, imagining that greater strides can be made by being included in the present system rather than creating a more egalitarian system in the future. The "radical disability rights organization" version of human rights disability activism ultimately brings us to the same place as the performative approach celebrated by Antebí, since both ultimately imagine that the problem is less about exploitation of labor than about system that discriminates against different bodies.

Or to say this differently, if disability is "broad-based" and "open," these "practices" are still limited to questions of "new and shifting identities" and not necessarily to a critique of an economic system that exploits all, regardless of their identity. Indeed, insofar as one of the primary ways in which the gap between rich and poor continues to grow is through the disconnection from labor, we can also say that these "new and shifting identities" are not only welcomed by, but perhaps — as movements like REDI make clear — mobilized on behalf of

¹⁶ For example, Daniel Chávez notes that the leftist turn in Latin America, and in Uruguay in particular, has produced important shifts regarding the question of inclusion, especially regarding victims of human rights abuses during the last dictatorship (171).

capitalism. In short, the commitment to understanding disability as a marker of difference, like racialized or gendered bodies, need not be anti-capitalist. From the standpoint of the neoliberal Left, the solution becomes a modification of and inclusion into the system rather than its destruction and the creation of a more economically egalitarian system. The Left's usage of human rights discourse, in short, allows for the articulation of various kinds of differences today without producing a structural critique of capital.

Final Remarks. An Anti-capitalist Vision of Disability Studies in Latin America

As the field of disability studies develops in Latin America, it is critical to take note of some challenges that this human rights model maintains in its relationship to the widening gap between rich and poor. It is best to approach this question through some of the more radical constructivist claims made on behalf of disability studies today. Perhaps the most provocative claim is that at some point everybody, if they live long enough, will be disabled; that is, everybody is on his or her way to becoming disabled. A slightly different version of this claim is that in some other historical period, those who are now able-bodied would have been disabled. For example, eyeglasses have effectively eliminated what would have been understood as impairment in another period. The underlying force of such claims reveals that disability is not natural but constructed; it also allows disability to be defined within a specific historical moment (Oliver). While these are revelatory claims at both ontological and epistemological levels, we can immediately see how they can also function to bolster the system of exploitation, not contradict it. Indeed, according to this logic, the construction of disability serves to uncover not only "new and shifting identities" (abled/disabled; young-able/old-disabled; black-able/black-disabled; etc.) but also how individuals who were excluded from the market are now a part of it (people with

eyeglasses). From the position of inclusion, in other words, the emergence of disability studies serves to provide not a critique of exploitation, but rather the opportunity to become a more productive part of the system of exploitation. Indeed, it might be fair to say that late capitalism has sought to deconstruct essentialist claims in order to diversify the labor market.¹⁷ As such, the claim made by disability advocates that everyone is potentially disabled is also a world where, at best, those at the very top have disabled bodies. Or to put it more simply still, it is a world that imagines justice as a higher proportion of disabled people doing the exploiting. For this reason, Sunny Taylor shows concern when she declares that, "[s]till, I remain unconvinced that fighting for equality within the current system (that is, to some extent, the right to be part of the exploiter class as opposed to being part of the exploited) is the ultimate ideal worth fighting for" ("Right not to Work")

It is from this position, that we should also approach the question that there are certain impairments that cannot be included into the labor market because of their extreme severity. As it turns out, this issue is another rearticulation of the problem posed above, but now recast into

¹⁷ In his insightful reading of *As Good as it Gets*, McRuer notes, for example, that a certain tolerance of – and flexibility toward – disability and queerness are needed to maintain neoliberalism. It would seem then that McRuer is suggesting that identity is deeply compatible with neoliberalism. This idea, however, ultimately comes undone by his insistence that neoliberalism be associated instead with a "compulsory heterosexuality or compulsory able-bodiedness" (29-30). As such, at the very heart of McRuer's critique is the idea that tolerance is not completely dismantled in this neoliberal period, and thus, discrimination toward disabled people and gays are still central to neoliberalism's logic. To this end, one is reminded by what Walter Benn Michaels has suggested in a recent interview "that in competitive markets, capitalists cannot afford to discriminate," as was already suggested by the neoliberal economist Gary Becker in his 1973 text, *The Economics of Discrimination*. As Michaels continues, "You've got twenty people in the room, half of them are men, half of them are women. You have a job for them to do, you need ten people to hire, and you only want to hire men. In effect, then, the ten guys in your labor force have formed a kind of union. They can get better wages out of you. As Becker always pointed out, you can get away with that in relatively uncompetitive markets. But the main thing about the globalization that's taken place since Becker published his book is that we aren't just buying and selling things for ourselves here in Chicago, or even in the US; markets have gotten much more competitive. Whatever I'm making, I'm competing with some guy in Sri Lanka or wherever. So now I can't afford my taste for discrimination. I can't afford just to hire white men if I have got to pay them an extra three cents an hour; I've got to hire whoever I can get." From this position, what McRuer's critique misses – despite understanding the importance of neoliberal flexibility – is that neoliberalism would be happy to do away with discrimination insofar as discrimination hinders profits.

the future. If the challenge of impairment in the past was resolved with technology, technology also becomes theoretical solution to these challenges in the future. The point here, of course, is not to see technology as problem, or to negate innovation, but rather to point out, as Barnes does in a different context, that technology can also "appeal to proponents of the ideological cornerstones of capitalist development" (Independent).¹⁸ Today's severely impaired workers can become tomorrow's exploiters. Or to return to Denning, the process of capitalism reveals a structure "in which greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion . . . the workers are sometimes repelled, sometimes attracted again in greater masses." This dynamic, as such, allows us to understand that severe impairments should still be understood as a surplus population of workers. The point here is *not* that technology should be seen with skepticism in all cases. The point is rather that for disability not to be co-opted by the market, this project must move beyond a politics of the body, exclusion, and human rights. It must move beyond identity, whether it be opened or closed, or fixed or shifting, a minority model or an open-ended system. It must articulate an anti-capitalist project as its point of departure.¹⁹

¹⁸ Barnes here is talking about independent living and how some have critiqued it as only benefitting a small, privileged group of disabled people. Nevertheless, the same logic still holds true where technology can serve "capitalist development" insofar as it is deployed for that purpose.

¹⁹ To be sure, there has been a recent wave of disability theory that attempts to complicate the relationship between identity and social constructivism, including Jasbir Puar's commitment to affect theory. In many ways, however, this commitment to affect theory reproduces rather than rejects many of these past theoretical claims, including the attempt to destabilize the able/disabled binary. For example, Puar proposes to "rethink disability in terms of control society" as an "intervention into the binaried production of disabled versus nondisabled bodies that drives both disability studies and disability rights activism" (155, 153). Puar's "ecology of sensations," however, by attempting to blur the lines of languages, law, bodies, and identities follows her poststructuralist predecessors; and although, affect "opens us to a range of connections" that these predecessors closed, it nevertheless does very little to make a system of exploitation visible (157). For this reason, part of the triumph of neoliberal thought could be understood through affect theory insofar as the desire of affect theory is to move beyond all limits and all politics, including a politics that attempts to critique capitalism.

Thus, we might ask, is there something about the attention to disability that makes it somehow more anti-capitalist than any other critical approach? The answer to this question cannot be found in a human rights model that imagines that our disabilities are all constructed, since that project has only led us to a conversation about inclusion, and not necessarily about eliminating exploitation. So can there be a non-identitarian "social model" reading of disability? I'd like to end by returning to emergence of Latin American disability movements in the 1970s alluded to above as a possible answer. We can get a sense of this in the emerging stories of disabled people. For example, in Argentina's *Nunca más*, we find narratives of disabled people who were tortured, including the Chilean José Liborio Poblete, who used a wheelchair, and who was disappeared along with his wife and child. Poblete, who had lost his legs in an automobile accident, belonged to the aforementioned Frente de Lisiados Peronistas and also to UNSEL/Unión Nacional Socioeconómica del Lisiado). UNSEL played a central role in the creation of what is perhaps the most radical disability labor law in Latin American history, one which included a "4 percent mandatory job quota for hiring workers with disabilities in both the public and private sectors alike." What is important here, in a certain sense, is not the body, but rather the belief in a better system; and from the perspective of an anti-capitalist Left, what is essential about the 1980s is that this project to eliminate exploitation disappears.²⁰

²⁰ According to one newspaper article, one of the "cruel paradoxes" of the dictatorship is that they killed so many, but still enforced disability rights ("Ayer y Hoy"). For example in Argentina the brutal junta leader Jorge Rafael Videla passed Law 22.431, or The Law for the Integral Protection of Disabled People (Ley de Sistema de Protección Integral de los Discapacitados o Ley 22.431). But, in many ways, there is no paradox in ideological terms. Both the military and the Left were equally committed to this ideological battle, indicative of Videla's response to the British press about the disappearance of Claudia Inés Grumberg, a paraplegic sociology student. Videla states "I know that she is detained despite being disabled [crippled]. Let me return to my original statement: terrorists not only are considered such because they kill with a weapon or place a bomb, but also because they activate [activan] through oppositional ideas to our western and Christian civilization." The point here, of course, is not that we should believe Videla, or deny that the dictatorship killed innocent people; rather the point – and this point is also true for the Left – is that the conflict was articulated in ideological and not corporeal terms. For the Left, in particular, by insisting solely on corporeal difference in the case of Grumberg (and Poblete) in many ways already pushes aside whatever

For this reason, perhaps the most radical claim that can be made on behalf of disability studies is not what makes disabled bodies different from other bodies or what excludes these same bodies from production, but precisely what makes all of us the same. By this I mean what Marx's claim "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,"²¹ a claim that is neither about identity nor about the body, but rather about the material realities that determine our relationship to work and the world. Nor does the claim negate or ignore impairments in order to realize equality for all—just the opposite. Impairments are material markers that reveal the totality of our shared exploitation. Thinking through impairment, in this sense, allows for a more encompassing critique of capital.²²

As disability studies grows in Latin American literature, disability readings can remind some who have forgotten, or teach many more for the first time, that the severely impaired are still exploited workers. That is, disability criticism can provide a crucial vantage point to argue

beliefs Grumberg and Poblete had. In other words, according to this disability reading, what becomes important is that they were disabled, and not necessarily what they thought about capitalism, disability or even the regime.

²¹ Marx's statement, from his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, imagines utopia as a society free of alienation of from labor. And as Joly and Venturiello correctly note, in this utopian moment, "those who cannot perform any kind of work, material, intellectual, artistic, or otherwise, be they children, retirees, or disabled, in principle, are not excluded from the benefits of societal production" (334).

²² For this reason, I am cautious of Mitchell's idea of an "interdependent space," established between the gay Joe Buck and the disabled Ricco "Ratso" Rizzo, as an alternative space to neoliberalism in his reading of *Midnight Cowboy* (13). For Mitchell, the film "consecrates an alliance based on mutual interdependency between queer/crip masculinities" (10), which "threaten[s] to unseat heteronormative systems of embodied independence, productivity, and excessive consumption as the basis for neoliberal commodifications of value" (13). Yet, as Mitchell also notes, "this interdependent space can be sustained as a political project for only a short duration due to the compounding vulnerabilities of poverty, environmental hazards, insufficient food, the laborious demands of the hustling life, and the exposures of homelessness" (13-14). Although Mitchell suggests that this space vanishes at the end of the film because Ricco dies, his commitment to how these identities overlap prevents a reading of difference between disability and homosexuality, which might prove central to historicizing this transition into neoliberalism. Said differently, if we accept Mitchell's reading of *Midnight Cowboy* as a commentary on the "encroaching shadow of neoliberalism at the close of the 1960s," it fails think through why liberation politics of certain groups were achieved earlier than others (3). To say this another way, Mitchell's essay presents no response as to why Ricco must die, while Joe must live, which, could certainly be read through historical, political and economic obstacles that these respective movements had to overcome. In this way, I wonder if by insisting on this interdependent space one loses much of what disability and/or queer studies can tell us about the development of neoliberalism.

that we are all potentially a surplus population, able-bodied and disabled alike.²³ To do so, however, Latin American disability studies must turn away from a constructivist model and toward a more direct critique of capital. Indeed, as we have already seen, the risk of the constructivist model is that it transforms the very markers of exploitation into the celebration of our shared misery. To be clear, the idea here is not a call to armed action, nor a return to a pre-1980s politics. Nor is the idea that we have failed to adequately represent the body, produce more bodies, or hybrid bodies. The challenge has more to do with the ways in which the body is understood, and how exclusion rather than exploitation becomes the primary lens through which we see the world. In short, limiting questions solely to corporeal differences cannot produce an anti-capitalist politics unless these politics are brought back to a critique of the capitalist system. Undoubtedly, my idea here is neither pragmatic nor easy; this project is a long-term effort that requires a (re)building of anti-capitalist Left. For the field of disability studies in Latin America, perhaps paradoxically, what this means is moving beyond an insistence on corporeal difference. The task at hand, in other words, is the slow but essential creation of a movement for the end of exploitation for all, regardless of identities and differences.²⁴

²³ My argument understands itself as completely compatible with Nick Brown's concerns about the "tropological understanding of disability." In his review of Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness*, he asks, "How does the tropological understanding of disability interact with disability itself which, if we understand it in the strongest social sense, could be eliminated tomorrow? In a socialist order, if we can still imagine such a thing, all kinds of prejudices might remain, but the idea of disability becomes incoherent: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Under Stalin, the final word in Marx's slogan was, symptomatically, altered to "work"). The social model of disability has, at its core, a Utopian message akin to Marx's. But does an understanding of the trope of disability get us any closer to realizing it?"

²⁴ Here Adolph Reed's statement in a recent article about the loss of an anti-capitalist Left in the US may also be useful:

The crucial tasks for a committed left in the United States now are to admit that no politically effective force exists and to begin trying to create one. This is a long-term effort, and one that requires grounding in a vibrant labor movement. Labor may be weak or in decline, but that means aiding in its rebuilding is the most serious task for the American left. Pretending some other option exists is worse than useless. There are no magical interventions, shortcuts, or technical fixes. We need to reject the fantasy that some spark will ignite the People to move as a mass. We must create a constituency for a left program — and that cannot occur via MSNBC or blog posts or the *New York Times*. It requires painstaking organization and building relationships with people outside the Beltway and comfortable leftist groves.

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