Access to work or liberation from work?

Disabled people, autonomy, and post-work politics

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Abstract

Waged work has been a central issue for the Disabled People's Movement since its inception. For example, the influential analysis of the pioneering Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation in the United Kingdom placed the exclusion of people with impairments from work as the origin of disablement, which is therefore inherent in modern capitalism. Thus it has been traditional in the Disabled People's Movement in the United Kingdom to regard the removal of barriers to participation in the wage labour economy as a key strategy for overcoming disabled people's social exclusion and oppression.

However, some authors in the Disabled People's Movement (e.g., Abberley, 1996; 2002; Taylor, 2004; Withers, 2012) have argued that waged work cannot be the route to liberation for all disabled people, pointing 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'. This issue is especially urgent in the present historical moment, when the 'work ethic' has been mobilised by neoliberals and neoconservatives in government and the mass media to justify the cutting of vital support systems for disabled people, who are being demonized as 'workshy', 'scroungers', etc.

This paper will examine critiques of work and workerism from anarchist, autonomist, and feminist writers and identify theoretical currents that conceptualize disabled people's liberation as requiring a much more fundamental rejection of the values of capitalism.

Keywords

Anti-work, Autonomy, Basic Income, Capitalism, Disablement, Disabled People's Movement, Gift economy, Post-Work, Wage labour

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Introduction

In present-day Britain, as well as in much of the rest of the developed world, disabled people[i] are facing unprecedented attacks from the state on their standard of living, ability to participate in society, and in many cases even physical survival (Grover & Soldatic, 2013). These attacks are part of a wider neoliberal agenda of 'austerity', in which all aspects of the welfare state are being blamed for the supposed 'financial crisis', but disabled people are both most harshly affected by 'universal' changes, and are being specifically targeted for more severe attacks on our rights and living conditions than any other sector of the population. However, while this is a marked escalation of disablist government policies, this is not 'new' – not only were many of the harshest attacks on disabled people currently ongoing in the United Kingdom (UK) started by the New Labour governments of 1997–2010, and merely intensified by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, the ideological roots of these policies are very much older, dating back at least to the early stages of capitalist industrialization (Malhotra, 2012).

Several of the policy changes brought in by the current UK government which most severely affect disabled people are closely related to the ideology that work is a social good and a moral responsibility, and that those who do not contribute 'productively' to a society by working are not entitled to its support. A partial selection of these policy changes includes the following:[ii]

Work Capability Assessments

The previous Labour government rebranded the income replacement benefit for disabled people considered incapable of full-time work, formerly known as "Incapacity Benefit" (IB), as "Employment Support Allowance" (ESA) in 2008. At the same time they introduced a new assessment system called the "Work Capability Assessment" (WCA), which was designed to make ESA harder to claim than IB (Grover & Soldatic, 2013). The use of the WCA was extended and its conditions made stricter by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government when they were elected in 2010. The WCA replaced a "criterion-based" system with a "norm-referenced" system of decision-making about eligibility for the benefit, meaning that "there is a finite number of claims the assessment system will allow to be awarded the benefit, regardless of the number of people who objectively meet the criteria for benefit eligibility" (Franklin, 2013, p. 2).

The WCA sorts claimants into three categories: those considered "fit for work", who must then claim Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA); those who are deemed to have "some limited capability" for work, who are placed in the "work-related activity group" (WRAG) of ESA; and those deemed unfit for any form of paid work, who are placed in the "support" group (Grover & Soldatic, 2013). This assessment takes no account of the active discrimination faced by disabled people in the workplace, let alone the overall availability of jobs. Baumberg, Warren, Garthwaite, and Bambra (2015) argue that, due to its inflexible focus on medically defined 'functional limitations', "the WCA simply does not assess claimants' capability for work... [it] is a standardised test, but one that consistently measures the wrong thing" (p. 13).

Atos Healthcare, the French corporation that was initially awarded the government contract to carry out the WCA, withdrew from it over a year earlier than originally intended, at least in part due to protests and resistance (Warren, Garthwaite, & Bambra, 2014). As correctly predicted by critics such as Franklin (2013) and Grover (2014), when Atos was

replaced by another private contractor, the norm-based assessment criteria of the WCA did not change. The replacement contractor is the multinational Maximus, based in the United States (US), which has been involved in several scandals in the US including expenses fraud and discrimination based on both gender and disability (Gentleman, 2015; Pring, 2014).

Maximus has attempted to appease critics from the Disabled People's Movement by hiring Sue Marsh, a disabled writer and former anti-cuts campaigner, as "head of customer experience" (Gentleman, 2015). Disabled people, however, have not been convinced that any of the harmful and oppressive aspects of the WCA will be mitigated by this or by the replacement of Atos with a new company, and the transfer of assessment centres to Maximus was marked by a national day of protests by the activist group Disabled People Against Cuts on 2nd March 2015 (Pring, 2015a).

"Workfare" schemes

A number of schemes set up by the Department for Work and Pensions impose "mandatory work activity" on unemployed people (including people in the WRAG of ESA, who can in fact be given "placements" of unlimited length, unlike those on JSA, for whom there is a maximum of 8 weeks (Wood, 2012) under threat of losing all benefits. The line taken by the government is that these programs help unemployed people to find longer-term paid work, despite evidence from similar workfare schemes that have existed in the US since 1996 and in both Canada and Australia since 1997 that this is not the case. In fact, there is evidence that such schemes "can even reduce employment chances by limiting the time available for job search and by failing to provide the skills and experience valued by employers" (Crisp & Fletcher, 2008, p. 1).

Activists against "workfare" have argued that it is a transparent collusion between government and corporations to exploit labour as cheaply and with as few workers' rights as

possible, but justified with an ideology that work is not only a social good in itself, but always beneficial for the physical and mental health of the individual. This ideology invokes medical and psychological authority for these claims, while completely disregarding the actual effect on the lives of people forced to undergo such activity. Some workfare schemes were scaled down or made non-compulsory after public protest; but those for disabled people remain in place, and the 'jobs' that many disabled people are forced into on these schemes are totally unsuitable for their impairments, often involving hard physical labour with insufficient safety equipment (Void, 2012). In Australia, Soldatic and Meekosha (2012) argue that workfare is part of a neoliberal shift towards viewing work as an 'absolute responsibility' of all citizens, leading to activities outside the paid workplace being erased and devalued even more than they were previously. This, they argue, has disproportionately negative effects on disabled people, particularly disabled women.

Closure of government-owned sheltered workplaces and Access to Work cuts

In the UK, a government-owned company called Remploy, founded in 1945, has historically run 'sheltered' factories (producing goods such as furniture and wheelchairs) which exclusively employed disabled people. The Labour government closed many of these factories in 2008, and the Coalition government closed or sold the remainder in 2012–13 (Pring, 2013). Historically these segregated factories have mostly been opposed by the Disabled People's Movement, which opposition has been co-opted by the government to justify cuts (Clark, 2012). Liz Sayce, chief executive of the lobbying organization Disability Rights UK, has called for transfer of funds from subsidization of Remploy to fund the "Access to Work" scheme – through which the government provided assistive technology, personal assistants, etc. to enable disabled people to work on equal terms with others – and enable more disabled people to be in 'mainstream' employment (Sayce, 2011; Wood, 2012).[iii]

However, disabled people working in these factories have stated that simply closing them down leaves those who worked in them worse off than before. As the disabled activist and comedian Laurence Clark writes in the *Independent* newspaper:

> ...as much as I'm in favour of inclusion in the workplace, the inescapable, uncomfortable truth of the Remploy closures is that most of the disabled workers being made redundant will probably not find other jobs in the current climate. Furthermore, impending cuts and other changes to support systems will only make it harder for disabled people to survive and thrive in work. (Clark, 2012, para. 8)

Remploy itself has now been sold to Maximus, the same company taking over the contract for the WCA (Plimmer, 2015), leading to fears that what remains of it may be integrated into the punitive system of the WCA, workfare, and benefit sanctions.

Ironically, given Sayce's recommendations, funding for the Access to Work scheme itself has also been cut, with the most recent restriction being a cap on how much an individual can receive through Access to Work in one year, which is particularly likely to affect Deaf people who need BSL interpreters and those with high needs for personal assistance (Pring, 2015b). These cuts mean that many disabled people who were able to work full-time may now be unable to continue doing their jobs, again becoming subject to the WCA and workfare if they are then unemployed (Ryan, 2015).

The UK Disabled People's Movement and its perspectives on work

The Disabled People's Movement in the UK has traditionally focused on the removal of barriers to paid work for disabled people as crucial for overcoming disability and achieving the full inclusion of disabled people into society. This position has its roots in the historical materialist analysis of disablement by the intellectual founders of the movement, which places the origins of the modern forms of oppression and social exclusion faced by people with impairments in their exclusion from the waged labour market during the transformation of European economies from peasant agriculture to modern capitalism based

on the labour of the industrial proletariat (see e.g., Finkelstein, 1980; Gleeson, 1999; Oliver, 1990. For parallel perspectives from the US and Canada, see Malhotra, 2012; Russell, 1998; Russell & Malhotra, 2009).

Gleeson (1999), for example, argued that "reciprocity between work and reward for individuals" was not a principle of social organization in "primitive" societies, in which the labour process was "co-operative", and there was a "communal, rather than individual, distribution of the social product" (p. 65). Thus, in pre-industrial peasant households, "work and domestic life combined without the formal distinction between paid ('productive') and unpaid ('reproductive') spheres that characterised industrial capitalist social relations" (Gleeson, 1999, p. 71). In such a society, people with impairments could be far more easily integrated into everyday life than in an industrial capitalist society which demanded a "standardised" individual worker with the "physical capabilities of operating the new machines and... willingness to submit to the new work disciplines imposed by the factory" (Oliver, 1990, p. 46).

A particularly important publication with regard to this position is the booklet "The Fundamental Principles of Disability", published in 1976 by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) – one of the first organizations of disabled people in the UK. Considered a foundational document of the UK Disabled People's Movement, the "Fundamental Principles" contains the text of a debate between UPIAS and the Disability Alliance (a federation of organizations concerned with disability, including both those 'of' and 'for' disabled people). This debate emerged within the context of earlier disagreements between UPIAS and the Disability Incomes Group (DIG), another early British disabled people's organization, on how best to achieve social inclusion for disabled people. DIG, as its name suggests, advocated a state-granted 'disability income' or 'pension' for disabled people; whereas, UPIAS took the position that this constituted another form of the paternalistic

'charity' approach that disabled people needed liberating from:

> ...the alternative to an 'incomes' (or more properly, 'pensions') approach to the particular poverty in disability is to struggle for changes to the organisation of society so that employment and full social participation are made accessible to all people, including those with physical impairments.... [I]t is necessary to go forward with the serious struggle for the right to paid, integrated employment and full participation in the mainstream of life. (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS] 1976, p. 15)[iv]

This belief that inclusion in paid employment was essential for liberation from disablement was not limited to UPIAS. Another notable early example from the UK Disabled People's Movement is that of Allan Sutherland, a founder member of the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities (a group contemporary with UPIAS, which was based more on feminist-influenced 'consciousness-raising' activities.[v] In his chapter on employment in *Disabled We Stand* (Sutherland, 1981, pp. 33–44), Sutherland focuses on physical and attitudinal barriers to employment for disabled people, including discrimination by employers and the inflexibility of the way work is organized. He does not, however, ever discuss the possibility that some disabled people may be unable to work at all, and he argues that society can best be made less disabling and more accessible by having disabled people employed in all professions. (Sutherland's only mention of state benefits is to argue that some are available only to disabled people who are already in work, and that this constitutes a barrier to employment.)

In more recent years this position has shown itself in, for example, protests by disabled people against workfare and the exploitation of disabled people on 'work preparation' schemes run at 'adult training centres' using slogans such as "Real Jobs for Real Pay", and in some activists in the Disabled People's Movement perceiving campaigns to defend welfare benefits as antithetical to 'pride' and 'self-respect'. For example, veteran activist Alan Holdsworth (2012) argues that focusing on disabled people's vulnerability and inability to work "portray[s] us as pathetic, helpless and dependent' and that 'benefits... only

serve to extend the poverty trap unless they are still there to ensure equality in the workplace" (para. 24; 22) reiterating almost word-for-word the arguments of UPIAS (1976, pp. 15–16) against DIG. Activists like Holdsworth have valid concerns about charities and other organizations not run and controlled by disabled people portraying themselves as the face of 'disability rights' activism and undermining the cause of disabled people's liberation by reinforcing perceptions of disabled people as passively 'tragic' and in need of salvation by non-disabled people.[vi] However, they still portray 'the workplace' both as attainable for all disabled people and as a route to liberation.

Dissenting perspectives

One notable dissenter from this view within UK disability discourse was the late Paul Abberley, who from 1996 to 2002 progressively elaborated the argument that 'classical social theories' – in which he included Marxism – were fundamentally inadequate as the intellectual basis of a liberation politics of disability because of their focus on work as constitutive of an essential human identity and as an essential requirement for full membership of society (Abberley. 1996; 2002). Abberley shared with his contemporaries (such as Finkelstein and Oliver) the starting point of a Marxist-influenced historical analysis of the origins of disablement in its modern forms. Thus, he did not seek to "deny that the origins of our oppression, even for those with jobs, lie in our historical exclusion, as a group, from access to work, nor... to oppose campaigns for increasing access to employment" (Abberley 1996, pp. 76–77). Instead, he sought to "point out that a thoroughgoing materialist analysis of disablement today must recognise that full integration of impaired people in social production can never constitute the future to which we as a movement aspire" (Abberley 1996, p. 77).

Abberley argued that "even in a society which did make profound and genuine attempts to integrate impaired people into the world of work, some would still be excluded by

their impairment"[vii] and that "a society may be willing, and in certain circumstances become eager, to absorb a portion of its impaired population into the workforce, yet this can have the effect of maintaining and perhaps intensifying its exclusion of the remainder" (1996, p. 71). Therefore "an inclusion which is dependent upon employment is by no means advantageous to all disabled people, since it is not likely in modern labour markets that all disabled people could find or reliably retain employment" (Abberley, 2002, p. 134). The truth of these statements is evident in the many portrayals in mainstream British news media of disabled people who do manage to succeed in the world of employment, with an implicit (and sometimes explicit) message that all disabled people are therefore capable of being employed, and thus that anyone who claims that they are genuinely unable to work (either due to impairment or disablement) must be lying or faking, and therefore a member of the 'undeserving poor', subject to vilification as the folk devil of the 'scrounger' (Garthwaite, 2011).

Abberley (1996) further argued that the "work-based model of social membership and identity" is inextricably linked to 'cure'-oriented medical model approaches to disabled people, implying a "value judgement upon the undesirability of impaired modes of being" (p. 74), and ultimately implying that disablement can only be fully overcome by eradicating impairment itself. Thus a truly liberatory, social model approach to overcoming disability must "reject work as crucially definitional of social membership and [be] sceptical about some of the progressive imperatives implicit in modern science" (Abberley, 2002, p. 135). In his final version of his argument, Abberley specifically – and presciently – warns against "the over-enthusiastic espousal of work-based programmes for overcoming the exclusion of disabled people which leave welfare systems unchanged or, worse still, depleted" (Abberley, 2002, pp. 135–6).

More recently, Canadian disabled activist and writer A.J. Withers makes a similar

criticism of the UPIAS stance on work and benefits, describing their position as "highly problematic on pragmatic grounds" (Withers, 2012, p. 89) because, regardless of whether disabled people are theoretically capable of paid work in a more accessible and less discriminatory society, in currently existing capitalism they are systematically discriminated against by employers, and therefore many have no choice but to rely on state benefits for their basic needs. Withers (2012) goes on to argue, echoing Abberley, that an exclusive campaign focus on "participation in paid employment (i.e., participation within the capitalist system)...continues to perpetuate the capitalist value that people's worth is connected to their productivity and participation in paid employment" (p. 90, emphasis in original).

Anti-work theoretical alternatives

If, as Abberley counsels, we must look outside "classical social theory" to find theoretical perspectives capable of supporting disabled people's liberation, where should we look? In fact there is a tradition within Marxism that, like Abberley, rejects the orthodox Marxist valorization of waged labour: the autonomist tradition. This tradition originated in continental Europe in the 1960s, with one important starting point (and the origin of its name) coming from the Autonomia movement in Italy. This movement grew out of "a loose coalition of workers, students, feminists, and unemployed people" (Weeks, 2011, p. 93). Parallel movements in other European countries – such as the Paris-based Situationist International – and the US around the same time shared similar critiques, which can be said to constitute a broader 'libertarian Marxist' milieu.[viii] There are also close similarities between autonomist critiques of waged work and those from traditions outside Marxism, including anarchism, radical feminism, and social ecology; in particular, the relationship between autonomism and the more communist strands of anarchism is close enough that there is often little to meaningfully distinguish them (Clough & Blumberg, 2012).

A central concept in these critiques is the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous activity. Productive activity is autonomous if it is carried out for its own sake or because its product is needed or desired, and 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, and thus is working under the authority of the employer rather than their own. The French eco-socialist Andre Gorz (1982) considers the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous productive activity to be parallel to Marx's distinction of use-value and exchange-value, and uses the word 'work' only to describe the latter:

> Work has not always existed in the way in which it is currently understood. It came into being at the same time as capitalists and proletarians. It means an activity carried out: for someone else; in return for a wage; according to forms and time schedules laid down by the person paying the wage; and for a purpose not chosen by the worker... Work is an imposition, a heterodetermined, heteronomous activity, perceived by most of those who either 'have' it or are 'looking for' it as a nondescript sale of time. (Gorz, 1982. p. 1)

Whether an activity is autonomous or heteronomous thus depends not on what the activity is, but on the motivation for doing it; heteronomous work is not done because the worker him/herself thinks it needs to be done, but because the worker needs the wage they will receive from it, resulting in the alienation of workers from their labour. This is seen by most Marxists as alienating workers from their own human nature (implicit in which is the identification of productive work as central to human identity which Abberley criticizes) and as entrenching the power of the capitalist class. However, the Italian Autonomist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (2009a) argues that such "estrangement from the mode of production and its rules" can be transformed into a "refusal to identify with the general interest of the capitalistic economy" (p. 46), and thus become a catalyst for resistance.

Autonomists criticize orthodox Marxists for replicating the work ethic – and associated ideologies of economic growth and industrial 'progress' – of the same capitalist society that Marxism seeks to overthrow. In this they share common ground with socialist-

feminists (some of whom would also regard themselves as autonomists and vice versa), who

reject "the centrality that Marxism has historically assigned to waged industrial work and

commodity production as the crucial sites for social transformation", and criticize its "neglect

of the reproduction of human beings and labour power" (Federici, 2012, p. 122). Autonomists

also regard the working class "not primarily as capital's victims but as its antagonists"

(Weeks, p. 94), thus stressing the possibility for autonomous action by workers against

capitalism, rather than the historical inevitability of orthodox Marxism.

Autonomists, like many anarchists, regard the wage system and its imposition of

heteronomous work on the working class as central to the oppressive social regime of

capitalism, which is a "system built upon the subordination of life to work" (Weeks, 2011, p.

97). Therefore, central to both their activism and analysis is the refusal of work, which Weeks

(p. 99) describes as:

> ...not in fact a rejection of activity and creativity in general or of production in
> particular... but rather a refusal of the ideology of work as highest calling and moral
> duty, a refusal of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the
> rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of
> production. It is a refusal, finally, of the asceticism of those – even those on the Left –
> who privilege work over all other pursuits, including 'carefree consumption'. Its
> immediate goals are presented as a reduction of work, in terms of both hours and social
> importance, and a replacement of capitalist forms of organization by new forms of
> cooperation. (Weeks, 2011, p. 99)

A key criticism of work as it exists in capitalist society by anarchists and autonomists

alike is that, far from being something to be valorised as a route to liberation, 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. For example, Vaneigem (1967), a member of the Situationist International,

describes work as "punishment for poverty" (p. 52), Berardi (2009a) calls it "a matter of

discipline, the production of docility" (p. 17), and a pamphlet produced by the Anarchist

Federation in the UK (2008) argues that "the imposition of work – the socially-created need

and compulsion to work – is a prison we are desperately seeking to escape" (p. 16).

The imposition of heteronomous work on those who are able both to physically do it, and to 'get' it (in terms of being able to persuade employers to employ them), is thus part of the same unjust regime as the exclusion from its grudgingly dispensed rewards of those who cannot. Both are oppressed by the same capitalist logic, which, often aided by nationalist, racist, and eugenicist ideologies, seeks to divide them against each other by portraying disabled and unemployed people as 'burdens' or 'parasites' on the social body. The 'work ethic' that capitalist society indoctrinates in people through institutions such as schools and the media results in internalised oppression at the fundamental psychological level of self-value. As the Anarchist Federation (2008) pamphlet asks, "in a society where life is work, doesn't our failure to have and to hold onto employment condemn us to failure as human beings?" (p. 20). Thus a vital component in the struggle against capitalism is 'self-valorization', or the autonomous construction of ethical values counter to those of a society based on authority and exploitation, in order to not merely react reflexively to specific attacks by capital, but to positively and creatively re-invent social relations (Cleaver, 2011; Weeks, 2011). Anarchists (at least of the anarcho-communist strand of the anarchist tradition) and many autonomists reject entirely the concept of the wage, as part of a wider rejection of the concept of exchange-value. As the influential Russian anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin argued in 1913:

> A society having taken possession of all social wealth, having boldly proclaimed the right of all to this wealth — whatever share they may have taken in producing it —will be compelled to abandon any system of wages, whether in currency or labour-notes. (p. 167)

The economy of a society without a concept of exchange-value would be a 'gift economy', in which everything that is produced would be freely given to those who need to use it; what is produced would be chosen according to the needs and desires of the community; and the concept of profit would be unknown, as the 'value' of each product or

activity would be unique to itself and not exchangeable for the value of any other.[ix] There are differences between thinkers in the anarchist, autonomist, and eco-socialist traditions on the question of whether heteronomous work can be abolished entirely, or whether (as Gorz (1982; 1999 contends) an ineradicable core of it will remain which needs to be distributed equitably. Critics from these traditions are united, however, in considering it profoundly undesirable and antithetical to a free society, and in believing that it can be at least vastly reduced.

The right to work or the right not to work?

A phrase which has been frequently used on the 'left' in the UK and Europe is "the Right to Work".[x] One recent example of this is a campaign of that name led by the orthodox Marxist Socialist Workers' Party[xi] and the public sector trade unions, which focuses on "fighting job losses" (Right to work, n.d.) and attempts to defend and preserve the public sector against austerity measures. However, this agenda does not question the system of heteronomous wage work as a primary means of organizing society. As Gorz (1999) points out, the demand for the 'right to work' – as if it were a citizenship right – is tied up with the valuation of paid employment as an essential component of social status, which, even if 'full employment' were to be achieved, would still leave many disabled people excluded from the status of full members of society (p. 64–5). Counter posed to this is the demand of disabled activists such as Sunaura Taylor (2004) for a "right not to work":

> Shouldn't we, of all groups, recognize that it is not work that would liberate us (especially not menial labor made accessible or greeting customers at Wal-Marts across America), but the right to not work and be proud of it? ... What I mean by the right not to work is perhaps as much a shift in ideology or consciousness as it is a material shift. It is about our relation not only to labor but the significance of performing that labor, and to the idea that only through the performance of wage labor does the human being actually accrue value themselves. It is about cultivating a skeptical attitude regarding the significance of work, which should not be taken at face value as a sign of equality and enfranchisement, but should be analyzed more critically. (para. 20)

However, this demand is neither new nor exclusive to disabled people —as Kropotkin

wrote a century ago:

> We must recognise, and loudly proclaim, that every one, whatever his grade in the old society, whether strong or weak, capable or incapable, has, before everything, *the Right to Live*, and that society is bound to share amongst all, without exception, the means of existence it has at its disposal.... Enough of ambiguous words like 'the right to work', with which the people were misled in 1848, and which are still resorted to with the hope of misleading them. Let us have the courage to recognise that *well-being for all*, henceforward possible, must be realised. (Kropotkin, 1913, pp. 42–3, emphasis in original)

As the Anarchist Federation (2008) argues, "The right to work is the right to misery

and denies the possibility of the right not to work" (p. 16); thus, anti-cuts campaigns that

make the 'right to work' their focus leave disabled people, the group most severely affected

by the cuts, unrepresented and implicitly unwanted in their activism. This constitutes an

example of what the Canadian anarcho-communist collective Common Cause (2013)

describe as the 'dual consciousness' of non-disabled workers, in that, while on one level it

involves workers fighting back against a reorganization of capital that results in the loss of

their income, it simultaneously entrenches capitalist values and excludes those who are most

acutely oppressed by the ideology and the material reality of wage labour. As Marta Russell

(1998, argues, "[to] buy into the capitalist propaganda that work is god, that people are

labourers first and human beings second, serves only to oppress us all" (p. 83)**.**

Expanding definitions of 'work'?

Some authors within Disability Studies in the UK, such as Colin Barnes (2012), have argued

that a definitional expansion rather than a refusal of work can enable inclusion of disabled

people in an employment-based society. Barnes – taking a position influenced by Abberley

(1996; 2002) as well as by Finkelstein (1980) and Gleeson (1999), and can perhaps be seen as

an attempt to stand midway between them – argues that the category of 'work' that deserves

social (and monetary) reward should be expanded further to also include the daily activities

involved in managing impairment and the 'biographical work' of incorporating it into

everyday life and explaining it to others, as well as the 'work' involved in employing and

managing personal assistants. He also argues that this expansion of the definition of work

"should not be construed as an alternative to the on-going struggle for disabled people's

participation in the paid labour market, but complimentary [sic] to it" (Barnes, 2012, p. 481).

Barnes (2012), compares this to redefinitions of the meaning of 'work' by feminists to

include housework and childcare, calling to mind the famous demand by some feminists in

Europe (especially Italy) and the US in the 1970s–80s for "wages for housework" (see e.g.,

Dalla Costa & James, 1972). "Wages for housework" was a controversial slogan and demand

even among socialist-feminists. Some, such as Freeman (1980) and Davis (1982) opposed it

on grounds that paying wages for housework would only institutionalize it further as a realm

of the essentially feminine, arguing that a better route to women's liberation from capitalism

and patriarchy would be to abolish 'housework' as a separate sphere and 'socialize' the tasks

involved as public rather than private services.[xii]

However, Silvia Federici, who was among the Italian feminists (associated with the

Autonomia movement) who were active in the "wages for housework" campaign, describes

"wages for housework" as not so much a concrete demand as a political perspective which

could be more accurately described as "wages against housework" (Federici, 1980). The

demand for a wage was not an end in itself, but firstly a counter-claim to the 'naturalization'

of women's unpaid domestic labour as an 'act of love', and thus not really 'labour' at all, in

patriarchal capitalism; thus, "to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the

expression of our [women's] nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that

capital has invented for us" (Federici, 1980, p. 257). For Federici, the demand for wages for

housework was therefore not meant to celebrate or glorify either domestic work or the wage

relation, but was in reality more about refusal of (unpaid) work and highlighting the

importance of the domestic sphere as an essential component of the capitalist system of

production, and was ultimately a demand for autonomous personal power rather than for

money.

This perspective is shared by Kathi Weeks (2011) in her feminist analysis of the

refusal of work. In Weeks' analysis, however, this demand failed because its content did not

live up to its "promise as a perspective and provocation" (p. 137). For Weeks (2011) the

logical conclusion of the tensions inherent in the demand for wages for housework is to

instead demand a universal basic income, which she defines as "an income paid

unconditionally to individuals regardless of their family or household relationships,

regardless of other incomes, and regardless of their past, present, or future employment

status" (p. 138), which must be sufficient to meet all basic survival needs for everyone.[xiii] As

Davis (1982) notes, this was a much more appealing demand than "wages for housework" to

women on welfare in the US in the 1960s–70s, and Weeks (2011) points out that a basic

income was one of the core demands of the US National Welfare Rights Organization (p.

144).

Similarly, I would argue that an unconditional basic income is the logical conclusion

of the argument made by Barnes (2012), because several of the categories of activity he

includes in his expanded definition of 'work', such as 'biographical work' and the activities

involved in managing impairment, are either not measurable, or measuring them would

involve an unacceptable level of paternalistic intrusion into disabled people's daily lives.[xiv]

Also, unlike 'housework', while these activities do involve expenditure of energy on the part

of the disabled individual, they do not either produce or reproduce anything for capital;

therefore, it is hard (at least from an administrative point of view) to see a meaningful

distinction between paying people for them and paying people for 'simply existing'. An

unconditional basic income would also differ significantly from the 'disability incomes'

campaigned for by DIG and opposed by UPIAS, because it would be given to everyone, both

disabled and non-disabled, and thus would not stigmatize or segregate disabled people as a

class considered uniquely dependent or 'incapable'.[xv]

It can be argued that the concept of unconditional basic income is incoherent, because

it is impossible within capitalism (because for a government to grant it would go too far

against the capitalist logic of work as definitional of citizenship to be acceptable), and it

would be unnecessary without it (as if exchange-value were abolished and a 'gift economy'

established, then there would be no such thing as 'income'). However, in view of the broader

politics of many of its proponents, it can perhaps best be seen as a transitional demand

leading to the ultimate anarchist/autonomist ideal of a gift economy, based on the principle of

'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs', which, taking into

account both the historical materialist account of the origins of disablement and the

impossibility of disabled people participating as equals in a labour market whose foundations

were built on their exclusion, is arguably the only truly non-disabling economy.[xvi]

Conclusions and ways forward

Abberley (2002, p. 135) calls for "an explicit recognition that the aspirations and

demands of disabled people involve the development of values and ideas which run

profoundly counter to the dominant cultural problematic of both left and right" (where by

'left' he primarily means orthodox Marxism). Anarchism and autonomism provide a source

of such values and ideas that are potentially of great (theoretical and practical) use to the

Disabled People's Movement in a time of critical threats to, as Abberley puts it, "the future

survival of alternative, impaired modes of being".

The historical position taken by the Disabled People's Movement in the UK (e.g.,

Holdsworth, 2012; UPIAS, 1976) of demanding access to paid employment, and regarding

income replacement benefits for disabled people as paternalistic and contrary to the social

model, can all too easily be co-opted by right-wing governments into a justification for

cutting benefits and leaving disabled people who cannot participate in the paid work market

(either because of genuine incapacity or because of discrimination and barriers to the

workplace) to starve. To avoid this, 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. However, while a

campaign focus on defending benefits is necessary, it must not be an end in itself, but should

be consciously transitional towards a more radical reorganization of society. As Withers

(2012) argues, such immediate struggles can be "complementary to the overthrow of

capitalism rather than contradictory to it" (p. 89).

The community-building and consciousness-raising aspects of the Disabled People's

Movement (including the Disability Arts movement, which in the UK has roots in both

UPIAS and the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities (Sutherland, 2006), can be

seen as an example of the autonomist concept of self-valorization, in that they allow disabled

people to radically reject the capitalist valuation of people by their 'productivity', and instead

envision a future society in which human diversity is respected and celebrated. The Disabled

People's Movement can use strategies of self-valorization to "organize struggles that neither

take the form nor mirror the logic of what they contest" (Weeks, 2011, p. 96). This logic can

be difficult to escape; as Withers (2012) argues, even people who are actively involved in

radical liberation movements frequently retain the 'core capitalist value' of productivism,

valuing people based on their "contributions to the struggle" (p. 109). Both the feminist

movement and the Disabled People's Movement have found themselves, despite anti-

capitalist analyses, adopting strategies that "do more to preserve than to challenge the

integrity of the wage system" (Weeks, 2011, p. 137). However, as Abberley (2002) says, "a

consistently liberative analysis of disablement today must recognise that full integration of impaired people in social production can never constitute the future to which all disabled people can aspire" (p. 135). To act on such an analysis requires disabled people and their allies to "participate in projects that seek to undermine the material basis (wage-labour, housing, etc.) that produce able-bodied privilege and disableism" (Common Cause, 2013, para. 33).

While, as many disabled writers and activists have argued (e.g., Finkelstein 1980; Morris 1991; Oliver 1990; Taylor 2004; Withers 2012), being impaired is not inherently a 'tragedy', and people with impairments are ultimately no more 'dependent' on others than anyone in a modern, complex society. [xvii] I would argue that 'disability pride' does not, as Holdsworth (2011) suggests, need to be based on disabled people portraying themselves as capable of succeeding on the same terms as non-disabled people. Instead, disabled people's self-valorization can consist in the assertion that 'dependence' is neither shameful, nor incompatible with personal autonomy, and indeed that 'independence' in the sense of self-sufficiency is neither possible nor desirable. [xviii] With such a counter-hegemonic imagination, "alternative, impaired modes of being" (Abberley 2002, p. 135) can be valued regardless of their 'productivity' or otherwise; indeed, as Withers (2012) suggests, perhaps not 'productively contributing' to an "unsustainable and unjust economy" (p. 109) can itself be something to be proud rather than ashamed of. If we truly wish to see the liberation of all disabled people, rather than only those who can be easily assimilated into capitalist social relations, we must, with Kathi Weeks (2011, p. 97), "call not for a liberation of work but for a liberation from work".

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[i]   I use the phrase 'disabled people' rather than 'people with disabilities' in line with usage in the UK Disabled People's Movement, and because it describes people as 'disabled by' an oppressive and exclusive society rather than as possessing 'disabilities' as individual attributes, making it a phrase more consistent with the social model of disability.

[ii]   Several other recent changes, such as reductions in eligibility to housing benefit (popularly dubbed the 'Bedroom Tax'), the closure of the Independent Living Fund, and the loss of specific state benefits such as Disability Living Allowance, are no less devastating to disabled people, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

[iii]   Clifford (2012) argues that Access to Work is notably one of the services provided by government to disabled people in the UK that is closest to a social model of disability, as it focuses on barriers that must be overcome in order to allow a disabled person to start or keep a job, rather than locating the problem within the individual.

[iv]   With hindsight, it is worth noting that UPIAS took a highly optimistic view of technology which, while not unusual in the 1970s, has not been supported by the working-class experience of technological developments that have occurred since then (which have generally increased the specialisation and precarity of labour [see e.g., Shukaitis, 2013] rather than made it easier or more accessible), and that the exclusive focus of UPIAS (as shown by its name) on physical impairment, and in particular its neglect of the issues associated with severe

cognitive impairment, resulted in what can be considered an incomplete analysis of disability, both of which factors can be argued to have been influential on their apparent belief that paid employment was a realistic possibility for 'all' disabled people.

v For a more detailed account of the Liberation Network, see Sutherland (2006).

vi See Williams-Findlay (2011) for a discussion of this dynamic in recent UK disability activism.

vii Abberley's line of argument here can be related to the feminist (constructive) critiques of the social model of disability which were made by women within the British Disabled People's Movement in the 1990s (e.g., Crow, 1996; Morris, 1991), who argued that some proponents of the social model, such as Oliver and Finkelstein, had neglected the bodily realities of impairment, and in doing so risked alienating many disabled people, including those with non-physical, progressive, or fluctuating impairments, from the movement.

viii From here on, I will use the terms 'autonomist'/'autonomism' to refer to this school of thought within Marxism more generally, as opposed to the Italian Autonomia movement in particular.

ix This concept of 'gift economy' as anarcho-communist utopia, which has its origin in Kropotkin's concept of 'mutual aid', and more recently has been a focus for radical and eco-feminists (see e.g., Vaughan (ed.) 2007) should be distinguished from the anthropological concept of 'gift economies' in actually-existing societies, which originates in the work of Marcel Mauss; for more on this, see Graeber (2010).

x Ironically, but perhaps tellingly, the phrase "right to work" is also used in the US for laws which restrict collective bargaining agreements between trade unions and employers, with the result of reducing wages and increasing the precarity of work and the power of corporations over workers (Bureau of Labor Education, 2011).

xi The Socialist Workers' Party in the UK is a Trotskyist party that is a member of the International Socialist Tendency; it is distinct from the organisation of the same name in the US.

xii Angela Davis's argument that the oppression of women as housewives originates in the consolidation of industrial capitalism, and therefore that participation in the waged labour market is the best route to their liberation, closely parallels that of UPIAS with regard to disabled people.

xiii It is worth noting here that the proposed replacement of several existing benefits in the UK by a new, supposedly simpler (but considerably less generous) system called "Universal Credit" could be seen as a co-option by the Conservative government of the language of unconditional basic income.

xiv Here my argument follows that of Caroline Freeman (1980, p .206) that a wage for housework from the state would make the state the employer of housewives, and thus result in state policing and surveillance of how much housework they do, and therefore that a demand for 'wages' for housework without regard to how much is actually done would effectively be a demand for a guaranteed minimum income. I do not, however, accept her conclusion from this that such a demand is counter-revolutionary.

xv Many disabled people do have needs that non-disabled people do not (e.g., assistive technology or personal assistance); therefore, it is necessary to distinguish payments to disabled people to meet these needs from 'income replacement' benefits awarded on the basis of inability to work. A universal basic income should not be expected to cover these additional expenses of being a disabled person; within the context of nation-states and the money economy, these should be regarded as separate and specific rights. Abberley (2002, p. 136) argues for basic income "in addition to realistic compensatory benefits on the model of the British mobility allowances".

xvi There are unresolved questions regarding people with impairments in a gift economy, such as how personal assistance for those disabled people who need it would be organized in such a society. As Graeber (2010, p. 13) notes, "when 'abilities' and 'needs' prove disproportionate, communistic relations can easily slip into relations of inequality"; this is likely to be a particular concern for disabled people, who have both been historically oppressed by and produced a strong body of criticism of paternalistic models of 'charitable giving' (see e.g., the chapter in Withers 2012 (pp. 57–80) on the 'charity model'). These are questions I hope to address in future research.

xvii   This is not to deny that disabled people's dependence on others is both more stigmatized and often materially more 'severe' for the individual in present-day society; as argued by Common Cause (2013), non-disabled people have the privilege of having their dependence normalized and thus accommodated to such an extent that it goes unnoticed.

xviii   While somewhat outside the scope of this paper, the genealogy of the term 'dependency'– which with the advent of industrial capitalism came to signify a deviant and stigmatised condition rather than a 'normal' one – by Fraser & Gordon (1994) is illuminating here, and has close parallels with the historical analysis of disablement by authors such as Oliver (1990), Russell (1998), and Gleeson (1999).