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‘I’ve always felt these spaces were ours’: disability activism and austerity capitalism

Reflections on *City*’s interview with DPAC

Debbie Humphry

This paper reflects on City’s interview with the UK activist group, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), examining their practices of resistance within the broader structural frame of austerity capitalism. This enables an exploration of how capitalism has constructed disability as an exclusionary category over time to support the accumulation of wealth, from urban industrialisation to austerity capitalism. The paper also engages with Gargi Bhattacharyya’s argument that austerity is deployed through a post-colonial logic of racialisation, exploring how this notion may be applied to disabled welfare claimants. It also explores her argument that austerity marks a shift towards a post-consent politics but argues that both coercion and consent are key dimensions of state governance that seek to produce public acquiescence to punitive policies that threaten disabled people’s livelihoods and lives. Indeed, the multiple struggles against austerity, including those by DPAC, clearly indicate the failure of moves towards

Keywords **austerity capitalism, disability activism, racialisation, disablement, social reproduction, the social model of disability**

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a post-consent politics. The paper demonstrates how the city, therefore, is not only a key site for exclusion but also a central site for resistance. DPAC's resistances disrupt and contest austerity's processes and model an alternative prefigurative politics based on collaborative care and the use value of social reproduction. This opens up possibilities for post-capitalist futures and a right to the city based on collective rights and power. DPAC positions itself as both an identity and a class campaign, integrating reformist strategies into a longer-term anti-capitalist agenda and reaching outwards to other urban struggles that are similarly resisting the harms inflicted on bodies and minds by global capitalism. Therefore, building on the work of Mary Jean Hande, this paper argues that disabled people are not simply worthy of inclusion when theorising and constructing anti-capitalist and urban resistance, but are integral to and at the forefront of such struggles.

Introduction

What has happened since 2010 is a sharp reflection of the fundamentally important role that disability plays within capitalist political economy. It therefore has a relevance to anyone seriously interested in what is wrong with capitalism and how we fight it. (Ellen Clifford 2020, 2-3)

What can examining disability activism tell us about austerity capitalism and struggles against it? And how can understanding austerity's processes that subjugate disabled people contribute to wider debates and resistances? Since the 2008 financial crisis, US and European cities are argued to be key sites of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013; Mayer 2020) as public service cuts impact on marginalised urban dwellers who are subjected to 'extreme economies' (Peck 2012). In the UK disabled people are one of the groups most negatively impacted by the last decade of social and welfare service cuts (Duffy 2013; Clifford 2020) and this paper addresses the above questions by reflecting on City's interview with Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) (Humphry et al. 2020), an activist group formed in 2010 in response to UK government austerity policies. Whilst successive UK Conservative prime ministers have claimed that austerity is over (BBC 2018; Partington 2020), in the most recent 2022 Autumn statement Rishi Sunak announced more public spending cuts. There was some welcome news for disabled people, in terms of the rise of benefits in line with inflation and some additional funding for social care, but austerity's key characteristics of conditional distribution of welfare entitlement, withdrawal of the state's responsibility for ensuring social reproduction and the opening up of social welfare to private sector markets have been embedded and continue. This article revisits City's interview that I

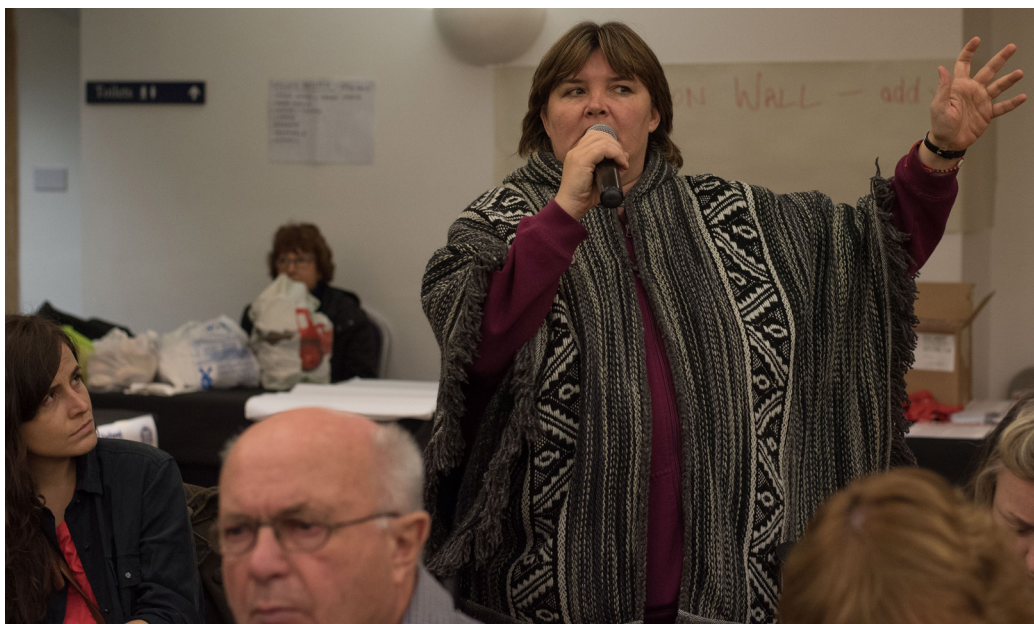


Figure 1: Paula Peters representing DPAC at a Homes for All Summit. Photo by Debbie Humphry.

conducted with DPAC members Ellen Clifford, Andy Green, Paula Peters and Keith Walker, who are all disabled, drawn from two longer pair-interviews, addressing their experiences of austerity and resistance. I have worked with DPAC over several years as a housing activist and have integrated insights from this relationship into the analysis (Sng 2018; Humphry 2020), also drawing on DPAC's website and other texts (ROFA 2019; Clifford 2020) (see Figure 1). I sent drafts of the article to the interviewees, inviting feedback and amends. I am also a secondary carer for my disabled mother.

The aim of the paper is to further explore and theorise issues raised in the DPAC interviews. This has involved examining DPAC's everyday practices of resistance as a situated ground from which to consider the broader political, social and economic processes of austerity capitalism, including how they are shaped by a post-colonial logic (Bhattacharyya 2015). As such, the analysis and theory-making is grounded in the social ontology of everyday struggles and takes seriously feminist and queer approaches that emphasise the constitutive role of experience, embodiment and emotions for both theory making and modelling practice (Kern and McLean 2017; McLean 2018; Hande 2019; Ruddick et al. 2018). The first part of the paper explores the workings and impacts of austerity capitalism and the second part explores DPAC's resistance against it.

The paper develops the concept of 'austerity capitalism', previously used to interrogate the deployment of austerity policies in diverse and contingent ways across several Global North capitalist social spheres (Hill 2012; Cole 2014; Lendvai and Stubbs 2015). This firmly situates austerity within a capitalist political-economy framework and shapes an exploration of the impacts of austerity on disabled welfare claimants. This connects to scholarship that has not explicitly used the term 'austerity capitalism' but nevertheless situates austerity within capitalism and class relations (Peck 2012; Harvey 2014; Mendoza 2015; Mayer 2020; Clifford 2020). As such, the paper focuses on the role of disability in the

wealth accumulation processes of both labour exploitation and accumulation by dispossession during austerity (Merrifield 2013; Harvey 2014).

Then, drawing on the work of Bhattacharyya (2015), a post-colonial lens is integrated into the analysis to better understand the processes applied to disabled claimants during austerity capitalism. Bhattacharyya argues that the key driver for austerity is the increasing vulnerability of a post-colonial European elite, who implement austerity policies as a strategy to hold onto their wealth and power, which has been increasingly threatened following the 2007/08 financial crash. Central to her argument is the notion that post-colonial 'racialisation' processes are being applied to new populations during austerity, including to disabled claimants, with the aim of dispossessing citizens of their social entitlements and eroding their democratic participation. This is shaped by an institutionalisation of despair and a post-consent politics based on coercing obedience. However, this paper contests the notion that there has been a definitive shift from consent to post-consent politics. In line with other authors (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021; Clarke and Newman 2012) who have drawn on Gramsci to argue that consent as well as coercion are present in the state's governance of austerity, the paper also explores processes that produce public acquiescence to the state's punitive policies that inflict violence on disabled welfare claimants. As Bhattacharyya argues, consent is not total, as clearly evidenced by the multiple struggles worldwide against austerity, including those by DPAC.

Therefore, the second part of the paper examines the ways that DPAC forwards its resistance to contest and undo austerity's processes through various collaborative practices. They mount their resistance in multiple ways and in multiple spaces: on city streets and occupying key spaces of power, outside assessment offices, in appeals tribunals and through the internet and other spaces of communication (see Figures 2 and 3). Their grounded resistances directly disrupt accumulation processes and state power, as well as offering a post-capitalist prefigurative politics based on collective models of reproductive care (Jeffries 2018). Central to DPAC's collaborative approach is that it situates itself as both an identity *and* a class campaign, which produces a two-pronged strategy, with a reformist human-rights approach deployed alongside the longer-term goal of replacing the current system with an anti-capitalist radical politics. DPAC's pluralist approach contributes to an inclusive and outward-reaching campaign that seeks wide collaborations with policy actors as well as with radical urban movements, which strengthens its resistance.

Threaded through the analysis is an effort to understand the role of the city and urbanisation processes in the construction of disability, the austerity capitalist project and DPAC's struggles against it. Drawing on the social model of disability (Finkelstein 1980; Clifford 2020) and theories of disablement (Hande 2019), the paper explores how the capitalist city is a key site for producing the disabled category, disability exclusion and damage to bodies and minds, both historically and in the contemporary moment. But at the same time, resistance in the city provides a basis for an inclusive wide-scale anti-capitalist urban struggle, with disabled people positioned at the forefront and on the frontlines (Hande 2019). The city is therefore a key battleground, site of disabled people's exclusions but also of their resistance. A close-up analysis of DPAC's everyday practices, contestations and negotiations provide insight into how grassroots struggles can appropriate and



Figure 2: Disabled activists outside a Global Disability Summit to highlight the hypocrisy of it being co-hosted by the UK government that was indicted by the UN for disability rights abuses. Olympic Park, London 2018. Photo by Paula Peters.

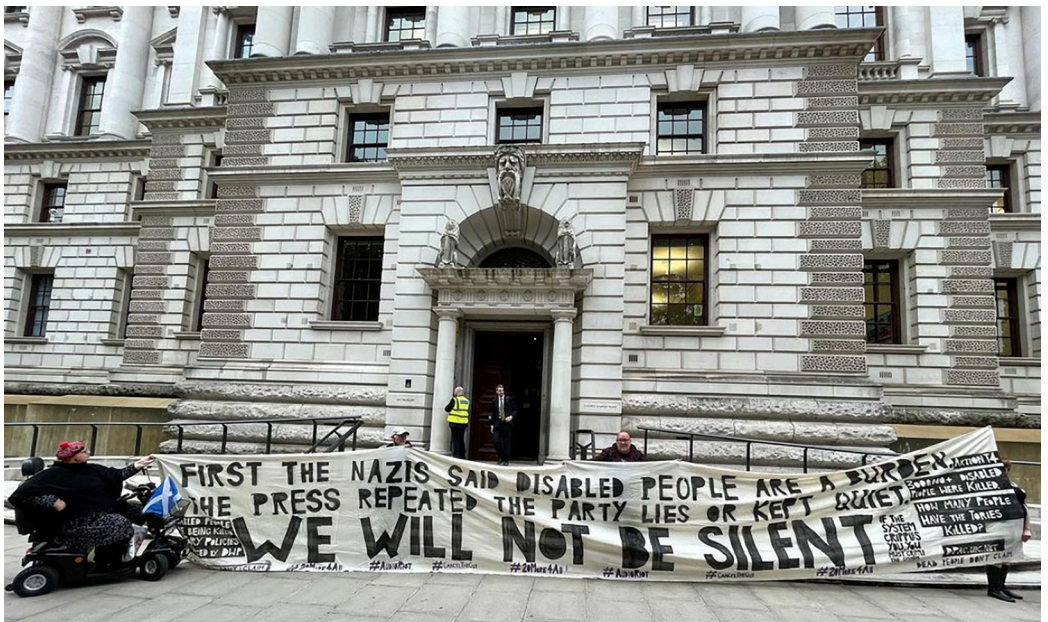


Figure 3: DPAC outside Rishi Sunak's office when he was chancellor: we will not be silent. October 2021. Photo by Paula Peters.

transform urban space in order to construct a pluralist and expansive alternative emancipatory politics (Brenner 2018). Moreover, disabled people's localised micro-resistances in the city have wider constitutive potential as they provide embodied prefigurative practices of collaborative care (Springer 2016) that can extend an alternative politics across wider geographies. DPAC's micro-resistances therefore contribute to constructing post-capitalist alternatives centred on the use value of social reproduction, which also builds on and reaches out to feminists who have long argued that social reproduction is central to understanding and offering alternatives to capitalism (Federici 2009, 2014; Fraser 2016).

Disability and austerity capitalism

Disabled welfare claimants are disproportionately targeted by austerity as cumulative cuts to public expenditure so far have resulted in the 8% of the disabled population bearing 29% of the cuts and 2% of those with the severest disabilities bearing 15% of the cuts (Duffy 2013). Overall, thousands of disabled people have had their entitlement to disability benefits removed, enabling the government to achieve its target of cutting billions off the benefits bill (Clifford 2020). These cuts are therefore a form of redistributing wealth upwards via accumulation by dispossession, argued to be an increasingly central capitalist strategy in the Global North as labour exploitation shifts South, which, along with automated productivity, reduce the requirements for waged labour (Merrifield 2013; Harvey 2014; Shaw and Waterstone 2019).

Before examining the exclusions wrought by austerity capitalism more closely, a brief review of disabled people's exclusion during 19th century industrial capitalism is useful for framing the historical roots of the inter-relation between the disabled category, exclusion and capitalism. Using the social model of disability (SMD), Marxist/socialist scholars drew on key stage capitalist theory to identify how exclusion became institutionalised during the 19th century with the shift from cooperative agrarian feudalism to urban industrial capitalism (Finkelstein 1980, 2007; Oliver 2013; Oliver and Barnes 2012; Russell 2019). They argued that the automated factory system, organised around the commodification of an average body, excluded people with impairments, which then became normalised. Disability was therefore constructed by the material structures of industrial capitalism, leading to ideological structures that produced the disabled category. As such, the SMD distinguishes impairment from disability, the former being a condition of the body and the latter referring to the social barriers disabling independent living and social participation. Disabled people won greater equality during 20th century welfare capitalism and through their struggles for access and inclusion in the 1970s and 1980s, but exclusionary processes were never entirely eliminated, as demonstrated by the persistent disability employment gap. Hopes that the sectoral, digital and organisational transformations in the post-industrial city would provide more favourable employment conditions have been largely unrealised as a private sector logic pervading the services industry produced a disciplinary employment milieu aimed at maximum productivity, unsuited to employees with impairments (Roulstone 2002).

Meanwhile, interactive service work requires particular kinds of ‘desirable bodies’ so is equally unsuitable (McDowell 2009).

The construction of the disabled category therefore persists, shifting according to the different ways that society is organised (Finkelstein 1980) and austerity has wrought new forms of exclusion as the removal of the welfare state’s safety net threatens disabled people’s survival. Fraser (2016) argues that austerity capitalism has produced a ‘crisis of care’ as the extreme welfare cuts jeopardise the reproductive processes on which production depends. But Federici (2009) points out that state disinvestment from social reproduction emerged precisely because research indicated that social investment did not increase productivity. Add to this the reduced need for waged labour and increase in a chronically unemployed non-productive *stagnant* surplus population, then, from a capitalist point of view, state support for social care and reproduction is unnecessary. In this context the *stagnant* surplus populations—what Marx (2013 [1867]) referred to as the ‘lumpenproletariat’—become disposable human waste products (Shaw and Waterstone 2019). Bhattacharyya (2015) and Clifford (2020), however, go further, arguing that rendering populations as disposable serves a purpose for capitalism as it makes any kind of work seem preferable. In other words, austerity’s threat to disabled people’s reproduction is an intentional and key dimension of the capitalist economy because it works as a deterrent against wider populations claiming benefits, thus incentivising the wider *floating* surplus of precarious waged labour to accept increasingly poor conditions and enumeration for fear of becoming a non-entitled person without the means of survival themselves.

Disabled people are themselves a particular target of the coercion into extreme labour exploitation, as indicated when two Conservative politicians openly proposed that disabled people be paid below the minimum wage. In 2011 MP Philip Davies justified his proposal on the grounds that ‘some of those people with a learning disability cannot, by definition, be as productive in their work as someone who does not have a disability’ (Hansard 2011). Then in 2014 Lord David Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform, pronounced that some disabled people were ‘not worth the full wage’ and could be paid as little as £2 an hour (Watt and Wintour 2014). Clifford expressed further concerns about the exploitation of disabled people following Brexit,

There was a suggestion, I think it was Shaw Trust who run disability employment support, they were saying with Brexit, there’ll be less people coming over, so people with learning difficulties can basically be shipped off to hop picking farms, basically kept in a farm, it’s just horrific.

Despite apologies and refutations from the ministers and government, these comments clearly emerge from an ideology that measures value in economic rather than social terms; with extreme labour exploitation proposed as a way to include disabled people in the economy, rather than resourcing employment schemes, which have been reduced during austerity (Melling and Turner 2018; Ryan 2019; Clifford 2020). This approach is reflected in the typically peripheral part-time, casual and self-employment of disabled people in the UK, with around a third earning below the minimum wage (Powell 2020). Thus, during austerity capitalism, the production of people as disabled plays a particular role in both

accumulation by dispossession and labour exploitation, working in tandem to redistribute wealth upwards. Go forth and be exploited because otherwise you will be dispossessed.

Whilst the redistribution of wealth upwards may not be linear, non-working disabled people are dispossessed of their entitlement to state-provided welfare wealth, whilst the state and corporations profit. During austerity, the care market has been further opened up to the private sector, tasked by the state to cut billions off the benefits budget (Wintour 2010). In 2012 Atos, a French IT consulting and outsourcing company, was awarded a £400 million government contract to deliver the Work Capability Assessments, designed to remove disability benefits (Clifford 2020). As Peters says,

That's what the private companies are about. It's about making money, denying you support, and if they kill people in the process it's all well and good. Yes, we've saved you (the government) all this money, and they are making vast amounts of profit. I think Atos and Capita in the first 12 months made over £200 million.

Federici (2014) refers to the privatisation of care as the financialisation of reproduction, ongoing for over three decades but intensified since austerity. Whilst she emphasises its disproportionate impact on women, it also disproportionately impacts disabled people who are not only dispossessed of wealth, but also of livelihoods and lives.

Key stages capitalist theory (Finkelstein 1980) has been critiqued for being too unitary and generalising and scholars have sought to incorporate nuance and complexity, such as highlighting more inclusive models of small-scale businesses and labour unions' push for disability concessions (Roulstone 2002). And, of course, disabled people occupy diverse class positions. Nevertheless, disabled people are over-represented amongst the groups in the UK experiencing poverty (JRF 2020) and the SMD frame highlights the important role of the capitalist city in constructing disability, producing consent to disabled people's exclusion from the labour market and society as they are variously segregated into a range of institutions—workhouses, asylums, colonies and special schools—in order to free up the productive labour force.

The racialisation of disabled people

The changeable ways that disabled people have been categorised, devalued and excluded over time echo racialisation processes that were simultaneously occurring in colonised nations to constrain particular groups' entitlement to social resources, status and freedom in order to redistribute wealth to a capitalist elite. Critical literature is beginning to expose the role of the racial state and its divisive race-making practice in the dispossessions of global capitalism (Danewid 2020) and Bhattacharyya (2015) argues that austerity has heralded a new phase post-colonial 'racialisation', whereby UK benefit claimants are being categorised, monitored and subjected to internal bordering processes with the aim of dispossessing them of full citizen entitlements. These governance processes echo the bordering technologies already mobilised against migrants

categorised as under-documented and UK citizens deemed to be 'terrorist suspects'. Bhattacharyya's novel conception is that austerity marks a shift whereby racialisation is not directly categorising populations due to the colour of their skin or their country of origin (although it undoubtedly disproportionately impacts these groups) but rather that the machinery of racialised categorisation, bordering and loss of entitlements is extended to include new populations, including disabled claimants. Therefore, experiences of exclusion, insecurity and threats to the rights of citizenship become significantly more generalised:

The techniques of the racial state become central technologies to institute differential entitlement and, in this, create austerity as a racial project, even where there is little or no discernible targeting of racialised groups. (Bhattacharyya 2015, 112)

The categorising and sorting process is central to how disabled claimants' are assessed for disability benefits, with the rationing of welfare entitlement processed through Work Capability Assessments (WCA) that evaluate whether a claimant's impairments are extensive enough to receive disability benefits, or alternatively whether they are 'fit for work'. Every disabled person who was already on disability benefits was re-assessed, including for mobility allowance and independence payments. This has resulted in thousands of disabled people being shifted into less well-resourced conditional benefits that compel them to look for work, accept jobs offered, attend interviews and training courses and be punctual for appointments. Disabled people often find the conditions difficult or impossible to manage, yet failure to do so results in sanctions that enforce a suspension of benefits for variable amounts of time, sometimes for months. Between 2010 and 2018 over one million sanctions were applied to disabled people, rising to 580% between 2013 and 2014 (Ryan 2019; Clifford 2020). To be clear, this means no money to eat, stay warm, pay the rent or buy essential remedial supplies. In other words, disabled people are deprived of sufficient resources to socially reproduce themselves.

Moreover, this process constructs disabled claimants as objects of suspicion and as cheats and fraudsters, indicating clear discursive parallels with the stigmatisation and treatment of asylum applicants and 'terrorist' suspects. Peters says that the discourse changed as soon as the new government announced their intention to cut £18 billion from the welfare bill in 2010,

The rhetoric started appearing in the media, calling us scroungers, fraudsters, shirkers, workshy and everything else The government, they're the ones who caused this ideological policy. It was about saving money ... Scrounger posters on lampposts were appearing at the time, 'Shop this claimant'. And hate crime just went through the roof. Disabled people, anyone on benefits, was demonised.

Monitoring and surveillance technologies manage the bordering processes that divide and disentitle. The first barrier is filling in the opaque forms:

You just get this ambiguous ESA50 form. They don't tell you how to fill it out... I think a lot of people are found fit for work because they don't know they need to put further medical evidence in because that's not explained ... You don't know you've got

28 days to appeal ... You don't know how to get that appeal bundle. You don't know to ask for a statement of reasons. (Peters)

Instead of support to access entitlements there is seemingly a deliberate obfuscation of information. The crude computer-based assessment technologies are unable to capture complex health conditions (Mendoza 2015), whilst monitoring technologies treat disabled claimants as suspects,

The assessment centres had hard seats and they keep you waiting outside for hours. There's cameras. As you're going in, you're watched. Do you have a bag, how are they dressed. Watching, watching, watching. (Peters)

Walker describes how being assessed for disability benefits felt like being 'on trial'.

Disabled claimants' movements in everyday spaces are also monitored, echoing the hostile environment policy whereby migrants' citizenship statuses are monitored in everyday spaces by landlords, banks and employers with the aim of withdrawing entitlements. As Greene explains,

Greater Manchester police have a written agreement with the Department for Work and Pensions to report disabled people if they are protesting, on the basis that if they are fit enough to protest, they must be fit enough to get around and to work, and shouldn't be getting disability benefits ... So for me the state is always violent in different forms.

Both the Greater Manchester and Lancashire police have agreements with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to share information on disabled people who participate in protests (Pring 2019b). The logic being that if disabled people are able enough to protest then their disability claims are suspect, 'It's part of police protocol. Just for participating, because the implication is that ... if you're able enough to get to the protest then you're committing benefit fraud' (Clifford). The DWP also use CCTV surveillance and monitoring data provided by businesses, airports, public buildings, gym memberships and social media, to build cases against disabled claimants (Watts 2018). Monitoring thus becomes a tool to constrain and punish disabled claimants' everyday use of public space, threatening to exclude the minimal mobilities necessary for survival, social inclusion and mental health. It also threatens the right to assembly, association and free speech, eroding disabled people's entitlement to civil rights and democratic citizenship, which supports Bhattacharyya's argument that austerity has characteristics of coercion associated with a post-consent politics, examined in more detail next.

Post-consent and the institutionalisation of despair

Bhattacharyya (2015) claims that austerity's shift towards a post-consent politics is characterised by a political effort to produce obedient compliance rather than governance via popular assent. She argues that from the outset austerity was represented as an economic necessity as a result of the financial crisis, rather

than a political choice, which rendered political accountability, redress and consent as irrelevant, or at least limited. Thus the 'primacy of the economic' narrative works to degrade democratic participation.

Austerity's logic of conditionality suggests some support for this theory as conditions attached to welfare benefits and a range of monitoring technologies work to coerce obedience. However, the widespread 'scroungers, fraudsters, shirkers' narratives that emerged in the early stages of austerity indicate that consent from the general public for disability benefit cuts was sought. In these terms, as Clarke and Newman (2012) have argued, austerity is re-formulated as the political solution to a moral problem of irresponsible benefit claimants: a kind of 'magical thinking' that shifts the blame away from the high-risk strategies of bankers and the market and indicts the public rather than the private sector as requiring political regulation and fiscal cuts. At the same time, however, this intense ideological work is shored up and operationalised through processes of disciplining and coercion.

An integral tenet of coercive post-consent politics, according to Bhattacharyya, is the deliberate institutionalisation of despair, used to produce obedience. This relates to Marx's concept of 'immiseration' (2013 [1867]) that ties the accumulation of wealth to the accumulation of misery (Hill 2012; Cole 2014), so presciently relevant for understanding the contemporary impact of austerity on the poorest members of society, disproportionately comprised of disabled people (Clifford 2020; JRF 2020). Much has been written about the devastating impacts of austerity, but it needs repeating, not least in order to counter its normalisation as common-sense consent. Austerity removes disabled people's entitlement to the material resources, such as food, fuel and shelter, necessary for survival. Thousands of deaths and suicides have resulted from benefit cuts and sanctions, stressful assessment procedures and the pain of living lives with disrespect, with disabled claimants persistently monitored and menaced and continuously anxious about survival. Since fit-to-work assessments were introduced, the rates of disability benefit claimants attempting suicide have more than doubled (Bulmer and Polyanskaya 2017) and three-quarters of a million more people in the UK were receiving prescriptions for anti-depressants by 2016. So, as Hande (2019) points out, austerity is not only failing to mitigate disability, it also creates 'disablement'. By 2019, 5,690 disabled people had died within six months of being found fit for work (Pring 2019a). One disabled person died because they could not afford to keep essential medication at the right temperature in the fridge (Ryan 2019). Others died of starvation (Williamson 2020). Peters describes in distressing detail how two of her friends committed suicide, one due to the stress of waiting for disability assessment tests, the other due to a mistaken overpayment demand. As summed up so devastatingly by one of DPAC's protest mottos, 'Cutting the welfare bill one death at a time'. The logical conclusion, as Bhattacharyya argues, is that 'the state has no interest in assisting the reproduction of some sections of the population' (2015, 333). This supports the argument that the threat to survival serves the purpose of incentivising surplus labour to accept ever-worsening exploitation. In these terms, consent is not needed because the threat of penury will do a better job (see Figures 4-6).

The persistence of welfare cuts despite evidence of the deprivations and deaths they have incurred suggests the deliberate inculcation of despair, which

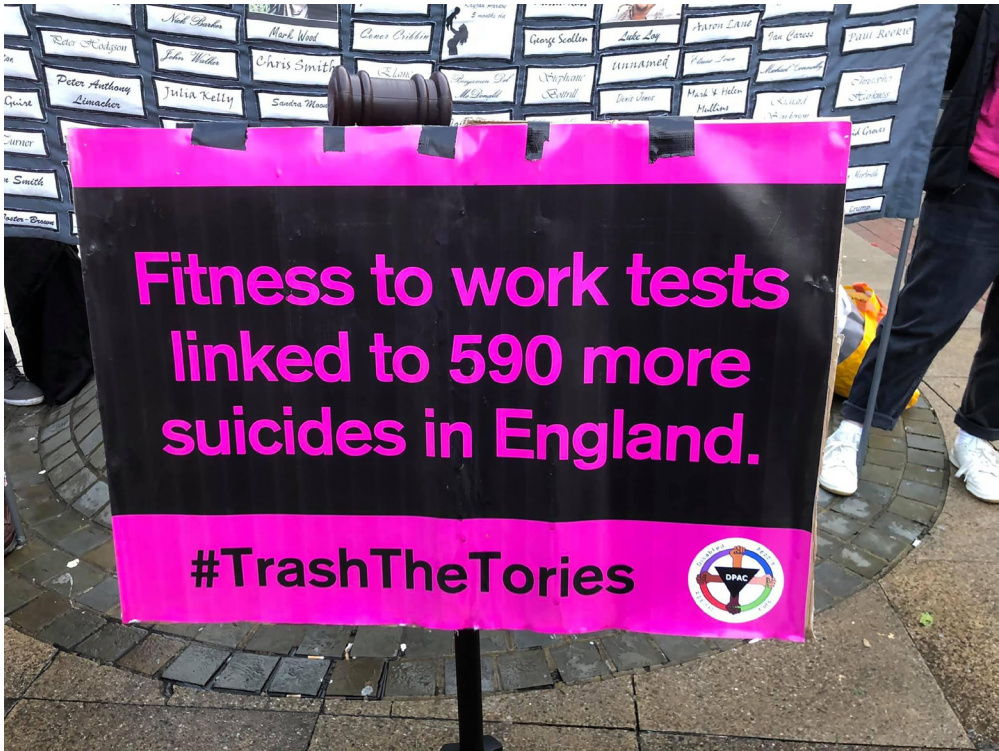


Figure 4: Protesting deaths due to sanctions and benefit cuts in Boris Johnson's Uxbridge & South Ruislip constituency, May 2019 Photo by Paula Peters.

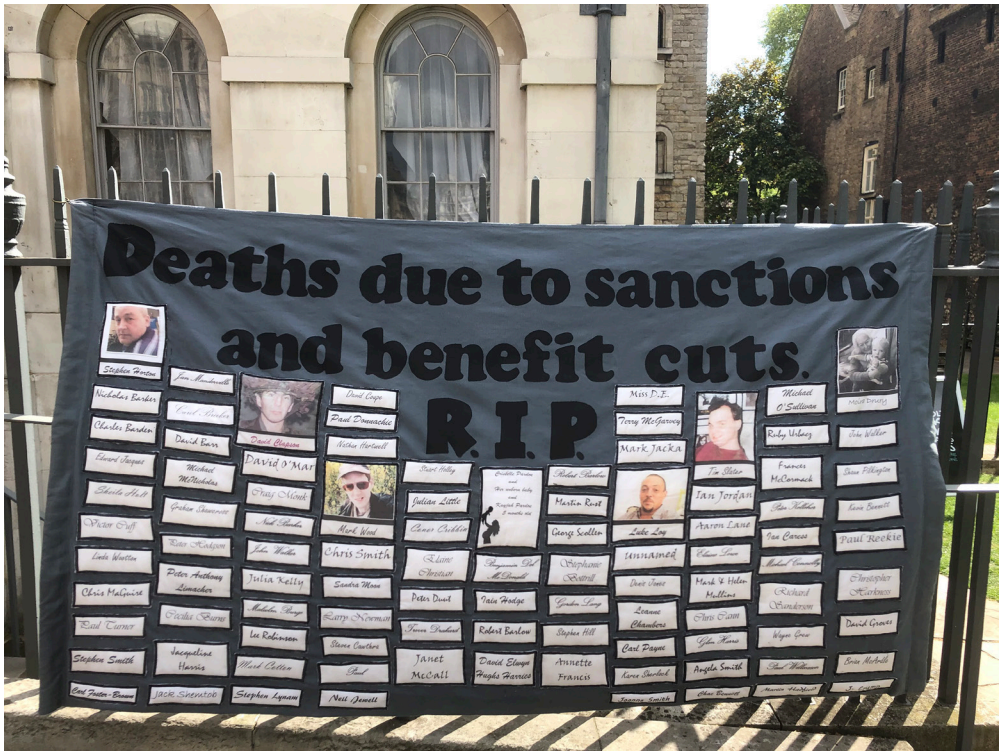


Figure 5: Deaths due to sanctions and benefit cuts RIP, May 2019 Photo by Paula Peters.



Figure 6: Stephen Hill—Elenore Tatton—Brian McArdle—all found fit for work and died soon afterwards. Photo by Paula Peters.

is borne out by DPAC's narratives. Peters explains how an ontological sense of insecurity was produced amongst disabled people from the outset,

We had the emergency budget of June 2010, I remember watching it, everyone on incapacity benefit was going to be reassessed for employment and support allowance. It put the fear of God in everybody ... we were worried from one day to the next, what did it mean ... I couldn't sleep ... developed health problems because of the continual stress of never knowing when that brown envelope's going to arrive. It's torturous when you never know. It's the financial insecurity they put you under, the hoops they put you through, to prove you need that bit of support.

Despair is also embedded into the monitoring and surveillance technologies that organise the welfare system as they systematically produce multiple forms of opacity, uncertainty and discontinuity leading to emotional and psychological distress. The obfuscation of how to fill in the forms correctly is a case in point, and Peters elaborates on how the constantly shifting goalposts impacted on mental health:

You had six weeks to fill it out. Then they changed, you had four weeks. And that's not very long with 20 descriptors, putting your life in the form that you have trouble filling out. So when I got the assessment letter in 2012, I went to pieces.

Assessment processes are ongoing and relentless, regularly repeated and never secure, with the veracity of disabled people's claims persistently called into question. Those whose health conditions or precarious employment means they can only work intermittently undergo re-assessment each time they claim. Claimants repeatedly experience the threat of exclusion from welfare entitlements in embodied felt ways, leaving them vulnerable to the threat of sanctions and demands for compliance and obedience.

Attention to the lived felt experiences generated by these systems and technologies supports Bhattacharyya (2015) claim that despair is not an unintentional consequence of welfare reform but rather a deliberate weakening by the state of citizens' expectations and resistance. DPAC's narratives vividly conjure how austerity's routine production of the emotions of fear, frustration, insecurity and anxiety, coupled with the impoverishment produced through material deprivation, pressure for compliance. Yet at the same time popular consent is sought for the cuts through ideological efforts to apportion moral blame onto disabled claimants. However, neither the production of consent nor the disciplining of obedience are complete, as the numerous resistances worldwide against austerity, including those by DPAC, attest (Hill 2012; Harvey 2012; Cole 2014; della Porta 2017; Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021).

Anti-austerity struggles

As Bhattacharyya argues, to recognise the institutionalisation of despair is not a call to abandon hope but can help us to better understand austerity's processes. It also provides a useful guide for analysing how DPAC's campaign strategies work to contest and undo austerity's racialising, monitoring and despair-inducing tactics and processes.

DPAC's routine work of offering information and support for disabled claimants who are appealing disability assessment decisions is important both in practical and ideological terms. Between 2013 and 2018 more than 550,000 disabled claimants appealing against assessments were successful, an astonishing 50%; whilst successful appeal rates for Personal Independence Allowance (PIP) and Employment support allowance (ESA), benefits supporting people with illness, disability or mental health conditions, were up 76% and 77% respectively in 2019 (Independent Living 2020). As well as restoring material entitlements this was an overwhelming rebuttal of disabled claimants being categorised as 'fraudsters' by the state.

Alongside the 'fraudster' category, the ascription of 'victim' applied to disabled people is also persistent and problematic. Both categorisations are individualising and pathologising narratives that locate disability in individual's bodies rather than in social structures. Clifford explains how this poses problems when resisting austerity:

It's a bit like a tightrope because, yes, we have support needs, we need resources and the city to be built in a way that we can use, but not because one is vulnerable or victim.

DPAC's direct actions in the city are a central strategy for addressing this problematic as they simultaneously exploit and challenge the 'victim' ascription. Since a public outcry in 2010, when the Metropolitan Police dragged Jody McIntyre from his wheelchair during the student riots in London, disabled activists have taken advantage of police anxiety not to be seen as perpetrators of violence. Greene says that this is particularly the case in the city due to heightened public and media attention, which he contrasts with disabled fracking activists who are largely hidden from the press and do not enjoy the same privileges:

There is a clear management technique employed by police or private security, which is to contain and then remove, whether that be with violence or not. But they can't deal with us like that, particularly in the public eye. So we really can own spaces because police beating disabled people is an indefensible position in public opinion... I've always felt these spaces were ours.

So, whilst protesters may ordinarily be kettled and subjected to physical violence, disabled protesters can resist containment and move into spaces that other protestors cannot access, giving them a unique advantage in the battle to occupy space. DPAC exploited this advantage when they occupied the Department of Work and Pensions, and again when they left the building, insisting that their disabilities required them to leave through the front entrance, straight into the media spotlight. Having constructed disabled people as 'other', outside of the borders of equal and inclusive citizenship, the state is hoisted on its own petard (i.e. thwarted by its own strategies) as DPAC simultaneously uses and inverts dominant discourses of power. They appropriate and transform urban space and relations of power through their embodied actions, demonstrating how dominant urbanisation processes deployed by powerful regimes can be disrupted by everyday practices.

DPAC's actions also demonstrate agency and refute the institutionalisation of despair, such as when they occupied the road crossings outside the entrance to the prime minister's residence,

I remember the day outside number 10 when people started moving across these two crossings and it was like, just the energy and the looks of joy on people's faces, red-faced and sweating and laughing, like that space is absolutely deadly and people are exhilarated. (Greene)

These belligerent, joyful and confrontational actions are an effective antidote to the powerlessness that austerity seeks to impose, embodying possibilities for change. They animate and disrupt the disciplinary infrastructures of the city, producing it as a battlefield. As Hande argues, disabled people are 'integral to, rather than unfortunate casualties of, inner-city struggles' (2019, 559). The unexpected, opportunistic, and anarchic character of DPAC's actions demonstrate in praxis Kern and McLean's point that a feminist/queer approach to urban theory holds space 'for that wondrous anarchy... essential for transformative politics' (2017, 420) (see [Figure 7](#)).

DPAC also works to undo the deliberate obfuscations embedded in the assessment forms and appeal processes. Less attention-grabbing and more



Figure 7: Cuts Kill. Road block of Kings Cross, September 2021. Photo by Paula Peter.

mundane than urban actions, but equally important, is the sharing of knowledge amongst campaigners.

If it wasn't for the social media groups and websites, I would have been clueless how to fill that form out... We had to learn the law to try and change this law. We had to learn our rights, to defend other people's rights ... Knowledge is power. (Peters)

DPAC also inverts austerity's monitoring processes, placing the state and its agents under suspicion, with a similar destabilising effect,

When we have a silent protest outside the job centre, outside an assessment centre, it rattles the establishment. When we go into Parliament, it rattles them. When we watched them in their Select committee hearings, it rattles them. When we protest out there, it frightens them. When we sit in the public gallery, they don't like it. (Peters)

This demonstrates how understanding austerity's technologies, tactics and discourses is not only important for understanding them but also for resisting them. Harvey (2012, 2014) argues that the right to the city is an active process of constructing a better world for ourselves, which then enables us to re-make ourselves. But by examining the right to the city through the situated lens of the body, we attend to the reverse direction of travel whereby the remaking the self (as agent not victim, as obstructive not compliant, as visible not excluded, as joyful not despairing) contributes to the remaking of the city. As scholars

have argued, attention to the body offers insights into unexpected, undecided possibilities for disruption and resistance (Kern and McLean 2017; Ruddick et al. 2018), whilst grounded, 'sweaty' analyses of the body can illuminate structures and strategies of power.

Routes to post-capitalism

The social model of disability (SMD) emerged explicitly in conjunction with a disability movement that sought to overthrow capitalism (Finkelstein 1980). As disability was understood to be constructed by the organisation of capitalism, the only route for disabled people's full equality was therefore through political-economic re-organisation *outside* of capitalism, to be achieved by seizing control of the resources and discourse (Finkelstein 1980, 2007; Oliver 2013; Russell 2019). DPAC accords with this view. As Clifford says, 'it's not possible to have full disability equality until we get rid of capitalism'. But in practice their strategies are not necessarily linear or direct. Being anti-austerity demands policy reform but is not necessarily anti-capitalist. Meanwhile, DPAC's positioning as an identity campaign, fighting for its own group's needs, could be critiqued as insufficient to the task of driving radical social transformation (Harvey 1996): theoretically because class relations are claimed to underpin all social inequalities and pragmatically because identity politics threaten to fragment and weaken class resistance. And indeed, DPAC does contribute to reformist policy collaborations. For example, they worked on the Independent Living strategy (ROFA 2019), which supports service-users' individual needs within a welfare capitalist and individualised human rights model. So, given that DPAC situate this work within an anti-capitalist agenda, it is instructive to look at how they manage the dichotomies of identity/class and reform/structural change.

The Independent Living strategy proposes that support is delivered by a user-led and cooperative organisational structure, which shifts policy governance towards grassroots autonomy and away from the imperatives of capital. Similarly, DPAC worked with the Commission on Social Security to produce a policy white paper, but this is led by people with lived experience of the benefits system to inform alternative visions for organising welfare. Greene's work with *Disability Action in Islington* also shapes organisational structures for disabled service-users to steer their social service provision and additionally proposes that in the long-term they own and control resources,

So ideas of what a social care system might look like in the future. We are speaking about new forms of ownership and preparing the Disabled People's Organisations to be able to take the money that councils currently get to manage social care locally. So people like Virgin Care, United, those big industry players that currently organise the whole care system; instead looking at co-ops and local organisations developing, not just a service, but developing community-owned assets, self-controlled services. So, organising on the ground and reclaiming and redistributing some of the power and wealth that currently those big elites have. And using state services in the first instance to retake some of that battleground.

These projects, whilst located within welfare capitalist structures, are nevertheless building governance structures that devolve control downwards, away from capitalist logic and control. In the short term, these strategies counter austerity's attack on reproduction and in the longer term they prepare for post-capitalist forms of user-led ownership and political control over the means of reproduction. Radical political action requires gaining control of resources and services to subvert the state's political and bureaucratic grip on civil society (Barnes and Mercer 2010; Merrifield 2013). Even Marx and Engels commented that improving the material conditions of the working class better positions them to forward an anti-capitalist revolution (Hill 2012), an and/also approach that is echoed by Greene who acknowledges an immediate need to contest austerity, yet accompanying it with supporting people 'to think further down the line' about structural change and building a post-capitalist society. As DPAC's (2019) introduction to the Independent Living strategy states,

That struggle will take different forms at different times... It is important that we do not lose sight of the bigger picture that we are fighting for, of a society where each person is valued for their diverse, personal worth rather than their ability to labour and produce profit.

Meanwhile, DPAC's direct actions explicitly attack private corporations that profit from the care market. They exposed the role of Atos, the multinational IT company that was delivering the UK disability welfare assessments, in disability denial and the ensuing deaths through actions across numerous UK cities. In a breathtaking feat of hypocrisy, Atos sponsored the 2012 London Paralympics Games, so DPAC simultaneously performed their own 'Atos Games'. There was a podium for medals, 'Congratulations, you have been found fit for work, here's a gold medal' (Clifford) and 'miracle tents' where people had disability assessments and were pronounced cured.

We raised awareness of how toxic the work capability programme was, how toxic this government was, how toxic these companies were.... We had 400 people there and the press were all over us... Before that people weren't making the connection that Atos were the contractor. The only way the companies understand is when you hit them in the profit margin. So you trash their reputation. (Peters)

These strategies to inflict reputational damage resulted in diminishing share prices and recruitment problems for Atos, leading to the company prematurely buying their way out of their £400 m state contract (Gentleman 2015) (see Figure 8).

When Maximus, a US healthcare company, took over the Atos contract, DPAC proceeded to expose their involvement in Medicaid fraud and disability discrimination,

We called them Maximarse (*laughs*) and we had bare bums on T-shirts and badges, saying 'Maximarse', and we started trashing their reputation. They couldn't recruit... We made it toxic to work for any government provider. And a year later the Maximus share prices dived by thirty percent. (Peters)

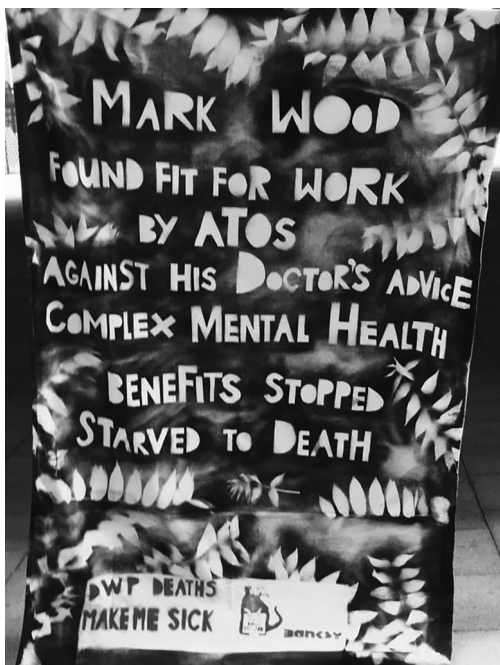


Figure 8: Mark Wood found fit for work by Atos: starved to death. July 2018. Photo by Paula Peters.

DPAC's creative, provocative actions in the city demonstrate the capacity for micro-resistances to disrupt the macro-accumulation processes of global capital.

DPAC's irreverent slogans find an echo in Springer's (2016) 'Fuck neoliberalism' thesis that explicates the power of such slogans to express rage against neoliberalism's 'noxious malice' (286), reject its violent inequities and renounce its avaricious cycles of accumulation. Most crucially, the slogans offer a rallying cry for an alternative prefigurative politics that can 'embrace the conviviality and joy that comes with being together as radical equals' (287). As Clifford says,

It's transformational. It's seeing people so empowered because they're being pushed down their whole lives and here they're kicking back a bit. And for me I especially love it when we're cheeky, when we're being challenging. It's really important for disabled people to feel that they're taking the piss out of the system... Because disabled people can get away with things that other people can't. And that's because of the marginalised place we're given in society that allows us to do it, but it's exploiting this position. So at one of the Tory party conferences in Manchester, we were throwing plastic balls at the Tory delegates as they went in, which is naughty. Paula goes, 'balls to the budget' *this* far from a policeman, who was trying not to laugh... and that makes me happy.

Inclusive solidarities of care

is a point echoed by feminist scholars who argue that focusing on messy unpredictable sites of collaborative practices can illuminate possibilities for radical alternative futures (Kern and McLean 2017; Ruddick et al. 2018). This is demonstrated in the ways that DPAC organises its actions. Jeffries (2018) emphasised the importance of social reproductive processes, such as washing, cooking and caring, for enabling the 2011–13 urban protest encampments: but reproductive processes are necessary for even one-off street actions by disabled activists. Due to the range of physical impairments and multiple social barriers producing disability, DPAC needs to carefully plan strategies of mutual care in advance of its protests (Clifford 2020), from financial help for transport to physical assistance on site.

The way that we organise a protest is always collectively and it's very inclusive and accessible. So, we've almost got a microcosm of what future society could look like, because we have to be very interdependent and we work together. (Clifford)

As such, DPAC are producing 'micro-worlds of alternative urban relationships' (Kern and McLean 2017, 418) by enacting 'horizontal relationships and forms of organization that strive to reflect the future society being sought' (Springer 2016, 287). These embodied practices are thus worthy of academic attention because they have the potential to constitute what is possible at scale, a potential that is captured by the description of these micro-practices as 'worldmaking' (Kern and McLean 2017) or 'mondialization' (Ruddick et al. 2018).

DPAC's model of collaborative care also helps shift the discourse of 'dependency', re-presenting it as a positive and progressive value. People with impairments are not excluded because of what they cannot do but instead the diverse skills amongst a solidarity group are recognised, supported and put to use for the common good,

What's great is we all bring different skill sets. Some are great with social media, some are great with direct action, some are great at talking to the media, some are great at lobbying MPs, some are great at doing research. It's horses for courses, what you're good at. (Peters)

Significantly, DPAC centre their struggles on the reproduction of life, the right to reproduce the self and others, which feminists have argued is the "point zero" of anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial struggle' (Jeffries 2018, 580). Rather than emphasising the role of social reproduction in the *exchange* value of the capitalist relations of production, disabled activists centre its *use* value for the reproduction of the self and other (Vogel 2019). DPAC's struggles for subsistence and survival therefore provide orientation for alternative visions of a post-capitalist society that privileges care over competition, collectivism over individualism and reproduction over production.

Not just the mode of solidarity but also its inclusivity and reach are important. The SMD has been criticised for the crudeness of its 'disabled' category that insufficiently accounts for the diversity or barriers of impairment. However, this crudeness is favourable to building a broad inclusive campaign, able to bring people with diverse impairments together into a broad-based

solidarity, expanded even further in Clifford's (2020) re-invigorated SMD model that includes people with mental health conditions. Disabled people are a heterogeneous group, but as a whole they face a range of structurally-induced exclusions. They are one of the largest groups in the UK experiencing poverty (around four million), whilst another three million people living in households where there is a disability also live in poverty (JRF 2020). Together their common experiences could provide the motivation and critical mass necessary to effect structural transformation.

Hande (2019) worked with disabled activists in a stigmatised neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada, who also used broad and expanded definitions of disability. Whilst the SMD's notion of 'disabled' refers broadly to the ways that capitalist social organisation disables people with impairments (from buses without stair lifts to jobs without flexibility), 'disablement' refers more pointedly to a wide range of harms inflicted by global capitalism to the extent that bodies and minds are damaged and transformed: a term so clearly applicable to disabled welfare claimants whose survival is threatened by austerity. Defining 'disablement' in these terms expands disability consciousness to include all those who have been harmed by a range of capitalist violences, including austerity but also, for example, gentrification, displacement and labour precarity. This highlights the causal link between global capitalist processes and disablement, which contests the pathologisation of stigmatised individuals. Inner-city neighbourhoods are a key battleground in this respect as they concentrate populations harmed by global capitalism, as evidenced by the exponential growth of addiction, HIV and AIDS, hepatitis C, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other forms of 'mental illness' in these centres (Hande 2019). Yet, as Hande argues, this also situates disabled activists on the frontlines of a range of urban struggles, which are facilitating a more radical expansive disability politics. As one of the Toronto activists comments, 'we were doing a kind of organizing that wasn't really being done, where disability was being fore-fronted but we were talking about immigration and we're talking about poverty and looking at systemic oppression and focusing on disability' (Hande 2019, 569).

DPAC are similarly concerned to connect with wider urban struggles. They do this by positioning themselves against austerity (*Disabled People Against Cuts*) which points them outwards towards the wider set of movements fighting against austerity and for social reproduction, such as demands for adequate housing, healthcare, food, fuel and services; and also solidarity with other groups marginalised by government policies (see Figures 9-11).

As Peters says,

DPAC's about everyone and for everybody who's been impacted, against austerity ... We work with trade unions, we work with a great many different groups... Because it is what it says, *Disabled People against Cuts*. We firmly and passionately believe in solidarity and supporting one another's campaigns... What disappoints many of us, they see disabled people, well it's only about benefits. Well, we use libraries, we use the trains, we use the buses, we use the hospital, we used GP services, we have children who have been hit by education cuts and budget cuts. It's everything. And I think what's great with DPAC, we look at the bigger picture.



Figure 9: DPAC supporting anti-racist campaigns. Instagram posts by Paula Peters.



Figure 10: DPAC supporting the striking black taxi cab workers in Parliament Square. March 2019. Photo by Paula Peters.



Figure 11: Rights not Charity—Solidarity Across nations. July 2018. Photo by Paula Peters.

The work of DPAC and the Toronto activists refute arguments by scholars such as Harvey (2012) that class, not identity, must be foregrounded to maximise the critical mass and impact of urban activism, due to the risk that so many identity/single-issue campaigns will fracture resistance. Against this, this paper argues that the focus needs to be on how to bring fragmented campaigns and multiple anti-capitalist struggles together and that building disability/disablement consciousness and resistance is a way to do it.

Hande (2019) argues that a disability consciousness focused on the breaking down of bodies through the violences of capitalism produces a radical disability activism distinct from more traditional disability struggles for rights, pride and inclusion. DPAC, however, draws on both these approaches, reaching out widely to a range of anti-capitalist political struggles that then feed back into strengthening disabled identity and resistance. As Clifford explains,

Partly because of DPAC's profile ... since 2010, (more) disabled people have come out as disabled ... because they feel more powerful now ... We have DPAC members on most of the different committees for the different unions and we probably identify first as DPAC, and that's because it's a positive identity.

DPAC can therefore be regarded as an identity group *in* itself and *for* the working class. They demonstrate that political resistance can engage in identity politics *and* propose a radical class politics enabling self-confidence and broad solidarities to be developed, providing a better chance for driving radical change. Seeking commonalities also helps erode the racializing and divisive borders that austerity attempts to construct. With disabled people a long-standing part of the increasing surplus populations, now is the time to build common cause against austerity capitalism (Shaw and Waterstone 2019; Mayer 2020).

Conclusion

A structural capitalist analysis has situated disabled people's experiences within a broader temporal and theoretical frame, indicating how disability has

been constructed as an exclusionary category since industrial urbanisation, mobilised in new ways during austerity capitalism to produce new forms of labour exploitation and accumulation by dispossession, and producing new forms of coercion and consent.

Attention to the grounded experiences of disabled claimants has provided a more detailed understanding of Bhattacharyya's (2015) argument that post-colonial processes of racialisation are being extended to new populations during austerity, as monitoring and bordering processes, deployed across welfare assessment systems and everyday spaces, constrain disabled people's entitlement to social goods, social reproduction, public space and democratic participation. Disabled claimants are framed as guilty until proved innocent and repeatedly put on trial. The analysis also captures the endlessly repetitive ways that obfuscation and uncertainty have been systematically built into welfare's technologies, with a range of coercive strategies contributing to psychological distress and ontological insecurity, thus supporting Bhattacharyya's claim that the production of despair is deliberately institutionalised to coerce obedience. Yet ideological work to produce consent is also required to justify these moves, so a post-consent politics is by no means total.

This is clearly indicated by the mass political resistance that austerity has engendered. Whilst Marx (2013 [1867]) did not consider the 'lumpenproletariat' had any revolutionary potential as they lacked class consciousness, the actions of DPAC and the many others resisting austerity demonstrate that the stagnant and disposable class has great potential for radical action. Understanding the micro-ways that austerity capitalism is deployed and experienced, via both consent and coercion, also helps formulate strategies of resistance: as illuminated through the analysis of how DPAC works to contest and undo its processes, such as sharing knowledge to dispel its obfuscations, inverting its monitoring processes to claim power and deploying joyous irreverent actions to resist its pathologisation and despair.

The city is a key site for DPAC's actions as disabled people can occupy material sites of power and attract and exploit media attention for their own ends. Their everyday practices of collaborative care suggest different ways of being in the city, able to generative a wider vision of the 'relations, solidarities, and possibilities that embody the spirit of the city that we wish for' (Kern and McLean 2017, 421). From the inter-dependent mutual support during street actions to developing user-led organisational practices, disabled people's resistances speak to Harvey's (2012) call for a 'right to the city' reinvented by collective rights and power. DPAC's embodied, messy, undecided small-scale actions thus produce a prefigurative 'worldmaking' politics that opens up and constitutes possibilities for post-capitalist futures at wider scales (Springer 2016; Kern and McLean 2017; Ruddick et al. 2018; McLean 2018).

Moreover, the ontological *form* of the city provides a concentrated 'centrality' with the potential to bring difference together, creating opportunities for productive and radical gatherings (Ruddick et al. 2018) and expanding critical mass. DPAC exploits this potential through contributing to a whole range of human rights, anti-austerity and anti-capitalist campaigns emerging from austerity urbanism (Peck 2012). As highlighted by Hande (2019), these groups represent a whole range of people who have been disabled through austerity,

their bodies and minds harmed and transformed by global capitalism. As such, these various groups, all emerging in the context of austerity urbanism, can be brought together into an expanded disability consciousness to produce new solidarities for action. This situates disabled people on the frontlines and at the forefront of a range of urban struggles, well-placed to unite fragmented campaigns.

Examining DPAC's micro-resistance in terms of the wider processes of capitalism therefore helps to build a wider, inclusive politics. The potential for identity and issue-based movements to drive broader structural change started to be recognised during the 2011 Occupy and Arab Spring mobilisations (Harvey 2012) and DPAC's positioning as an identity group *in* itself but *for* the working class suggests the benefits of a flexible and pluralist campaigning approach. It enabled them to reach out to wider anti-capitalist struggles yet at the same time strengthen disability identity and its potential for leading resistance. It means that DPAC can simultaneously campaign for individualised civil rights within a reformist welfare capitalist frame, at the same time as forwarding a radical anti-capitalist agenda. With the longer-term goal always in mind, they are arguably exactly the right group to be engaging with current policy as the models of collective organisation and ownership they are developing can contribute to envisaging a post-capitalist future. Disabled people's long-term experience of exclusion by capitalism means that they are well used to formulating alternatives outside of its logic and central to this is prioritising the *use* value of social reproduction, with its privileging of collective care and protection of the entitlement to survival.

Disabled people are often ignored in mainstream academic debates about capitalism and resistance, no doubt, as Clifford (2020) argues, exactly because capitalism has so effectively excluded them from production, society and minds. They are too often understood as passive recipients of care and marginal

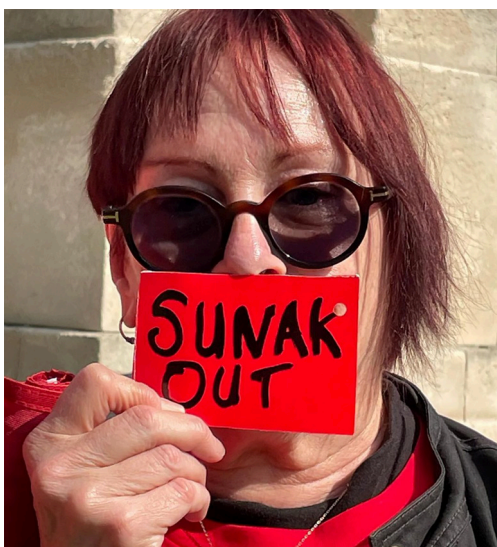


Figure 12: Resisting Rishi Sunak's Spring Statement with a £9bn mini-budget of tax cuts that had no support for disabled people and the most vulnerable households, responded to the biggest squeeze on living standards on records by targeting better-off workers.

to capitalism's processes, rather than active agents and integral to capitalism's processes. But analysis of disability and its activism makes a highly relevant contribution to wider debates on austerity capitalism, resistance to it and the form that 'twenty first century socialism' might take (Cole 2014; Hill 2012; Harvey 2012; Shaw and Waterstone 2019). This paper hopes to spur more debate that recognises disabled people as not simply worthy of inclusion, but as being integral to the analysis of urban change, theory and action (see Figure 12).

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