

Abstract: This paper attempts a reconstruction of the ontological account of disablement put forward by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS): a small, but historically important group of disabled activists in Britain, active between 1972 and 1990. Following Walter Benjamin's (2003 [1940]) imperative to read the past as a terrain of danger and failing social reproduction, I situate UPIAS's theoretical innovations within a metatheoretical moment of crisis. UPIAS responded to an incoherent disability settlement (led by the state) and a mass counter-hegemonic movement both collapsing under the weight of their internal contradictions by interrogating the underlying causes and incentive structures of disability as a form of social oppression. Their resultant argument, unfolding across productive and reproductive structures of capitalist economies, characterised disablement as a recursive 'by-product' of bourgeois societies; highly vulnerable, and responsive, to capitalism's crisis tendencies, class struggle, and institutional competition (UPIAS: 2023 [1981]). The strategic outcomes of this analysis – which identified disability as a mode of social abstraction, generated jointly but heterogeneously by struggles over production, distribution, and the management of surplus populations – challenge contemporary activist and scholarly orthodoxies. 'Disability' is located, in this analysis, not in the commonality of traits or authentic representation of a particular group, but in the shifting and contradictory needs of market economies and state-building projects which often produce disablement impersonally and arbitrarily. Activist responses, then, should exist at the level of conflicts over power and control of social infrastructure, rather than reliance on pluralistic, representative, or consultative frameworks to 'right' questions of inequality or injustice. Approaching such a response, I indicate, requires an analytic and strategic approach focussed on the fragility of disabling social structures, and the gaps in their reproduction where emancipatory control can be collectively seized by disabled people.

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Usable and dangerous histories

Histories of Disabled People's Movements (DPMs) have, in the main, aspired to the construction of what Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky call a 'usable past'¹ – which, simultaneously, makes sense of our present by the tracing of continuities (whether of values, oppressions, or collective aims) between our predecessors and ourselves, while providing an historical example by which to transform our shared future. These histories have their pantheon of great men and women – Ed Roberts and Judy Heumann in the US, John Evans and Jane Campbell in Britain, and Siegfried Braun in Austria and the Czech lands (whose pioneering work and personal heroism are only now coming to light).² The purpose of each, and their supporting casts of (often nameless) comrades and co-thinkers, is to demonstrate: firstly, a causal chain which stamps contemporary analysis with a respectable lineage, and explains the distance travelled between their time and now; secondly, to assert a quasi-teleological narrative of final victory. The road is long, the movement historian acknowledges, but great obstacles have been overcome before by men and women armed with the same ideas and orientation as us. To take their example and to continue their struggle is (eventually) our guarantor of freedom.

My purpose in this paper, the reconstruction of an analysis of disablement from within the British DPM that is both ontological and socio-political, is twofold – one (at least nominally) compatible with the 'usable past' approach, the other opposed to its methods (while, I believe, loyal to its ethical and political impulse). The first of these is a contribution to ameliorating what two Dutch comrades have recently called the problem of 'Disability Heritagization'³; the fact that disabled people's liberation struggles have fared comparatively worse in the popular imagination and contemporary research cultures than those of women, LGBTQ+ and racialised people⁴. One of many consequences is that the kind of intellectual-political histories now common for other movements – which treat activist theorists with the same dignity as professionalised intellectuals, and take their disagreements as seriously as one would the poles of a scholarly debate⁵ – are lacking for the DPM. An explication of one critical position from this movement's history, then, provides some small step to equalising this discrepancy.

The second is to indicate the dangers of reading 'usability' backwards through time, and of the assumption of omniscience accompanying such a view. To approach our past this way presumes us moderns to have an uncomplicated grasp of our own position, sorting and ordering our predecessors (selecting the most relevant people, actions, and campaigns) according to their trajectory towards the present as we

¹ 2001: p,23

² For an (English language) political biography of Braun; see Schoenweise & Wegscheider: 2021

³ Pollaert & van Trigt: Forthcoming

⁴ This claim, itself, contains an absurdity which demonstrates Pollaert and van Trigt's point. Impairment closely tracks poverty and, thereby, the demographic features of oppressed groups in general. Movements of the dispossessed should, therefore, be considered as disproportionately movements of disabled people – regardless of (and in combination with) their primary identification. That the fact of impairment within these movements is more commonly treated as either incidental or individualised belies the bad infinity (*schlechte undendlichkeit*) of contemporary heritagization agendas – which have succeeded only, hitherto, in setting voluntarist memorial against voluntarist memorial, unspoken hierarchy against unspoken hierarchy.

⁵ Cf, *inter alia*, Stevenson: 2019; Robinson: 2007; Williams: 2022

understand it. As Walter Benjamin noted, this approach manifests a two-fold political error for radical movements. In the first instance, it incentivises conservatism – there is nothing so corrupting as the belief that one is swimming with history’s tide; carried forward by analyses, tactics, and slogans whose success is ‘verified’ by the reforms which followed them.⁶ In the second, we willingly abandon weapons in our struggle against oppression by declining to read our past in its own terms. The ‘usability’ approach stresses, reasonably, the knowledge which the historian holds and her subject cannot – that of the train of subsequent events. There is equally, however, a knowledge held by those before us which we lack and desperately need. This is their recognition of the fissures of the society in which they lived and which threatened to make it precarious – the gaps which may have caused structures of oppression to *fail to reproduce* if appropriate leverage were applied.⁷ To imagine we can identify these retrospectively or in our own time via a chain of historical causation and example is not only to assert our current understanding of ourselves as *ne plus ultra*; but to imagine every step leading to it to have been optimal – with no losses or wrong turns in our constructed lineage.

To state the obvious, capturing this knowledge begins with taking seriously what our predecessors’ said about the conditions of their oppression, their analyses of its whys and wherefores, and the opportunities they saw for its transcendence or abolition. Ontological arguments – those concerned with the nature of a phenomenon and its imbrications with others – are a fruitful starting point. They not only state explicitly how an activist formation thought their world worked, but imply significant political and theoretical contestation within the movement (if we all agreed on what constituted our position, there would be little point outlining it). An argument may be on the winning or losing side of this contestation; it’s supporters or opponents may be able to steer movement development, strategy and tactics. If it loses, such an argument must account for its failure to convince others in its premises or implications. The winning side is also forced to explain whether its explanation of the world was, or remains, as insightful and politically efficient as the position it vanquished.

This paper unapologetically presents a minority position in the British DPM – although much of its terminology and rhetorical flair was taken up by Movement’s mainstream, and used with little regard to its original substance. This is the social definition of disablement as originally outlined by members of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) – a small and militant group which stood in the vanguard of the DPM in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, but which became increasingly sidelined by other factions thereafter. The power of UPIAS’s argument

⁶ Benjamin: 2003 [1940], Thesis XI

⁷ It is these conjunctures of frailty in the existing order of things that I take Benjamin to be referring to as the ‘danger’ which threaten both ‘the content of tradition and its receivers’ (‘Die Gefaehr droht sowohl dem Bestand der Traditionen, wie ihren Empfaengern’), and to which we must hold fast (festzuhalten) in each of its historical and contemporary moments (ibid. Thesis VI).

lies not in a simple identification of disablement (as arbitrary restriction of activity and autonomy imposed on functionally different humans) with social factors – a claim which pre-dated UPIAS, and was broad enough to accommodate multiple and contradictory interpretations – but in its analysis of disablement as inherent to the dynamics of a particular type of society; capitalism in its developed, (post-)industrial form. By the real subsumption of labour power to capital, such societies not only necessitate disablement as (absolute or relative) exclusion from social production and social life; but establish the incentives, infrastructure, and regimes of technical knowledge for it to constitute a subterranean sphere of domination. Simultaneously, the crisis tendencies of capital, and the conflicting institutional and professional interests generated by its competitive dynamics, recursively undermine and throw into chaos the management of the surplus population marked out as ‘disabled’. Within this latter process, where structures of disablement struggle to reproduce themselves, UPIAS highlighted opportunities for disabled people to claw collective control over their lives from their oppressors’ hands, and to join in struggle with other oppressed groups.

Moments of crisis in the reproduction of a social order are metatheoretical as well as theoretical. They are not only what activist-theory grasps and explains in abstract form, but the conditions for theory itself – it’s jumping off point, presenting those engaged in social struggle with problems for which previous analyses equip them poorly. The next section of this paper outlines the development of a transparently incoherent re-interpretation of disability as a social problem by the British state in the ‘Golden Age’ of welfarism after the Second World War, and the collapse of bottom-up attempts to transform the subsequent settlement by activist-formations of disabled people and non-disabled professionals. The failure of these counter-hegemonic campaigns, and their leaders’ eventual capitulation to the state and exploitation of their disabled base, posed the question of why integrating disabled people into the social mainstream proved so intractable, and why attempts to do so generated unstable and self-destructive political coalitions. The subsequent section describes UPIAS’s answer to these questions; rooted in its understanding of disablement as a necessary corollary of capitalist production, and consequently a problem of social management which creates and formalises contradictory interests and positions, whose conflicts generate emergent properties. In the final section, I attempt to briefly explain the reasons why this analysis was largely forgotten, before generating some provisional research questions based upon it.

The Post-war State and its (inconsistent) discontents

There is an understandable temptation to read the relationship between war and disablement as located below the level of formal politics⁸, transforming relations of

⁸ I use ‘politics’/‘formal politics’ in this paper to mean power relations explicitly formalised through the state’s policy and assessment mechanisms (whether the party system, government departments, judicial system, etc), as distinct from social struggles where oppressed people transform their conditions of life independently of policy actors. My justification for doing so stems from Marx’s (1844) critique of

power between impaired people, para-state institutions, and informal hierarchies without requiring an immediate policy response. War is always a mass impairment event; and the fusion of economy, military, and medicine which it necessitates revolutionises medical and social responses to injuries suffered in service. The disabled soldier, lionised by war propaganda and required as a worker for post-war reconstruction (or redeployment to the front), finds himself well placed to negotiate the conditions of his rehabilitation with a medical-bureaucratic system which offering him more (in terms of aids, equipment, status, and treatment) than at any previous time. In the process, his and his communities' expectations of social integration are raised, and the state only steps in to formalise or regulate the outcomes already being produced.⁹

This reads, however, disability solely in terms of social processes which people with impairments are already emmeshed in. Wars and their end, typically, constitute larger scale nation-building projects and transformations of citizen categories and forms of governance; often with a decohering effect on the positions of marginalised groups. Disabled people in Britain increasingly became subject to state building policies; but only 'indirectly, via more politically expedient issues'¹⁰, rather than as a population granted conceptual coherency or ascribed a distinct policy focus. The foundation of the National Health Service effectively nationalised the hodgepodge of local 'hospitals' where disabled people had been incarcerated, but without significantly transforming their degrading and stultifying conditions. Generous, non-means tested benefits were allocated to those impaired in war or industrial work, while those whose impaired via any other means (disproportionately women) were restricted to poverty-level discretionary benefits. Employment subsidies and placements existed, but generally only for adults with a pre-impairment history of employment. Outside of the pre-existing lobby frameworks for blind and D/deaf people; the state's primary concern was with whether an impairment was caused by legitimated forms of labour – not the impairment itself, the person living with it, or their socio-economic conditions.¹¹

The arbitrariness of this settlement exacerbated grievances against how impossible it was for many to live under. A worker impaired on the job received significant resources to keep him living in his home and community, and to re-enter the workforce at the earliest opportunity (in effect nearly doubling his income). His colleague, if hit by a bus travelling to work, would be restricted to benefits set just below subsistence levels, reliant on his family to perform personal support around their work commitments or forced into a soul destroying institution. Women, generally excluded from all but part-time and informal work by sexism, were left destitute by the tax contributions which opened entitlement to welfare. A significant and multifaceted movement formed in the 1950s and '60s in response; contesting

politics and the state as alienated social relationships, applied to the question of war and politics by Balibar (2010)

⁹ For accounts of this type see, for example: Elsey: 1997; Bonfiglioli Stagni *et al*: 2015

¹⁰ Hampton: 2016, p.85

¹¹ For a more detailed description of this policy settlement, see Hampton: 2016, pp.48-82; Millward: 2015, pp.281-3

everything from conditions in long-stay hospitals and government nursing homes, to criteria for cash benefits, to the specific driving regulations attached to adapted vehicles.

These formations were heterogeneous, but at a general level we can discern three commonalities in them. Firstly, they were uneven collaborations of a vanguard of liberal professionals – social workers, sociologists, rehabilitation professionals, political insiders, etc – and a lay disabled membership and mobilising base.¹² The division of labour between these groups was aggressively asserted by their leaderships. In the Cheshire Foundation and the Spastics Society – ‘crusader’ charities, which initially aimed at building anti-institutional group living arrangements for disabled people¹³ – service users were expected to fundraise and propagandise for the building of radical new services, but denied any representation on policy making bodies, and threatened with expulsion or publicly humiliated if they objected too strongly to management diktat¹⁴. In the Disablement Income Group (DIG) – the large benefits lobby – disabled members produced its street level politics (public meetings, demonstrations, propaganda), while its demands and strategy were set by a small group of academics and politicians who had access to negotiating partners within government¹⁵.

Secondly, each group was situated, to borrow a phrase from a later activist-collective, in and against the state.¹⁶ The residential charities were opposed to the state’s tactics of locking up disabled people in unbearable hospitals and care homes, but relied heavily on funding from the hospital boards and councils which ran them to survive; while DIG (whose demands could only be granted by central government) required cabinet ministers, their advisors, and civil servants to sit down with them. Even the self-organised blind groups, typically more autonomous than other disability organisations, were heavily constrained by government-constructed policy forums.¹⁷

Thirdly, each movement organisation at its outset tried to respond to the incoherence of the disability category. DIG was most explicit, demanding that the state recognise disability as a ‘category of being’¹⁸ within the British citizenry with corresponding rights and entitlements; while consumer and trade union groups attempted to subsume the fractured disabled identity to a subset of recognised interest groups (drivers, workers, tenants, etc). The de-institutional charities attempted coherence by the back door through consolidating rights-claims with appeals to welfare facilitation. Disabled people were united with the rest of the population by rights to domestic autonomy and social recognition, and only distinct through the specific infrastructure required to achieve it.¹⁹ If housing and industrial

¹² Notable exceptions here include consumers organisations of adapted vehicles (the Disabled Drivers’ Association, Disabled Drivers Motor Club), and the blind trade union the National League of the Blind.

¹³ J. Hunt: 2019, p.27

¹⁴ J. Hunt: 2019, pp.32-45; Beesley: 2024

¹⁵ Hampton: 2016, pp.189-90

¹⁶ London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group: 1979

¹⁷ Reiss: 2015, pp.156-9

¹⁸ DIG: 1965

¹⁹ Cf. Cheshire Foundation: 1958; Spastics Society 1962

strategies were required to give these rights to the working class, analogous housing and employment measures would be required to grant them to disabled people.

In combination, these factors were volatile and unstable. The unravelling of the post-war disability movement looks different for each radical group²⁰, but the overall dynamic can be plausibly drawn in a thumbnail. The state, holding the whip hand over opponents who were dependent on it to survive, exploited its leverage to use radical groups for its own policy agendas. The residential charities were compelled to address gaps in Health Service provision and local authority housing, with conditions attached which imported medical and bureaucratic elements into group facilities of the kind these charities had initially opposed. For DIG and the blind organisations; central government effectively stonewalled discussion of all but the most milquetoast reforms, forcing their policy representatives to either accept outcomes unacceptable to their members, or walk away empty handed. The acquiescence of DIG, Cheshire Foundation, and Spastics Society leaders to this pressure appalled their disabled grassroots; and more-or-less strident anti-leadership mobilisations occurred across all three. The professional and leadership castes, anxious variously to defend their authority and exploit the opportunities opened by integration into state resource- and policy-systems, responded disproportionately. In the residential charities, newsletter editors were leant on to censor residents' views and publish offensive caricatures of them by staff and management,²¹ and residents control over propaganda organs and fundraising bodies was wound down. In DIG, the leadership raised a censorious uproar against members who publicly criticised its negotiation policy, and ignored its own democratic processes when they contradicted leadership strategy. Both this outright hostility, and demobilisation of the disabled grassroots that went along with it, required justification; and leaders adjusted their characterisations of disablement accordingly. DIG effectively accepted the government's insistence that different sections of the disabled population should have different entitlements, and satisfied itself with arguing over the minutia of eligibility rules. For the Cheshire Foundation and the Spastics Society, recognition claims were replaced by appeals to paternalism and vulnerability. Disabled people's needs were redefined from facilitative (requiring certain policies or resource distribution to enjoy the same rights as other) to a need for overbearing protection – first from the trauma (supposedly) associated with impairment, and later from the discrimination of the wider social world.²²

Characterising the crisis: the source of disablement and responses to vacillation

To return to our theme of danger, disabled activists in this period experienced two interlocking moments of failed social and institutional reproduction. The first, from the

²⁰ For a description of their collapse focussed on the residential charities see Beesley: 2022 & Forthcoming. From the perspective of blind organisations see Reiss: 2015. For a description focussed on incomes campaigns see Hampton: 2016, pp,198-232

²¹ Cheshire: 1965; J.Hunt: 2019, p.51

²² Cheshire: 1964; Loring: 1971

mid-1950s to around 1970²³, was a liberatory challenge to an unbearable status quo. In an ascendant movement, disabled activists had shaped prefigurative forms of communal living which demonstrated the inadequacy of existing provision. The expansion of these projects, housing thousands by the end of the '60s²⁴, showed hegemonic models of warehousing and segregation to be arbitrary and replaceable. Through incomes and trade union campaigns, disabled activists caused a rupture in the governing Labour Party; in which its backbenches (supported by Party conference) pushed a series of the Movement's demands into law against their government's wishes, only for Ministers to contrive to make the subsequent Act impossible to implement²⁵. As the sociologist Peter Townsend noted in the middle of these events, disabled activists had forced an agenda onto the political stage whose response required 'a reconstruction of society and schooling new attitudes in the entire population'.²⁶

The institutional and epistemological projects which mounted this challenge had, however, collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions. Between 1964 and 1974²⁷, movement formations became less democratic, coercive to their grassroots, and increasingly organs for professional opportunity hoarding rather than popular reform – asserting, in the process, opportunistic definitions of disablement against their disabled base²⁸. The initial, and understandable, response from many activists living was to purge their movement of this vacillating professional element, while maintaining as much of the underlying ideology which inspired past mobilisations as possible. While holding on to the critiques of medicalisation and individual rights claims generated in the movement previously, existing groups led by disabled people attempted to extricate themselves from professionally dominated campaign settings; while new groups of people with learning difficulties, spinal injuries and mental distress constitutionally barred non-disabled people from their decision-making bodies. Where the previous movement leadership had defined disablement to suit their own interests, grassroots activists now performed an inversion. The watchword of the 'new politics' was 'to speak for ourselves, do everything for ourselves'.²⁹ The nature of disability was, accordingly, associated closely with the experience and self-reflection of disabled people – articulated against the status ascribed them by entrenched institutional actors.³⁰

²³ A rough periodisation running between the founding of the Spastics Society and expansion drive of the Cheshire Foundation, and the passing of the Chronically Sick and Disabled People's Act (1970)

²⁴ Hunt: 2019, p.25

²⁵ Hampton: 2016, pp.158-60

²⁶ Townsend: 1966, p.vi

²⁷ A timeline beginning with the failure of Cheshire Foundation residents to secure representation on Management Committees, and ending with the National Federation of the Blind's attempts to exit charity dominated political coalitions.

²⁸ Middle class reformers first allying with, then seeking to dominate, an oppressed group in pursuit of sectoral and status goals is, of course, not unique to disability-related movements. For what I take to be the classical description of its dynamics, and consequent social problem framing devices, see Nancy Wood's (1982) work on 19th Century feminist and Christian 'rescue' missions amongst working class women.

²⁹ People First activist, quoted in Shearer: 1981, p.177

³⁰ Ibid: p.182

UPIAS distinguished itself by arguing that this response was tactically necessary, but analytically naïve. Drawing on Lenin³¹, they argued that the collapse of previous activist projects had not solely been the fault of bad faith actors, but a fundamental confusion amongst disabled militants about what they were fighting for. The movement of the '50s and '60s, they argued, had largely been driven by spontaneous reactions to the misery and absurdity of the status quo. The 'genuine feeling' of anger amongst disabled activists had been entirely justified, but lacked any assessment of the forces and structures which had led to the conditions it sought to change. Without a coherent analysis of the problems disabled people faced, this anger was easy for professionalised strata to 'divert' into projects more advantageous to them than their base; imposing their own interpretations of the world on disabled activists, and presenting their preferred solutions to an oppressed group desperate for change.³²

Two key strategic and analytic points followed this insight. The first that it is insufficient simply to banish non-disabled professionals from movement politics. Independent action requires independent demands and strategy. These, in turn, require an independent analysis of disabled people's social position – demanding 'the same intellectual rigour as any other problem which is approached scientifically' to avoid bending to the sophistries of others' interests³³. Secondly, such an attempt could not be based solely on the experience or identity claims of disabled people themselves. The previous campaign, and its betrayal, had demonstrated that experiences of disablement differed dramatically – mediated by class, gender, social responses to impairment types, or sheer luck. A collective identity from which to raise demands and justify strategy was, then, something to be consciously curated by movement activity; not something it could presuppose. At an individual level, professional domination had already spread 'a powerful and insidious disease within the consciousness of disabled people';³⁴ a belief, at least for many, that because forced dependence and markers of inadequacy had characterised their lives hitherto, at least elements of these are inevitable and must be lived around rather than overcome.³⁵ The inversion described above, whereby disabled people pitted their own voices and demands against that of professionals, was simply the obverse side of a single coin; a welcome description of prevailing conditions from the side of the oppressed, but one which failed to capture the determinants of this situation or chart a path for its eradication.³⁶

To borrow terms from contemporary social ontology: the mainstream of the new movement attempted a *grounding* account of disability and disablement – a coherent description and political project embracing the diverse experiences of disabled individuals – while UPIAS focussed on an *anchoring* project to explain the conditions for social oppression.³⁷ The question was not, primarily, one of making sense of any

³¹ See particularly 1973, pp.26-49

³² UPIAS: 1976, pp.12-13

³³ Ibid, p.13

³⁴ UPIAS: 1976, p.20

³⁵ Finkelstein: 2018 [1974], pp.32-33

³⁶ Finkelstein: 1980, p.9

³⁷ For an overview of grounding and anchoring accounts, and their modal differences, see Epstein: 2015

individual's thoughts, feelings, or self-conceptions arising from their position of exclusion and domination – such responses were too heterogeneous to expect them to be compatible³⁸ - but of explaining the social dynamics which generate and enforce this positionality. The resulting claim, that 'disability is not something we possess, but something our society possesses'³⁹, is modally distinct from the definitional and framing claims of both the old and new disability movements, based on more or less plausible characterisations of the oppressed group and its members. Instead, UPIAS argued, the social and political implications of the disability category could only be captured by explaining its social function, and its (often chaotic) interactions with other social phenomena and regimes of domination.

Disability as capitalism's 'by-product'

To approach any concept in this way, a characterisation of society is needed which does not reduce diverse phenomena to singular causes and accounts for historical change, while providing sufficient logical coherence to assign conceptual clarity to a particular subset of social process. For UPIAS, this characterisation was provided through the framework of the prevailing mode of production,⁴⁰ and UPIAS members saw their theoretical intervention as situating the emergence of disability from the glue that binds capitalist societies together. Their account of disablement relies on three claims about the cohesion of capitalist societies to cash out the conclusion that their social organisation leads to systematic disadvantage for functionally different people. These respond to different 'levels', or scopes, of social coherence: which I will refer to as the foundational (relating to the production process), the meso (or middle, mediating level, describing the dynamics of the distribution of resources relevant to processes of exclusion) and the sectoral (describing the street-level interactions between an excluded group and those who manage their exclusion). These levels of analysis are differentiated and quasi-autonomous; but have a metaphysical dependence on each other in addition to presumed causative relations. Each level sets a problem, or series of problems, for either the reproduction of the social whole or of the disability category itself, which the other levels of activity attempt to address. While these levels are practically indivisible – the problems at

³⁸ Finkelstein: 2018 [1974], p.28. See also Leaman: 2023 [1996] & Hunt: 2001 for a later statement of this argument by ex-UPIAS members. A sense-making project was conceived as a crucial element of any mobilisation based around an emergent analytic framework; but remained a second order question. Any struggle inherently involves a coming-to-consciousness on the part of the oppressed, but the failure of the '60s indicated that spontaneous struggle does not transparently reveal the object that this consciousness is of (UPIAS: 1981, pp.4-6)

³⁹ UPIAS: 1981, p.5 – emphasis in original

⁴⁰ While modes of production are totalities insofar as there is nothing *outside* of them, they are characterised by the co-existence and interaction of incommensurate, often contradictory, practices and incentive structures within a structure of mutual dependence whereby developments in one sphere alter the activity of others. Any mode of production, therefore, is characterised by fractious, uneven, and chaotic progressions within a shifting set of social constrictions; rather than a flat standardisation of social processes or a smooth teleological development. Cf Banaji: 2014, pp.96-99

one level constrain or incentivise actions at another, and changes in one recursively affect all others – they are only systematic insofar as they express divergent elements of a single, contradictory, social system. Activities in any one sphere are not translatable or reducible to those in another, and (as we will see) outcomes at meso and sectoral levels are generated by human agency and strategic action, rather than teleological inevitability.

At the foundational level is the basic, materialist claim that capitalist society is 'based on the necessity for people to compete in the labour market in order to earn a living' and that 'relative productivity' is the primary mediator in this competition. Where groups of people cannot, by virtue of their physical constitution, consistently adapt to new productivity norms they will end up 'at or near the bottom' of the labour market; a gamut running from segregation in low-productivity sectors, to regular periodic unemployment, to absolute labour market exclusion.⁴¹ Where productive labour is the central activity of a society, supplementary activities (building houses, organising public transport, healthcare, etc.) will, for the most part, function to enable its smooth running.⁴² The relative absence of the excluded group from labour entails relative exclusion from these processes (expressed in 'bargaining power', conscious choices by decision-makers, or limited incentives to integrate the excluded group).⁴³ It also implies, at least for any society not actively genocidal, that separate and smaller scale social activities will be undertaken to approximate at least some of the same functions as these supplementary activities for the effected group. As one member summarised the analysis several years after UPIAS's disbanding: the standardisations and intensifications of the labour process necessitated by competitive markets had 'abstracted [disabled people] from society'; depriving them of both the admittedly limited) leverage and autonomy over their own reproduction entailed by the wage-relation. In the final analysis, this abstraction could only be resolved 'in the class struggle where the historical direction of society is fought, won or lost. (...) [Where] the boundaries of knowledge that have put disabled people aside from the 'normal' can and have to be openly questioned'.⁴⁴

At the meso level, the claim is made that this abstraction is uneven and arbitrary, and itself reflects the balance of class struggle over determinants of the labour process and the distribution of their product. Capitalist production generates goods, technologies, and knowledge with the potential to give functionally different people access to the social activities they are excluded from. These can include rehabilitative technologies, personal aids, alternative design models, etc; and can (at least potentially) transform both the labour process and life outside of the workplace. Given, however, the centrality of the competition between labourers in production, there are consistent obstacles to these fulfilling their integrative potential. The comparative absence of potential consumers from the general wage fund will hamstring the development of efficient distribution markets, there are few incentives for owners of

⁴¹ UPIAS: 1975, Paragraph 4

⁴² UPIAS: 1976, pp.15-16; Davis: 2023 [1989], n.p.

⁴³ UPIAS: 1975, Paragraph 7

⁴⁴ Finkelstein: 2001, p.5

technologies with integrative potential and profitable functions to optimise both, and those managing separate social activities will likely have reduced means to employ these goods and limited incentive to do so if they interfere with existing sectoral practices.⁴⁵ As UPIAS members argued to their comrades in the socialist movement in 1981:

At the same time as the system of segregation was being created, enormous advances in technological developments were being made for capitalist exploitation. For us, the new technology has particular significance: it opens the way to a massive increase in our potential, holding the key to solving many of our problems and our liberation. But the technology that can integrate and liberate is the very same as that which keeps us, along with many others, out of work, dependent on charity, and segregated⁴⁶

UPIAS members characterised this as a social contradiction constitutive of the disability situation; existing social capacity proved that integration was possible, and exposed the social relations of production as responsible for the reproduction of segregation. In short, both the fact that disabled people's activity is restricted and that this is an expression of social organisation are anchored in the contradiction between integrative capacity and the social relations which prevent its application, and the various forms this contradiction might take.⁴⁷ Recursively, equilibria reached within this contradiction determine the inhabitants of the abstracted group, without resolving the problem of abstraction itself. If either the price of an adaptation (varifocal spectacles are UPIAS's preferred example⁴⁸) is driven down through more intense exploitation, or a struggle to de-commodify this technology is successful, then a portion of the excluded group can be re-integrated into labour and consumption markets on more equal terms. Despite this, the remainder of the abstracted group is, at best, left in the same position as before or, at worst, supplemented by the workers unable to adapt to emergent workplace regimes.

At the sectoral level, UPIAS members argued that exclusion from social activities generates not only a separate, segregated, sphere of social activity, the 'disability industry',⁴⁹ but the emergence of two new social actors: disabled people, and a professional status group managing parallel social activities (segregated services, disability specific markets, etc.).⁵⁰ The latter group is attributed certain rights and privileges – career-paths, research funding, and social influence – but, restricted to activities outside of most labour and commodities markets, have suppressed life chances compared to similarly skilled professionals in other sectors. This creates ambiguous and potentially conflictual relationships within this status group, between

⁴⁵ UPIAS: 1975, Paragraphs 1-2

⁴⁶ UPIAS: 2022 [1981], n.p.

⁴⁷ UPIAS: 1975:.. Paragraphs 1-2

⁴⁸ UPIAS: 1976, p.15

⁴⁹ Davis: 1993, p.197

⁵⁰ UPIAS: 1981, Finkelstein: 1981, pp. 13-14

its members and their disabled charges, or between the sector and the overall management of civil society. Disability professionals may utilise integrative technologies to seize market share from one-another, or to increase their collective leverage over other social actors. They may, similarly, suppress these technologies within their sector to protect professional autonomy or the social relations which underpin it.⁵¹

Disabled people, on the other hand, are grouped together in the segregated sector; occupying a vantage point to observe its workings and contradictions, and empowered by any progressive uses of technology and knowledge within it. Under these conditions, they develop a collective identity, analyses of their shared situation, and the ability 'to draw together [their] diverse struggles for a better life by facing directly and consciously the challenge of an oppressive society'.⁵² This ability is not automatically exercised, and much actual struggle over life-conditions continues unconsciously, or at least pre-theoretically. The conditions for disabled people to assert either individual or collective demands are predicated on the composition of the disability industry; which both centralises them into networks of social abstraction and exploits emerging social technologies for purposes of internal competition or to seek rents from wider society. In the first instance, resistance corresponds to the particular contradictions and inhumanities of the abstracted realm, while leaving many of underlying principles unquestioned.⁵³ In the post-war movement, resistance had manifested itself: firstly, as disaffection with the absurd ascription of poverty and institutionalisation to some; secondly, as rebellion against those who had betrayed the initial resistance project. The social relations underpinning these contradictions are thrown briefly into relief at different points in these struggles, but never wholesale and never transparently.

There emerges a field of shifting alliances and conflicts within the sector, responding to broader social conditions and the individual strategies of the parties involved. These conflicts, generated by the prior two anchoring claims, are likely to centre, at first, on the resources available to the disabled client group, the purpose of professional interventions, and the practices of different sectoral actors. Working in parallel to the production process, the professional strata is incentivised to focus on what Marx called the 'historical and moral element' in the determination of the distribution of resources;⁵⁴ either stressing the moral unacceptability of past practices, or promising to manage the disabled population more cheaply than competitors to lower the drain on the collective purse. Insofar as such diagnoses are accurate, pointing to actually unacceptable forms of domination or promising a degree of social integration to undercut segregated provision, alliances with disabled client groups are both possible and politically desirable. New forms of professional domination are preceded by charm offensives 'designed to give the illusion of being progressive; a device designed to

⁵¹ P. Hunt: 2022a [1975]

⁵² UPIAS: 1981, p.5

⁵³ Finkelstein: 1980, p.; UPIAS: 1981

⁵⁴ Marx: 2020, p.51

justify their intervention into our lives'.⁵⁵ Disabled people's ability to subvert these emergent projects in line with their own interests, exploiting integrative knowledge and technologies provided by them against the paternalism of their initiators, dictates both the nature of sectoral settlements, and the distribution of integrative knowledge and technologies at a broader social level. In as far as disabled people can make their struggle collective and conscious, they cultivate the possibility of exiting the path-dependency of the helper/helped relationship; marshalling integrative technologies on their own behalf, without the need for professional initiation and paternalism⁵⁶.

Outlined in this way, UPIAS's analysis appears as an argument of a radically different type to that usually found in disability research. During the '80s, two UPIAS members described it as an account of social phenomena's emergence as 'by-products' of capitalism's core workings. Just as steel production necessarily produces slag and services for its disposal, capitalist labour markets produce relatively excluded populations, and imperatives for civil society to manage them.⁵⁷ It is equally well-defined as an account of capitalism's unfolding: in which the relations of commodity production integrate and exclude populations from emergent subsystems; creating, in turn, social actors, incentive structures, and conflict conditions. The existence of disablement as a form of exclusion is unresolvable from either professionals' or disabled people's vantage point; but questions of who is excluded from what, and who benefits, are determined by the conflicts between them, and the socio-economic and political projects which shape both groups' divergent interests. Because each level of activity described is recursive, and emergent from unsolvable problems generated at underlying levels, any equilibria in the disability category is fragile and equilibria of forces within it are liable to collapse under the weight of relatively minor changes. Like Benjamin's, the UPIAS project is primarily one of identifying and embracing danger; emerging from a double-crisis of the *status quo ante* (in which both the state-led settlement of disability and its counter-hegemonic alternative proved dysfunctional), UPIAS developed an analysis and strategy focussed on the ruptures and gaps in the social order. Against previous (and for that matter, subsequent) attempts to define disability; UPIAS's innovation was to capture the fragility of the social relations underpinning definitional accounts, their liability to incoherence and transformation, rather than an imputed commonality across the demographic assigned to the concept.

Conclusion: danger as research project

The account I have outlined suffered two great defeats. In the first, its most obvious strategic implication was too ambitious to be implemented by a small cadre organisation. UPIAS members aspired not only to be the theoretical leadership of a mass movement, but to be its boots on the ground: building its capacity to take practical control of everything disabled people needed to assert freedom over their

⁵⁵ Davis: 2023 [1989], n.p.

⁵⁶ P.Hunt: 2022b [1975] – esp pp.231-232

⁵⁷ UPIAS: 2023 [1981], n.p.

own lives, while clarifying the essentials of the social world. These tasks were often incompatible and, when demands for concrete action contradicted strategic sense, UPIAS members all too often acquiesced in the name of the Movement's unity. What followed was a kind of tailism, where UPIAS and its members held back criticism of emergent orthodoxies in campaigns for anti-discrimination legislation and direct payments until the worst of the damage was done, and the movement had marched itself into a dead end. Tragically, an account that began with a sober assessment of the old movement's fragilities and contradictions was unable to squarely face those of its successor.

The second defeat was at the deadening hands of academia – always duller than, and parasitic upon, the practical vibrancy of social movements. Through the pens of an aspirational elite, who had stumbled on UPIAS almost by accident, a rich dialectical argument was reduced to a bi-partite non-causal claim: disablement is stuff society does, impairment is stuff the body does – neither causes the other. A cottage industry was feverishly established, marked by a loyalty to methodological nationalism and individualism all the more vehement when it rejected those terms. Every aspect of every disabled person's life could be dissected, categorised into various social factors (attitudinal, economic, institutional, infrastructural, etc), and sold as a policy analysis for the action of this or that bourgeois government. Beyond being an affront to intellectual rigour, ontological assumptions contrary to UPIAS's were snuck in through the backdoor. Both exegeses of, and objections to, what was passed as UPIAS's argument remained on the terrain of defining a population – to give any definition of disablement is 'hence' to give a definition of disabled people, and vice versa.⁵⁸ Subsequent disputes (about the importance of bodies, identities, experience and recognition) remain in a fundamentally alien ontological register to UPIAS's: one that perceives social problems as the problems of social groups, and calls on us to obsess over their minutia as catastrophe rages around us.

With profound economic, social, political, and military crises unfolding, and with a DPM that is increasingly weak and path-dependent, there is a pressing need to rethink danger and our potential role within it. Responding to the care crisis of the '60s and '70s, UPIAS members attempted to build collective control of all segregating public services and turn them to integrative ends – coming tantalisingly close to achieving this in two local government areas, where disabled activists controlled everything from equipment showrooms to community transport. That solution required the remnants of a social democratic state (where what was once nationalised could be socialised), but it is striking that no road to power has yet been identified in the midst of the current civic crises. For our movement to approach emancipation, rather than merely to hold back the tide of dehumanising social disintegration, we require not only a clear understanding of the dynamics which have made us their playthings; but a strategy to push at their contradictions such that their reproduction crises are our opportunities to seize control of our destinies.

⁵⁸ Shakespeare: 2006, p.36

I see UPIAS's intervention, then, as the foundations of a research program for any resurgence in our movement. Based on it, we might begin with the following questions to determine a scope of action:

- What are the contemporary production processes which consolidate labour market exclusion (total or relative) on the basis of functional difference? What alliances might be pursued to curtail or overcome them?
- What are the supply and distribution chains for ameliorative technologies (material or knowledge-based)? Where are the weak points in these chains, and how might they be socialised or expropriated?
- Who benefits from our oppression and on what terms? What are their interests, vulnerabilities, and support networks? What kind of pressure might lead to their marginalisation, or domestication by a resurgent polity.

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