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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The centrality of disablement subjectivation to the reproduction of capitalist social relations: considerations for Critical and Global Political Economy

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In the face of a global, mass impairment- and chronic illness-producing event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of how to consider and integrate the politics of disablement within Global Political Economy scholarship and anti-capitalist activism has become ever-more pressing. In this article, I provide a proposal for how to conceptualise the capitalism-specific commonality between people who identify as having impairments, being chronically ill, neurodivergent, D/deaf, experiencing mental distress and who may or may not also identify as disabled people. To this end, in this article I adopt the ‘social model of disability’ and engage with both Moran’s cultural-materialist approach to identity and Autonomist Marxism’s ‘class composition’ thesis. Then, I make the case for the analytic usefulness of the non-identity, relational concept ‘subjects of disablement’ as *the technical composition of disability* on the basis of which the socio-political identity ‘disabled people’ as *the political composition of disability* emerges. Acknowledging disablement oppression and exploitation as central and fundamental to the reproduction of capitalist social relations would equip the GPE scholarship embedded within the praxis of dissent and resistance (see [Bonfert et al, 2022](#)) to generatively support activist groups’ already-existing efforts and mobilisations against and beyond – what I call – *disabling capitalism*. The *Global Political Economy* journal offers the opportunity for the ‘sluice gates’ ([Clua-Losada and Moore, 2022: 6](#)) of this interdisciplinary field to be widely opened for, and welcoming of, further explorations of how capitalism cannot be fully understood and ruptured without an analysis of structural disablement.

Key words disabling capitalism • identity • social model • disability composition • subjects of disablement

Key messages

- Disablement is integral to the reproduction of capitalist social relations and disabling capitalism.
- Critical and Global Political Economy ought to meaningfully engage with the UPIAS-inspired social model of disability.
- The relational, non-identity concept ‘subjects of disablement’ is analytically and politically useful for acknowledging the technical composition of disability.

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Introduction

This article develops a conceptual tool for how and on what basis common ground could be articulated among people who have impairments, experience mental distress, are neurodivergent, D/deaf and/or chronically ill (who may or may not identify as being disabled). It offers a theoretical contribution to Critical Political Economy and Disability Studies in relation to identity and subjectivity, in the context of the politics of disablement under capitalism. The aim of the article is to provide a way forward for a coalitional politics that places disablement at its centre, together with other processes of exploitation and oppression. To this end, I build upon a cultural-materialist understanding of identity and the Autonomist Marxist class composition thesis to propose a distinction between the ‘technical’ and ‘political’ compositions of disability. Such distinction constructively alters and updates the UPIAS¹-inspired *social model of disability*’s ‘people with impairments – disabled people’ dialectic. This alteration is especially important, considering that – for instance – some activist groups (such as those of people who experience mental distress) do not conceptualise mental distress in terms of ‘impairment’. Yet, I contend that all people who are impaired, chronically ill, neurodivergent, D/deaf and/or who experience mental distress, share a common experience of living under capitalism – that of structural disablement subjectivation through oppression and exploitation.

The adoption of ‘class composition’ to theorisations of disablement oppression and exploitation helps scholars and activists of a Marxist persuasion to formulate a collective politics that has the abolition of disabling capitalism at its heart. Thus, I contend that a new relational, non-identity concept proposed here, namely ‘subjects of disablement’, represents the technical composition of disability in disabling capitalist society as it underlies the commonality of structural disabling capitalist subjectivation of the aforementioned groups. Conversely, some subjects of disablement establish the political composition of disability through the socio-political identity ‘disabled people’, alongside ‘Mad’ and ‘Crip’ people (socio-political identities with their respective histories) through collective self-mobilisation – with the possibility of other future socio-political mobilisations to emerge in future. Therefore, the already well-established political and collective identity ‘disabled people’ represents one (and the most mobilised) strand of the political composition of disability that emerges when the subjects of disablement are organised collectively along emancipatory lines. As a relational commonality that arises from the material conditions of everyday life in disabling capitalism, I argue, ‘subjects of disablement’ avoids the essentialism often found in contemporary approaches to individualised identity.

A focus on the politics of disablement as a fundamental feature of capitalism enriches Critical Political Economy scholarship and allows it to find evidence of active resistance and dissent against, and the prefiguration of social alternatives beyond, disablement oppression and exploitation. Indeed, as Bonfert et al posit, within Critical Political Economy:

agents of dissent are abstracted from their socio-economic relations and instead considered mere individuals or citizens, thereby dissociating them from their broader positions within the political economy, from their inter-relationships to each other (especially class relations), and from the power relations and subjectivities that are associated with each of these. (2022: 15)

In this article, therefore, I address the scholarly dissociation of the agents of dissent from disabling social relations and subjectivities. In the following section, I offer a brief overview of the UPIAS-inspired social model of disability, which makes a distinction between 'having impairments' (bodymind features) and 'being disabled' by society (society *disables* people with impairments). Following this, in the second section of the article, I consider Moran's cultural-materialist analysis of the concept of identity and its changing meanings over time, which will allow us to understand the particular cultural-material context of 'identity' in contemporary Western societies, and be open to approaches to identity that are yet to come. Finally, the third section explores the disability composition thesis proposed here in more depth, followed by brief concluding remarks.

The social model of disability and its origins

In 1972, a UK-based group of self-identified disabled people (mostly people with physical impairments) who had lived in residential homes/institutions came together under the name of Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) to collectively and radically reinterpret the meaning of disability, challenge the practices and assumptions of mainstream approaches to disability and shape the disability agenda in the UK (Slorach, 2016: 27). Their *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976) became a foundational text for disability politics in the UK and beyond; in this document, UPIAS distinguished for the first time between 'impairment' and 'disability': 'In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society' (UPIAS, 1976: 4). Seven years later, informed by the UPIAS writings and practice, the 'social model' was coined by Mike Oliver (1983), although he 'did not invent' it: 'I may have been the godfather at the christening but I certainly wasn't the real father at the conception' (Oliver, 2009: 10). The social model was articulated as being critical of and standing in opposition to the 'individual model' of disability that is prevalent across capitalist societies, governmental policies and much of the scholarly research produced within them. The individual model,² in short, seeks to 'fix', 'cure' and manage bodyminds that do not conform to impossible standards of so-called 'ability' and 'productivity'. This model reproduces oppression and exploitation through its conceptualisation of 'disability' as an individual 'failure', rather than as a political and structural process that ought to be dismantled. Other more concrete sub-models that emerge from within the individual model/approach to disability are, most notably, the tragedy, charity, administrative, bio-psycho-social, rights-based/liberal and medical-centric models (Oliver and Barnes, 2012).

The original producers of the ideas that underpin the social model were activists of what became the Disabled People's Movement that upheld a historical materialist, communitarian, collective and socialist agenda.³ Since then, many other Disabled

People's Organisations (DPOs) and activist groups in the UK have adopted the social model and engaged in direct action, civil disobedience, policy and arts work, and other forms of collective action. Disability Studies as a discipline emerged in the UK in the late 1970s (at the Open University, followed by Kent and Leeds), influenced by the debates and contributions made by the Disabled People's Movement and academic activists who were part of both activist and academic spaces (Finkelstein, 1997; Sheldon, 2006: 3; Oliver, 2009: 137; Barnes, 2012: 17). However, since then, the social model language has been co-opted and distorted by the state and collectives with a liberal agenda (Oliver, 2009: 145; 2013), leading one of UPIAS' co-founders, Vic Finkelstein, to declare that the 'social model' had become a 'potpourri' due to its loss of critical edge (Finkelstein in Oliver, 2009: 151). Finkelstein went even further to state that as a result of the broadening and dilution of the social model, Disability Studies had turned into Disabling Studies (Finkelstein, 1997). In agreement with Finkelstein, and considering that the social model research has continued to maintain its 'potpourri' form and substance (Slorach, 2016: 40), it is important for any researchers who wish to adopt the social model to state the particular strand of the social model that they engage with. To that effect, this article specifically builds on the UPIAS-inspired social model.

The UPIAS-inspired social model conceptualises disability as social oppression (a result of social exclusion, forced proletarianisation, poverty and prejudice) that arises from the fabric of disabling society (made up of its social relations solidified into institutions, practices, laws, work and the distribution of wealth), and not from people's bodyminds. Thus, it is society and its treatment of people that ought to be changed,⁴ not the bodyminds and behaviour of chronically ill, D/deaf and neurodivergent people, and people who experience mental distress or have impairments. Disability is a 'social condition': 'if disability is a social condition then an analysis of the ways in which society actually disables physically impaired people is obviously required before the condition can be eliminated' (UPIAS, 1976: 18). Further, social modelists argue that there is a difference between 'impairment' ('functional limitations') and 'disability' ('disabling barriers of unequal access and negative attitudes') (Morris, 2001: 2). More explicitly: 'An inability to move one's body is an impairment but an inability to get out of bed because appropriate physical help is not available is a disability' (Morris, 1994: 44). The 'pragmatic' (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: 23) distinction between disability and impairment brings to attention the historically contingent and political environments in which disabled people live. The distinction represents a tool to think through and create possibilities for change within society, for disabled people to live autonomous and self-determined lives (Gleeson, 1997: 193). In other words, 'disabled' points to the social formation of a collective and political consciousness (Oliver, 2009: 101–2) that rejects oppressive models of disability. Identifying as 'disabled' – within the Disabled People's Movement and activist groups – acknowledges shared experiences of being oppressed in a society 'dominated by nondisabled people' (Russell, 1998: 14; Charlton, 2000: 82). However, not all people with impairments, who experience mental distress, or who are D/deaf, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent identify as disabled due to socio-political, biographical, cultural and other factors, as discussed later (Wendell, 1996: 25; Watson, 2002; Beresford et al, 2010: 31; Slorach, 2016: 15; Berghs and Dyson, 2020: 14). Furthermore, the meaning and explanatory value of the term 'impairments' has also been brought into question (Plumb, 2011[1994]), thus

indicating one of the factors that have contributed to the ‘social model’ not being adopted by a wider section of society.

Participation in the Disabled People’s Movement in the UK has been declining since the mid-1990s (Barnes, 2008). This trend culminated in an ‘organisational crisis’ in the 2000s which saw national ‘disability charities’ regain influence over policies, with non-disabled people increasingly speaking ‘on behalf of’ disabled people (Beesley, 2019). Within such a context, the UPIAS-inspired social model has had less leverage within society, policy creation and the academy (Oliver, 2009). The reduced influence of the UPIAS-inspired social model has coincided with a proliferation of new approaches/models of disability that have minimised and/or sidelined the role of capitalism in the politics of disablement – for example bio-psycho-social, liberal rights, postmodern, cultural and the posthuman approaches, to name but a few. Thus, alongside the concerted denunciations of the UPIAS-inspired social model (see Shakespeare, 2006; Goodley, 2013; Mitchell et al, 2019; Siebers, 2019), the terrain of the politics of disablement has undergone a series of changes (Oliver, 2013) that embrace neoliberal approaches to disability and disability-related identity. In other words, the personal approach to disability-related identity has increasingly superseded the UPIAS-inspired social approach. Before exploring the practical implications of different operationalisations of disability- and bodymind-related identities, the next section provides a cultural-materialist overview of the changing meanings of the concept of ‘identity’ across past centuries, as presented in the work of Marie Moran (2015; 2018; 2021).

Understanding ‘identity’

Identity is an often taken-for-granted and reified concept – that is, a seemingly self-evident term that has a traceable history. Identity, most commonly, functions as a ‘classificatory device’ (Moran, 2015: 50) within everyday parlance and institutions. In *Identity and Capitalism*, Moran argues that it is through its apparent ubiquity and familiarity that the ‘term masks what are in fact a range of different, oppositional or even incompatible meanings’ (2015: 34). Following Moran’s cultural-materialist approach to the genealogy of identity and the use of ‘keywords-as-method’ (2021: 1022), I posit that understandings of identity (and its signifiers) are culturally and politically contingent upon the social reality of a given society. Thus, I present a brief overview of Moran’s work here, as its conceptualisations offer historical context and analytical depth to this article’s analysis and discussion. This presentation is followed by an exploration of differing approaches to identities related to bodyminds and disability in UK society and among activist groups, to show the need for a unifying relational concept that avoids divisions among those subjected to disabling capitalist oppression and exploitation.

A cultural-materialist genealogy of ‘identity’

Moran’s work builds upon Raymond Williams’ cultural-materialist approach by taking into account ‘the cultural political economy of capitalist societies’ (2015: 28) and assuming that the production of meanings is a ‘practical material activity [...] a means of production’ (Williams, cited in Moran, 2021: 1024). Moran goes on to assert that ‘identity’ is a historically contingent concept which has undergone a ‘significant change of meaning’ since the 1950s (2015: 22) within the ‘changing social

reality’ of Western societies (2015: 27). In other words, while ‘identity’ as a term had existed in previous centuries, it has continued to be a ‘bearer of new meanings’ (2015: 28). More concretely, in the 16th century, identity was deployed as a marker of sameness and indivisibility of a person – that is, despite the changes in one’s life, one continues to remain oneself. This approach was followed by a ‘legal’ use of identity (which still persists) with the invention of identity cards, two centuries later; this is when ‘identity theft’ started to become a practice. Moran further posits that from the mid-20th century onwards, a historically novel and dual understanding of identity has been created – namely, *personal identity* and *social identity*, briefly explored next (2015; 2018; 2020).

With the emergence of ‘consumer society’, neoliberal hegemony and the deradicalisation of trade unions, ‘identity’ has taken on the meaning of *personal identity* – that is, a set of features that one possesses and that can be easily categorised: ‘being a particular person, with recognisable features’ (Moran, 2018: 28). In the case of disability, I would add, the ‘feature’ of a person appears through their ‘impairment(s)’. This form of newly invented ‘identity’ has been mobilised both by industries and consumers towards creating markers of difference, uniqueness, flux, personality and individuality, de-linked from political economy and class politics. Within this context, mass consumption and capitalism more broadly have been understood to provide new ‘opportunities’ to more groups of atomised individuals-as-consumers (2015: 37–44, 167–70).

Alongside consumerist framings, ‘identity’ has also been mobilised by social movements⁵ as *social identity* – that is, membership of ‘a particular social group’ (2018: 28). Thus, social groups have been understood to be formed on the basis of socially constructed commonalities (ascribed, agreed or claimed), or differences from other groups (2015: 45–6). Social identity-based groups’ activities are often referred to as ‘identity politics’, promoting ‘in-group solidarity and the expression of group-based pride’ (2018: 37), although they may not entirely escape consumerist/neoliberal approaches to identity. By contrast, gender and ethnicity – the argument follows – have not always been understood *through the lens* of (contemporary neoliberal understandings of) identity and the artificial separation between ‘culture’ and ‘the economy’ (2015: 172). Rather, when these terms were initially mobilised, they were framed more broadly in relation to ‘self’, ‘society’, ‘social categories’ and ‘groups’ (2015: 23). The identities that emerged from such mobilisation were relational, rather than categorical, thus highlighting race and gender’s structural embeddedness within capitalist social relations (2015: 157, 166). Indeed, Moran argues that ‘identity politics’ has lost its redistributive and solidaristic principles, which were at the forefront of the Black Power and Women’s Liberation Movements half a century ago (Moran, 2020).

Similarly, in the context of the politics of disablement, redistributive social approaches to identity have been placed in tension with the proliferation of new consumerist and personal identity terms. This tension can be noticed not least through the decline in UPIAS’ radical social approach to (and model of) disability and disabled identity since the 1990s (Slorach, 2016). In other words, through the neoliberal iterations of disabling capitalism, the *individual approach to disability, disablement* and identity is embedded within all spheres of social life. This approach, thus, has become the main point of reference for society in general – influencing understandings of identity in the context of the politics of disablement, as detailed later. However, it is the (redistributive, solidaristic) enunciation of social identity that this article builds

on and seeks to reinvigorate – albeit with some caveats that will become apparent later on. In the following paragraphs, however, I briefly introduce the diversity of understandings and approaches to bodymind- and disability-related identities found in society, the academy and activism.

Prevailing understandings of disability, neurodivergence, chronic illness, D/deafness, mental distress and impairments in the UK

In the UK, disablist perceptions of disabled people continue to prevail through the lens of participation in waged work and an ideological framing of what it means to be a ‘productive’ member of society. From the 2018 British Attitudinal Survey, we find that 32 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that disabled people are less productive than non-disabled people;⁶ agreement levels had been over 30 per cent since the question was first asked in 2009 (Dixon et al, 2018: 11). In response, the national disability charity Scope took the view that societal attitudes would change if non-disabled workers were to be in closer proximity to disabled workers. They recommended the following: ‘Government and other organisations must be ruthless and relentless in their action to increase the number of disabled people in employment, including meeting the aim of getting a million more disabled people into work’ (Dixon et al, 2018: 22). Notwithstanding the fact that resources and other relative benefits can be accessed through the wage in capitalist societies, Scope regarded the *solution* as increasing the ‘inclusion’ of disabled people ostensibly *through* the social relation of exploitation mediated by the wage. The authors of the report also uncritically endorsed the Government agenda for reducing social security, which demonises and pu(ni)shes disabled people into (often precarious and inaccessible) waged work.

Within scholarly journals, academic writers, too, have approached the topics of work and social inclusion from a seemingly ‘positive’, inclusive and affirmative perspective which inadvertently hides its disabling⁷ underpinnings. I will take the example of Szulc et al’s (2021) article on ‘neurodivergent human capital’, which features the following postulation: ‘highly functioning neurodivergent individuals often possess unique abilities akin to human superpowers that are likely to make them excel in professional settings’ (2021: 859). Throughout the article, Szulc et al reproduce the discourse of exceptionality and ‘high’ or ‘different’ productivity which, notably, is restricted to ‘highly functioning’ neurodivergent workers. Attempts to move *some* neurodivergent people higher on the hierarchical pedestal of disability are prevalent in the article, instead of seeking to disrupt the hierarchy altogether. The article’s readers cannot but notice the absence of a discussion of disabling capitalist oppression and exploitation. Instead, the authors declare that neurodivergent people’s ‘talents’ are ‘unintentionally [...] discard[ed]’ due to ‘*innocent* assumptions of employee homogeneity’ (2021: 859, emphasis added). In effect, their argument is that some (the most productive) neurodivergent people are in fact exceptional and ‘normal’ – that is, *not disabled*. Leaving the realm of employment to the side, we also find narratives of exceptionalism within sports: ‘in the London 2012 Paralympics, the Committee President Philip Craven (himself a wheelchair user) went so far as to argue that the word “disabled” should be dropped from all media coverage altogether. “How could these athletes be viewed as anything other than ‘able’?”’ (Slorach, 2016: 17). From this, it emerges that the way bodymind/disability-related identities are ordered,

contested, claimed and ascribed meaning within society is inherently political and subject to changes within particular spheres of activity (including employment and sports) and society. Concurrently, the legal/medical identity ‘disabled’ is often denied to many people with chronic illness – especially women and racialised people – whose experiences are over-scrutinised and disbelieved by professionals with preconceptions about what being a ‘disabled’ person means and who qualifies for this identity (Clifford, 2020: 313). Thus, ascribed and assumed identities are policed, restricted and re-defined through the state, institutions, spheres of work and cultural spheres more generally, while also being (re)claimed and shaped by people with impairments, chronic illness, who experience mental distress, who are D/deaf and/or neurodivergent – individually and collectively. However, as alluded to earlier, at a time when disability-related concerted struggle is less prevalent in the UK (compared to the 1970s), it is unsurprising that only a quarter of those who would qualify as ‘disabled person’ under the Equality Act 2010 declared themselves as such, in response to a question of identification posed in the 2012 British Attitudinal Survey of the UK’s Office of National Statistics (Slorach, 2016: 253).

With the development of postmodern, cultural and posthuman models of disability, identity in the context of the politics of disablement has been increasingly framed through a ‘personal identity’ approach. In practice, bodymind- and disability-related identities are coupled with so-called ‘ability’. Additionally, ‘privilege’ is treated as a quasi-measure for arbitrary measures of bodymind ‘functioning’; capitalism is omitted from analysis and disability discourse is rejected and ‘subverted’ (i.e. McRuer, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Schalk, 2013; Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016; Goodley, 2018; Mitchell et al, 2019; De Schauwer et al, 2021). These artificial and apolitical approaches reproduce a moralistic politics based on ‘call-out culture’ (Moran, 2020) where ‘allies’ are filled with individualised guilt and self-flagellation (Mohandesi, 2017).⁸ Furthermore, some individual experiences may be perceived as more ‘political’ than others, leading to ‘selective empathies’ that could be mobilised for conservative ends (Phipps, 2016: 304). Sectarianism, political cleavages and ‘moral accounts of solidarity’, rather than political ones (DuFord, 2022: 11) are the inherent outcome of such a(n anti)politics. Indeed, within individualistic societies, identity on its own becomes ‘a precarious source of solidarity’ (Hughes and Paterson, 1997: 338) that can have real, material implications in how activist groups organise and mobilise for collective social change.

However, contemporary notions of identity will likely not wither away any time soon. For this reason, critical explorations of identity-related debates can be politically and praxiologically generative, articulating vantage points and experiences of living in disabling capitalist societies, while also being aware that all uses of identity have an ‘implicit’ and ‘endemic’ essentialism (Moran, 2015: 50; 2018: 36). The next section illustrates that the nature, operationalisation and meaning of identity-based essentialisms stand at the core of prolonged disagreements among activists and scholars with impairments, chronic illness, who experience mental distress, are D/deaf and/or neurodivergent.

Disagreements over the meaning of ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ across activist groups

The abundance of multiple models of disability and the appropriation of the social model’s language by state institutions have contributed to increased contestations

of disability-related identity concepts. Such contestations can be found not least on Disability Studies mailing lists, where casual comments about the difference between ‘disabled person’ (using ‘identity-first language’) and ‘person with a disability’ (using ‘person-first language’) can trigger dozens of immediate responses (see [The Disability Research Discussion List, 2022](#)). Contributors’ views are often diametrically opposed, although the interlocutors share a commitment to some form of justice for the *subjects of disablement*. In any case, I do not simply advocate for a particular identity term in this article. Rather, I suggest a unifying relational (currently non-identity) concept for a materialist approach to disablement, without seeking to flatten differences in embodied disablement, or insinuate empirical equivalence between experiences.

Although recent UPIAS-inspired social modelists do not prioritise the experiences of people with physical impairments over those of neurodivergent, D/deaf, chronically ill people and people with mental distress ([Oliver, 1996](#); [Beresford et al, 2010](#); [Graby, 2012](#); [Slorach, 2016](#); [Hale, 2018](#); [Clifford, 2020](#)), the impairment–disability dichotomy has persisted within scholarly work. The meaning of impairment, therefore, needs further examination. Later, I briefly explore a series of standpoints on ‘impairment’, as articulated by activists who experience mental distress, are neurodivergent, chronically ill or D/deaf. I note that within some spheres of organising and scholarship, the meaning of ‘impairment’ has been expanded to encompass experiences that had previously been invisibilised. For instance, The Chronic Illness Inclusion Project (a Disabled People’s Organisation) has recently framed chronic illness as ‘energy impairment’, and its members regard themselves as ‘disabled people’ ([Hale et al, 2020](#)). Others frame neurodivergence through the idea of ‘social impairment’ ([Graby, 2012](#)). The adoption of the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ is especially important within the context in which disablement-related claims of people who experience mental distress, are neurodivergent or chronically ill, are dismissed by medical professionals and the state ([Clifford, 2020](#): 313).

Conversely, the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ have been deemed inadequate by some activists within mental distress, D/deaf and neurodiversity activism/struggles. To people who experience Hearing Voices, schizophrenia or PTSD, ‘impairment’ has pathologising, medicalising and discriminatory undertones ([Balderston, 2011](#): 58; [Plumb, 2011\[1994\]](#); 2011; [Sapey, 2011](#); [Spandler, 2011](#): 15). In response to this pathologisation – and seeking to move away from it – Beresford et al developed a ‘social model of madness and distress’ (2010) through which they emphasise the social circumstances that contribute to distress. Conversely, other activists and scholars have opted for ‘mental distress’, ‘system survivor’ and ‘service resister’ as suitable terms for self-identification, delinking ‘illness’ from ‘distress and dissent’ and conveying distress as responding to socially induced trauma ([Plumb, 2011\[1994\]](#); 2011). Other rejections of ‘impairment’ have been made by D/deaf people who argue that deafness is not an impairment and being D/deaf does not mean being disabled; instead, D/deaf people are a minority group with its own Sign Languages ([Corker, 1998](#); [Sparrow, 2005](#); [Shakespeare, 2006](#): 69). Finally, within some neurodiversity groups, a similar cultural approach is adopted – the collective identity ‘minority neurotypes’ is used to indicate that neurodivergent people live in a society built for neurotypical people ([Graby, 2015](#): 234).

The aforementioned disagreements are not simply lexical – they are different ‘categories of practice’, as language itself is a ‘site of political struggle’ ([Moran, 2018](#): 41–2). Definitions of terms such as those mentioned previously have been

incorporated within collectives' constitutions, thus materially influencing who is included or excluded from participating in decision-making and agenda-setting processes. For instance, UPIAS restricted full membership to people with physical impairments (see 1976: 7) – in its constitution, 'mentally ill' people were referred to as a 'different oppressed group'. Similarly, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People restricted membership to self-organised groups that subscribed to the idea of having 'impairments' (Plumb, 2011[1994]). Furthermore, according to Clifford, disagreements over the naming of the 2017 coalition of groups 'involved in monitoring the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' led 'certain organisations to pull out' (2020: 311), thus impeding the possibility for coalitional struggle. Thus, the way 'identity' is deployed in scholarly, policy and activist spheres has implications in practice and the possibilities that such practice may facilitate or stifle.

The aforementioned examples point to the limited political efficacy of in-group differentiations,⁹ as they create fertile ground for: group solipsism based on ahistorical and incoherent politics; the reproduction of 'functioning'-based disabling hierarchies; and the conceptualisation of some groups as more 'privileged' than others. These strategies inadvertently encourage liberal allyship rather than political comradeship, by accommodating the neoliberal separation of people into ever-more distinct 'communities' as units of government (in a Foucauldian sense) (see Rose, 1996). Efforts to create common ground have emerged, however. Most notably, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) (a national Disabled People's Organisation in the UK) held an event in 2020 on the theme of 'reinvigorating the social model' (DPAC, 2020). The contributors to the event were members of collectives that focus on chronic illness, neurodivergence, mental distress and D/deafness, alongside impairments. Importantly, I argue that other collectives that do not focus specifically on the politics of disablement ought to incorporate an analysis of disabling capitalism within their perspectives, too, alongside an approach to identity that is not 'personal', but (radically) 'social' (Moran, 2018; 2015: 172–3). It is this radical social identity of 'disabled people', alongside the relational non-identity term 'subjects of disablement' that are expanded upon in the following section through an engagement with the 'class composition' thesis of Autonomist Marxism.

Moving beyond personal identity through a materialist approach

The aforementioned implicit essentialism of identity, the lack of widespread popular knowledge of the social model of disability in the UK and the myriad ways in which identity is currently understood in society point to the need for a relational non-identity term through which to analyse the common experience of living in a disabling capitalist society among all people who have impairments, are neurodivergent, D/deaf, chronically ill, experience mental distress and/or identify as disabled people. I argue that the main commonality among all the aforementioned groups is that they are all subjected to the disabling social relations of capitalism (albeit with contextual, empirical differences across societies). Thus, the concept 'subject of disablement' is introduced in this article not as a marker of identity in the contemporary, mainstream sense, but as an acknowledgement of the processes of oppression and exploitation evidenced by everyday life in contemporary UK. Through a materialist approach,

the concept ‘subjects of disablement’ points to the historically contingent nature of disablement and directs focus to materially rooted experiences, social positionality and social relations more generally. As a corrective to the UPIAS-inspired social model’s argument that *society* disables people with impairments, I contend that the focus ought to be on how *capitalist social relations* subject people (with impairments, who are D/deaf, chronically ill, neurodivergent or experience mental distress) to disablement oppression and exploitation. Such an analytical approach brings the analysis of disablement closer to an analysis of class.

Disability as a capitalist social formation

In this section, I make the case for conceptualising disability as a relational and non-categorical social formation akin to how class is formed and composed within capitalism. ‘Disability’ has a socio-political and historical rather than a biological ontology.¹⁰ This ontology ought to be understood in political terms to account for oppression and exploitation under capitalism. Indeed, disability is ‘a political state and not a personal one’ (Taylor, 2004). Similarly, ‘class ... is not just another identity, another “subject position”; it is a social relation among people mediated by their relationship to the means of production’ (Gimenez, cited in Moran, 2015: 166–7). Furthermore, class (and disability) ‘evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure’ (Thompson, 1963: 9). Inspired by these approaches to class, I contend that disability is not a static ‘structure’ or ‘category’, but ‘something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships’¹¹ (Thompson, 1963: 9). Finally, ‘rethinking class as an identity is not a useful way to proceed’ with critical analysis (Moran, 2015: 167), and I contend that the same applies to disability, too.

In relation to class and through the concept ‘class consciousness’, some Marxists distinguish between class ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ (Andrew, 1983; Neilson, 2018). The former concept refers to workers’ structural position in relation to capital, and the latter refers to the workers who are assumed to have class ‘consciousness’ (Mohandesi, 2013; 2017). However, the idea of consciousness has been used by Leninist groups professing to ‘raise’ workers’ consciousness from an assumed position of intellectual leadership of a potential working-class movement (Ivysyn, 2019). Critical of the hierarchical underpinnings of such a political outlook, Autonomist Marxists propose an alternative set of concepts. Instead of ‘class consciousness’, they talk of ‘class composition’ (as a specifically capitalist phenomenon); across class, we find ‘technical’ and ‘political’ compositions (Mohandesi, 2013: 85; Notes from Below, 2018). The technical composition of class refers to how a class is materially constituted and how ‘capital brings together the workforce’ (Kolinko, 2003[online]). In turn, the political composition of class is ‘the manner in which the class composes itself’ (Mohandesi, 2013: 85) – namely, how it organises itself collectively for struggle.

Moving to disability, I contend that the UPIAS-inspired social modelists adapted the concept of ‘class consciousness’ to the politics of disablement. To this end, the term ‘people with impairments’ is understood as disability-in-itself, and ‘disabled people’ are the equivalent of disability-for-itself (that is, being oppressed on top of having impairments *and* being aware of such oppression). For instance, Oliver (1999: 164) suggested that ‘disabled people’ are those who, alongside having impairments – and being oppressed ‘as a consequence’ of having these impairments – they also

'identify themselves as *disabled*' (emphasis added).¹² It follows that Oliver treated 'consciousness' as a(n essentialising) pre-requisite for disability-for-itself. However, consciousness-raising efforts (as rallying efforts for collective action) have had important but limited gains in the face of neoliberalism's strong ideological illusions – in 2011, only 6 per cent of the 'disabled people'¹³ surveyed by the Office for Disability Issues (Slorach, 2016: 265) knew about the social model. Therefore, I remain unconvinced that 'consciousness' is a politically useful concept, as it involves a psychologised politics that allows for individualist and idealistic accusations of 'false consciousness' (see also Mohandesi, 2013). Unlike Shakespeare (2006: 72–4), however, I do not call for the abandonment of the political project underpinning the UPIAS-inspired social model – instead, I seek to offer political clarity to it.

One of the sources of conceptual confusion within the social model (of all permutations) and mainstream discourse, I contend, stems from the widely accepted *impaired – disabled* distinction. While I agree with claims that both 'impairment' and 'disability' are social in origin (see Abberley, 1987; Tremain, 2002; Shakespeare, 2006: 35), I suggest that their origins differ. Following the philosophy of internal relations, we can argue that 'disabled people' and 'people with impairments' belong to different levels of generality (Ollman, 2003: 88–9). More concretely, being 'disabled' (by society and capitalism) is a specifically capitalist phenomenon. On the other hand, having impairments (and experiencing mental distress, being chronically ill, D/deaf or neurodivergent) *precede* capitalism – although the manifestations, social factors, relation to capital, cultural meanings and bodymind experiences change over time.

Thus, the unacknowledged disconnect between the levels of generality in the *impaired – disabled* relationship leads to confusion and lack of precision in analysis and praxis. Put more simply, while 'disabled people' is a socio-political identity, 'people with impairments' is – and has increasingly become more – embedded in a personal, individual identity understood in categorical (that is, 'having' particular bodymind characteristics) rather than relational terms. The leap from the personal, categorical understanding of 'people with impairments' to the social, relational understanding of 'disabled people' is a precarious one to take, and one that builds the social understanding of disability-related identity on individual foundations, thus restricting its potential (cf. Moran, 2015: 177). Instead, a non-identitarian foundation for the socio-political identity 'disabled people' would reflect the social relation between capital(ism) – on the one hand – and people with impairments, who are neurodivergent, chronically ill, D/deaf and/or who experience mental distress – on the other.

It is necessary, therefore, for a disabling capitalism-specific concept to replace 'impaired' in the *impaired – disabled dialectic*, and I propose that its replacement be 'subjects of disablement'. Considering the debates and different narratives explored earlier, the concept ought to incorporate those who do not find the term 'impairment' useful. Indeed, 'subjects of disablement' reflects the collective subjectivation of people with impairments, illness, who experience mental distress, who are neurodivergent, D/deaf – and others yet to come – through disabling capitalist exploitation and oppression. This subjectivation, for example through workplace exclusion, dismissal of experiences, precarious working conditions and iatrogenic harm, remains true, regardless of how the subjects of disablement personally identify themselves. 'Subjects of disablement' will remain a useful concept and constant phenomenon as long as disabling capitalism exists, and subjects' waged and unwaged work will

continue to contribute to and organise against-and-beyond, capital accumulation (see Raekstad and Gradin, 2020; Munro, 2021). Conversely, the terms and criteria used for establishing the ontologies of neurodivergence, impairments, D/deafness, mental distress and chronic illness will continue to change;¹⁴ the socio-political and/or legal identity ‘disabled people’ may also change. In the context of this article, I explore in further detail how the concept ‘subjects of disablement’ is located within disability composition.

The usefulness of the concept ‘subjects of disablement’

I will now consider how a Marxist Autonomist-adapted ‘disability composition’ would be adopted through a materialist approach. I contend that the *technical composition* of disability (that is, everyone who is subjected to disablement, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge the subjectivation) is represented by ‘subjects of disablement’. Alongside it, the *political composition* of disability is expressed by how the subjects of disablement organise themselves for collective struggle via politically collective identities, for example disabled, Mad, Crip or other similar socio-political identities. The technical and political compositions are not *determined* by each other – they are internally co-constitutive and their iteration within a particular socio-historical context can be established through empirical enquiry. Alongside the articulation of the dialectical relationship ‘subjects of disablement – disabled people’ (a specifically materialist concern), I now propose other justifications for the analytical usefulness, political potential and explanatory power of this new concept.

By adopting ‘subjects of disablement’ as a relational non-identity concept alongside the socio-political identity ‘disabled people’, we overcome neoliberal personal identity-based approaches and models¹⁵ that have an understanding of oppression and exploitation in terms of deterministic powerlessness (see Moran, 2015: 166). As argued by hooks, ‘every liberatory struggle initiated by groups of people who have been seen as objects begins with a revolutionary process wherein they assert that they are subjects’ (2015: 43). Thus, the ‘subjects of disablement’ are collectively an ever-changing social formation – they are the bearers, embodiments, contesters, defiers, personifications, actors and transformers of disablement subjectivation. They (*we* – myself included) have agency and potential for resistance and transformation in the face of the contingent and conjunctural nature of oppression and exploitation (see Moran, 2015: 166; Scott, 2017: 60–1).

Regardless of whether people with impairments, who experience mental distress, who are D/deaf, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent are conscious of their subjectivation, or whether their subjectivation is more apparent in certain contexts, they are structurally and collectively subjected to disabling capitalism (see Finkelstein, 2018[1974]). For instance, one can be subjected to disablement while their depression is developing; while working in an organisation that prioritises work outputs over workers’ wellbeing and while living in a society that holds ‘productivity’ as a fundamental criterion for measuring individuals’ worth. In other words, disablement subjectivation may start much earlier than the moment when a person comes to terms with their disability- and/or bodymind-related identity. Being subjected to disablement is a socio-political process whose unfolding reflects the material conditions of disabling capitalism.

Through the use of ‘subjects of disablement’ as a marker of the technical composition of disability, we also avoid the imposition of a *personal* identity upon the multitude of (important and valid) self-narratives that emerge and develop through people’s lifetimes. These narratives can be influenced by factors beyond one’s direct control – such as parents reacting negatively to their children’s neurodivergent way of being. However, the real-ness of disabling capitalism in shaping people’s livelihoods cannot be ignored. For this reason, ‘subjects of disablement’ is a useful concept both for Marxist analysis and for establishing common ground among self-organised groups on the basis of subjectivation under disabling capitalism. This subjectivation (the technical composition of disability) can be politicised and used as the basis for a political and temporary identity ‘disabled people’ as a section of oppressed and exploited people. With this in mind, I suggest that the collective identity ‘disabled people’ is provisional and strategically essentialist (see Spivak, 1988), ultimately needing to be abolished with the abolition of disabling capitalism. According to Bhambra and Margree, ‘politicised identities’ could: ‘be premised upon an explicit affirmation of the provisionality of political identity that is oriented to a “tomorrow” in which the identity will no longer be required’ (2010: 59). Concurrently, it is important to recognise the contradictory meanings of the term ‘disabled’, as, alongside its socio-political meaning, it is also a legal identity used by the state and society more generally. ‘Disabled’, as a concept, presents what Moran would call ‘an analytic challenge’ (2020: 262) to its users. Within this conundrum, the subjects of disablement are compelled to operationalise the term ‘disabled’ (as legal identity) to navigate everyday life spheres mediated by laws, policies and practices. Nonetheless, as identity represents a ‘real referential relationship to the world’ (Moya, 2002: 13), we cannot do away with it. However, acknowledging that the meaning of ‘identity’ changes with the material conditions of everyday life helps us to avoid ahistorical identity-based essentialisms and instead be prepared and open to critically assessing and potentially embracing new identity iterations that are yet to unfold.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the historical novelty of contemporary approaches to ‘identity’ within the context of the politics of disablement and suggested that identity is not the only possible starting point for building a collective politics against disabling capitalism. I also cautioned against the reproduction of ‘ability’/functioning-related hierarchies as the basis for collective politics. Following this, I highlighted the disconnect between the UPIAS-inspired ‘impaired – disabled’ dialectic due to their different levels of generality. As a resolution to this conundrum, I proposed the concept ‘subjects of disablement’ – the capitalist-specific collective experience of living in a disabling society and the missing *sine qua non* (essential condition) of the politics of disablement for scholars and activists of Marxist persuasion. ‘Subjects of disablement’ is an explanatory concept specifically within an analytical framework through which to critique disabling capitalism. As such, those unconcerned with oppression and exploitation within capitalism may not find this concept of much value.

Emancipatory politics underscores the process of disabling capitalist subjectivation and leaves open the possibility for newcomers to join in: for instance, people with Long Covid, recognised as legally ‘disabled’ in a UK tribunal for the first time in June 2022 (Clark, 2022). Through a materialist approach, Critical Political

Economy scholars can produce knowledge about the collective condition of living and collectively struggling within-against-and-beyond disabling capitalist societies, based on the concrete experiences of the subjects of disablement and their collectives. The end goal of an anti-disablement materialist theory and practice is the abolition of disabling capitalism and, ultimately, the identity ‘disabled’ itself. Thus, instead of valorising anew the subjects of disablement through disabling capitalist society’s ‘logic of productivity’ (Oliver, 1999; Abberley, 2002: 134–5), mutual recognition beyond capitalist categories is necessary. This form of recognition is unmediated by capitalist logics, ‘[it] is anti-identitarian’ (Holloway, 2021: ix), and it manifests itself through interdependent, collective self-determination. Building on Moran’s cultural-materialist work, Critical Political Economy scholarship ought to be attuned to the changes of meanings and practices related to identity and its embeddedness in oppression and exploitation.

Critical Political Economists should also take the opportunity to engage with scholars working within and beyond Disability Studies – starting with those who have already built bridges between the two fields: Oliver and Barnes (2012); Russell and Malhotra (2019); Soldatic (2019); Russell (2001); van Toorn (2021). Such engagement offers the possibility not only to understand and challenge capitalism’s inherent disabling structures, ideology and practices, but it also paves the way for a transformation of the questions and assumptions (re)produced through Critical and Global Political Economy – thus moving this scholarship away from its current individual and personal approach to disablement and disability-related identity. GPE ought to reveal and demonstrate opposition to the disabling processes of oppression and exploitation present in the everyday lives of the subjects of disablement, to assist the work of the agents of dissent in making obsolete the social relations upon which these processes rest.

Notes

¹ Founded in 1972, UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) was a broadly socialist activist group of disabled people in the UK. The social model of disability adopted in this article is the original model inspired by UPIAS who, for the first time, made a distinction between ‘disability’ as oppression and ‘impairment’ as a bodymind characteristic that is socially perceived as a lack (*sic*).

² In addition to UPIAS-inspired social modelists’ interpretation of the ‘individual model’ of disability as one that finds ‘problems’ within people’s bodyminds, I would add that individual modelists also find ‘solutions’ to disability-based discrimination through celebrations of individual, depoliticised identities and mobilisations for rights and incremental reforms.

³ There is disagreement over whether UPIAS was a Marxist-Leninist group (Sheldon, 2006: 6), whether it only had some ‘elements’ of Marxism within it (Baldwinson, 2019), or whether it moved from a Marxist perspective towards a materialist and not necessarily Marxist perspective (Rydström, 2019: 1653).

⁴ UPIAS explicitly referred to physical impairments as the group was formed by people with physical impairments (Barnes, 2000: 442); this, however, does not invalidate the strength of the model – as any other approach, theirs is historically and contextually situated, and it can be adapted to reflect recent developments in the politics of disablement.

⁵ Feminist, anti-racist, Disabled People’s, but also far-right ‘activism’.

- ⁶ The question itself is politically significant.
- ⁷ It is important to note that the critique of the ‘affirmative’ approach to disability in this article does not include the UPIAS-inspired activists’ Disability Pride – a celebration of disabled people’s collective struggle, rather than simply a celebration of depoliticised ‘identity’ or bodymind characteristics.
- ⁸ Mohandesi regards deferential practices as reproducing an inverted form of vanguardism, where those considered most oppressed are placed on a pedestal by ‘privileged’ bystanders (2017).
- ⁹ For a discussion on inter- and intra-group identities of race and gender, see Alcoff (2006: 34–6).
- ¹⁰ The ontology of disability is intertwined with the socio-political, phenomenological, historical and biological reality and production of impairment, chronic illness, mental distress, D/deafness and neurodivergence.
- ¹¹ Similarly, Tabili argued that race is a ‘relationship, and not a thing’ (2003: 126).
- ¹² See Mohandesi (2013) for a critique of the idealism of ‘consciousness’.
- ¹³ Moreover, not all subjects of disablement may be aware that they are such. Furthermore, the conditions of disablement are already in place prior to one’s birth.
- ¹⁴ Crozier explored the culturally specific factors embedded within a plurality of understandings of mental distress (2018), and Jolly (2003) pointed to the ‘ontological ambiguity’ of impairment.
- ¹⁵ Molyneux suggested that ‘Chronically Impaired, Neurodiverse, Deaf and Disabled People+’ should ‘collaborate’ and work together under the umbrella term ‘CINDDP+’ (2021: 152). However, bodymind-based identity fragmentations remain unaltered with this concept.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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