



Crip Solidarity. Vulnerability as the foundation of political alliances

Plain English Summary

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Introduction

This article argues that disability theory and disability activism can help us rethink the concept of solidarity. I lay out how common notions of solidarity historically and in the academic literature tends to exclude disabled people, as a result of a strong focus on wage labour. Drawing on disability scholars and activists, I argue that we rather should understand solidarity as grounded in the recognition of a shared vulnerability.

Main theoretical frameworks

The argument is informed by an analysis of the literature on solidarity, both discussing foundational texts in the development of the concept and also contemporary scholarly work. Pinpointing the gaps in these literatures, I then go on to discuss how the work of disability scholars, activists, feminist theorists, attend to these.

Summary of main arguments

Whether we are looking at solidarity as socialists and as part of the labour movement, and/or in the sociological tradition stemming from the writings of Émile Durkheim, solidarity is intimately related to work. This understanding also prevails in the contemporary academic literature. As a consequence, theoretical elaborations of solidarity are not very helpful when analysing solidaristic relationships beyond the working part of the population.

Historically, disability has largely functioned as a label for people that are perceived to be unable to work, which means that they are largely excluded from theoretical discussions of solidarity. Of course, disability activism proves that solidarity is central also for disabled people and their political struggles, but this insight is lost in theoretical discussions of the concept.

To respond to this, I argue that disability theory, and feminist theory, can offer resources to help us formulate a better understanding of the nature of solidarity.



Feminist and disability scholars and activists have argued that vulnerability is a grounding condition in all human lives, implying that anyone can become disabled. Ableism is a normative and cultural system shielding us from this insight, alienating us from our own bodies. A crip understanding of solidarity suggests that solidaristic relations are understood as grounded in this shared vulnerability. Our reasons for acting in solidarity with others is the insight that we share an interest of living in a society where we carry this vulnerability together and as equals.

Thus conceived, our vulnerability is a resource that can help us to act on each other's needs even though we may fall on different sides of the dividing line between disabled and non-disabled.

Main implications

Narrowly viewed, the most important implication of these arguments pertains to theorisations of solidarity, where the arguments urge us to disentangle the concept of solidarity from "work".

More broadly, the article offers theoretical support for the disabled people's movement, which repeatedly stress our shared vulnerability in the context of political struggles.

In terms of social justice, crip solidarity offers a way of conceiving solidaristic relations that bridges the divide between working and non-working people; between those that seen as "normal" and those that are labelled as "deviant". This is not to argue that we are all the same, but that our shared vulnerability can serve as a way of overcoming such divides through allyship and joint political action.

The idea that solidarity is grounded in vulnerability contains a vision of social justice, spurring us to strive to realise a society where we carry our shared vulnerability together and as equals. This means that living conditions should not be determined by how our bodies look and function and that we need to undo the hierarchical division between "normal" and "deviant" ways of functioning.

These ideas are of course not new in the context of disability studies, but they are in the context of a theoretical discussion of solidarity.

Author biography

Niklas Altermark is an associate professor in political science at Lund University, Sweden. His work focuses on disability politics and welfare state retrenchment,



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often alongside and in cooperation with disability activists. Currently, his scholarly work is focused on ableism as a system of alienation.