

Theorising Disablement through the Collective-Materialist Approach to Disabling Capitalism

Plain English Summary

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Introduction

This paper proposes a new way of thinking about disablement oppression and exploitation in capitalist societies. It brings together arguments made by those who adopt a 'social model' understanding of disability and those who adopt Marxist approaches that are critical of productivism. The theory proposed in this paper is called 'the collective-materialist approach to disablement'. It seeks to complement the work and arguments already started by the UK-based activist group called the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970s. In addition, it seeks to address UPIAS-inspired social modelists' calls for a *theory* of disablement.

Approach

This paper adopts Marxist and social model arguments to analyse and critique -what I call- 'disabling capitalism'. This concept bears similarity with the already well-developed concept and framework of 'racial capitalism' (see Cedric Robinson's and Gargi Bhattacharyya's publications). In short, this paper regards disablement as a structural and fundamental feature of capitalism. Building on the premise that there can be no structural disablement without capitalism and vice versa, this paper highlights the relationship between capitalism and disabled people's paid and unpaid work. It then articulates a political stance of disability abolitionism that aims to imagine and act *against-and-beyond* disabling capitalism.

Summary of main arguments

This paper's proposed theory includes five key tenets (arguments/principles). Each tenet is a building block for the overall framework of the paper. Other activists and scholars can further develop these and other tenets through an exploration of arguments and publications of Black, Feminist, Autonomist, Queer, Trans, and other Marxisms that have emerged broadly since 1968. Notably, such approaches should be synthesised (merged) with Disability Studies and disability activist arguments and publications that are critical of capitalism.

The usefulness of merging Marxisms with Disability Studies (especially the UPIAS-inspired social model) is two-fold. Within Marxist literatures, as well as within various disciplines such as Sociology, Political Economy, Political Science, and others, disability should be given much more attention. Within Disability Studies, Marxism should no longer continue to be sidelined. The tenets seek address these current gaps.

The first tenet states that disablement is both a form of oppression and of exploitation. In other words, oppression and exploitation are processes that affect all disabled people, regardless of whether they undertake paid work or not. The unpaid work that is imposed on disabled people on a daily basis reproduces (maintains) capitalism.

The second tenet reinforces the importance of using the concept 'subjects of disablement', which does not refer to an identity. The concept 'subjects of disablement' was first developed in Chis (2023). It refers to all people who, in capitalist societies, have impairments, are neurodivergent, chronically ill, and/or experience mental distress. The concept indicates that no matter how the people mentioned above self-identify, they are nevertheless subjected to disablement oppression and exploitation. They are also agents of dissent who resist oppression and exploitation, on a daily basis.

The third tenet refers to the importance of focusing on collective power, collective struggle, and the importance of making concrete (material) change. This is why the theoretical approach proposed in this paper is called 'collective-materialist'. Resistance at individual level is important, but activists and scholars should aim to argue for wider social change that can benefit us all. Notably, while it is important to criticise the way in which society oppresses and exploits the subjects of disablement, capitalism (its social relations) drives oppression and exploitation.

The fourth tenet refers to the goal of achieving autonomy and Independent Living. This goal is important because all people who are subjected to disablement should have control over their bodyminds (bodies and minds) and daily activities.

The fifth tenet argues that theories and forms of activism that can transform society for the better should adopt a stance that is critical of productivism. Productivism is a capitalist principle adopted by employers, state institutions, and individuals in various contexts – it assumes that only people who do (well-paid) work are 'valuable' and worth supporting. Productivism is disablist and serves to maintain the social relations of oppression and exploitation.

This paper concludes with the argument that disabling capitalism should be abolished (it should end). Alongside this abolitionist approach, the way in which work is undertaken and organised in society ought to be radically transformed.

Main implications

Theoretically and politically, this paper opposes the rising abandonment and sidelining of both Marxism and the UPIAS-inspired social model of disability within Disability Studies. The paper also offers a theoretical approach that can be embedded within various academic disciplines – many of which have historically neglected the meaning and role of disablement in their analyses. By contrast, this paper recognises the political and analytical strength of the UPIAS-inspired social model. Alongside a revived interest in the arguments surrounding this model, I make the case that a theory of disablement is necessary to complement its political efficacy.

Furthermore, this paper's critique of work has methodological and political implications for disabled people's organisations, trade unions, and social movements. For instance, the argument that work undergoes a process of *transfer* across society that can be influenced 'from above' and 'from below' can be mobilised towards collective resistance to the state and employers' further imposition of unpaid work upon the subjects of disablement. The proposed understanding of exploitation as spanning across all spheres of (paid and unpaid) work serves to avoid the historical prioritisation of paid workers and their (paid) work in social movements' and scholarly critiques of capitalism.

About the author and paper

Ioana Cerasella Chis is a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham, in the Political Science and International Studies Department. This paper's insights are based on Ioana's research project called 'The Politics of Disablement and Precarious Work', which can be followed on X at @DisPrecWork. The project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, grant number ES/P000711/1). Ioana would like to send her heartfelt thanks to Emma Foster and Laura Jenkins for their ongoing guidance, and to the two anonymous reviewers and IJDSJ's Editor-in-Chief, Angharad Beckett, for their constructive and very helpful feedback, encouragement, and support.