

# The socialist tradition in the disability movement: Lessons for contemporary activists

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## Introduction

The Law Faculty of the University where I am a PhD student recently built a brand new, beautiful building. On the top floor of the new Law School there is a Wellbeing room, a quiet place where staff and students can enjoy the spectacular view of the city and exercise their mindfulness. Presumably, by taking a breath of air and re-focusing their positive energy, the workers in the University can somehow shift the feeling of stress and discomfort that the organisation of their labour has created. As if the root of their work related problems is somewhere within themselves, and not in the exploitative working conditions that the institution has imposed on them.

The Wellbeing room is not only peaceful, but also disability accessible, unlike many sites on campus. Despite the lack of a comprehensive and proactive disability plan for the University, the good news is that disabled staff and students can also be part of the corporate cop-out that is mindfulness. The glass walls of the room allow for an interrupted view of the otherwise inaccessible environment, and also hinder the possibility to take your discontent further. What is higher than the top floor? And who will hear you shouting from there?

This glass Wellbeing room is a good metaphor for the position in which disabled people find themselves in 2016. In the era of human rights, disabled people are routinely treated as second class citizens by punitive means, such as the unfair targeting of disabled benefits claimants in the context of the ongoing welfare reform. Despite the continuous calls for emancipation and independence, institutions still hold many disabled people captive; accessibility continues to be an issue. Poverty, unemployment, and marginalisation are still seen as personal failures, as opposed to a failure of society to facilitate the substantive equality of disabled people. The voices of disabled people, their

families, carers, allies, of the self-advocates and activists, continue to be ignored, or are rendered inadequate to the neo-liberal quest for personal responsibility and efficiency.

I suggest that the disability movement has been segregated to a room on the top floor of the neo-liberal society, in full view of everyone on the outside, and has been put under pressure to re-examine its internal response to oppression, rather than the external oppressive environment itself. To give an example with the welfare reform in Britain again, disabled benefit claimants are expected to adapt to the punitive cuts and improve their employability, as opposed to question the harmful ideology that inspired the reform in the first place. The fact that the recent disability protests against the welfare reform have gone largely unnoticed suggests that the proud radical tradition of challenging the hostile oppressive society that results in disability and is separate from impairment has perhaps become old fashioned.

Anyone interested in disability studies or disability activism will recognise that this understanding of disability, disability as societal oppression imposed on top of impairment, is known as the radical social model of disability. A group of disabled socialists coined this controversial term and consequently inspired generations of disability scholars and activists. At a time when we are aggressively encouraged to internalise unfairness and inequality, it is important to recollect the Marxist tradition of the disability movement.

## Disability movement history

Those of us interested in the history of the disability movement in Britain consider the 1970s to be a key period for disability activism and organisation. Whilst reflecting on the fact that the history of the movement as a whole predates the 1970s, the focus of this article is the activists and socialists who in 1972 formed the Union of the Phys-

ically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and consequently developed the radical social model of disability.

A brief overview of this period would reflect on the letter that Paul Hunt, a physically impaired activist, wrote to *The Guardian* in 1972. In his letter Hunt passionately critiqued the oppressive structures of society and the regimes of restrictions and isolation within institutions that segregated disabled people. He called upon people with physical impairments to join forces and tackle together the oppression that creates disability.<sup>1</sup> Another prominent disabled activist, Vic Finkelstein, responded to the letter and soon after a group of disabled Marxists joined him and Hunt to form UPIAS. The main aim of UPIAS was to engage in a relentless and critical attack of the medicalization of disability and the plight of the disability institutions, which were seen as the ‘ultimate scrap-heaps of this society’ and a ‘prisons for life’.<sup>2</sup>

UPIAS stood out among the other disability organisations that existed at the time; it was also a different group of activist for the organised Left as a whole. Judy Hunt, a key member of UPIAS, recalls that at the time the Union was formed few comrades saw the struggle of disabled people as interlinked with the struggle of the marginalised communities against the oppression of capitalism. Hunt, however, argues that ‘the term disability is a capitalist creation. Historically one can say that disability was used to define a category of people unable to work. Disability is about not having control over your life.’<sup>3</sup> The UPIAS activists were socialists and saw their struggle for independence and control over their life as an intrinsic part of Left wing politics. This particular feature of UPIAS has made

them a unique organization for the British disability movement and is the focus of this article.

At a time when institutionalization was being questioned and the integration of people with impairments was becoming more mainstream, the members of UPIAS aimed to offer an ever more radical understanding of the ‘true nature of [their] oppression and the radical changes necessary to overcome it’, calling for a ‘fight to change the conditions of life which oppress [them]’.<sup>4</sup> The work of UPIAS focused on the emancipation of people with physical impairments in particular, but this emancipation was not separate from the fight for justice of other disadvantaged groups, such as blacks, unskilled workers, the elderly, the mentally handicapped and the low income earners.<sup>5</sup> Comparing the segregation of disabled people to apartheid, UPIAS argued that ‘the disabled people’s movement involves challenging the social culture that denies people rights of self-determination and it’s about being part of the mainstream of life.’<sup>6</sup>

The activity of UPIAS was envisioned to include publishing pamphlets and a Newsletter; leading campaigns on various issues; building up information and advice services; and organizing various kinds of assistance to people with physical impairments. Although the Union eventually disintegrated, a number of important advances were made that continue to resonate with contemporary disability scholars and activists. It is worth pointing out two contributions UPIAS made to the disability movement: the pursuit of an ‘objective, practical and hands on approach towards the struggle for social change’; and the development of the understanding that ‘disability is created by a world designed for able-bodies living rather than by the way our

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<sup>1</sup>Judy Hunt, ‘A revolutionary group with a revolutionary message’ (2001) *Greater Manchester of Disabled People’s Magazine ‘Coalition’*. The article is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

<sup>2</sup>UPIAS Manifesto 1972, paragraph 7.

<sup>3</sup>As above No.2.

<sup>4</sup>UPIAS Manifesto 1972, paragraphs 4-5. A full text of the Manifesto is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

<sup>5</sup>I am using the original language and terminology of the Manifesto.

<sup>6</sup>As above No.2.

<sup>7</sup>Vic Finkelstein, ‘Outside, ‘Inside Out’ (1996) *Coalition GMCDP* April. The article is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

bodies are impaired.<sup>7</sup>

## The socialist tradition: the activist agenda of UPIAS

This was the message of both the radical social model of disability and the disability activism that followed the establishment of UPIAS. Both theory and activism are fascinating and important topics and deserve an in-depth analysis. The radical social model as a theoretical approach has had a tremendous impact on disability studies as an academic discipline and continues to be the most accepted and used model of disability within contemporary scholarship. For the purposes of this article, however, I will focus on the activist agenda of UPIAS. As a disability researcher I appreciate the strengths (and weaknesses) of the social model of disability for the production of critical and politically engaged research. As an activist I have a far greater need to reflect on the radical history of the movement, in order to be able to draw conclusions about where socialist disability activism should go next.

It is important to point that both the activist agenda of UPIAS and their radical model of disability were considered controversial by many. For example, at a time when other groups were campaigning for the civil rights of disabled people, the UPIAS activists were increasingly concerned with how the quest for anti-discrimination legislation was overtaking the work of many disability organizations. As important as civil rights were, UPIAS ultimately saw them as a 'single-issue campaign', or 'pressure group politics taking priority over grass root work', thus neglecting the general membership of the disabled community, who were advocating for a much broader and more radical re-organization of society.<sup>8</sup> Instead, UPIAS pursued a socialist agenda: to locate the struggle of disabled people against stigma and isolation with the struggle of other op-

pressed communities by critiquing 'all the manifestations of prejudice and discrimination'.<sup>9</sup> An example of this ethos was the frequent reference to the apartheid in South Africa, or to the black Americans movement in the USA, who were also seen as 'rejects from ordinary life, and subject to the same experience of devaluation by society'.<sup>10</sup> UPIAS were skeptical of the traditional 'mode' of disability activism that focused on isolated issues and emphasized the special nature of disability activism and instead argued for a struggle for full integration that would develop the strengths of the disability movement and would bring them into contact with many groups who also have an interest in influencing social change.<sup>11</sup>

Connected with their socialist activism was the use of highly politicized language, often accused of isolating those disabled people who were not interested in disability politics, but were looking for empowerment through other means, most noticeably through the arts. An example of this political language was the use of the term 'disabled', as opposed to 'with impairments'. At the time UPIAS was active the term 'people with disabilities' was becoming more mainstream. The same term now dominates the international and domestic human rights documents, policy documents, academic articles and the popular media. UPIAS saw the use of seemingly positive, or neutral, language, such as 'people with disabilities' as a withdrawal from 'the uncomfortable, subversive position from which we act as a living reproach to any scale of values that puts attributes or possessions before the person'.<sup>12</sup> Although the widely accepted 'people with disabilities' terminology claims to put the person first and the disability second, Finkelstein has argued that it portrays disabled people as 'tragic figures whose lives are wholly dominated by difficulties and a desire to be normal' and thus has the effect of imposing the abled-bodied version of ideal

<sup>8</sup>As above No.8.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Hunt, 'A Critical Condition' in P. Hunt, *Stigma: The Experiences of Disability* (1966, London: Geoffrey Chapman)

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>UPIAS, Comments on the discussion held between the Union and the Disability Alliance on 22nd November 1975. The article is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

<sup>12</sup>As above No.9.

person as a role model or an aspiration.<sup>13</sup> Since disability was understood as a particular form of social oppression brought about by unnecessary isolation and exclusion from full participation, UPIAS insisted on using the term ‘disabled people’, thus breaking the causal link between impairment and disability and attributing the second to the harmful effect of a disablist segregationist environment

The socialist activist agenda of UPIAS, combined with their call for disabled people to get involved in the politics of disability, allowed them to break away from one of the stigmas associated with disability: the label of the tragic a-political and therefore pliable burden to society. Instead UPIAS demanded that disabled people are not only formally reconsider as equal citizens, but also that they have the exclusive power to control their agenda, activities, their livelihood, identity and position in society. Thus UPIAs rejected the liberal projects of charity and compassion and exposed the hypocrisy of the able-bodies community. ‘[The able-bodied person] admits equality as a theory, but when you *act* as though you are *equal* then the crucial test comes. Most people are good-willed liberals towards us up to this point, but not all of them survive close contact with disability without showing some less attractive traits.’<sup>14</sup> UPIAS countered the political and cultural dominance of the non-disabled by relying on grassroots activism that would eventually build the mass movement necessary to achieve the radical transformation of the disablist society. When asked about disability and culture, Finkelstein defended the concept of a disability cultured based on grassroots activism and mobilisation. ‘If we are to make our unique cultural contribution to society then this must come collectively from the people, it cannot be imposed on us by leading disabled individuals from

the top down’.<sup>15</sup> Hence the long term aim of UPIAS was to inspire many disabled people to be proactive in the shaping of their own personal and political reality. ‘A general mass movement of disabled people, and our increasing integration into normal work and other social situations, will radically improve our social status as a group.’<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

So what can a recollection of the socialist tradition within the disability movement do for the contemporary disability activist agenda? It was the activist group of UPIAS who first discussed the social construction of disability. It was their legacy that inspired the see-through wellbeing room metaphor: disability is not a problem that you can overcome by changing your attitude whilst confined within the walls of the institution. Disability is a problem of the capitalist society and theory and activism should seek to smash its see-through walls.

The socialist tradition of UPIAS continues to be extremely relevant to the current situation and could be used to direct and inspire the efforts of the contemporary disability movement: critique the oppressive environment; deconstruct and destabilise oppressive processes and knowledges on disability that are not coming from disabled people themselves; increase political consciousness and intensify disability resistance; work on the grassroots level and demand nothing less than absolute control and independence.

The Left wing allies, be it academics or activist, should aim to support the formation of a mass disability movement, whilst accepting that disabled people themselves must be in control and avoiding tokenistic interventions that go ‘no further than to document the poverty and deprived conditions under which disabled people [are] living.’<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Vic Finkelstein, ‘Disabled People and Our Cultural Development’ (1987) Paper presented at the first annual meeting of the London Disability Arts Forum. The article is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>As above No.11.

<sup>16</sup>As above No.13.

<sup>17</sup>Vic Finkelstein, ‘Researching Disability: setting the agenda for change’ (1992) National Conference 1st June 1992. The article is available via the University of Leeds Disability Studies Archive, free and online.

Disabled people's struggle for fairness and equality should be a priority for the Left, ensuring that the disabled voices are not being silenced and that their radicalism and passion is not being diluted.

We as a Union are not interested in descriptions of how awful it is to be disabled. What we are interested in, are ways of changing our conditions of life,

and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top of our physical impairments by the way this society is organised to exclude us. In our view, it is only the actual impairment which we must accept; the additional and totally unnecessary problems caused by the way we are treated are essentially to be overcome and not accepted.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *UPIAS Manifesto* 1972, paragraph 14.