

Big Society? Disabled people with the label of learning disabilities and the queer(y)ing of civil society

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This paper explores the shifting landscape of civil society alongside the emergence of ‘Big Society’ in the UK. We do so as we begin a research project *Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities and Civil Society* [Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1)]; we consider what ‘Big Society’ might mean for the lives of disabled people labelled with learning disabilities (LDs). In the paper, we explore the ways in which the disabled body/mind might be thought of as a locus of contradictions as it makes problematic Big Society notions of: active citizenship and social capital. Our aim is to queer(y), or to trouble, these Big Society ideas, and to suggest that disability offers new ways of thinking through civil society. This leads us to three new theoretical takes upon civil society: (1) queer(y)ing active citizenship, (2) queer(y)ing social capital and (3) shaping, resisting and queer(y)ing Big Society. We conclude by suggesting that now is the time for disabled people with LDs to re-enter the fray in a new epoch of crisp civil society.

Keywords: learning disability; Big Society; civil society; queer theory

Introduction

The civil self is compelled to repeatedly display his purity by vigilant self-monitoring and disciplinary purification rituals. (Seidman 2008, 18)

This paper addresses contemporary understandings of civil society alongside the emergence of ‘Big Society’ as a policy agenda in the UK. We are interested in how civil society and Big Society are conceptualized as we embark on a new research project *Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities and Civil Society* [Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1)]. We ask what ‘Big Society’ might mean for the lives of people labelled with LD and what the possibilities might be to subvert what we might be described as Big Society’s implicitly normative pitch. Labels are contentious phenomena; they give (in terms of inviting support and services) and denigrate (they threaten to limit how we view people so-labelled). In our research, we have chosen to use the term ‘LD’ to recognize the label most prominent in the British policy context. Labels such as mental handicap and retardation, intellectual/cognitive/developmental disabilities have been and are used across the globe, but we use ‘disabled people with learning

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disabilities (LD)' because it picks up on a key point, made by Simone Aspis (1997), that individuals who have been labelled administratively (so they receive services) or clinically (through psychological services) are explicitly disabled by a wider mainstream society that often excludes them from everyday life. We recognize that many within the self-advocacy movement prefer the term 'learning difficulties' while others prefer 'People First'. We seek to recognize and maintain this definitional confusion and complexity, because, we feel, this fits most readily with our understanding of humanity per se.

We do not come to this research fuelled solely by intellectual curiosity. Rather, we believe that there is an immediate need to make sense of and to galvanize civil society and its response to disablism in the lives of disabled people with LD. We define disablism as 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being' (Thomas 2007, 73). We are currently witnessing a resurgence of hate crime in the UK against disabled people that is also being explained in terms of a few mindless, evil souls. Hate crimes are often portrayed in the media as yet further evidence of individual criminality and the feral nature of the feckless. And yet, as we have argued elsewhere (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011), hate crime might be better understood as the symptomatic expression of a more generally spread disablism systemic violence. Reduced public expenditure, increased social unrest, intensified feelings of social isolation amongst our communities will inevitably lead to hostilities, often enacted against those perceived to be the weakest in society. Add to this the dominant ideology of neoliberalism: a self-governing, self-serving, moral responsibility for oneself and one's family, then anyone considered unable or unwilling to take on such a citizenship role will receive a 'marked identity' (Bauman 1994) such as 'scrounger', 'waster' or 'dependent'. These are crucial times for organizations of disabled people, advocates, family and parent organizations because we are witnessing the emergence of what we term *disabling civil society*. These are, quite simply, times that are a matter of life and death.

Our response is to seek to subvert – more properly queer(y) – Big Society (Gibson-Graham 1999; Slater 2013). By queer, we mean we want to trouble contemporary understandings and hegemonic positions on civil society, and we attempt to do so through including the contributions and positions of disabled people with LD. We take as a given, following McRuer (2006) and others, that disability queers the normative pitch; it gets us to rethink how we typically live our lives and organize our societies. And so, we ask what the possible threats and opportunities might be for people with LD in a time of Big Society and what we can learn from the lives of disabled people with LD about the potential to queer the normative pitch?

Big Society

The Big Society is what happens whenever people work together for the common good. It is about achieving our collective goals in ways that are more diverse, more local and more personal. (Department for Communities and Local Government 2010, 2)

Big Society is an English phenomenon; it does not have the same currency throughout all the countries of the UK (including Wales, Scotland and the north of Ireland). The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, first used the term 'Big Society' in the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November, 2009, to set out his ambition to transition from Big Government to Big Society (Evans 2011). His aim was to give power, responsibility and decision-making to individuals and neighbourhoods and, simultaneously, to take power

away from the state (Evans 2011). Big Society is intended to be more than a policy statement, rather it is a 'political narrative' (Evans 2011, 164), a story about how society *should* be. The Coalition Government, in England, set out the key aims of Big Society as follows:

- government will make it easier to establish, expand and run charities social enterprises and voluntary organizations;
- public sector workers will have new rights to form co-operatives to deliver public services;
- 'red tape' will be removed;
- a 'Big Society' bank will be established as a new source of loan funding for the third sector;
- philanthropy and charitable giving will be encouraged;
- a National Citizen Service will be established to give 16-year-olds volunteering opportunities;
- a Big Society Day will encourage volunteering and social action;
- 5000 community organizers will be trained to support neighbourhood groups;
- power will be devolved to local government (Alcock 2010).

Two principles underpinning Big Society have emerged: first, that the state should be smaller and, second, that the general public should be more involved in decision-making (Crines and Halsall 2012). Big Society is concerned with the process of devolving power from the state to individual social actors and groups within civil society (Diamond 2011). Blond (2009), the author widely credited with inventing 'Big Society', has argued that the role of policy-makers is to facilitate the shrinkage of the state and the restructuring of welfare provision (Alcock 2010, 384).

Big Society is premised on individualized and neoliberal ways of thinking. It is 'a society in which individual citizens *feel big*: big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood' (our italics, The Big Society Network 2011 cited in Crines and Halsall 2012, 2). While the state maintains a role in economic management, Big Society represents a move away from the principles of collectivist action and social equality towards *individual* social provision. The big individual does the work. As a result, Big Society relies not upon a discourse of collectivism, rights and equality, but upon senses of individualism, responsibility and altruism that draw upon philanthropic leanings and the nineteenth-century concepts of self-help (Crines and Halsall 2012, 2).

Ironically, the government has also perpetuated the view that 'we are collectively becoming less civil: more self-centred, more aggressive, more hostile, less willing to devote time to causes greater than ourselves' (Diamond 2011, 4) and that we are living in 'Broken Britain' (Evans 2011). Simultaneously, it is claimed that the bonds that bind people together in society (Putnam 2000) have been fractured and that social fragmentation has led to an increasingly disconnected society where individuals have become alienated from friends, neighbours and formal democratic structures. Such terrorizing images of civil society have always existed though, currently, we are experiencing sustained representations of fragmented society.

Big Society suggests three solutions for what must be done to fix 'Broken Britain'. The first, as we have seen, is to reduce the size of the state and to shift responsibility and decision-making to local government and to the third sector. Second, the Coalition

Government has set out its plan to tackle broken families by supporting marriage, reducing family break down and lone parenthood and tackling poor parenting. And third, the government is determined to reduce welfare dependency through a cap on benefits and a reduction in disability, sickness and out-of-work benefits (Wood and Grant 2010). This latter point is crucial: Big Society is a key justificatory discourse for the rolling back of welfare support and benefits (Scott 2011).

By drawing on individualism (and individuals' responsibilities to their communities), Big Society offers a cultural narrative that attributes the underlying causes of a 'broken society' to the failings of individuals rather than to socio-economic structural forces (Lister and Bennett 2010). The consequence of this analysis is welfare reform that must 'make work pay'. A shrinking state has been described as a by-product of neoliberalism (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012, 1480), as the state rolls back (Sothorn 2007). There is already evidence to suggest that these reforms will disproportionately affect disabled people (Roulstone 2011). This leads us to ask what moments of possibility and/or resistance might there be within Big Society and wider civil society for disabled people with LD?

Civil society

For Hardt and Negri (2005), civil society is the institutional infrastructure for political mediation and public exchange – made up of ideological, cultural and economic institutions outside of the state. Here the rational order of civil society is contrasted with the irrational disorder of nature, and the distinction between the civil society and the state is maintained. Civil society has both defensive and forward-looking strategies. Gill (2000) finds moments of radical reconstruction in postmodern civil society on the part of anti-capitalist activists. Gill (2000) takes things further and suggests that we are in an epoch of *postmodern civil society* where a set of conditions, particularly political, material and ecological, are giving rise to new forms of political agency whose defining myths are associated with the quest to ensure human and intergenerational security on and for the planet, as well as democratic human development and human rights (Gill 2000, 131). Such postmodern politicization is taking place in a global marketplace where supranational organizations, such as the World Trade Organisation and The World Bank, are engaged in macroeconomic policy-making that will minimize democratic policies and institutions, in particular economic contexts while opening up new markets for American and Western European corporations. This, for Gill (2000), links to the project of disciplinary neoliberalism – deregulation, privatization and liberalization – that will meet specific groups' ambitions and, quite simply, bypass other organizations. There are new spaces for capitalist restructuring: a cutback in the welfare state and an increase in more coercive policing in order to establish market selves (Sears 2003). Goonewardena and Rankin (2004) similarly worry about the bourgeois category of civil society: a context that is not only globalized but also occupied as much by the World Bank as it is by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as voluntary, faith and free press organizations. This category has been co-opted by an ideology of neoliberalism – so that civil society is an entity that colludes with rolling back the state and getting governments out of our lives and seeking the help of NGOs and free enterprise. In an era of fiscal stringency, social welfare and education have been reduced – creating a crisis of social reproduction felt by the poorest. The question is, of course, how does contemporary social theory imagine new forms of political action and activism, agency and identity and new forms of ethical,

democratic organization? And how do these new forms of political action touch upon the lives of disabled people with LD?

In an attempt to imagine new forms of political action, Gill (2000) deploys the mythical and utopian notion of the *postmodern prince*: a signifier that challenges modernist projects (such as the consolidation of the project of globalization under the role of capital) by bringing together activists including indigenous people, farm workers, industrial workers, environmentalists, social justice, students, disabled people and scientific and political organizations. These inclusive and flexible forms of politics use and refuse the conditions of neoliberalism. For our project of theorizing disability and civil society, then, a critical analysis of the workings of the market and neoliberal ideology is absolutely paramount. However, unlike some theoretical responses (especially Marxist analyses) that reject these dual coupled processes, we are committed to making sense of the ways in which neoliberalism is worked at and with disabled people with LD and their organizations. We are not suggesting that neoliberalism is the correct way of thinking for contemporary society. On the contrary, we deplore and detest the elements and impacts of such a worldview. We do, however, and not without bitterness, accept that neoliberalism is, frankly, everywhere, whether we like it or not (Sears 2003). The question remains then: how can disability politics mobilize and manoeuvre itself in these neoliberal times?

For Jacobs (2000), the discourse of civil society has existed through the development of a semiotic binary that combines inclusion of dominant groups' ambitions alongside the exclusion of the aims of a number of minority groups. Civil society is by definition conflicted. Sears (2003) concludes that we need to think again about queer politics in a time of anti-capitalist and anti-poverty movements; he finds that queer young people, queer women of colour, queer street people and queer people of low income are still suffering. He suggests that many queers have been left out in the cold. In 1998, Chappell (1998) made exactly the same point about disabled people with LD. Sears (2003) asks how is queer space commodified and exclusionary to some poor working-class queers? A similar question could be asked about civil society: to what extent has it become commodified and exclusionary to disabled people with LD?

One potential area of commodification and exclusion relates to the centrality of work. While understandably many disabled activists have fought for access to a meaningful and well-paid job, this has not transpired for many disabled people with LD who require more interdependent forms of support or for whom work is not a practice they will engage with. The closure of segregated and sheltered housing schemes and workshops – while in line with the commendable ambitions of inclusive employment activists – has left many disabled people with LD with few to no opportunities to labour, meet with friends and expand their communities. Similarly, the closure of traditional social education centres and adult training centres and the outsourcing, distribution and privatization of these services to small businesses have broken long-established peer groups and prevented there being a central base from which to meet. This creates a worrying predicament. As Burrington (1998) has argued, marginalization refers to a restriction from free circulation in the life of a community or public space. This restriction is enacted through the processes of silence (no one knows, nor challenges), isolation (individuals become estranged from their communities) and demonization (communities respond negatively and with suspicion to these lone individuals who exist on the periphery of the community).

So where can we find spaces for resistance? For Hardt and Negri (2005) in those moments of desiring production, kin work and care work, we need to refashion what we mean by labour: for labour is at the heart of all conceptions of civil society. This view of immaterial labour – developed with Negri later (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2005) – evokes the kinds of interdependent connections, support networks, distributed competencies and shared knowledge production found in the disabled multitude (Goodley 2011) – the focus of our research project.

The project

This paper emerges from the beginnings of a research project *Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities and Civil Society* [Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1)]. The project runs from June 2013 to June 2015 and is a partnership between four universities (Manchester Metropolitan University, The University of Sheffield, Northumbria University and the University of Bristol) working with three partner organizations (Speak Up Self-Advocacy, independent living advisors and Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities) in England. The overall research question asks: how are disabled people with LD faring in Big Society? The research is being carried out through seven overlapping and interconnected phases as follows:

Phase 1: Key stakeholder interviews: interviews with disabled people with LD, members of the third sector, policy-makers, lawyers and family members;

Phase 2: Longitudinal documentary analysis: an extended analysis of academic and policy literature relating to Big Society;

Phase 3: Ethnographic case studies with co-researchers: an extended period of ethnographic work with the three partner organizations;

Phase 4: Analysis: a period of analysis following the data collection in phases 1, 2 and 3;

Phase 5: Impact workshops: a series of impact workshops to share our findings and develop analysis and impact;

Phase 6: Researcher-in-residence: a researcher from the project will work with partner organizations to promote knowledge exchange;

Phase 7: Public Engagement Events: a series of events to share research findings and increase the impact of the project [More details available at: www.bigsocietydis@wordpress.com].

Ethical clearance has been sought and gained and we are in the early stages of the overlapping phases 1–3. This initial empirical work and meetings with research partners and the impact research management group have pushed us to think, together, critically and theoretically about the lives, ambitions and civil society of disabled people with LD.

Queer(y)ing Big Society

In our analysis of Big Society, we suggest, as we have argued elsewhere (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2012), that disability offers not only a site of contradictions, a ‘paradoxical space’ (Sothorn 2007, 146), but also a potentially productive space. We have already hinted at the ways in which the disabled body/mind might be thought of as a locus of contradictions in the spaces of Big Society as it makes problematic notions of active citizenship, social capital and the processes of discipline, control and normalization at work within Big Society. In thinking through these ideas further, we seek to queer(y) Big Society. Following Slater (2013, 19), we use queer ‘as a verb: to queer, to make

others think differently, to disrupt the status-quo' and we borrow from Gibson-Graham (1999) the term queer(y)ing to describe this process of questioning in order to seek out possibilities and opportunities for change. Our attempt to queer(y) Big Society draws on the insights emerging from Crip theory in the field of critical disability studies (McRuer 2006). Sykes (2009, 247-248) has commented that disability studies have 'interrogated what gets counted as a "normal" body, challenging taken-for-granted ideas about mobility, productivity, and even that any body is able across different circumstances and times of life' and so by 'focusing critical analysis and politics on the construction of normative bodies, in this case "able" bodies' similarities emerge between queer theory and Crip theory which seek to explore the connections between the social construction of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness' (Sykes 2009, 247-248). This has led to the emergence of new vocabularies shared between queer theory and Crip theory (Goodley 2014).

As one of us has recently argued, Goodley (2014), this shared language has taken on particular relevance in a time of global neoliberalism. The neoliberal agenda is dependent on the construction of 'us' and 'them' (Ramlow 2006; Runswick-Cole, forthcoming). The 'us' are those who are judged to be fit, able and rational enough for work; those who fail to meet this ideal are consigned to the category of 'them' with the prospect of little support from the welfare state and social isolation. For Whitney (2006, 40), this lack of community support 'can be exhausting, isolating, and lead to internalized ableism and homophobia'. Given the dominance of global neoliberalism, we might argue, the outlook for queer and crip bodies looks bleak; it appears that a life of exhaustion and isolation is inescapable. And yet, resistance and subversion are readily found in queer and crip spaces (Goodley 2014). For Sedgwick (1990, 3), sexuality occupies a distinctively privileged relation to the constructs of radicalized identities. While McRuer (2006) has shown that disability has come to occupy a central place in the fight for recognition and citizenship, and, in so doing, disability unsettles narrow conceptions of what it means to be fully human. For Namaste (2009, 15), queer theorists focus in on the lives of those who have been excluded from the category of the fully human. To be gay, lesbian, bi or trans is to occupy a social position that has historically been considered less than human.

In neoliberal times, we cannot escape the attraction of normative desires and identifications. People with LD are subjected to these desires and processes through numerous tests and assessments that claim to assess their capabilities and capacities at different stages of the life course, from childhood intelligence tests to 'work readiness' and disability benefits assessments in adulthood. Queer theory's commitment to uncertain, fluid and becoming subjectivities forms a productive alliance with critiques of ableism that disrupt traditional ideas about what passes as 'normal': who is 'us' and 'them'? We see the alliance of crip and queer politics as sharing a political agenda to question the taken-for-granted virtue of the production of self-governing, discrete, enterprising individuals. When a person needs the support of others to eat, to sleep, to bathe, to be mobile, to communicate, to be part of the community and to engage in relationships, this troubles the assumed models of citizenship (Goodley 2014). Our task, according to Meleo-Erwin (2012, 396), is 'to crack open the concept of normal and trouble it in order to see what relations of power it acts in the service of'.

Queer(y)ing active citizenship

Civil society is underpinned by the notion of active citizens associating freely in the pursuit of liberty and equality (Powell 2009). The discourse of active citizenship

permeates the Big Society narrative; community empowerment, social action and volunteering are dependent on the contribution of active citizens. This rhetoric has touched the lives of disabled people with LD. In 2001, the previous New Labour government published *Valuing People* (Department of Health 2001) and set out the aspiration for disabled people with LD to take power and control over their lives including the care, support and services they receive. The privatization of services and creation of market choices have given rise to the personalization of service delivery for growing numbers of disabled people and increased choice and flexibility (Dowse 2009) – to become active citizens.

And yet, as the Department of Health's (2012) review of care practices at Winterbourne View, an assessment centre for disabled people with LD, so graphically revealed, disabled people with LD continue to be disciplined within institutions and often have little choice and control in their lives. Such abuse of disabled people with LD has fed the view that the management of risk should be the overriding principle of care in response to the lives of disabled people with LD (Dowse 2009), thus rendering disabled people with LD in need of constant surveillance and control.

Above all, it is Big Society's requirement that active citizens are independent and productive, within the terms required by neoliberal markets, that renders disabled people with LD problematic citizens. In the labour market, the 'able-body/mind' is often the required norm (Wilton and Schuer 2006), and as neoliberalism privileges paid work as a marker of citizenship, this has intensified the consequences for those who fail to access the work place (Wilton and Schuer 2006).

Our aim is to draw on the experiences of disabled people with LD, their interdependencies and their productivity within in their families and communities, to queer(y) concepts of active citizenship that inevitably lead to the categorization of disabled people with LD as 'them'. Take for example, Matt, a young man we met through our research. Matt is 29; he has a house, a mortgage, a job and is active in his local community – all the markers of an ideal neoliberal citizen. Matt lives in his own home with the support of full-time carers; he works for an hour a day, five days a week; and he has a circle of support¹ which ensures that Matt is included in his local community. In short, Matt's *independence* is the product of his *interdependencies*. Matt's story troubles individualized concepts of 'active citizenship' and exposes the limits and implicit contradictions of a politics of individualism – a point we return to below.

Queer(y)ing social capital

While Big Society valorizes individualism, as we have seen above, it is also premised on the view that Britain is broken because a sense of connectedness between people has been lost. Re-creating a sense of connection between people is seen as a key mechanism to mend Broken Britain and to address issues of political inequality in Big Society. This approach directly draws on social capital theory (Putnam 2000). Putnam (2000) describes buildings, plants and equipment as physical capital; people, skills, knowledge and experience as human capital, and social networks and norms of trust as social capital (Bates and Davis 2004, 196). Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding and bridging relationships in which bonding relationships form between people who have a connection or interest in common, while bridging relationships bring diverse individuals and groups of people together (Bates and Davis 2004).

When disabled people with LD lives are viewed through the lens of social capital theory, it is often argued that they are not faring well. Disabled people are often described

as having strong bonding ties with close friends and family members, but that their ability to form bridging ties which bring diverse individuals and groups together is described as limited. For example, Bates and Davis (2004, 201) claim that ‘perhaps only a third of the people utilizing learning disability services have even one non-disabled friend’. There is an assumption that if disabled people with LD can only fit into the existing bonding and bridging relationships that are seen to build valuable (normative) forms of social capital then community participation will follow. And yet, the experiences of disabled people with LD queer these normative assumptions. Another story from our research illustrates this point:

At the end of the [self-advocacy] meeting, Annie tapped me on the shoulder to show me the photographs on her ipad. Annie, who is in her fifties, told me she used to live with her mum but that her mum had died in June last year. At that point, Annie met Angela and Caron, social workers from the Shared Lives Scheme² in the local area. Angela and Caron helped Annie to find a new family. Now Annie lives with Jean and Keith, their teenage daughter and their three dogs. Annie showed me some photos with three lovely dogs and her new family. (Ethnographic field notes from Katherine)

The close ties Annie has formed with her Shared Lives family are non-normative; the family is not constituted as a result of biological relationships or traditional parent/child roles. Annie’s family troubles traditional concepts of bonding and bridging ties that underpin a ‘normal’ family life and community engagement.

The presence of disability queer(y)s social capital by drawing our attention to the inherent contradictions within Big Society which on the one hand valorizes independence and which is, on the other hand, built through the promotion of (normative) bonding and binding relationships that build social capital. Big Society relies on interdependence *albeit* that such interdependencies are usually premised on abled and normative ties and relationships. We know, though, that the presence of disability promotes new forms and understandings of social, emotional and cultural capital (McKeever and Miller 2004). Our task is to re-imagine social capital as it is practised and, therefore, conceptualized in the lives of disabled people with LD.

Shaping, resisting and queer(y)ing Big Society

the rhetoric of individuality, personal fulfillment and entrepreneurial responsibility under which these neoliberal reforms were sold serves to deny the particularity and irreducibility of the disabled body thus making disabled bodies rhetorically invisible even while their physical and discursive presence is foregrounded. The perversity of this argument is that, in the claim that the disabled body ‘is just like everyone else’, its difference is at once marked in relation to the norm (everyone else) that it reproduces even while the specificity of its difference is effaced (the political claim of being ‘just like’). (Sothorn 2007, 147)

To meet its aspirations, Big Society demands that we are all active, entrepreneurial selves, and so disability occupies a troubling space within the marketplace. At times, disability is absent, erased by an unswerving adherence to the promise that market forces alone will eliminate inequality. Yet, at the same time, the disabled body is manipulated for profit by the pharmaceutical trade (Sothorn 2007), the commodification of disability (Mallett and Runswick-Cole 2012) and the psychological industry (Goodley and Lawthom 2005).

It seems as if neoliberalism, with which Big Society allies itself, has emerged as a monolithic force ‘out there’ effortlessly reproducing itself (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012), and as a result opportunities to shape, to resist and to queer(y) seem unattainable

and out of reach. However, the paradox of disability offers the potential to destabilize neoliberalism and to see instead the ways in which it is fabricated, co-constituted and contingent on a range of assemblages and alliances (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012). Disability creates a space to queer(y) Big Society by exposing the limits and contradictions of its ‘normative constructions’ (Sothorn 2007, 157).

Williams, Cloke, and Thomas (2012, 1486) argue that it is possible to engage in ‘little processes of revision, refusal and resistance’ and they urge third-sector organizations, and we might include organizations of disabled people with LD, to present themselves as ‘professional’ and ‘fit partners’ to the Big Society ideal, while maintaining ‘alternative values and practices “on the ground” that retain a capacity for performative subversions of official government strategies’. Such resistance must be premised on the belief that disability is not a failure to achieve normal humanity (Linton 1998). Rather, disability is a positive identity that ‘demands respect and a political-economic and cultural symbolic reckoning with difference’ (Sothorn 2007, 148). It is imperative that we attend to the ways in which disabled people with LD, like Matt and Annie, are using, refusing and shaping Big Society.

Conclusion: towards a crip civil society

In this paper, we suggest that disability offers a paradoxical and productive space in which to expose the limits and contradictions of the individualism that underpins Big Society. Disability allows us to queer(y) the assumptions of ableist normativity upon which Big Society is premised (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2011). We suggest that through little processes of refusal, revision and resistance, it may be possible to destabilize the seemingly monolithic pressures of neoliberalism, and that organizations of disabled people, as civil society actors, may be able to find the spaces to do just that. To queer is not to find an end state or to replace one hegemony with another, but to continue to question, destabilize assumptions that marginalize and exclude bodies and minds that are judged to fail to meet the expectations of ableist normativity.

Undoubtedly, disabled people and those close to them are facing a newly defined form of marginalization. This will have huge material impacts (finance, work and infrastructure). As importantly, the cuts in welfare threaten the idealist or cultural centres of disabled people’s communities (arts, belief and counter-hegemonies). The cuts risk promoting infighting amongst disabled people’s groups as they search for ever reduced funds to survive. We will witness a potential reduction of disability arts – the heartland of the creative industries of disability politics – as fewer and fewer funds are distributed to artists because the economic cupboards are bare. Furthermore, we will continue to witness within disability studies research an antipathy to new forms of theoretical work as we associate scholarship with irrelevance in these difficult material times (see for example Sheldon 2004). However, we believe that theory can help us to create opportunities for the urgent acts of refusal, revision and resistance needed to bring people in from the cold.

As the community, political and social lives of us all ‘are continually generating a multitude of ways of being queer and crip and of coming together’ (McRuer 2012, 1), we need to ask, as a matter of urgency, are we now entering a time of crip civil society? In asking this question, we are reminded of McRuer’s (2006, 154) carefully considered questions ‘who haunts the margins of the work that we do, the margins of the feminist, queer, and disabled worlds? What would an ongoing commitment to those spectral presences entail?’ We know that neoliberalism produces greater inequities but we wonder

how it can be used and refused in ways that promote resistance and agitation. We must continue to ask: can we do something with what Power (2005) terms the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions of neoliberalism? Furthermore, what ‘counter-tendencies’ are produced by neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002). We need to consider the imaginative ways in which neoliberalism is being appropriated and exploited. Too often disabled people with LD are left to occupy the borderlands of disability studies – now is the time for them to re-enter the fray in a new epoch of crip civil society.

Notes

1. Circles of support are a group of family, friends and supportive workers who come together to give support and friendship to a person. They help them do the things they would like to do and support in planning for new things in their life. Visit: <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/our-work/family-friends-community/circles-of-support/>.
2. Shared Lives is an alternative to home care and care homes for disabled adults and older people, used by around 15,000 people in the UK. In Shared Lives, a Shared Lives carer and someone who needs support get to know each other and, if they both feel that they will be able to form a long-term bond, they share family and community life. See more at: <http://www.sharedlivesplus.org.uk/what-is-shared-lives/shared-lives#sthash.PiQBD2Q.dpuf>.

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