

# Out of the frame: disability and the body in the writings of Karl Marx

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## ABSTRACT

How disability as a phenomenon is to be understood has been widely discussed within the field of disability research. Influenced by a Marxist perspective, the social model has reinforced the view that disability results from the organization of society rather than from individual premises. This article elaborates on these issues by exploring the writings of Karl Marx and his views concerning disability. The analysis pinpoints bodily normality in Marx's reasoning and how the economic system shapes the premises for participation and roles, but also how people with disabilities were left out of the progressive call for social change.

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## Introduction

The introduction of the Marxist-inspired social model has had a huge impact in understanding disability in relation to social structures, barriers and exclusion (Barnes and Mercer 2004; Goodley 2014). Marx is considered to be one of the most influential theorists that understood the evolution of society based on its materialistic<sup>1</sup> premises (Worsley 2002; Collyer 2015). For instance, Marxist theory has influenced sociology as a theory that focuses on the interests of competing groups, and health has been studied in relation to the capitalistic system and conditions of the working class (Collyer and Scambler 2015). Marxist theorists have also focused on the body in the light of social organization and the mode of production. As noted by previous research (Soper 1981; Morawski 1990; Nasser 1990; Rader 1990; Wood 1990; Benton 1999; Jessop and Wheatley 1999; Kovel 1999; Lee 1999; Goodley 2014), Marx stressed the idea that the human body is a fundamentally active and creative organism, capable of durable production and realization of potential bodily capacities, but that alienation has turned the body into an instrument for labouring and consumption in relation to the logic of a capitalistic system that 'destroys the integrity of the laboring body' (Harvey 2000, 108). Even though scholars have analysed health and illness in relation to Marxist theory (cf. Coburn 2015), it is hard to find studies that explicitly discuss Marx's view on disability as such, based on in-depth analyses of his own writings. Collyer (2015) is one who made use of various texts of Marx to further analyse his view on health-related issues in relation to his overall theoretical construction. According to her, Marx put forward the idea that the capitalistic system transformed both the human body and the human nature, and that he showed how illness and disease were related to the living conditions of the working class. An understanding of Marx and the body in relation to societal organization has also been emphasized by Harvey (2000). As reported by him, Marx's reasoning underpins the idea that the body is an historically and geographically malleable entity that 'is created [...] in a spatiotemporal flux of multiple processes' (98). In so doing, he challenges reductionist theories on diseases by relating them more to the organization of the social

world. Harvey (2010) also notes how Marx in *Capital* uses reports of factory inspectors to emphasize industrial capitalism's negative impact on the health status of the workers. Here one must also recognize the influence of Marx's copartner Friedrich Engels, who wrote extensively about the misery of the English working class (Abberley 1997; Worsley 2002). The works of Marx are thus crucial to the field of body and disability (Goodley, Hughes, and Davis 2012). But few studies try to analyse the writings and thinking of Marx in relation to his own descriptions of reality, ideas and values in relation to disability. Foremost, Marx's theory is rather used as an overall source of inspiration in which theoretical features, such as conflict theory, are accentuated (e.g. Finkelstein 2001; Oliver 2009). Accordingly, Oliver (1996) refers to the writings of Marx when talking about barriers and the way these are produced by the economic structures of society. For Abberley (1996, 1997), Marx's writing is put in relation to the system of production and the ability to create value and to perform in connection to Marx's idea of the normal worker and the kind of recognition that a person will be able to receive.

The aim of this article is to further analyse Marx's writing in this respect, which, in turn, can contribute to the discussion concerning the meaning and implications of the social model as well as how to understand disability as a phenomenon. This kind of project is also motivated by the fact that disability theory, even though it has evolved, needs to be further developed in relation to social theory (Goodley 2014; Goodley, Hughes and Davis 2012). The overall research question guiding this article is as follows: to what extent – and in relation to what aspects – does Marx touches upon the issue of bodily normality and deviance and what does this say about how he perceived disability as a phenomenon?

## Analytical frame

There are several ways to approach the theory and analysis of disability (Shakespeare 2006). The social model, in contrast to the medical or individual model, explains disability in relation to social barriers and the organization of society (Barnes, Oliver, and Barton 2002; Hughes 2002; Oliver 2009). What is also crucial in this respect is that the 'foundations of the social model, and hence disability theory, lie in historical materialism' (Vernon and Swain 2002, 89). People with disabilities, Finkelstein states, 'must find ways of engaging in the class struggle where the historical direction of society is fought, won or lost' (Finkelstein 2001, 5); and Oliver (2009), leaning on Marxist theory, implies how capitalism produces certain social categories and standards of performance, making people with disabilities in need of institutional support. As reported by Finkelstein (1991, 29), disability has, to a large extent, 'come to mean unable to work' and dependency, a view that was established parallel to the industrial revolution. Simultaneously, the social model has been criticized for its reductionist tendencies and for neglecting the body and factors such as gender, ethnicity or different impairments, and attempting to tone down personal experiences (Hughes 2002; Thomas 2002, 2004; Traustadóttir and Kristiansen 2004; Shakespeare 2006). The ambition to move away from reductionists' views can also be traced within critical realism<sup>2</sup> where disability is related to different levels and dimensions with various generative mechanisms (Bhaskar and Danermark 2006). Oliver (2009) has responded to the criticism above by enforcing the idea that disability is foremost an outcome of social barriers and must be linked to the activists' calls for social change. At the same time, he questions the claim that the social model ignores, for instance, people's experiences.

Concurrently, disability relates to normality and deviance discourses that are not fixed but contextually produced, in the sense that the notion of normalcy belongs to a continuum that is historically and culturally grounded (Vernon and Swain 2002; Swain, French, and Cameron 2003; Foucault 2006; Shakespeare 2006; Stiker 2006). As Goodley (2014) reminds us, the body outside of culture is 'a fantasy, in actuality, our bodies are moulded by alienating choreographies of capitalism' (83). Moreover, the body is linked to things like changing biopolitics and constructed binary opposites that affect the notion of normality. An important remark in this respect is that dichotomies such as the dis/abled body must be seen in the light of social structures and societal changes, such as 'the body's materialisation in and through capitalism' (91), in which, for example, the neoliberal society

has triggered ideas of ableism and the autonomous, adaptable subject. In this reasoning, Goodley (2014) leans on Harvey (2000) and his ideas concerning the body as an 'unfinished project' (98), historically and geographically produced, in the sense that 'performative activities available to the body in a given place and time are not independent of the technological, physical, social, and economic environment in which that body has its being' (98). That is why, Harvey (2000) argues, a 'study of the body has to be grounded in an understanding of real spatio-temporal practices [...] and the prevailing structures of political-economic power' (130). Furthermore, Harvey (2000) stresses that the human body not just hold a passive, economic role. On the contrary, the body is an entity that is 'active and transformative in relation to the processes that produce it' (99); which must be understood in a relational perspective, since 'no body exists outside of its relations with other bodies' (120). Therefore, it is crucial to understand humans in terms of their malleable positions within a certain system which is where 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are created (106). Concurrently, Thomas (2002) and Armer (2004) argue for the need to capture the complexity in system changes and how this affects social positions and the premises for social actions in relation to the economic system. The objective here is to empirically analyse how Marx reasoned concerning disability and the tension between normality and deviance.

The analysis of Marx's writing has been narrowed down to the three volumes of *Capital*, written in British exile in the second half of nineteenth century. *Capital* is Marx's most important work when it comes to presenting a coherent theory concerning the structure of the capitalistic society and the mechanisms that explain it (Worsley 2002). Still, to elaborate on Marxist theory as such is beyond the scope of this article. The analysis process has been guided by a thematic approach (Padgett 2008). The reading of the texts contained a familiarizing phase where the three volumes were read in their entirety, and passages were identified that relate to body functions. Through meaning concentration, larger units were turned into codes of meaning. Subsequently, a cluster of codes formed common categories, which in turn were constructed into analytical themes containing Marx's description and evaluation of reality, and recommendations of action. The beginning of the analysis process was inductive, while the later parts were more deductive as the categories emerged. The analysis process was characterized by an interplay between the empirical and the theoretical links (the concept of normality). Simultaneously, there is always a risk for anachronism when conducting a textual analysis on historical material. It is important to keep in mind that these texts were written prior to the development of any disability theory, and that, in Marx's day, there was no equivalent concept to today's disability. Despite this fact, disability is used here as a unifying concept to depict some sort of limitation concerning activity and participation based on bodily function in relation to the surrounding environment (e.g. Gustavsson 2004).

## Findings

### *The ideal man*

One important element in the writing and philosophy of Marx is that his work and theory not only addressed the economic system, historical changes and the structure of the social order as such. It also entailed fundamental ideas concerning the nature and essence of man,<sup>3</sup> and what actually constitutes and distinguishes man as a creature. Thus, according to Marx, being human presupposes the ability to interpret one's need in relation to a given context and make use of the material and resources provided by nature. This interplay between man and nature is crucial in Marx's thinking. As stated by Worsley (2002) Marx highlighted that man's ability to produce an end-product was the characteristic that separated man from animals. Indeed, in the context of *Capital*, the crucial dimension was that of creativity. As noted by Marx, the ideal man was not just a passive observant in the world, but someone who responded to the world by interpreting it and then using his or her capacity in a certain direction. In other words, the true essence of man was constituted by a process that intertwined cognitive factors with the physical, in which a mental image was materialized. The ideal man therefore

stood in relation to labour. 'We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human', Marx stated, '[...] But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality' (Marx 2013, 120).

These words not only accentuate Marx's ideas that man strives to create objects and, in the end, change nature and its materials, but also that these changes in themselves affects man's self-understanding. To reach the ideal state of man, an individual had to go through a number of phases. Firstly, man had to become aware of needs and how these could be met. Secondly, man must create a mental image of what was to be constructed; and thirdly, the product had to be constructed based on those creative and abstract thoughts. The philosophy underpinning Marx's reasoning holds a considerable amount of physiological dimensions intertwined with the idea that a true human is someone who constantly utilizes bodily capacities in order to create. Thus, man's essence equals not only hidden potentialities, but several bodily activities. In this process, man must move beyond what is immediately given to an imaginary world that is still not there, but yet to come. In other words, the ideal and normal man must be equipped with the ability to think abstractly. Marx also seemed to link bodily functioning and capacity to the evolution of man, in which man moves from instincts to future planning, which, too, touches notions of normality and the importance of coordinating 'mental and physical capabilities' into an overall goal-driven activity, which underlines how the ability to work becomes a fundamental feature in Marx's understanding of the human condition and what constitutes normality (Marx 2013, 113). As stated by Worsley (2002, 22), Marx highlighted man's work ability to have the power to 'invent not only new ways or new technical instruments, but also new intellectual instruments and social institutions'. But for the majority of people in a capitalistic system, Marx stressed, activity is devoted not to this kind of innovations but to survival and reproduction. In Marx's reasoning, it is the discrepancy between this ideal state of man and the reality that gives man a sense of alienation in the capitalistic world, in which the worker was restricted in using his bodily potential and had no control over the end-product, which left the worker 'helpless' and dependent on the capitalist (Marx 2013, 292). Accordingly, Marx argued that the capitalist system 'mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man' that turns him into an 'appendage of a machine' (Marx 2013, 451). If a worker had an aptitude for a certain type of activity, this could also determine the individual's position within the system of production. Even though Marx acknowledged the power hidden in the mechanisms of capitalism, it, according to Marx 'converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity [...] a mere fragment of his own body' (Marx 2013, 251).

Simultaneously, in Marx's thinking, the outcome of a certain bodily deficit was not fully given. The rationality of the system could sometimes take unexpected turns. 'As a matter of fact', Marx declared, 'some few manufacturers in the middle of the eighteenth century preferred, for certain operations that were trade secrets, to employ half-idiotic persons' (Marx 2013, 252). In other words, a cognitive disability could be used by the system in order to preserve and strengthen it. Still, the disability inspired rhetoric illustrated above underlines how Marx pictured disability as something negative and out of the normal.

In sum, Marx's ideas touched not only upon body functions as such, but presented an ideal man characterized by certain cognitive and physical features and abilities, which is in line with Abberley's (1997) argument that the social membership in Marx's world was associated with work ability, which turns body functions into something crucial in the understanding of man. The ideal man is someone who has the capacity to coordinate certain cognitive and physiological abilities. To be normal is to be an active creature, not a passive observer.

### *The producer of disability*

Marx did not only reflect on how capitalism threatened man's true nature. He also identified capitalism as a producer of disability as such. Thus, *Capital* is filled with accounts that highlights how the capitalism's quest for profit had a profound impact on man 'robbing' the labour power 'of its normal, moral and physical, conditions of development and function' (Marx 2013, 183). The

'antithetical character of the capitalist mode of production', Marx stated, 'leads it to count the squandering of the life and health of the worker, and the depression of his conditions of existence' (Marx 1991, 179). For Marx, capitalism was simply a threat to man's health in general, since it 'produces this waste of the workers' life and health' (Marx 1991, 182). The magnitude of this threat was underlined by Marx's use of war metaphors in which industrialism equaled an 'industrial battle' (Marx 2013, 294). New technology also demanded faster movements, as when Marx used a factory inspection report that stated that 'fingers must be quicker and defter in their movements to take up the broken thread, for, if placed with hesitation or carelessness, they are sacrificed', which underlines how man's value was based on how well the body could adapt to the system it was supposed to serve (Marx 2013, 1077).

Also worth noticing in Marx's reasoning is the fact that he highlighted a system that had various outcomes in relation to the body. Since production was differentiated with various activities, the physical outcome in terms of disabilities varied along these lines. For example, Marx used accounts from a physician regarding the life conditions of the potters that were particularly vulnerable to certain types of illnesses that made them 'as a rule, stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed' (Marx 2013, 170). This underlines a feature in Marx's reasoning that the industrial society was one where certain disabilities were produced depending on people's position within that system. Marx also spoke of the so-called nomad population, which constituted 'the light infantry of capital, thrown by it, according to its needs' (e.g. railway-making) and which, too, was connected to certain conditions (Marx 2013, 465). Thus, Marx presented a more complex scene that related infirmity and disability to certain types of activities and groups.

Notable is also how Marx used statements from workers to illuminate how bad working environments created fears of damaged bodies leading to unemployment (Marx 2013, 349). Even a most restricted decrease in body functions, such as the 'loss of a finger', could have a crucial influence on the individual's ability to compete in the labour market, as when Marx built his case by referring to a factory inspector's statement:

I have usually put this question: Suppose you were in want of an additional workman, and two were to apply, both equally well qualified in other respects, but one had lost a thumb or a forefinger, which would you engage? (Marx 2013, 1077)

Marx also recognized how women and children had lesser resilience to physiological stress caused by the system and he frequently used statistics and official reports to strengthen his line of argument. Some of the worst examples included reports of children having to do 'ceaseless labour of 30 hours in the "shoddyhole"', which threatened their lungs (Marx 2013, 1040). As Marx points out, it was the logic of the system that made children end up in factories that could lead to life-long disabilities (Marx 2013, 339). With the help of a declaration made by a county magistrate, Marx used *Capital* to warn of a situation where children suffered and were caught in working conditions making 'their limbs wearing away' (Marx 2013, 169). Accordingly, Marx also highlighted, in relation to children, the necessity of light when it came to both 'sight' and 'cerebral functions' (Marx 2013, 1043). Marx's line of argument entailed a notion that disabled children *and* capitalism were increasingly related. An effect of this kind of exploitation was that the child, after discharge – due to 'mental and bodily degradation' – had a hard time finding a new job (Marx 2013, 336). For Marx, other social factors could coincide in a way that made some children more likely to become disabled. For instance, Marx stressed that workers in the match industry were at risk of be taken with the so-called lockjaw. As reported by Marx 'only the most miserable part of the laboring class half-starved widows and so forth, deliver up their children to it' (Marx 2013, 171). Thus, children in resource-poor environments were more likely to experience certain forms of disabilities, which underlines the importance of taking several factors into account when addressing Marx's understanding of disability.

Frequently throughout *Capital* Marx also seems to be worried about how capitalism not only threatened the traditional gender roles, but also posed a threat to women's composition, in which the system caused 'the physical deterioration [...] of the women' (Marx 2013, 274).

The fact that Marx devoted whole sections to the exploitation of women underlines the need to understand Marx's theory in relation to various premises concerning bodily constitution and gender, where women, for instance, according to Marx, had 'slight muscular strength' (Marx 2013, 273).

What is also worth noticing is that Marx's reasoning – that tied certain types of disability to certain groups (e.g. silk-weavers) – was valid also when it came to women's role in industrial production (Marx 1991, 186, 2013, 459). In *Capital*, Marx reported, with references to physicians, how workers like female bleachers were likely attracted to specific forms of conditions, such as 'hysteria' (Marx 2013, 1052; see also Marx 1991, 190). Worth noticing is also that Marx used medical reports that, to some extent, focused on women's own experience and their assessments regarding health status (Marx 1991, 190). This in turn indicates that Marx saw a higher risk of mental disorders among women due to their constitution and how it reacted to the factory environment. Thus, in Marx's reasoning, capitalism to some extent produced different disabilities depending on gender.

Concurrently, Marx also observed how the Western societies were in the process of ongoing degeneration. Based on commissioner reports, Marx showed how bodily functions and the constitutions of the working people were continuously deteriorating. For instance, '[e]ach successive generation of potters is more dwarfed and less robust than the preceding one' (Marx 2013, 170). Marx also utilized military statistics to show not only that body length had decreased over time but that many potential soldiers were even rejected due to 'bodily weakness' (Marx 2013, 1039). '[T]he degeneration of the industrial population', Marx stressed, 'is only retarded by the constant absorption of primitive and physically uncorrupted elements from the country' (Marx 2013, 186). What is noteworthy in Marx's thinking is not only the fear for a weaker population, but also the idea that the rural population in a sense stood closer to normality, which, too, exemplifies Marx's depiction of disability as foremost an increasingly urban phenomenon. These accounts also accentuate how natural science and Darwinian theory influenced Marx's reasoning concerning bodily normality, which can be put in relation to the emerging eugenicist discourse of the nineteenth century (cf. Hughes 2002).

In sum, according to Marx, capitalism and disability is highly connected. In line with Collyer's (2015) statement, Marx wrote extensively on health issues in relation to capitalism. This went hand-in-hand with Marx's view that the system did not equivalently impact all human bodies, which underlines the importance of body in Marx's theory. For Marx, the notion of normality was not the same thing, but related to the distinctive premises of various categories and contexts. What is also striking in Marx's reasoning is the idea that the capitalistic system was a threat not only to the present population, but that it was the duty of society to prevent further degeneration of mankind.

### *The residual character of disability*

As reported by Marx the capitalist society consisted of three classes: the wage-labourers, the capitalists and the landowners (Marx 1991, 1025). Simultaneously, Marx presented a refined analysis that further divided the 'surplus-population' into several subcategories, depending on how well-adapted they were in relation to the demands of the economic system:

First, those able to work [...]. Second, orphans and pauper children. These are candidates for the industrial reserve army [...]. Third, the demoralised and ragged, and those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation, due to the division of labour; people who have passed the normal age of the labourer; the victims of industry, [...] the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, &c ... (Marx 2013, 450)

These words underline not only that an individual's value and recognition was related to the economic logic of the system, but that people with disabilities were also excluded from valorized roles possible within the working-class category, such as 'overlookers' (Marx 2013, 293). People with disabilities were also associated with other forms of dependency and morally reprehensible individuals. In other words, disability was not given a category of its own, but was rather understood in terms of a residual category, which illustrates that Marx himself witnessed how people with disabilities experienced lesser status and possibilities on the labour market. As reported by Marx, the individual was

rather recognized, and assigned value and status based on the ability to fulfil specially designed roles within the system. Since the rationality of capitalism is pushed forward by the acquisition of surplus-value, man's ability to perform activities, as such, is not the crucial factor. To be recognized by the ruling class, the activities and body functions of the individual had to be associated with that particular mechanism (e.g. Marx 2013, 355). In line with Marx's analysis, the individual's status was also determined by the ability to contribute to the circulation of capital within society, a prerequisite for the system to work (e.g. Marx 2013, 643). This meant that people with disabilities, in Marx's thinking, risked a double devaluation from within capitalism, since they were neither producers nor high consumers.

Thus, in Marx's view, people with disabilities are, because of the political economic system, left weak and vulnerable and without much agency of their own. For instance, he pictured them as incapable, based on weak economic resources, to make use of the legal system to enforce their rights, which underlines his ideas of how various factors coincided when it came to disability. One way to handle disability in Britain in the 1800s was through the legal system, something that Marx rejected as wishful thinking. To think that an impaired worker would ever sue an employer was, Marx concluded, 'sheer mockery, given English legal costs' (Marx 1991, 184). In a way, this stands in contrast to Marx's insight that, earlier in history, society in some aspects had created systems of special support for people with disabilities, such as the 'beggar's license' introduced in the 1500s for those who were 'old and unable to work', while vagabonds were being whipped and imprisoned (Marx 2013, 514). Thus, it was not, as recognized by Marx, given that the evolution of society meant a continuing improvement for people with disabilities. Rather, it was the character of economic obstacles that changed.

Put in another way, the overthrowing of the oppressive system presupposed strong social forces coming together and Marx highlighted the consciousness of the working class as critical. For Marx, changes could only come about if the workers 'as a class' would 'put their heads together' and formed a front against capital (Marx 2013, 206). Words like these are interesting since they underline not only the idea that the organization of society could be changed by the conscious, collective actions of those with inferior positions, but also that the agents of change were formed by their active position within the system of production, which excluded parts of the population from that process.

In sum, Marx's line of thought clearly identifies how the stratification of society is drawn on the basis of bodily function and the capacity to produce surplus-value. According to Marx's view, this in turn could be explained by the fact that the capitalistic mode required the ability to adapt to the logic of machinery production, which follows Oliver's (2009) interpretation of Marx's theory where the production system also shapes social categories and premises for recognition. Accordingly, normality is in Marx's world identified as a prerequisite for social action and mobilization.

## Concluding remarks

Marx identified the rationality of capitalism as a major producer of disability, which relates to Marx's vision of an ideal future, where the provenance of disability was lower. Clearly his utopia was influenced by the medical and natural science of his day, which further highlighted bodily normality in his diagnosis of society. For Marx, the notion of normality to some extent coincided with his own societal theory, and becomes a part of his rhetoric – disability as a proof of a failing system. In parallel to this, Marx's writing is frequently occupied with how various factors coincide. Man was not homogenous in terms of bodily functions, and he recognized, for instance, that disability *and* children was a growing phenomenon. The outcome was not given, but depended on which group was made visible. Simultaneously, Marx also showed some interest in individuals' own experiences in connection to their life conditions.

One important dimension in Marx's reasoning is also the idea that man has an essence and that man was on a sliding scale in relation to a normative template. Thus, bringing disability into the

analysis problematizes earlier research on Marx and the body in relation to activity and production. In line with Abberley's (1996, 1997) analysis, Marx highlights activity and the ability to work, which pinpoints his idea of what generates social values. In this case, people with disabilities faced a higher risk of exclusion. But there is also a kind of paradox hidden in Marx's reasoning. Since the capitalist system in the nineteenth century moved the majority of the population farther away from the ideal man, the distance to people with limited body functions, on a theoretical level, decreased, which might suggest an idea in Marx that people with disabilities were both deviants and closer to the majority at the same time. In addition, Marx's reasoning indicates a rather mixed way to approaching normality and deviance. On the one hand, he often depicts deviation as a slow process where the worker's ability is increasingly deteriorating. On the other hand, his thinking was, from a disability perspective, rather categorical. If you end up in a certain category you are likely to stay there. Following Harvey's (2000) and Goodley's (2014) reasoning, Marx's image of the workplace turns into an arena of social relations directed by the logic of capital circulation and technological requirements which set the scene for comparison and evaluation of the body. Between the requirements and capacities, the body was defined. According to Marx's reasoning, the normal body in the age of the early industrial capitalism was influenced by the logic of standardization. Thus, Marx's work underlines how normality, deviance, disability and the body are not given phenomenon but, as stressed by Harvey (2000), an unfinished project located within a specific spatio-temporal context. The system is in constant motion and Marx's reasoning highlights the integration of various factors in how the body was interpreted and defined. Indeed, Marx's text suggests that the notion of normality was influenced also by wider cultural assumptions concerning, for instance, gender, age and the living conditions of certain groups, which underlines Harvey's (2000) idea of positionality. Marx's reasoning was also promoted by a context lacking an explicit rehabilitation philosophy, leaving the evaluation and interpretation of the body foremost to capitalist-driven facilities. This underlines how notions of normality shift depending on how the society as a whole is being organized (cf. Goodley 2014). What is also striking in Marx's writing is that persons with disabilities belonged to a category that was not homogenous but rather residual, in which the lowest common denominator was the inability to fulfil roles in relation to capital circulation. For Marx, having a disability meant being poor. Following Harvey's (2000) ideas of positionality, persons with disabilities thus feared the risk of being less valued. In other words, devaluation and vulnerability was, according to Marx, a consequence of how the capitalist system worked, which underlines an idea of how societal structures shape relations and roles.

To a high extent, Marx seems to exclude people with disabilities from the regular working class. Thereby, he also excluded them from the forces of social change, since the class struggle, in Marx's thinking, was the struggle over the means of production, and the utilization of surplus-value. Since they belonged to a residual category, they were also less likely to experience the kind of class consciousness that Marx saw as a precondition for social action. In line with Armer's (2004) reasoning, this raises questions regarding how Marx's thinking can be utilized within disability theory. For instance, on what grounds can people with disabilities develop a class consciousness that shapes a *class for itself* (cf. Harvey 2000; Worsley 2002)? What is the interest and conflict that binds a group together? Who are the exploiters and the exploited? How and on what premises do the actors involved change through history?

Even though an in-depth discussion concerning disability theory is beyond the scope of this article, the question of how the body and the society is related therefore remains a challenge for any approach that claims its Marxist origins. For Marx, disability was to some extent an anomaly, something out of the frame that did not quite fit his overall theory of social change or his utopian vision.

## Notes

1. *Materialism* is an elusive, and not necessarily a Marxist, concept that, unlike idealistic philosophy, focuses on material conditions (e.g. access to the labour market). *Historic materialism* is a specific term within Marxist

theory, which claims that ‘societies progress through distinctive modes of production’ (Worsley 2002; Brown, Fleetwood, and Roberts 2002, 11). Even though the terminology shifts within disability theory, which causes some conceptual puzzlement, leading social modellists draw ‘heavily on the materialist theories of Marx and Engels’ (Barnes 1996, 44; Armer 2004).

2. Even though it has been disputed, theorists also stress ontological and epistemological links between critical realism and Marxism (for a discussion, see Brown, Fleetwood, and Roberts 2002; Jessop 2002).
3. Here I am using *man* in the sense that Marx used it, but referring to humankind.

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## Notes on contributor

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