

## **Them and us: Brexit and the logics of neoliberal-ableism**

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On the 24<sup>th</sup> June at 7.20am the mobile phone rang. It was our daughters Ruby and Rosa. They had rung to tell us about the results of the EU referendum. We were just waking up after a heavy night in the fields of Glastonbury festival. One of our girls, Ruby exclaimed 'Mum, you will never guess what they have done ...' 52% of the British voters had chosen to leave the EU. Our other lovely daughter, Rosa, wrote on her Facebook update:

I feel totally let down by the people who have not thought this decision through? I'm not glad to say our country has the same view as Donald trump either.

Both girls were upset, angry and worried about what some of their 'Leave' peers at school were going to say to them that day. We fired up the kettle, made our coffees and tried to tell them that things would be alright. But they were unconvinced. They said their goodbyes, the school bus ride was beckoning, and we told them that we loved them.

Ruby said: Mum, you will never guess what they have done.  
Rosa wrote: I feel totally let down by the people.

What does Ruby mean by 'they'? By 'them'?  
And who does Rosa have in mind when she talks about 'the people'.

The us – at least for our family and friends – are Remain: this is one way in which we have come to view ourselves over the last few months. It has become, as Zygmunt Bauman would

have it, a marked identity. We are our people. Our people are us. And in finding this commonality we inevitably flatten distinctions and obscure differences of opinion. We *have* talked about the problems of the EU. Christ, even the late great British socialist Labour man Tony Benn disliked the capitalist monster that was the EU. But we certainly knew that we did not relate to them: those Leave people.

But exactly who are these others – ‘them’, ‘the people’? Clearly not everyone who voted to leave the EU is like Nigel Farage. Nor necessarily a racist. That would be a gross simplification of the complexity of the issues at stake. Some seemingly considered, moderate and thoughtful people voted to leave. 52% of Britain cannot be mindless racist idiots? No doubt, too, that the decision-making behind each individual’s vote was complex, personalized and idiosyncratic. People voted for many different reasons. A lot of soul-searching went on. Attempts, after the fall out of Brexit, to make sense of the decision have resulted in a number of explanations from the left (and their media). These include:

- We are now Little Britain
- This is the final nail in the coffin to the death of social justice
- Leave is a cultural vent for the rise in racism and xenophobia
- We are witnessing the expression of opposition to the bureaucratic machine of the EU project
- A move to the right in democratic politics
- A stance against immigration

But what does Brexit mean for disabled people, disability politics and disability studies? And, as importantly, what does

Brexit tell us about British society and the values that underpin this society?

Ruby: You will never guess what they have done.

Rosa: I feel totally let down by the people.

How might we read Leave if we were to think of it in terms of a rational decision that reflects a particular kind of guiding discourse or ideological narrative? Those defending leaving the EU have developed an explanatory discourse that includes the following tropes:

- Standing alone
- Reclaiming our independence
- Being self-sufficient
- Seeking autonomy (economic, cultural and national)
- Self-rule over our national concerns
- Maintaining our sovereignty

These statements are familiar to those of us who work within critical disability studies. They are our bread and butter. Because we know that each of these concepts is consistently fused with another in order to articulate an *ideology of ableism*.

Ableism accounts:

for the stifling practices associated with a contemporary society that increasingly seeks to promote the species typical individual citizen: a citizen that is ready and able to work, productively contribute, an atomistic phenomenon bounded and cut off from others, capable, malleable and compliant. Ableism breeds paranoia, confusion, fear and inadequacy. Ableism is an ideal that

no one ever matches up to. As [Robert] McRuer (2006) carefully puts it: compulsory ableism is to disablism what compulsory heterosexuality is to homophobia. Ableism provides just the right amount of temperature and nutrient from which disablism can grow (Goodley, 2014: xi).

As we turn to the study of ableism we begin to notice that this ideology of autonomy engenders an analytical turn away from disability to ability, from the monstrous to the idealised. What makes some of others able and others not? And why is so important to be autonomous today in 2016?

Ableism is equally a psychoemotional and a global economic project. And ableists are prepared to do deals with others who associate their practices with normalcy (including whiteness, heteronormativity, Anglocentric and malestream takes on the world). And ableism, as we are witnessing with Brexit, is at the heart of British national discourse. Is this a claim too far? Are we in danger of over-theorising Brexit? Are we pushing things too far? We think not. Because even seemingly benign ideas like national pride, celebrating one's independence or upholding one's individual achievements may well reveal implicit assumptions associated with the preferred kind of global citizen preferred by the locality of Britain. As Dan has written about previously:

**Ability** stories are ubiquitous. They speak of a phenomenon normatively understood as an a priori capacity to do something and, often, to do something well. When I think of my beloved football team Nottingham Forest F.C (or soccer team to those of you North Americans and Antipodeans who erroneously cite your own types of 'football') I am reminded of a number

of players over the years whom I would describe, along with my fellow fans, as having 'wonderful natural talent'. There were other players who had good 'engine rooms', never knew when to stop running or gave 110% each game (it is always 110% in football commentaries). But, when we think more broadly and more seriously of ability (and here I have to acknowledge, against my better judgement, that football is only a game) we find that one person's abilities are contextualised and inter-related to another's. An individual's ability can only ever emerge in relations with others. It has to be acknowledged, recognised and nurtured. The problem with ability is that just like the high expectations of fans of their (in my case low achieving) football teams, when we think of ability we have a destiny in mind. This destiny is associated with success. Away from the football field such linear, certain and expectant notions of ability undergird many societies' values around what it means to be a valued human being. For many of us, ableist expectations are impossible: and are set as impossible dreams for many. And, as a snowball effects, ability picks up speed, expands in nature, drawing into it cognitive, economic, cultural factors to become a monstrous entity: a great ball of ability. One might say that in its beginnings ability emerges as a seemingly objective concept. We all want to have abilities of some kinds in order to live. But when ability grows in scope and reach and remains fundamentally linked to the valuing of distinct individual traits, qualities and characteristics then it becomes an individualising and anti-social phenomenon: wary of anyone or any practice that gets in its way. Yet, as I write this I still worry about my failing Football team and wonder: are my anxieties ableist, elitist and exclusionary? Is there something

troublingly desirable about the notion of ability? Or is the problem of ableism when it is allowed to stop being a story, a debate, a conversation and becomes a fixed ideal? (Goodley, 2014: xii).

Clearly, Brexit pins down ableism as *the way to live one's life*. Alone. Segregated. Bounded. Fixed. Immovable. Static. Dead (or at least dead to the needs and demands of others). Brexit is the writing large of ableism: the ideology that assumes independence lies at the heart of what it means to be a good British citizen. Brexit marks the nation state of Britain as an ableist ideal: capable of governance and trade devoid of reliance on interdependent relationship with other European nations. And crucially a nation state with non-porous borders. Where non-European others are cast as threats to British ideals. Where now, as Farage would have it, non-Europeans (especially those of colour) threaten to create Breaking points.

Ruby: They...

Rosa: The people...

... are the neoliberal citizens of this brave new world of self-sufficient independence. These individuals are the treasured subjects of austerity. Working hard. Shopping enough. Delighting in their lack of need to pull down resources from the welfare state. Standing alone. Pulling themselves up by the boot-strings. In this together (but only with others that resemble themselves). With similar boots. And similar ways of marching in those boots.

The timing of Brexit and austerity are not coincidental. What we have witnessed over the last four years is a fundamental

rewriting of the British citizen's relationship with government. The government rolls back and individual responsibility rolls in. Brexit should come as no surprise. It is merely another example of the neoliberal-ableist individualism that marks our communities. Why would anyone want dependence, mutuality or interconnection with the European project when we are all austerity subjects now?

So, where does this leave us. What hope can we offer in these dangerous times? And what about us? The Other to the dominant them? The 48% remain? And more importantly what about those Others that have literally been cast as outside of this new British neoliberal-able project?

We need to find communities of like-minded people to get together. To recharge our batteries. To maintain our networks. To re-energise our assemblages. To find our us. Our we. Our people. Disability often sits as the monstrous Other to 'the people' and the 'them' described by Ruby and Rosa. And disability, we would argue, does not fit readily into the rationalist discourse of ableism. Disability has the potential to be the focal point for our commons: a community of activists and scholars that work to understand and contest the workings of ableism. So, we conclude this paper with some calls for – and examples of - urgent analytical work that we must undertake:

1. We must problematise ableism's psychological, social, economic, cultural character which normatively privileges able-bodiedness; promotes smooth forms of personhood and smooth health; creates space fit for normative citizens; encourages an institutional bias towards autonomous, independent bodies and leads to

economic and material dependence on neo-liberal and hypercapitalist forms of production.

2. We must seek to explore the possessive nature of ableism that clings to its own and expels outsiders. Our task must be to deconstruct its logics. One of these we might term *neoliberal-ableism*.

Brexit is but one manifestation of neoliberal-ableism. Brexit is not explained in totality by this phenomenon. Nor is neoliberal-ableism's complexity perfectly illustrated by Brexit. Nevertheless, Brexit does, bear the marks of neoliberal-ableism.

So let us finish then with some problematisation and exploration of neoliberal-ableism.

When the British feminist sociologist Diane Richardson (2005) observed that the rise of neoliberal politics of normalisation had engendered the 'desiring of sameness' she perceptively commented on the ways in which political and psychological economies feed back on one another. At the epicentre of our psychological desire for sameness is the emulation of the individual that we have come to cherish is a 'post-Cartesian entrenchment of the notion that the self-possessive inviolability of the bounded body grounds the autonomous subject' (Shildrick, 2007a: 225). Or, what we might call, independent Brit boy. Or Boris for short.

The capitalisation of the flesh that occurs through neoliberalism makes the body, as Vanderkinderen (2013) puts it; a key site of investment for the state. Here we find the production of a viable and productive body politic: the able body and mind. The discourse of neoliberalism has proven to be so compelling because in representing the world of



market rules as a state of nature, marketization has been naturalized (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 382). The ideal able body is the stuff of nature. We can identify a number of other elements of this moral fibre of the neoliberal individual.

Firstly, the neoliberal self is an able-bodied entrepreneurial entity. The ideology of ability is the unquestioned 'preference for able-bodiedness... the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that give or denies human status to individual persons' (Siebers, 2008, p. 8). Neoliberal discourses on freedom, borne through entrepreneurship, 'reassert the ideas of self-actualisation and self-development as one of the many needs and aspirations of the enterprising self' (Masschelein & Simons, 2005).

Progress is characterised in terms of one's life as a producer-consumer with needs and human capital situated in a (market) environment where everything has an (economic) value.

Similarly, for Freeman (2007) we are witnessing the rise of the reflexive project of the self: the entrepreneurial self flexible, inventive and adaptable. Ready to take control. We are told we are all entrepreneurs now: take control as Boris tells us.

But what remains unquestioned are those historical, political and economic conditions that permit only a small minority (think: white, heterosexual, bourgeois and able-bodied male or Boris for short) to exercise the 'material freedom to choose' (Erevelles, 1996: 523). Meritocracy is, of course, a limited and limiting definition of citizenship.

Secondly, the able-bodied is always and only provisional and therefore requires constant replenishment (Hannabach, 2007: 255). The neoliberal self is therefore constantly in the process of making and repairing itself. Help is at hand in the form of the cultural discourse of individual responsibility, where

individuals step up to the plate: doing the things that traditionally in social democratic societies the state used to do. Help is also offered through Big Pharma which can help the individual to keep going - psychiatrisation and psychologisation medicalisation of everyday lives. As the second biggest industry after the arms trade, Big Pharma can help medicate us in our time of need; not simply when we are down but also when we want to further enhance our productivity. We need to intervene in these endless processes of ableist regeneration.

Thirdly, neoliberalism metaphorically and literally gets under our skin. It threatens to psychologise the conditions of productivity: leading to what Carlson (2001: 140) terms cognitive ableism. This is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the *potential* for them) against those who are believed not to possess them. Cognitive ableism roots out and finds those that fail to meet its rigid criteria of success while also feeding into more everyday processes of individual autonomy. Instead, we would argue, how might we reclaim our cognitive failings and mutual dependence as antidotes to ableism's individualisation?

Fourthly, this able-bodied citizen we have come to crave so much is, in actuality, an 'abandoned citizen'. This concept, taken from the work of Vanderkinderen et al (in press), relates to the ways in which citizens are abandoned in the sense they are cast off if they feel to meet the neoliberal imperative. But we can also turn the concept round on to the ableist self: the citizen is abandoned, set afloat in the sea of ableist signifiers, to find and contain themselves. We must reject this desire for abandon and reclaim our communities.

The truth of Brexit is that we have all lost. Even some Leave voters have now expressed their 'Bregret' as we are plunged into psychological and economic uncertainty. One source of hope is found in critical disability studies: and specifically what we might term critical studies of ableism that seek to deconstruct the logics of ableism.

Perhaps it is now time for #Brableism

**References available on request**