

Deterritorialising Ability

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[This was originally written to presented as a talk at the 2023 Manchester Anarchist Book Fair, where I was scheduled to speak at. Two days prior to the book fair I received the diagnosis of an ocular legion behind my left eye, which I am presently awaiting surgery to be removed. I am sharing this paper now partly due to my desire to not be stopped by this tumour any more than I need to stop, but more so so that any value this writing might have in the world is available to individuals who might make use of it.]

Fredy Perlman wrote in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan* these words “*The darkling plain is here. This is the waste land: England, America, Russia, China, Israel, France....*”. I share these words here to remember that here we are, amidst the waste lands of Leviathan, colonisation, the territorialisation of these isles in The North Sea. I share these words remembering that colonialism and resistance to colonialism are present in the world today, and that that tension is frequently a sensitive, emotive and upsetting subject to talk about. Finally, I share these words as, like Perlman’s aforementioned book, I am not coming to this as an authority or expert, but anarchistically, and with a desire for anti-authoritarian solidarity and aid, though I favour the word care.

Until the past autumn and for several years, I have had the joy of being employed to support and care for young people, who this culture calls SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), within the context of a specialist school. While I have worked with age groups ranging from nursery to sixth form, I have predominantly worked with children whose ages fall within key stage one and key stage two age groups, supporting them with everything that a day at school for them might require. Prior to this I had previous experience in being employed to support adults with what is called cerebral palsy, for a shorter period, and for several years was involved in the care of my Opa, which is a term meaning grandfather, when he became reliant on a wheelchair to move, in his last years.

While I do not believe I am in a position to speak for, or on behalf of these individuals, or individuals who have a similar experience of life, or make any claim to do so; I have an experience of being-with these individuals that has brought me to a certain perspective, which I intend to share here. This intention to share here comes from a similar desire to affirm and support and care for these individuals, and to speak with great positivity about who they are, or rather

who I have experienced them to be, as I am not here to define them. With this positive affirmation, I intend to, perhaps in some small way, deconstruct and destroy the negative-ontology and metaphysics-of-lack, which dominate a great deal of the discourse, conversation and general perspective regarding what is often called “disability”. That this is limited to the scope of my experience, understanding, praxis and perspective, and is not “the-truth” as an authoritative declaration or status, I feel is obvious, but I am speaking to it now for the sake of sincerity, authenticity and integrity.

Now I am going to speak about Mia; with “Mia” being an anonymising name to fill in for the individual I am speaking about’s given name. Mia is a young child, younger than 8 years old, who I knew for three years and who is one of the most powerful individuals I have ever met. Mia is non-verbal - that is part of her description within the ontology of lack - but signs using makaton and can understand a great deal of verbal communication spoken to her. Mia - again, within the ontology of lack - does not retain information in the factoidal form that is generally typified within this culture as learning, but she has a keen ability to learn how other individuals will respond to her actions, which is highly exploratory and experimental. What has continually impressed me about Mia is her wilfulness and ability to assert her desires and intentions in ways that are utterly disempowering to many of the adults seeking to encourage her to conform to school narratives and systems; this often taking the form of going to ground and not getting up until she wants to. I also noticed Mia’s ability to affect me and my colleagues with great feelings of wanting to care for her and also great feelings of frustration, when her choices are ones that can make our days harder. As I see her, Mia is not an individual who in my eyes and experience lacks ability, but who has many different abilities, most of which differ intensely from the socially-normative humanistic conception of “ability”, but are real and true. When I look at Mia, particularly in those moments when she is refusing to conform to the wishes, requests and demands of adults around her, I honestly am amazed that anyone could consider her lacking in ability - it could even be argued that she disables the adults, through her powerful wilfulness.

The question that comes to me is “how did this concept of lacking ability, rather than being powerful and able in different ways, come about?”. To try and find something of an answer for myself I turned to language and etymology, but limited this to English terms. I found that the term “disability” comes from the 1570s¹; handicapped is a 20th century term²; invalid originates in the 1700s³; and the word cripple comes from the mid 13th century⁴. Obviously most of these terms are considered offensive now, but they have been used as descriptors for individuals like Mia for centuries. According to Historic England, medieval Britain favoured terms like “lepre”, “blynde”, “dumbe”, “deaff”, “natural fool”, “lame” and “lunatick”⁵.

During this period of AD 1040-1485, Historic England state that individuals who we today call disabled would typically be placed within the care of the church. This raises another question for me. What need is there to remove these individuals from their families and wider communities and place them under the provision of the church? This then lead to me reflecting on what the church is as an institution. In my eyes, the church, particularly during this period of history, is

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/disability?fbclid=IwAR1YhjCvdJXDHUAPXWWLvPNYexO8SB7B8MZzjXdYngyq7EbmINuYI>

² https://www.etymonline.com/word/handicap?fbclid=IwAR3hozRijgVDEtug3A_h-SBr6d5cte1_rp5F_fo43GfOvYaarrh-qozu12Q#etymonline_v_41573

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/invalid?fbclid=IwAR2r1v3cNuGrKBkPkBnXOaiWyJfuTZAaqnrTYnvtvyU8eJLJoVCEcPyaXuy>

⁴ https://www.etymonline.com/word/cripple?fbclid=IwAR1D8EPmyqNPS6GH_OXFxrA7Wszp6wZ6bQhtkEkoRiWkLMR9Vmleg0p

⁵ <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1050-1485/>

in many ways part of the institutional apparatus of Romanisation and Rome, retaining ties to the old Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. So there seems to be something of these individuals being used in a way that maintain the colonial institutions that were brought to these isles during the period of the Roman Empire - I feel it is worth mentioning that the vast majority of what I have read about disability within the Roman Empire has been suggestive of pretty brutal treatment of individuals who did not conform to the normative standards of ability and thus did not participate within the every day productive narratives, as desired by the state.

I got to wondering about the role of empire and colonialism within this context. I found a paper written by Nicole Ineese-Nash and published by the University of Toronto, which argues that disability is a colonialist construct placed upon individuals indigenous to Canada that conflicts with their perspectives and practices, and maintains the harms brought by colonialism⁶. I then found an article published by *Disabilities Studies Quarterly*, written by Minerva Rivas Velarde on indigenous perspectives on disability, which shares that little or no conception of disability or impairment comes into the identities of indigenous Maori, with “disability” being seen as a concept that serves to Otherise⁷.

This reading emboldened my feeling that there is some link between colonialism and the general perspective regarding individuals like Mia. I sought out information regarding the perspective before Romanisation occurred here. I could not find much - like much of Celtic history, this matter is somewhat shrouded in mystery and unclear. I managed to find one small tidbit of information from the Langdon Down Museum of Learning Disability website, which describes the Celts as “enlightened” and states that they were supportive of individuals we call disabled⁸, though there is nothing here of whether or not the concept/category of “disabled” existed within their language. The Irish language contains the adjective “duine faoi mhichumas”, which means to lack physical power, though I could find nothing on the etymology of this. Of course, over the centuries, it is entirely likely that a term could have been created within the Irish language to match the concept from the English equivalent, maybe. While its by no means confirmation or proof, this has intensified my feeling that disability is a category that comes from empire and colonialism - I imagine that within the pre-Roman Celtic world, much like within the Maori world, there would be little or nothing of the notion of impairment or disability, with individual difference being appreciated and affirmed for the strengths it brings.

To consider what seems to me to have happened here, I turned to the thought of Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus*. In this book they describe a form of psychic-imperialism occurring within the psychoanalytic practice of psychotherapy, where a territorialisation of consciousness occurs when a despotic signifier decodes and then over encodes thoughts, desires, etc., as a state-form that encourages machinic-enslavement⁹. Using this language to inform an understanding of disability as part of colonialism could follow like this: a Maori individual experiences their identity being decoded by the despotic signifier of the colonialist state-like medical institutions of New Zealand from that of who they have been throughout their lives, then encoded with the colonialist concept of “disabled”, which does nothing to empower them individually or

⁶ <https://cjds.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/cjds/article/download/645/899?fbclid=IwAR2r1v3cNuGrKBkPkBnXOaiWyJfuTZAaqrTYnvtBkKB6cTjNFKUUntAw#:~:text=Being>

⁷ https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/6114/5134?fbclid=IwAR2oR4-ES9NC8Bl_SvF4XDpFBkjG133YnUTD7norDn-BkKB6cTjNFKUUntAw#:~:text=Being

⁸ <https://langdondownmuseum.org.uk/the-history-of-learning-disability/social-history-of-learning-disability/#:~:text=The>

⁹ *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari

within the context of their tribe, but serves the narratives of machinic-enslavement. From this perspective, “disability” is part of the territorialisation of the body, the mind, identity and life, through despotic-signification. A Celtic individual who was blind or perhaps non-verbal, perhaps of the Dumnoni or Iceni tribes - I mention these as I live on land where the Dumnoni lived, who seemingly resisted a great deal of Romanisation and as the Iceni are documented to have rebelled and revolted against the Romans - they might well have equally been appreciated for their differences in abilities within their tribal relationships, while seen by the Roman’s as lesser and lacking. This makes sense to me, as I think about it. It makes sense to me that individual’s like Mia could only be considered as individuals who are lacking from the ontology of despotic-signification, colonialist concepts and, ultimately, statism.

If this is the case, then surely there is going to be some form of challenge from anarchists, rebels and those who are revolted by statism and colonialism? Surely there will be individuals who have sought to affirm the power and ability and presence of individuals like those I have known, within radical discourse and praxis? Sadly, there is little to nothing of this.

The vast majority of anarchist writings on ability, disability and ablism comes with a great deal of transhumanist ideology mixed in, with technology often being positioned as transcendence or salvation from disability, in ways that retain and reenforce the despotic-signification of individual difference as lack. For example, Lexi Linnell pushes anarcho-transhumanism as means of defeating ablism, positioning neurodivergence, with particular focus on autism, as something to “cure” - further despotic-signification, decoding and reencoding neurodivergent individuals, like Mia, as in some way ill or diseased¹⁰. Of course, Linnell is one individual and does not represent all the individuals writing within this ideology. But this does not appear to be an isolated example, a one time case of this type of thought. One of the main individuals involved in the larger transhumanist movement is Nick Bostrom. In a paper on existential risks, Bostrom advances dysgenics as a means of being able to engineer offspring with “desirable traits”¹¹ - dysgenics being genetic engineering, which would progressively work towards the erasure of “undesirable traits”. The similarities and links between the dysgenic technological push and eugenics has not been missed, with individuals going as far as to considering transhumanism as inherently ableist¹². I know that I certainly find myself feeling deeply untrusting towards this ideology and revolted by what I find within it.

At this point I am left wondering what disability liberation or ability liberation means in this context? What does rebellion against despotic signification look like and what does resistance towards dysgenic genetic engineering look like? How can these questions be answered?

Rebellions against genetic engineering are not new within activist conversation and practice, with individuals like Situationist and anarchist Rene Riesel employing various means of tactics, inspired by Luddites¹³. My instinct is very much that this matter, being far more emotive to many than genetically modified crops, requires greater sensitivity than the tactic of direct physical sabotage. In the second part of their Capitalism and Schizophrenia collection, titled A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari make the claim that a concept is a brick that can either be used

¹⁰ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lexi-linnell-this-machine-kills-ableism>

¹¹ <https://nickbostrom.com/existential/risks?fbclid=IwAR3Frrj9Nnc8tc4A0mgJf5xmY6gfyaybqu1xfxCWAPdQtbHhI4JmTeSI>

¹² <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2023/01/19/transhumanism-is-eugenics-for-educated-white-liberals/?fbclid=IwAR0drmlF9dEd2hzNbvWwWN035I27xBU-pEoR9e4dcUFoEA-nchoWKhtZDrho>

¹³ https://lust-for-life.org/Lust-For-Life/_Textual/ReneRiesel_AgainstTheEngineeringOfLife_VenomousButterfly-publisher_2002_36pp/ReneRiesel_AgainstTheEngineeringOfLife_VenomousButterfly-publisher_2002_36pp.pdf

to build a courthouse of reason or be thrown through a window¹⁴. Following from this, perhaps a new language with new concepts can be a means of smashing the despotic-signification that individuals called disabled undergo and serve as defence from the threat of dysgenic practices? This could be seen as something of psychic-Luddism, conceptually sabotaging the ontology of lack brought by despotic-signification. I don't know and don't claim to have or believe I have the answers. This is just how it seems to me.

Before I bring this to a close, I want to share something that I am lucky enough to be very close to. I am not the only individual within my household who has dedicated much of their life to the care and support of individuals who we generally describe as having a learning disability. My wife is a clinical psychologist who, during the research component of her doctorate took the opportunity to get the voices of women with learning disabilities going through menopause heard, by talking to them about their experiences, rather than the "experts" about them, and sharing their words. This research was not only published in a peer-reviewed journal but published open access, so that not only so called "experts" could encounter their experiences, something that Katie fought to make sure happened¹⁵. Obviously I am not suggesting that the answer to these matters is for us all to do phenomenological research and to have those accounts published within peer-reviewed journals. My suggestion here is that, like Katie, we don't turn to the so called "experts" of individuals who get categorised as disabled to learn of their experience, or in the attempt to create new concepts and categories of identity, that might be bricks to smash despotic-signifiers. Instead lets listen to these individuals and appreciate their voices, wants, wishes, their concepts regarding who they are and their freedom to choose to live as they wish. For those of us who are revolted by ableism, my belief is that the best way we can rebel against the colonialist conceptualisation of these individuals is to positively affirm who they are, who we experience them as being and who they feel they are.

I am now thrown into an awareness of the systems, structures, institutions and politics that impact a great deal of what happens during day to day life. There is something seemingly absurd about talking about challenging colonialist concepts, when colonialism first occurred here almost two thousand years ago, with much of human effort here since the Romans left being to attempt to maintain, expand and develop the systems, structures, institutions and politics that were brought here with empire; which have then been exported and imposed upon other areas and peoples, through colonialism. While I have been known to say "relax, nothing is under control" while at work, and see politics as being very much like a ship in a storm at night, ultimately at the mercy of the sea; it would be dishonest to suggest that that these don't have huge means of influencing and impacting upon the lives of individuals seeking to survive amidst their presence.

My mind returns to Mia. Mia is tiny in body, but in presence she is powerful. Politically Mia has no meaningful influence within those larger systems and structures that seek to define her journey, but ontologically, existentially, in her environment and in my eyes, heart and mind, Mia is mighty. If I were to put money on the outcome of a battle of wills between Mia and any emperor, Alexander the Great, Mehmet the Conqueror, Caesar, Elon Musk, I don't care; I'd bet on Mia every time.

¹⁴ A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari

¹⁵ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bld.12527?fbclid=IwAR0VmyMu7KJjiGYi8MjfsHVA9IAcseE0u_nD5v_h-AoSzcXr6ctCSsogGQU

Maybe the effort to decolonise our perspectives on ability and to challenge the technological push to try and erase individual differences, which is really diversity and uniqueness, can start with a stubborn refusal to move down the directions we're being instructed to move down? Maybe going to ground and wilfully refusing to conform to the narratives of these institutions, systems and politics is what I have learnt from Mia and what I need to take away with me, into my praxis?

Thank you.

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