Anarchism and Disability Liberation

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L.A. Motler: a Deaf Anarchist, by Dai O'Brien and Steve Emery, Anarchist Studies, vol. 33 no. 1, 2025.

L.A. Motler, "The Priest-Ridden Deaf", 1920.

This article introduces the thought of a little-studied British anarcho-communist writer in the 1910s-20s, who is also notable as a deaf activist in a period where few deaf people were involved in radical politics. The authors describe themselves as active in the deaf community and their interest comes partly from Deaf Studies. Co-author Dai O'Brien is deaf and has written a number of papers on deafness and disability, using theorists like Lefebvre and Bourdieu to theorise spatial experience. He also works on British Sign Language and language studies. This seems to be his first foray into writing about anarchism, although he reports a longer-standing interest. Steve Emery is also deaf and uses BSL; he describes himself as anarcho-curious and was previously active in the authoritarian left. He claims to be fascinated with Motler because he never met another deaf person in the left scene of his time.

The article is partly narrative, telling Motler's largely unknown story, and partly analytical, seeking to establish Motler's importance both as a deaf anarchist in a period where disability politics was uncommon, and as an overlooked theorist of importance. The authors insist that both an activist's disability and a disabled person's activism must be treated as relevant.

This article reconstructs the life and political significance of Leonard Augustine Motler (1888–1967), a profoundly deaf British anarchist-communist whose contributions to radical politics and deaf history have been largely overlooked. Drawing on archival research, Motler's writings, and historical context, the authors argue that he was a unique and pioneering figure: possibly the only documented deaf person active in non-parliamentary radical politics in early 20th-century Britain.

Motler became deaf in early childhood and was educated at St John's Catholic School for the Deaf (known as Boston Spa) using sign language. The methods used in teaching deaf children were hotly debated among teachers in schools for deaf children at the time. The two rival groups are called "oralists" and "manualists", and oralist schooling generally entailed an education focused almost entirely on acquiring the ability to speak. The manualists, who mostly used sign language, could offer a broader education. The issue was hotly debated, and Motler apparently

benefited from an approach which was not deficit-based and focused on other skills and knowledge, including vocational training.

However, the education provided was strongly religious, in the Catholic tradition. At the time, it was also common for deaf people to rely on Missions to the Deaf and Dumb for their information and social life, so the role of religion in social control was rather important. These clubs were run by missioners, who were usually hearing men and clergy. Like Missions for sailors, "fallen women", and other groups, the focus was on bringing the "word of God" to save people's souls.

Motler's manual education, combined with vocational training in printing, enabled him to become a skilled writer and printer. However, Motler had rejected religion by the time he left school, at the age of 15. His later politics were deeply shaped by this background, particularly his hostility to religious authority and paternalistic control over deaf people, which he criticised forcefully in his 1920 article "The Priest-Ridden Deaf", one of the earliest deaf-authored critiques of the missioner system in Britain. Although the authors are concerned to position Motler in Deaf Studies, this is the only one of the pieces they mention which deals with the position of deaf people. The other pieces are mostly about anarchism/anarcho-communism, socialism, workers' councils, labour issues, and opposition to World War 1. However, I think this is linked to Motler's specific experience of deafness, as I'll explain below.

In "The Priest-Ridden Deaf", Motler criticises the primacy of religion in religious schools, at the expense of what he calls 'actual' education, particularly in English. He suggests this bias in deaf schooling in particular leaves half of deaf people 'practically… untutored in English', and those who pick up skills are subject to prejudice because they are confused with this untutored group. I've located this piece online (it's only two pages long) and Motler also complains in it that deaf children are often neglected by their parents, that the church has effectively captured deaf people as a group and denies them access to anything outside its remit, and that prejudice arising from low education leads to wage discrimination against deaf people. Against such prejudice, Motler suggests that deaf people are good workers because they don't waste time talking on the job, and that they hold their own in piece-work systems. In other words, in Motler's view, deaf people are just as capable as other workers, except for the fact that they are usually held-back by the mission system and its effects. This argument implies that, in a socialist system without religious education, deaf people would fare well enough. Although Motler doesn't specifically say this, it partly explains his commitment to socialism and labour activism.

Motler portrays deaf people as captured by a church-led assemblage which functions like a total institution, taking care of everything in their lives while restricting their exposure to anything else. 'It is,' he says', 'next to impossible to improve the deaf-mute intellectually, chiefly owing to the hold the missioner has on him.' Unless of 'exceptional intelligence and strength of character' (presumably encompassing Motler himself), deaf-mutes 'are driven to avoid normal people and to associate together.' Unfortunately, the only place where they can do this is the club-mission, and this entails religious services. He suggests the missions functioned as pervasive patronage systems, handling issues like work and insurance as well as social life, marriage, etc. This is something he views as control rather than support. 'The very livings of the missioners would be threatened should the deaf ever become self-reliant, self-dependent citizens.'

Recounting an incident with a correspondent who had travelled abroad, but who thought Motler should be "locked up for his own good", Motler emphasised that the prejudices encouraged by the missions are not limited to clerics, but also arise among deaf people.

It seems, therefore, that Motler felt cut off from the deaf community because of its capture by organised religion, which he rejected. This effectively forced him into working mainly with hearing people, and led to an ideal that deaf people be self-reliant and independent. However, this brought him into conflict with the realities of capitalism, and probably explains why so much of his work focuses on labour and socialist issues. He wished to be a worker on an equal footing with non-disabled workers, and thought this could be achieved as part of a revolutionary project. This analysis is very much of its time, and relates to a type of socialism which has never been established. I suspect, however, in line with Stirner, that socialism by itself would not eliminate discrimination based on ideas of human essence or normal average capabilities – although both state socialist and social-democratic systems tend to provide things like sheltered employment, benefits, and services in which the state replaces religious missions and families as the patron/provider. Neoliberalism, in contrast, tends to throw people back on resources they don't have, refusing to recognise incapacities or refusing to take them as relevant to how anyone's treated.

I would also note here that, despite the various criticisms of radical autonomous spaces as insufficiently inclusive, I've always found them a lot more accepting of difference than mainstream spaces, because of the ethos of voluntary association and the assumption that everyone's different. Paradoxically, the moves towards enforcing inclusion have often made them less tolerant of difference. Prior to this shift, it was much easier to relate to the diverse unique individuals in these spaces than to people of the same positionality organised around professionals or in pro-system spaces. However, the norms of the latter kind of space have colonised autonomous spaces under the cloak of combatting ableism. Those of us who relied on these more open spaces have effectively been placed outside society.

Motler's critique is impressive in the range of ground it covers, but it's very much of its time. I doubt religion still has this hold in the UK today, and the move towards autonomous groups from the 1960s onwards has countered this tendency, but it's noticeable that groups like psychiatrists, NGO's, educators, and social workers still monopolise communities for certain groups of disabled people. Today, disabled people in the global North are usually pressured to integrate, in a context where allowances for difference are grossly insufficient and bosses are very selective in whom they employ. Welfare state provision has been decimated, and people who remain committed to autonomous counter-communities are denounced as "essentialists" and "separatists".

Politically, Motler was active from the Great Unrest (1911–14), a syndicalist-influenced strike wave which shut down many ports and factories, through to the aftermath of the First World War. He was a committed anarchist-communist well before the war, contrary to claims that he was a later convert from socialism He wrote poetry, satire, and propaganda for radical publications including Freedom, Voice of Labour, and The Workers' Dreadnought, and he edited the anti-war paper Satire (1916–18). He wrote pieces calling for the abolition of property, recounting sabotage of print copies by a print worker (an early prefiguration of autonomism), and a series of introductions to anarchism. His style was marked by humour, clarity, and accessibility, reflecting a strong belief that radical ideas should be communicated in plain language and visual forms to reach working-class audiences.

Deaf people were exempt from conscription, although some did pass the tests and fight in the war. It seems Motler instead dodged the draft. He was recorded as being in the army reserve from 1916, probably because he never registered for conscription and was automatically listed as called-up. He seems to have gone underground around this time, rather than register for conscription and seek exemption. He was later taken off the list, probably because he was tracked-down and

found to be deaf. This was an important conscientious stand. Some of his affines in the anarchist scene were arrested and jailed for refusing to register.

The article also recounts that deaf people were sometimes shot by soldiers within Britain, because they did not hear verbal warnings, orders, or threats. From other sources, I've established that this happened because of the sudden deployment of soldiers as sentries at sites such as train stations, railway lines, and public buildings, with no concern for the threat posed to civilians. The sentries expected to be able to bark orders and felt entitled to shoot people who ignored them. This also happens today with armed police in various countries, and also affects for example non-verbal people who do not understand the orders, people who panic when confronted, and people who are outraged at being bossed-about in this way. This low-level genocide-by-oversight had the side-effect of partially driving deaf people out of public spaces. After the first months of the war, deaf people seem to have stopped going out without accompaniment by hearing people. Presumably, many were driven back exclusively into the church-controlled mission-clubs. Motler was never shot by a sentry, but the authors stress that he was taking a risk just going about his life in the period.

The repressive conditions extended further than the problem of armed goons at public sites. Radical publications were persecuted during the war under special censorship powers introduced in 1914, and the Freedom offices suffered several raids and shutdowns. There were even worries that radicals could be charged with treason, leading to the death penalty (the treatment of conscientious objectors and traumatised soldiers in this war are also rather notorious). After The Voice of Labour was suppressed, Motler edited and managed the magazine Satire with his friend George Scates, another deaf radical. He moved the publication to his own publishing offices because of the police harassment of Freedom. Focusing on parody and simplicity, Satire rejected anything deemed too long, serious, or theoretical, aiming for a mass working-class readership. The authors don't mention it, but this was a period when satirical publications in general were booming, as an outlet for anti-war sentiment. They do mention that the Northcliffe press (e.g. the Daily Mail) were conducting hate campaigns against the anti-war press, calling for crackdowns.

In December 1917, the police raided Motler's home and workplace, and he was summonsed to appear in court. This was obviously directed at suppressing his publication. Police had stolen large quantities of printing materials during the raids and Motler initially feared being executed for treason. In the end, he received a fine for illegally selling four lottery tickets, but this was widely recognised as a form of disguised political repression. The lottery, organised as a fundraiser and advertised in Satire, was infiltrated by police agents or somesuch, who were reportedly the only ones to buy tickets and one of whom turned the tombola. At trial, having been offered a cleric as interpreter of BSL in court, Motler chose instead to use written English and have his defence read out by the interpreter. This is probably because of his distrust of the clergy. The case was also raised in Parliament due to Motler's attempts to recover the stolen property (which despite initial refusal, was returned within a month). These are rather familiar kinds of dirty tricks of a kind which are still in use.

Motler used written English rather than an interpreter in court, reflecting both his independence and his distrust of religious authorities. Satire closed following the case, but Motler continued to write for other publications. He also wrote several pamphlets during 1919, such as Soviets for the British and Anarchist Communism in Plain English, as well as a collection of poems. He was fired from a publisher for trying to organise the workers.

Internationalist in outlook, Motler was also an Esperantist, believing the language could unite the global working class. He claims to have learned the language in three weeks, and was translating poetry within a year. This means he was fluent in three languages – the Boston Spa version of sign language, written English, and Esperanto – by the age of 19. He expressed early scepticism about the Bolshevik trajectory of the Russian Revolution, warning as early as 1917 about the dangers of new rulers replacing old ones, though he continued to engage critically with revolutionary movements.

In the early 1920s, Motler emigrated to South Africa, possibly due to concerns about persecution of radical journalists in the UK which had continued after the war. In his new country, he continued writing poetry and political pieces, later returning briefly to Britain and attempting (unsuccessfully) to help unify non-parliamentary left groups in a federation. His later life is less documented, though he remained active as a writer and printer. Some of the poems suggest that he was now aligned with the South African Communist Party. In 1923 he wrote a short story about an interracial relationship between two men in the South African army, suggesting an interest in gay rights and anti-racism, although the article authors describe it as clumsy and stereotypical.

The authors conclude that Motler is significant in two major ways. For Deaf Studies, he stands out as an early deaf intellectual who challenged religious control, demonstrated linguistic and political agency, and participated directly in wider social struggles rather than remaining confined to deaf institutions. For anarchist history, he exemplifies grassroots, working-class anarchism rooted in accessibility, humour, and practical communication, and deserves recognition as an editor, propagandist, and organiser. His emphasis on accessibility and humour influenced the later anarchist press – and he did this using exclusively written (not spoken) English. Overall, the article reclaims Motler as a forgotten but vital figure whose life challenges ableist assumptions about deaf people and enriches the history of radical politics.

What it means for radicals: Motler is indeed a neglected figure, to the point where it's still hard to find his writings, and it's significant that a deaf activist would be attracted to anarchism. Anarchism rejects social hierarchies and is likely to appeal to anyone who feels an outsider, rejected, excluded, or stigmatized in the dominant system. Two of his pieces are online, one at the Anarchist Library and other sites, another at the Kate Sharpley Library. I haven't been able to locate an archive of his magazine Satire, but some of the other publications he wrote for are on sites such as Libcom. I also managed to find "The Priest-Ridden Deaf" on a university blog, and I've already discussed the significance of this piece above.

Aside from this important article, the pieces I've found by Motler don't seem to add much to anarchist theory, and my hopes to find something like an anarchist theory of disability in his work seem misplaced. This is unfortunate, as anarchism could do with thinking through disability more carefully.

Motler is focused on the oppression of the working-class and the poor, and wants the overthrow of the ruling-class and the state. His theory of Direct Action (which he capitalises), from The Anarchist Revolution, is basically a theory that all actions should be designed as part of a direct route to social revolution. This is, however, to be a revolution brought about through workers' own intelligence and power. His vision of post-revolutionary society is one where workers quickly learn how to run their own trades and eliminate the profit motive. Each group of workers appeals directly to the others for inputs they need, without any overall regulation. This will be sustained by the 'individual struggle to live', without any need for authority. This is the kind

of socialist optimism often found in his era, when people believed it would be relatively easy to maintain a modern economy without a ruling-class. It's thrown into doubt not just by the historical developments of socialism and social-democracy, but also by later critiques of work-as-alienation, of ecological effects of modernity, and of authoritarianism built into particular technologies and work-systems.

Motler's work is straightforward in certain ways, but not necessarily in a way which makes it accessible to contemporary readers. One of the dilemmas of accessibility is that it does not translate well over time; Motler relies a lot on familiar references which might be lost on a contemporary reader. Stylistically, it's littered with the podium-style rhetoric typical of early twentieth century radical texts – presumably copied from other such texts, since Motler would not have understood speeches at rallies.

Disability studies is heavily influenced in its theoretical basis by the social model of disability created by sociologists in the 1980s, and also the wider trends in identity politics; it tends to be far too integrationist for my tastes, which is not surprising since it's written by successful academics. There are discussions of capability and incapability in authors like Fourier, Stirner, Vaneigem, etc., and the general gist of egoism in particular is away from assumptions of benchmark normality and standardised social conditions. People vary in many ways, with unique strengths and weaknesses. These differences are typically ignored or overridden in systems built on models of a unitary human nature (whether essence, ideal, aggregate, or average of actual people) or on abstract values such as "the community" and "the nation".

Disability in the sociological sense arises when particular incapacities are excluded from the unitary model of what "everyone" is assumed to be able to do. The more authoritarian and paternalistic the systems, the more "disabling" these oversights are. Trigger-happy sentries murdering deaf people for not obeying barked orders they couldn't hear (why should they, anyway?!) is a good example of how normie supremacy rests on the creation of systems premised on a presumed essence with presumed capabilities. I wonder if others were murdered for defying the orders or because they panicked and ran; given the current record of armed police, it would not surprise me. Nobody seems to realise that posting armed sentries everywhere is a kind of slow genocidal threat against anyone different from the norm, or that it leads to people quite reasonably self-excluding from public spaces. This kind of nonsense has once more been normalised, but it's just one of the many ways authoritarian systems rely on what Scott calls "state simplifications" which override human complexity and uniqueness. In my view, the solution is not more recognition or technical changes, but the opening-up of spaces free from authoritarian power.

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