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Performativity and the Disability Category: Solving *The Zero Theorem*

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Abstract

This article explores critically the relationship between capitalist performativity and the disability category. It draws on Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of postmodernity to define 'performativity' as the principle of performance enhancement governing the world of contemporary techno-capitalism. The analysis then traces the historical development of the disability category in the 20th and 21st centuries and explains its complex interlinking with performativity. Special attention is paid to the impact of neoliberalism since the 1980s that includes both the disability category's administrative shrinking and its market-based expansion. These theoretical and historical reflections are supplemented by a reading of Terry Gilliam's movie *The Zero Theorem*. The conclusion discusses some possibilities for resisting performativity, suggested by the disability studies perspective espoused in the article.

Keywords

Introduction

Together with the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s, the development of governmental techniques and communication technologies has extended the reach and continuity of performance enhancement towards aspects of public and private lives which had till then remained outside the domain of performativity. Publicly, people have gotten increasingly implicated in processes of uninterrupted surveillance and control geared towards improving their 'outputs'. Even in ostensibly 'self-directed' occupations – such as academic teaching and research – few (if any) aspects of professional activity have been able to avoid performance management through ongoing measurement and comparison:

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> Audit culture is meant to ensure that professionals 'deliver' 'excellence' in terms of teaching and research 'outputs', with management having more ability to increase the 'performance' of professionals, in a 'market' environment. (Cruickshank, 2016: 2)

Similarly, private lives have gotten totally externalised, disaggregated and monitored, with or without the consent of their subjects. For one thing, millions have been compelled to share information about their most intimate and mundane activities on social networks on an everyday basis, where their privacies have been quantified and ranked in most superficial terms ('views', 'reads', 'likes', etc.). Thus, mediated by new communication technologies, the logic of performance enhancement has been imposed on personal experiences, with pleasure itself subjected to everyday auditing for the purpose of optimisation:

> I … felt that if I wasn't tagging myself at restaurants or uploading photos from nights out, people would assume I wasn't living. I remember a friend from uni said to me once, 'Yeah, but you're still going out having fun, I've seen on Facebook.' I tried to present myself as always having a great time. If my status didn't get more than five likes, I'd delete it. (Daisy, 23, from Manchester, quoted in Marsh, 2016: n.p.)

Critical thinkers of the 20th century have analysed this game that has devoured public and private lives (even when parading as play, entertainment, creativity, care, education or therapy) under various headings, from Heidegger's (1977) 'technology' and Frankfurt School's 'instrumental reason' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) to more recent 'biopolitics' (Foucault, 2008) and 'control' (Deleuze, 1992). The present reflection stems from this critical tradition, taking as its central concept that of 'performativity', borrowed from Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) well-known essay on postmodernity. According to Lyotard (1984: xxiv), performativity is the principle of 'optimizing the system's performance'. In a world governed by this principle, humans and non-human entities exist and are recognisable as good and true to the extent to which they are useful. Performativity is the ontological, ethical and epistemological principle of postmodern capitalism, where torn safety nets and rising indebtedness coalesce with new and emerging technologies to subject people to ever increasing pressures for performance enhancement.

In this article, I explore the interface between performativity and disability, supplementing theoretical reflection with a reading of Terry Gilliam's movie *The Zero Theorem* (2013). Why disability? Over the last several decades, the social-political study of disability has revealed in something individual and biological (an 'impaired' body/mind) *the key* to something general and structural (social oppression). This insight has stemmed from the 'social model of disability', an approach that has shifted the focus in the analyses of disability from individual deficiencies towards restrictions imposed upon people with impairments by the way society is organised (Oliver, 1996). The social model has originated in the disabled people's movement (UPIAS, 1976) and has subsequently been developed and revised within the interdisciplinary domain of disability studies (Goodley, 2013; Shakespeare, 1998). The ensuing perspective allows us to criticise capitalism by looking at the conditions of living of people with impaired bodies and minds.

What is more, disability studies has disclosed the very concept of 'disability' as an integral element of capitalism (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). In this article, I build on disability studies' insights to unpack the complex relationship between performativity and the changes in the disability category over time. I refer to 'disability category' as both an administrative and a market-based construct. As an administrative construct, the disability category regulates the access of people to public support (Stone, 1984); as a market-based construct, it creates demand for bodily and mental 'improvements' to enhance profit (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010). Exploring the relationship between performativity and the shifts in the disability category can help illuminate important features of performativity, disability and, ultimately, contemporary capitalism.

Aided by a reading of Terry Gilliam's dystopian work, the disability studies perspective may help understand better the horrors of a world where humans and non-humans exist and have value only to the extent to which they optimise the system's performance – and find ways to resist it. As a potential 'outside' to postmodern capital consolidated by the capital's very movement towards ubiquitous optimisation, disability may provide an immanent vantage point from which to perceive the danger and respond to it. This is my final, political reason for juxtaposing capitalist performativity and disability.

In terms of scope, the present analysis is concerned primarily with the relationship between performativity and the disability category in the urban regions of the Global North – as suggested by human geographers and postcolonial scholars within disability studies (Gleeson, 1999; Meekosha, 2011; Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012), the forces of capitalism have had a different (although not unrelated) impact on people with impairments living in rural localities and/or in the Global South. I commence by discussing the meaning of Lyotard's (1984) 'performativity' and I make recourse to a trenchant analysis of sleep in late capitalism provided by Crary (2014) to explicate the link between performativity and disability. I then explore the historical development of the disability category in the 20th and 21st centuries, drawing on Stone's (1984) classical work, updated by Roulstone's (2015) more recent analysis of the impact of neoliberalism since the 1980s. The next section complicates matters by highlighting the contradictory impact of neoliberal performativity on the disability category, where the latter's administrative shrinking has been complemented by its market-based expansion. Here, I bring into the analytical mix Deleuze's (1992) critique of 'societies of control' and Mitchell and Snyder's (2010) reflections on the marketisation of bodily 'imperfections'. All these themes are then put to work in a reading of Terry Gilliam's (2013) *The Zero Theorem*. The conclusion discusses some possibilities for resisting performativity that include affirming disability and rehabilitating relationality.

Performativity, the Ends of Sleep, and Disability

When reading Lyotard's (1984) essay on the 'postmodern condition', commentators tend to focus on Lyotard's definition of postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' – that is, the substitution of Enlightenment metanarratives organised around ideas such as humanism and historical progress with post-Enlightenment language games associated with notions such as post-humanism and post-history. On this reading, postmodernity has replaced ideological totality with ideological plurality. However, beneath this fragmentation of ideology, there has been consolidation of capital. On a closer look, postmodern plurality reveals itself as subordinated to a totalising logic – the logic of performativity, as also suggested by Lyotard (1984: xxiv) himself:

> There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism. The decision makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance – efficiency. The application of this criterion to all our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is commensurable) or disappear.

So, in contemporary, postmodern capitalism, the logic of performativity – 'be operational or disappear' – has tended to subsume all other logics. Postmodernity has institutionalised two major ways to be 'operational' – by labouring and by consuming. Some three decades after Lyotard, the American critical theorist and art historian Jonathan Crary (2014) has depicted this present-day

world of ubiquitous performativity in markedly dystopian terms. According to Crary, nowadays we live in a '24/7 world' whose key feature is to make the technologically mediated injunction to perform constant, uninterrupted. This system has colonised lived space and time by putting pressure on humans to labour and consume everywhere, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As the last frontier before the total submission of humans to the imperatives of capitalist performativity, Crary (2014: 74) has foregrounded *sleep*: 'Sleep is the only remaining barrier, the only enduring "natural condition" that capitalism cannot eliminate.' When we, the subjects of postmodernity, sleep, we do not perform, which means that we neither labour nor consume. In this sense, sleep is inherently anti-capitalist. The 24/7 world of capitalist performativity tends to erase sleep in order to clear the way for the unlimited enhancement of performativity:

> An illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist image of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change. 24/7 is a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability. (Crary, 2014: 9)

This social-political understanding of sleep evokes disability on many levels, especially considering Crary's deployment of notions such as 'otherness' and 'fragility' that have been central to contemporary disability scholarship. However, the only place in Crary's book that includes a disability-related discussion is Crary's brief recourse to autism. Yet autism is used by Crary as a way to condemn television that, according to a study quoted by Crary (2014: 86), 'might have a catastrophic *physical* impact on the developing human being … it could produce extreme, permanent impairments in the acquisition of language and in the capacity for social interaction'. In this account, autism is a pathology created by 24/7 capitalism rather than an impediment to its total instrumentalisation of life, as sleep is argued to be (Mladenov, 2016: 1227). Such an individualised and pathologised rendering of disability has prevented Crary from engaging with the perspective championed by disability studies. If we now fix this omission and think about disability in critical-theoretical terms instead of reducing it to individual pathology, we will see that disability is akin to sleep in that it has similarly been subjected to erasure in the world of 24/7 capitalism. To understand this dynamic, we need to historicise the disability category.

The Disability Category in Historical Perspective

The relationship between societal pressures to engage in productive labour and the disability category has been most clearly expressed by Deborah Stone (1984) in her classical work *The Disabled State*. There, Stone makes a distinction between 'need-based distribution' (to each according to need) and 'work-based distribution' (to each according to labour contribution) and argues that the tightening of eligibility for being administratively recognised as 'disabled' makes access to need-based distribution harder, thus putting additional pressure on people to rely on work-based distribution – in other words, to labour for a wage. From such a perspective, the disability category is pivotal not only for disability policy, but also for the welfare state as a whole, as well as for the economy: 'The very notion of disability is fundamental to the architecture of the welfare state; it is something like a keystone that allows the other supporting structures of the welfare system and, in some sense, the economy at large to remain in place' (Stone, 1984: 12).

Historically, the disability category has been expanding during periods of social-democratic and social-liberal governance, broadly characterised by promotion of redistribution, social rights and decommodification. Besides politics, this expansion has also been conditioned by developments such as medical advances, ageing populations, deindustrialisation and globalisation which have

objectively increased the number of people living with impairments. In the second part of the 20th century in the countries of the Global North, cash-based disability support underwent a gradual shift from compensation to extra-cost support, from conditionality to unconditional provision, and from targeting (means-testing) to universality. For example, in the United Kingdom, '[t]he period 1940-1997 was characterised by a period of growing welfare support away from simple war compensation-type programmes to extra-cost welfare support regardless of impairment/illness, income and whether a disabled person was employed or not' (Roulstone, 2015: 676). Following – and, in many instances, facilitating – such developments, disability studies and anti-discrimination legislation have also expanded their understanding of who counts as 'disabled'.

The global rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s (Harvey, 2005) has slowed down and eventually reversed these trends. Different welfare-state regimes in the Global North (Esping-Andersen, 1990) have implemented neoliberal reforms with varying pace and to varying degrees, with liberal welfare states such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America leading the way, but in terms of disability policy, analysts have identified 'a remarkable similarity of nation states embarking upon disability restructuring programmes to curtail expenditure and, as a means to create public consent, to withdraw state social provisioning measures' (Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012: 200). The expansion of the disability category has been identified as a major problem of an allegedly 'bloated' welfare state and consecutive governments, right- and left-wing alike, have made efforts at tightening the eligibility for being officially recognised as 'disabled'. The push towards the shrinking of the disability category reached a new high in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crises. Alan Roulstone (2015) has discussed these processes in his analysis of recent disability benefits reforms in the United Kingdom, but similar trends have been observed in other countries as well (e.g. Brennan et al., 2016). According to Roulstone, the shrinking of the disability category in contemporary British social policy has been underpinned by neoliberal discourse and misinformation, including tendentious use of evidence and negative representations of disabled people in the media (see also Briant et al., 2013), rather than by genuine economic need: 'the deliberate or selective use of the government's own evidence is a key component of establishing the imperative "disability welfare problem" in popular narratives in order to legitimate the shrinking of the disability category' (Roulstone, 2015: 681).

In Stone's (1984) original account, the disability category tends to shrink in times of economic underperformance and to expand in times of economic growth. However, Stone was writing for the post-war era dominated by social liberalism and social democracy underpinned by Keynesianism (Gamble, 1996). In contrast, the neoliberal modes of governance which have substituted Keynesianism since the 1980s (Gamble, 1996; Harvey, 2005), have been a one-way street for the administration of the disability category in the Global North, pressing ahead with its shrinking even during periods of economic recovery or relative prosperity: 'The notion of neo-liberalism as a default rather than a reactive policy position can thus be posited as the basis for formulating the disability category at times of both recession and social-economic growth. This is clearly different to Stone's formulation' (Roulstone, 2015: 676). It seems that within a neoliberal policy framework, the administrative expansion of the disability category has never been – and, most probably, will never be – on the agenda.

The Disability Category in Times of Neoliberal Performativity

The rise of neoliberalism has coincided with the intensification of performativity enabled by the development of communication technologies and governmental techniques. The technologically mediated global spread of the injunction to 'be operation or disappear' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv), for which 'sleep has no necessity or inevitability' (Crary, 2014: 9), has facilitated and, in turn, has been

facilitated by the neoliberal doctrine of radical marketisation. Neoliberalism constituted a meta-discourse that made the application of performativity 'to all our games' seem not only natural, but also inevitable, despite postmodern fragmentation: 'at just the point when theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard are heralding the bankruptcy of the metanarratives (*grands récits*) of the Enlightenment, in the Western world we have witnessed the revival and revitalization of the master narrative of classical economic liberalism in the guise of neoliberalism' (Peters, 2001: 115). Moreover, neoliberalism consolidated a shift that had already been under way, identified by Deleuze (1992) as a transition from the logic of 'discipline' to the logic of 'control': discipline was discontinuous, control is continuous; discipline worked through enclosure, control works through openness (it is unbounded); discipline was rigid, control is flexible; discipline was exercised in factories, through wages, control is exercised in corporations, through performance-based rewards and sanctions.[1]

Neoliberal performativity has supplemented disability as a matter of administrative discipline with disability as a matter of market-based control. Within this process, the market has impressed the disability category and its cognates (functional limitations, abnormalities, developmental disorders, etc.) upon an ever-expanding set of human appearances, thoughts and actions in view of multiplying opportunities for profit-making. In other words, the continuous and ubiquitous pressure to improve one's performance has framed more and more elements of human bodies and minds as non-performing or under-performing, which has created demand for performance enhancers of various kinds:

> Nearly all of capitalism now finds itself pitched toward *imperfection* as the standard with product supplementation as the solution – diuretics, impotency, indigestion, mobility aids, depression, manias, hearing loss, vision correction, chronic fatigue, etc. The body has become a multi-sectional market; whereas Fordist capitalism cultivated divided worker populations by hierarchicalizing the assembly line; postmodern capital divides us within our own bodies. (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010: 190)

The supplementation of the administrative shrinking of the disability category with its biopolitical incorporation into new and emerging markets of 'perfectibility' has been a key feature of the transition from the modern, Fordist world of discipline, to the postmodern, post-Fordist world of uninterrupted, 24/7 performativity. Along the way, the 'outside' to capital has been further reduced. From such a critical-theoretical perspective, Stone's rendering of the disability category as 'political privilege' tells only half of the story:

> a social observer cannot fail to notice that disability entails (or may entail) at least as much political privilege as it does social stigma. It is a political privilege because, as an administrative category, it carries with it permission to enter the need-based system and to be exempt from the work-based system. It can also provide exemption from other things people normally consider worth avoiding: military service, debt, and criminal liability. Disability programs are political precisely because they allocate these privileges. (Stone, 1984: 28)

However, in the several decades since the publication of *The Disabled State* in 1984, the need-based system of distribution has been increasingly undermined by neoliberal retrenchment, while the work-based system has escaped the confines of the factory: 'The modulating principle of "salary according to merit" has not failed to tempt national education itself. Indeed, just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination' (Deleuze, 1992: 5). Along the way, distribution according to work contribution has transmogrified into market-based performance management that has permeated every aspect of the emerging '24/7 world without shadows' (Crary, 2014: 9). In this world, the 'privilege'

that Stone referred to has *simultaneously* eroded and transmogrified into an instrument of performativity. On the one hand, medicalised systems for disability assessment have tightened eligibility requirements (Roulstone, 2015); on the other hand, technologically mediated performance management systems, complemented by emerging 'perfectibility' markets, have extended the framing of people as 'deficient bodies and inefficient resources' (Mladenov, 2011) to the whole of the population.

I will now explore more closely this point about denial of the disability category as administrative 'privilege' and its simultaneous imposition for the purposes of creeping performativity by looking at a dystopian movie created by the master of dystopias.

The Zero Theorem

In Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* (2013), the protagonist Qohen Leth (played by Christoph Waltz) represents the fate of a person under conditions of postmodern performativity. Qohen is a computer programmer, a data management virtuoso who refers to himself in the plural (quite fittingly, as he impersonates a multitude – in Qohen's own words: 'We are but one in many single worker bee in a vast swarm subject to the same imperatives as billions of others.'). He lives in social isolation and suffers from a long list of phobias. Qohen is also obsessed with finding the meaning of life. This faith in ultimate meaning finds everyday expression in Qohen's anticipation of a mysterious phone call from an unidentified source that is supposed to bring about revelation and relief (a motive echoing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*). Qohen resents his job in a large data-processing corporation that has subjected his being to fierce instrumentalisation. Through relentless auditing and immediate feedback, depicted by Gilliam via the tropes of techno-bureaucratic dehumanisation familiar from another of his dystopian masterpieces, *Brazil* (1985), the corporation exerts pressure on Qohen to meet continuously increasing performance targets imposed by his employer.

In a key scene from *The Zero Theorem*, Qohen attends a disability assessment commission. He seeks to be certified as 'disabled' in order to get a disability leave or, at least, be reassigned to work at home so that he does not miss his phone call. The members of the commission attend to Qohen's complaints with cynical suspicion – Gilliam constructs the setting, the characters and the action in a characteristically sarcastic way. The scene captures neatly the power that medical-productivist administration of disability exerts over people's lives (Mladenov, 2011). To the degree to which performativity functions as a guiding principle or societal norm, the actions of people who seek to circumvent performativity are bound to appear as subversive and (potentially) deceptive. The welfare state has solved this problem of deception by bracketing subjectivity through medicalisation (Stone, 1984: 28). Historically, the *objective* methods and instruments of the physical examination, parodied in Gilliam's movie, have been mobilised to 'free' physicians from their dependence on the *subjective* will, motivations, perceptions, imagination and interpretations of the applicant. Such encounters are experienced by those subjected to assessment as silencing, neglectful and oppressive – consider this real-life autoethnographic reflection:

> In the tense contact between myself and the medical committee my testimony of pain as the reason of me using a wheelchair becomes irrelevant. Through the committee I had the feeling that pain was not the answer they were looking for. Minoracy knowledge, my first-person account and claim of pain had no validity in the medical committees. It could not be absorbed within professional knowledge. My words, my knowledge, my experience are silenced and nullified. The committee was in need of concrete physical evidence of my difficulties that would not be mediated or transmitted by me, the subject. (Broyer, 2011: 59)

Ditto Qohen before the disability commission in *The Zero Theorem*. By seeking disability certification, Qohen attempts to find a legitimate way out of the totalising instrumentalisation of his being that breeds nihilism and, in its stead, to open up a space for meaningfulness, however self-deceptive the hope of getting a revelatory phone call might be. Disability assessment systems and disability certification regimes make people subjected to them, 'willingly or not, into the legitimate "non-workers" – those who refuse to participate not in productivity but in the productive net of capitalism' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010: 188). Qohen needs to be released from the 'productive net' of corporate labour so that he does not miss the call – his only hope for absolution from the nihilism of performativity.

Eventually, the commission refuses to certify Qohen as disabled. Instead, it refers him to further psychiatric examination to be conducted by a computer programme made to identify Qohen's problems but not to treat them. Predictably, this does not absolve Qohen from the terrors of performativity. Quite the contrary – when, in exasperation, Qohen requests by the head of the corporation (also referred to as 'the Management') to be allowed to work from home, promising to double his 'output' in return, he is granted permission but is presented with a new task – to solve a mathematical formula called the 'Zero Theorem'. Ironically, this formula is designed to prove that life is meaningless – although Qohen is intrinsically driven to find meaning, he is forced to affirm meaninglessness through his work, a situation of ultimate alienation. Solving the Zero Theorem eventually becomes a 24/7 preoccupation of Qohen's, facilitated by the dismantling of the distinction between public and private that comes with homebased working.

At home, Qohen gets bombarded with unachievable performance targets and, on the top of it, gets subjected to constant surveillance by the corporation (he finds cameras everywhere, including in his bathroom, and later in the movie tries to smash them with a hammer). In the rare instances when Qohen manages to sleep, he has nightmares involving a black hole (a popular symbol of meaninglessness). The only escape from this 24/7 toil – a world without shadows, echoing Crary's (2014) depiction of postmodern capitalism – is through interaction with Bainsley, a woman who eventually turns out to be a sex worker paid by the corporation. These encounters are mediated by virtual reality where, ironically, the sun never sets.

Towards the movie's end, the nihilism of performativity reaches a turbulent climax. Qohen achieves complete fusion between himself and the corporate network, whereby he is being told by the Management that life has no meaning. The purpose of the corporation itself is identified as fabricating order in an intrinsically chaotic world and manufacturing meaning for sale, which is precisely why Qohen has been its best employee – his phobias and obsession with meaning have served perfectly the purpose of commodification of meaning with the pace of ever enhancing performance. The movie ends when the corporation abandons Qohen as useless (now that he knows the truth), while Qohen re-enters the virtual dream world through the black hole from his nightmares, makes the sun to set (thus restoring the possibility of sleep) and is reconnected with Bainsley in this newly found realm of meaningfulness, the 'outside' to corporation's control.

Read in this way, Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* dramatises the contradictions of postmodern performativity that *simultaneously* seeks to efface the disability category (by denying disability certification) *and* extends it by affirming one's 'imperfections' (Qohen's phobias and obsession), thereby transforming them into vehicles for performance enhancement towards the ultimate (non) purpose of capital accumulation. Yet another insight concerns the possibility of resistance. Qohen becomes useless for the corporation at the moment when he gets 'rehabilitated' – i.e. when his 'imperfections' are 'fixed' by the revelation of the cynical 'truth' of performative nihilism. The reclusive, anxious and obsessive wait for the mysterious phone call is over. However, this is also the moment of release from the iron grip of performativity. The newly found realm of meaningfulness is discovered precisely through the supplements that used to compensate 'imperfections' and

enhance performance – networking, virtual reality, mediated love. Moreover, the conclusive reconciliation is deployed on the terrain of disability – rather than annihilating Qohen's preoccupation with meaning, the corporation has merely restored Qohen's agency over meaninglessness. He confronts the black hole and emerges from this confrontation victorious. In effect, the passive wait for the phone call is substituted by active intervention into fabricated reality that restores the possibilities of sleep and (non-performative) relationality.

Conclusion: Possibilities of Resistance

Such a reading of Gilliam's movie suggests that the disability category, while being a major means of disciplining (as an administrative construct) and controlling (as a market-based construct) under conditions of performativity, could also lead the way of resisting Foucaultian discipline and Deleuzian control. Consider Mitchell and Snyder's (2010: 186) revision of the familiar Marxist narrative on revolution by conceptualising people with 'non-productive bodies' as the real 'revolutionary subject of leftist history'. From this perspective, disability, reduced to non-productivity by the system that imposes uninterrupted, 24/7 productivity, becomes the ultimate means for undermining this very system – a moment of immanence that could bring about transcendence, echoing, *in a non-productivist register*, Marx and Engels's (1978 [1848]: 483) hopes about the proletariat: 'The development of Modern Industry… cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers.'

But how exactly could disability generate immanent resistance to performativity? In my previous work (Mladenov, 2016, 2017), I have suggested that one of the ways of reversing the creeping performative dystopia of contemporary capitalism is by rescuing the disability category from its neoliberal effacement. Such countermovement requires liberalising disability assessment so that people who seek disability support have greater access to it (Mladenov, 2016: 1231). Politically, this amounts to confronting neoliberal discourse with social-democratic values and logic – as Roulstone (2015: 685) points out, the 'longer-run growth of the disability category spawned by both radical and liberal reforms is a key adversary and challenge to neo-liberal tropes that dependency and faux disability lie at the heart of the current disability welfare problem'.

However, this strategy of re-asserting the disability category by liberalising disability assessment may unwittingly strengthen and empower key institutions of the disciplinary society – recall that the disability category, through its public administration, functions 'like a keystone that allows the other supporting structures of the welfare system and, in some sense, the economy at large to remain in place' (Stone, 1984: 12). Moreover, taken in isolation, the appeal to rescue the disability category from its neoliberal shrinking pays little heed to the biopolitical aspects of disability certification. Yet besides enabling the administration of welfare, disability assessment tools, actors and processes generate existential 'side effects' or 'surpluses' (Mladenov, 2015a: 60). Although it may be reclaimed for the purpose of resisting performativity by enhancing the access to need-based distribution as opposed to work-based distribution (Stone, 1984), the administrative assignment of disability could also damage the self-identity of people subjected to categorisation:

> The assessment process is entirely based on what you can't do. In several interviews with social workers, each lasting over two hours, my 18-year-old daughter has had to talk about her inability to wash, dress, walk, sit, get in and out of bed. She has not been given the opportunity to talk about her excellent AS grades, her shopping trips, or helping her younger siblings with their homework … As soon as the social worker left, my daughter burst into tears. Spending over two hours talking about all the things you can't do is hard for anybody. In a world in which being proud, powerful and disabled means challenging every assumption made about you, this is particularly wounding. (Wild, 2011: n.p.)

The most straightforward way of responding to the ableist misrecognition of disabled people as incapable – which is institutionally embedded in medical-productivist administration of disability that imposes on the people seeking disability certification the damaged self-identity of 'deficient bodies and inefficient resources' (Mladenov, 2011) – is to embrace a 'can do' attitude. This affirmative strategy often amounts to arguing that disabled people should be recognised as capable of working and should be provided with the means to do so: 'the right of disabled people to work is one of the most important values within disability and rights discourse' (Zaviršek, 2014: 197). Drawing on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996) and the Independent Living philosophy (DeJong, 1979), disability campaigners have insisted that disabled people could be as productive as non-disabled people, given the necessary environmental adjustments and individualised support. Against this grain, Zaviršek (2014: 197) has argued that 'the desirability of an ideology that glorifies work as the major facilitator of social inclusion has to be questioned'. In my previous work (Mladenov, 2017), I have similarly emphasised that, although the affirmation of productivity has its place in disability advocacy, it needs to be supplemented by other counter-hegemonic strategies – otherwise, it gets easily appropriated for the purpose of neoliberal retrenchment, which serves performativity quite well:

> In order to cut welfare and the costs to the UK economy of people getting sick, dis-ability got banned by the UK government to be replaced by a ruthless regime of positivity. We no longer ask what's wrong, just what's right. Fitness became compulsory. (Cotton, n.d., n.p.)

An alternative strategy of affirmation valorises the difference of the impaired body/mind in a way that avoids being framed by 'standardized labor demands of human value' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010: 184). For example, describing his cerebral palsy, the disability scholar James Overboe (2007: 221) has rendered his muscle spasms as 'expressions of life' – 'not in the sense of a "gift" from which other people learn, or as God's chosen "crippled angels," but rather how my spasms give me great joy and how they inform my life'. Here, the notion of 'joy' allows Overboe not only to affirm what is usually negated (his impairment), but also to affirm it in a non-instrumental way – the unmediated affectivity of 'joy' potentially exceeds attempts to reduce it to a means, and, accordingly, to quantify it, dis/aggregate it, compare it, etc. This opens up a space for asserting 'expressions of life' beyond the biopolitics that mobilises life to hit performance targets for the (non) purpose of capital accumulation. In this sense, Overboe's muscle spasms are similar to Crary's (2014: 74) sleep, conceived as an 'enduring "natural condition" that capitalism cannot eliminate' (note that the condition concerned is not really *natural*, for it expresses alternative biopolitics rather than pre-political reality – hence the quotation marks).

Another possibility for non-performative affirmation – suggested by Qohen's 'escape' in final scene of *The Zero Theorem* – is to regard the impaired body/mind as a solicitor of relationality: 'impaired embodiment demands new, inclusive and potentially exciting forms of response from others' (Goodley, 2013: 635). Earlier in the movie, Qohen attends to Bob, the Management's son, who is experiencing poor health. However, this caring relationship is promptly interrupted by corporation employees, who invade Qohen's home and take Bob away. Non-instrumental relationality is dangerous for the corporation even when it is meant to save the life of the boss's son, because it threatens to interrupt performativity.

In the article quoted above (Mladenov, 2016), I conceptualised the possibility of relationality opened up by disability as yet another way of resisting capitalist performativity, on a par with liberalising the disability category. The counter-hegemonic strategy I proposed in this regard consists in normalising and universalising the interdependence illuminated by disabled people's lives and experiences, coupled with unmasking of self-sufficiency experienced by able-bodied people as

underpinned by infrastructures of support and caring relationships (Mladenov, 2016: 1235). This, I argued, amounts to a shift from the (capitalist) work ethic to the (feminist) ethic of care. As a counterweight to performativity, the ethic of care has been embraced by disability scholars critical of the 'ideology of work':

> Disability, then, offers opportunities for reconsidering our relationships with life, labour and slow death. Could care, rather than work, be a place to find identity and recognition? Why wear yourself out? Disability provides a moment to intervene in slow death: why work yourself to death? Why (just) work? How do we support one another in a time of austerity? Why sweat to improve one's embodied and cognitive lot? How else might we live together to support, care and enable one another? What do we gain when we fail to meet neoliberalism's normative labouring standards? (Goodley et al., 2014: 983)

One final point concerns technology and progress. The affirmation of relationality sometimes goes hand in hand with techno-optimism: 'A new generation of scholars and activists are populating these spaces utilizing cyber worlds, plugged into rhizomatic networks of relationships with others, spurning traditional fixed identity categories and realizing community membership through rich diverse connections, and have no time for static modernist theories.' (Goodley, 2013: 641) As the reference to 'rhizomatic networks' suggest, this positive attitude towards postmodern technology is informed by the philosophy of immanence of Deleuze and Guattari (2004). Techno-optimism is similarly expressed in the final scene of *The Zero Theorem*, where Qohen reclaims agency and relationality by embracing the supplementation of networking and virtual reality.

However, in its association with disability, techno-optimism can dream of different things: of technologically eliminating impairments (fixing people), or of making it technologically possible for people with impairments to be included in society (fixing society); of making it technologically easier to take care of disabled people (techno-paternalism), or of making it technologically possible for disabled people to have choice and control in their everyday lives, including over their own support (techno-independence). In his book *Disability and Technology*, Roulstone (2016: 3) explicitly embraces an attitude of ambivalence towards technology when it comes to its impact on disabled people: 'One thing that is a leitmotif in this book is the paradoxical nature of technology: its simultaneous ability to open up but also to limit opportunities, access and inclusion.' In more general terms, under conditions of techno-capitalist performativity, networking tends to be reduced to surveillance, 'attention economy' and 24/7 instrumentalisation; flexibility – to precariousness; self-reflexive identity construction – to privatisation and atomisation; and virtual reality – to a mere extension of the spectacle.

Techno-optimism is premised on progressivism, an uplifting but tricky stance. Consider that the transition from institutional confinement to community-based services, while signifying a key achievement of the historical struggle for emancipation of disabled people, has also coincided with the transition from the disciplinary society to the society of control: 'in the crisis of the hospital as environment of enclosure, neighbourhood clinics, hospices, and day care could at firs express new freedom, but they could participate as well in mechanisms of control that are equal to the harshest of confinements' (Deleuze, 1992: 4).

As a function of general performativity, the 'ruthless regime of positivity' referred to above (Cotton, n.d.) has arguably appropriated for its ends both the social model of disability and the Independent Living philosophy, two keystones of the disabled people's movement and disability studies. For example, the marginalisation of the body by 'social model' theorists (Hughes and Paterson, 1997) has converged with the marginalisation of pain and fatigue within evolving systems for disability assessment, which has helped to reduce the number of people entitled to disability support: 'We can also say, however, that despite attempts to acknowledge impairment effects,

pain and fatigue, disability studies writers and social model writers may have inadvertently left open the terrain for a resurgence of highly abstract formulations of body, function and performativity.' (Roulstone, 2015: 685) Neoliberal retrenchment has similarly been legitimised by appropriating the language of 'Independent Living' in the service of promoting self-sufficiency and self-enhancement (Mladenov, 2015b).

However, this does not mean to abandon the fight for (non-instrumental) freedom and relationality. In the final analysis, '[t]here is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons' (Deleuze, 1992: 4). This search may be directed by disability. As administrative and market-based construct, the disability category circumscribes a terrain of immanence that simultaneously opens up possibilities for transcendence, for reclaiming the shrinking 'outside' to postmodern capital.

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Note

1. The term 'control' is used by Deleuze in a characteristically poststructuralist way. Like Foucault's 'power', Deleuze's 'control' is not exercised by an identifiable agent but is omnipresent, dispersed, un-bounded and un-bounding: 'Control is thus an intensification and generalization of discipline, when the boundaries of the institutions have been breached, corrupted, so that there is no longer a distinction between inside and outside' (Hardt, 1998: 150). Control's paradigm is the totalising performativity of the global market: 'the world market might serve adequately (even though it is not an architecture; it is really an anti-architecture) as the diagram of imperial power and the society of control' (Hardt, 1998: 142).

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