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**Big Society? Disabled people with the label of learning disabilities and the queer(y)ing of civil society**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the shifting landscape of civil society alongside the emergence of 'Big Society' in the UK. We do so as we begin a research project *Big Society? Disabled people with LD and Civil Society* (Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1)); we consider what 'Big Society' might mean for the lives of disabled people labeled with learning disabilities (LD). In the paper, we explore the ways in which the disabled body/mind might be thought of as a locus of contradictions as it makes problematic Big Society notions of: active citizenship; and social capital. Our aim, following Slater (2013: 19), is to queer(y), or to trouble, these Big Society ideas, and to suggest that disability offers new ways of thinking through civil society. This leads us to three new theoretical takes upon civil society: Queer(y)ing Active Citizenship, ii) Queer(y)ing Social Capital and iii) Shaping, resisting and queer(y)ing Big Society.

**Introduction**.

> The civil self is compelled to repeatedly display his purity by vigilant self-monitoring and disciplinary purification rituals (Seidman, 2008: 18).

This paper addresses contemporary understandings of civil society alongside the emergence of 'Big Society' as a policy agenda in the UK. We are interested in how civil society and Big Society are conceptualized as we embark on a new research project *Big Society? Disabled people with LD and Civil Society* (June, 2013 – July, 2015, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/K004883/1]). We ask what 'Big Society' might mean for the lives of people labeled with LD and what the possibilities might be to subvert what we might be described as Big Society's implicitly normative pitch. Labels are contentious phenomena; they give (in terms of inviting support and services) and denigrate (they threaten to limit how we view people so-labelled). In our research, we have chosen to use the term "LD" to recognize the label most prominent in British policy context. Labels such as mental handicap and retardation, intellectual / cognitive/ developmental disabilities have been and are used across the globe, but we use "disabled people with learning disabilties (LD)" because it picks up on a key point, made by Simone Aspis (1996), that individuals who have been labeled administratively (so they receive services) or clinically (through psychological services) are explicitly disabled by a wider mainstream society that often excludes them from everyday life. We recognize that many within the self-advocacy movement prefer the term "learning difficulties" while others prefer "People First". We seek to recognize and maintain this definitional confusion and complexity because, we feel, this fits most readily with our understanding of humanity per se.

We do not come to this research fuelled solely by intellectual curiosity. Rather, we believe that there is an immediate need to make sense of and to galvanize civil society and its response to disablism in the lives of disabled people with LD which we define as 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of

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restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being' (Thomas, 2007: 73). We are currently witnessing a resurgence of hate crime in the UK against disabled people that is also being explained in terms of a few mindless, evil souls. Hate crimes are often portrayed in the media as yet further evidence of individual criminality and the feral nature of the feckless. And yet, as we have argued elsewhere (XXXX), hate crime might be better understood as the symptomatic expression of a more generally spread of disablist systemic violence. Reduced public expenditure, increased social unrest, intensified feelings of social isolation amongst our communities will inevitably lead to hostilities, often enacted against those perceived to be the weakest in society. Add to this the dominant ideology of neoliberalism: a self-governing, self-serving, moral responsibility for oneself and one's family, then anyone considered unable or unwilling to take on such a citizenship role will receive a 'marked identity' (Bauman, 1994) such as 'scrounger', 'waster', or 'dependent'. These are crucial times for organizations of disabled people, advocates, family and parental organizations because we are witnessing the emergence of what we term ***disabling civil society***. These are, quite simply, times that are a matter of life and death.

Our response is to seek to subvert – more properly queer(y) –  Big Society (Gibson-Grahm, 1999; Slater, 2013). By queer, we mean to trouble contemporary understandings and hegemonic positions on civil society, and we attempt to do so through including the contributions and positions of disabled people with LD. We take as a given, following McRuer (2006) and others, that disability queers the normative pitch; it gets us to rethink how we typically live our lives and organize our societies. And so, we ask what the possible threats and opportunities might be for people with LD in a time of Big Society what we can learn from the lives of disabled people with LD about the potential to queer the normative pitch?

**Big Society**

> The Big Society is what happens whenever people work together for the
> common good. It is about achieving our collective goals in ways that are
> more diverse, more local and more personal
> (Department for Communities and Local Government. 2010, p. 2)

Big Society is an English phenomenon; it does not have the same currency
throughout all the countries of Britain (including Wales, Scotland and the North
of Ireland). The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, first used the term 'Big
Society' in the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November, 2009, to set out his
ambition to transition from 'Big Government to Big Society' (Evans, 2011). His
aim was to give power, responsibility and decision making to individuals and
neighbourhoods, and, simultaneously, to take power away from the state (Evans,
2011). Big Society is intended to be more than a policy statement, rather it is a
'political narrative' (Evans, 2011: 164), a story about how society *should* be. The
Coalition Government, in the UK, set out the key aims of Big Society as follows:

- government will make it easier to establish, expand and run charities social
  enterprises and voluntary organizations;
- public sector workers will have new rights to form co-operatives to deliver
  public services
- 'red tape' will be removed;
- a 'Big Society' bank will be established as a new source of loan funding for
  the third sector;
- philanthropy and charitable giving will be encouraged;
- a National Citizen Service will be established to give 16 year olds
  volunteering opportunities;
- a Big Society Day will encourage volunteering and social action
- 5,000 community organisers will be trained to support neighbourhood
  groups
- power will be devolved to local government. (Alcock, 2010)

Two principles underpinning Big Society have emerged: first, that the state should be smaller and, second, that the general public should be more involved in the decision-making (Crines and Halsall, 2012). Big Society is concerned with the process of devolving power from the state to individual social actors and groups within civil society (Diamond, 2011). Blond argued that the role of policy makers is to facilitate the shrinkage of the state and the restructuring of welfare provision (Alcock, 2011: 384).

Big Society is premised on individualized and neoliberal ways of thinking. It is "a society in which individual citizens *feel big*: big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood" (our italics, The Big Society Network, 2011 cited in Crines and Halsall, 2012:2). While the state maintains a role in economic management, Big Society represents a move away from the principles of collectivist action and social equality towards *individual* social provision. The big individual does the work. As a result, Big Society relies, not upon a discourse of collectivism, rights and equality, but upon senses of individualism, responsibility and altruism that draw upon philanthropic leanings and nineteenth century concepts of self-help (Crines and Halsall, 2012: 2).

Ironically, the government has also perpetuated the view that 'we are collectively becoming less civil: more self-centred, more aggressive, more hostile, less willing to devote time to causes greater than ourselves' (Diamond, 2011:4) and that we are living in 'Broken Britain' (Evans, 2011). Simultaneously, it is claimed that the bonds that bind people together in society (Putnam, 2000) have been fractured and that social fragmentation has led to an increasingly disconnected society where individuals have become alienated from friends, neighbours and formal democratic structures. Such terrorizing images of civil society have always existed though, currently, we are experiencing sustained representations of fragmented society.

Big Society suggests three solutions for what must be done to fix 'Broken Britain'. The first, as we have seen, is to reduce the size of the state and to shift responsibility and decision-making to local government and to the third sector. Second, the Coalition government has set out its plan to tackle broken families by supporting marriage, reducing family break down and lone parenthood and tackling poor parenting. And thirdly, the government is determined to reduce welfare dependency through a cap on benefits and a reduction in disability, sickness and out of work benefits (Wood and Grant, 2010). This latter point is crucial: Big Society is a key justificatory discourse for the rolling back of welfare support and benefits.

By drawing on individualism (and individuals' responsibilities to their communities) the state rolls in to our lives, with Big Society offering a cultural narrative that attributes the underlying causes of a 'broken society' to the failings of individuals rather than to socio-economic structural forces (Lister and Bennett 2010). The consequence of this analysis is welfare reform that will 'make work pay'. A shrinking state has been described as a by-product of neoliberalism (Williams, Cloke & Thomas 2012:1480), as the state rolls back (Sothern, 2007). There is already evidence to suggest that these reforms will disproportionately affect disabled people (Roulstone, 2011). This leads us to ask what moments of possibility and/or resistance might there be within Big Society and wider civil society for disabled people with LD?

**Civil society**

For Hardt (2005), civil society is the institutional infrastructure for political mediation and public exchange; made up of ideological, cultural and economic institutions outside of the state. Here the rational order of civil society is contrasted with the irrational disorder of nature and the distinction between civil society and the state are maintained. Civil society has both defensive and forward-looking strategies. Gill (2000) finds moments of radical reconstruction in postmodern civil society on the part of anti-capitalist activists. Gill (2000) takes

things further and suggests that we are in an epoch of ***postmodern civil society*** where a set of conditions, particularly political, material and ecological that are giving rise to new forms of political agency whose defining myths are associated with the quest to ensure human and intergenerational security on and for the planet, as well as democratic human development and human rights (Gill, 2000: 131). Such postmodern politicization is taking place in a global marketplace where supranational organizations such as the World Trade Organisation and The World Bank are engaged in macroeconomic policy making that will minimise democratic policies and institutions in particular economic contexts while opening up new markets for American and Western European corporations. This, for Gill (2000), links to the project of disciplinary neoliberalism - deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation – that will meet specific groups ambitions and, quite simply, bypass other organizations. There are new spaces and capitalist restructuring: a cutback in welfare state and increase in more coercive policing - to establish market selves (Sears, 2005). Goonewardena and Rankin (2004) similarly worry about the bourgeois category of civil society: a context that is not only globalized but also occupied as much by the World Bank as it is by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as voluntary, faith, free press organizations.  This category has been co-opted by an ideology of neoliberalism - so that civil society is an entity that colludes with rolling back the state and getting governments out of our lives and seeking the help of NGOs and free enterprise. In an era of fiscal stringency, social welfare and education have been reduced- creating a crisis of social reproduction felt by the poorest. The question is, of course, how does contemporary social theory imagine new forms of political action and activism, agency and identity and new forms of ethical, democratic organization? And how do these new forms of political action touch upon the lives of disabled people with LD?

In an attempt to imagine new forms of political action, Gill (2000) deploys the mythical and utopian notion of the *postmodern prince*: a signifier that challenges modernist projects (such as the consolidation of the project of globalisation under the role of capital) bringing together activists including indigenous people, farm workers, industrial workers, environmentalists, social justice, students, disabled

people, scientific and political organizations. These inclusive and flexible forms of politics use and refuse the conditions of neoliberalism. For our project of theorizing disability and civil society, then, a critical analysis of the workings of the market and neoliberal ideology is absolutely paramount. However, unlike some theoretical responses (especially Marxist analyses) that reject these dual coupled processes, we are committed to making sense of the ways in which neoliberalism is worked at and with disabled people with LD and their organizations. We are not suggesting that neoliberalism is the correct way of thinking for contemporary society. On the contrary we deplore and detest the elements and impacts of such a worldview. We do, however and not without bitterness, accept that neoliberalism is, frankly, everywhere; whether we like it or not (Sears, 2005). The question remains then: how can disability politics mobilize and maneuver itself in these neoliberal times?

For Jacobs (2000) the discourse of civil society has existed through the development of a semiotic binary that combines inclusion of dominant groups' ambitions alongside the exclusion of aims of a number of minority groups. Civil society is by definition conflicted. Sears (2005) concludes that we need to think again about queer politics in a time of anti capitalist and anti poverty movement; he finds that queer young people, queer women of colour, queer street people and queer people of low income are still suffering. He suggests that many queers have been left out in the cold. In 1998, Chappell made exactly the same point about disabled people with LD. Sears (2005) asks how is queer space commodified and exclusionary to some poor working class queers? A similar question could be asked about civil society: to what extent has it become commodified and exclusionary to disabled people with LD?

One potential area of commodification and exclusion relates to the centrality of work. While understandably many disabled activists have fought for access to a meaningful and well-paid job, this has not transpired for many disabled people with LD who require more interdependent forms of support or for whom work is not a practice they will engage with. The closure of segregated and sheltered housing schemes and workshops – while in line with the commendable ambitions

of inclusive employment activists – have left many disabled people with LD with few to no opportunities to labour, meet with friends and expand their communities. Similarly, the closure of traditional social education centres and adult training centres and the outsourcing, distribution and privatization of these services to small businesses has broken long-established peer groups and prevented a central base from which to meet. This creates a worrying predicament. As Burrington (1998) has argued, marginalisation refers to a restriction from free circulation in the life of a community or public space. This restriction is enacted through processes of silence (no one knows, nor challenges), isolation (individuals become estranged from their communities) and demonization (communities respond negatively and with suspicion to these lone individuals who exist on the periphery of the community).

So where can we find spaces for resistance? For Hardt (2005) in those moments of desiring production, kin work, care work  - in short we need to refashion what we mean by labour: for labour is at the heart of all conceptions of civil society. This view of immaterial labour – developed with Negri later (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004) – evokes the kinds of interdependent connections, support networks, distributed competencies, shared knowledge production found in the disabled multitude (XXXX); the focus of our research project.

**The project**

This paper emerges from the beginnings of a research project *Big Society? Disabled people with LD and Civil Society* (Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1).  The project runs from June 2013 to June 2015 and is a partnership between four universities (Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Sheffield, the University of Bristol and Northumbria University) working with three partner organizations (Speak Up for Action; the Foundation for People with LD and independent living consultants) in the UK.  The overall research question asks: how are disabled people with LD faring in Big Society? The research is being carried out through seven overlapping and interconnected phases as follows:

**Phase 1: Key stakeholder interviews:** interviews with disabled people with LD, members of the third sector, policy makers, lawyers

**Phase 2: Longitudinal documentary analysis:** an extended analysis of academic and policy literature relating to Big Society.

**Phase 3: Ethnographic case studies with co-researchers:** an extended period of ethnographic work with the three partner organisations.

**Phase 4: Analysis:** a period of analysis following the data collection in phases 1,2 and 3.

**Phase 5: Impact workshops:** a series of impact workshops to share our findings and develop analysis and impact.

**Phase 6: Researcher in residence:** a researcher from the project will work with partner organizations to promote knowledge exchange.

**Phase 7: Public Engagement Events**: a series of events to share research findings and increase the impact of the project.

[More details available at: http://bigsocietydis.wordpress.com/]

Ethical clearance has been sought and gained and we are in the early stages of the overlapping phases 1, 2 and 3. This initial empirical work and meetings with research partners and the impact research management group have pushed us to think, together, critically and theoretically about the lives, ambitions and civil society of disabled people with LD.


**Queer(y)ing Big Society**

In our analysis of Big Society we suggest, as we have argued elsewhere (XXXXX), that disability offers a site of contradictions, a 'paradoxical space' (Sothern, 2007: 146) but also a potentially productive space. We have already hinted at the ways in which the disabled body/mind might be thought of as a locus of contradictions in the spaces of Big Society in the ways that it makes problematic notions of active citizenship, social capital and the processes of discipline, control and

normalization at work within Big Society.  In thinking through these ideas further, we seek to queer(y) Big Society.  Following Slater (2013: 19), we use queer 'as a verb: to queer, to make others think differently, to disrupt the status-quo', and we borrow from Gibson-Graham (1999) the term queer(y)ing to describe this process of questioning in order to seek out possibilities and opportunities for change. Our attempt to queer(y) Big Society draws on the insights emerging from crip theory in the field of critical disability studies. Sykes (2009: 247248) has commented that disability studies has 'interrogated what gets counted as a "normal" body, challenging taken-for-granted ideas about mobility, productivity, and even that any body is able across different circumstances and times of life' and so by 'focusing critical analysis and politics on the construction of normative bodies, in this case "able" bodies' similarities emerge between queer theory and crip theory which seek to explore the connections between the social construction of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness' (Sykes, 2009: 247-248).  This has led to the emergence of 'new vocabularies shared between queer theory and crip theory' (Goodley, 2014: xx).

As one of us has recently argued, Goodley (2014), this shared language has taken on particular relevance in a time of global neoliberalism. The neoliberal agenda is dependent on the construction of 'us' and 'them' (Ramlow ????; Runswick-Cole, 2013). The 'us' are those who are judged to be fit, able and rational enough for work; those who fail to meet this ideal are consigned to the category of 'them' with the prospect of little support from the welfare state and social isolation. For Whitney (2006: 40), this lack of community support 'can be exhausting, isolating, and lead to internalized ableism and homophobia'. Given the dominance of global neoliberalism, we might argue, the outlook for queer and crip bodies looks bleak; it appears that a life of exhaustion and isolation is inescapable.  And yet resistance and subversion are readily found in queer and crip spaces (Goodley, 2014). For Sedgwick (1990: 3) sexuality occupies a distinctively privileged relation to the constructs of radicalised identities. While McRuer (2006) has shown that disability has come to occupy a central place in the fight for recognition and citizenship, and, in so doing, disability unsettles narrow conception of what it means to be

fully human. For Namaste (2009: 15) queer theorists focus in on the lives of those who have been excluded from the category of the fully human. To be gay, lesbian, bi or trans is occupy a social position that has historically been considered less than human.

In neoliberal times, we cannot escape the attraction of normative desires and identifications. People with LD are subjected to these desires and processes through numerous tests and assessments that claim to assess their capabilities and capacities at different stages of the life course, from childhood intelligence tests to work readiness and disability benefits assessments in adulthood. Queer theory's commitment to uncertain, fluid, and becoming subjectivities forms a productive alliance with critiques of ableism that disrupt traditional ideas about what passes as 'normal': who is 'us' and 'them'? We see the alliance of crip and queer politics as sharing a political agenda to question the taken-for-granted virtue of the production of self-governing, discrete, enterprising individuals. When a person needs the support of others to eat, sleep, bathe, be mobile, to communicate, to be part of the community and to engage in relationships, this troubles assumed models of citizenship (Goodley, 2014). Our task, according to Meleo-Erwin (2012: 396) is 'to crack open the concept of normal and trouble it in order to see what relations of power it acts in the service of.

### i) Queer(y)ing Active Citizenship

Civil society is often underpinned by the notion of active citizens associating freely in pursuit of liberty and equality (Powell, 2009). The discourse of active citizenship permeates the Big Society narrative; community empowerment, social action and volunteering are dependent on the contribution of active citizens. This rhetoric has touched the lives of disabled people with LD. In 2001, the previous government published *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) and set out the aspiration for disabled people with LD to take power and control over their lives including the care, support and services they receive. The privatisation of services and creation of market choices has given rise to the personalisation of service delivery for

growing numbers of disabled people and increased choice and flexibility (Dowse, 2009) – to become active citizens.

And yet, as the Department of Health's (2012) review of care practices at Winterbourne View, an assessment centre for disabled people with LD, so graphically revealed, disabled people with LD continue to be disciplined within institutions and often have little choice and control in their lives. Such abuse of disabled people with LD has fed the view that the management of risk should be the over riding principle of care in response to the lives of disabled people with LD (Dowse, 2009) thus rendering disabled people with LD in need of constant surveillance and control.

Above all, it is Big Society's requirement that active citizens are independent and productive, within the terms required by neoliberal markets, that renders disabled people with LD problematic citizens. In the labour market, the 'able-body/mind' is often the required norm (Wilton & Schuer, 2006), and as neoliberalism privileges paid work as a marker of citizenship, this has intensified the consequences for those who fail to access the work place (Wilton & Schuer, 2006).

Our aim is to draw on the experiences of disabled people with LD, their interdependencies and their productivity within in their families and communities, to queer(y) concepts of active citizenship that inevitably lead to the categorization of disabled people with LD as 'them'. Take for example, Matt, a young man we met through our research. Matt is 29; he has a house, a mortgage, a job and is active in his local community – all the markers of an ideal neoliberal citizen. Matt lives in his own home with the support of full-time carers; he works for an hour a day five days a week; he has a circle of support[1] which ensures that Matt is included in his local community.  In short, Matt's *independence* is the product of his *interdependencies*. Matt's story troubles individualised concepts of 'active citizenship'

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[1] Add details of circles of support

and exposes the limits and implicit contradictions of a politics of individualism - a point we return to below.

## ii) Queer(y)ing Social Capital

While Big Society valorizes individualism, as we have seen above, it is also premised on the view that Britain is broken because a sense of connectedness between people has been lost. Re-creating a sense of connection between people is seen as a key mechanism to mend Broken Britain and to address issues of political inequality in Big Society. This approach directly draws on social capital theory (Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) describes buildings, plants and equipment as physical capital; people, skills, knowledge and experience as human capital and social networks and norms of trust as social capital (Bates & Davis, 2004: 196). Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding and bridging relationships in which bonding relationships form between people who have a connection or interest in common, while bridging relationships bring diverse individuals and groups of people together (Bates & Davis, 2004).

When disabled people with LD lives are viewed through the lens of social capital theory, it is often argued that they are not faring well. Disabled people are often described as having strong bonding ties with close friends and family members, but that their ability to form bridging ties which bring diverse individuals and groups together, is described as limited. For example, Bates and Davis (2004, cited Robertson et al., 2001) claim that 'perhaps only a third of the people utilizing learning disability services have even one non-disabled friend (p.201). There is an assumption that if disabled people with LD can only fit into the existing bonding and bridging relationships that are seen to build valuable (normative) forms of social capital the community participation will follow. And yet, the experiences of disabled people with LD queer these normative assumptions. Another story from our research illustrates this point:

> *At the end of the [self-advocacy] meeting, Annie tapped me on the shoulder to show me the photographs on her ipad. Annie, who is in her fifties, told me she used to live with her mum but that her mum had died in June last year. At that point, Annie met Angela and Caron, social workers from the Shared Lives Scheme² in the local area. Angela and Caron helped Annie to find a new family. Now Annie lives with Jean and Keith, their teenage daughter and their three doges. Annie showed me some photos with three lovely dogs and her new family (ethnographic field notes from Katherine).*

The close ties Annie has formed with her Shared Lives family are non-normative; the family is not constituted as a result of biological relationships or traditional parent/child roles. Annie's family troubles traditional concepts of bonding and bridging ties that underpin a 'normal' family life and community engagement.

The presence of disability queer(y)s social capital by drawing our attention to the inherent contradictions within Big Society which on the one hand valorizes independence which is, on the other hand, built through the promotion of (normative) bonding and binding relationships that build social capital. Big Society relies on interdependence albeit that such interdependencies are usually premised on abled and normative ties and relationships. We know, though, that the presence of disability promotes new forms and understandings of social, emotional and cultural capital (McKeever and Miller, 2005). Our task is to re-imagine social capital as it is practiced and, therefore, conceptualized in the lives of disabled people with LD.

### iii) Shaping, resisting and queer(y)ing Big Society

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² Shared Lives is a little known alternative to home care and care homes for disabled adults and older people. It is used by around 15,000 people in the UK and is available in nearly every area In Shared Lives, a Shared Lives carer and someone who needs support get to know each other and, if they both feel that they will be able to form a long-term bond, they share family and community life. - See more at: http://www.sharedlivesplus.org.uk/what-is-shared-lives/shared-lives#sthash.PiGQBD2Q.dpuf.

> … the rhetoric of individuality, personal fulfillment and entrepreneurial
> responsibility under which these neoliberal reforms were sold serves to deny
> the particularity and irreducibility of the disabled body thus making disabled
> bodies rhetorically invisible even while their physical and discursive presence
> is fore grounded.  The perversity of this argument is that, in the claim that
> the disabled body 'is just like everyone else', its difference is at once marked
> in relation to the norm (everyone else) that it reproduces even while the
> specificity of its difference is effaced (the political claim of being 'just like').
> (Sothern, 2007: 147)

To meet its aspirations, Big Society demands that we are all active, entrepreneurial
selves and so disability occupies a troubling space within the market place.  At
times, disability is absent, erased by an unswerving adherence to the promise that
market forces alone will eliminate inequality.  Yet, at the same time the disabled
body is manipulated for profit by the pharmaceutical trade (Sothern, 2007), the
commodification of disability (Runswick Cole and Mallett, 2012) and the
psychological industry (Goodley and Lawthom, 2005).

It seems as if neoliberalism, with which Big Society allies itself, has emerged as a
monolithic force 'out there' effortlessly reproducing itself (Williams, Cloke and
Thomas, 2012), and as a result opportunities to shape, to resist and to queer(y)
seem unattainable and out of reach.  However, the paradox of disability offers the
potential to destabilise neoliberalism and to see instead the ways in which it is
fabricated, co-constituted and contingent on a range of assemblages and alliances
(Williams, Cloke and Thomas (2012). Disability creates a space to queer(y) Big
Society by exposing the limits and contradictions its 'normative constructions'
(Sothern, 2007: 157).

Williams, Cloke and Thomas (2012: 1486) argue that it is possible to engage in
'little processes of revision, refusal and resistance' and they urge third sector
organizations, and we might include organizations of disabled people with LD, to
present themselves as 'professional' and 'fit partners' to the Big Society ideal,

while maintaining 'alternative values and practices 'on the ground' that retain a capacity for performative subversions of official government strategies' (ibid). Such resistance must be premised on the belief that 'disability is not a failure to achieve normal humanity (Linton, 1998). Rather, disability is a positive identity that demands respect and a political-economic and cultural symbolic reckoning with difference' (Sothern, 2007: 148). It is imperative that we attend to the ways in which disabled people with LD, like Matt and Annie, are using, refusing and shaping Big Society.

## Conclusion: Towards a crip civil society

In this paper, we suggest that disability offers a paradoxical and productive space in which to expose the limits and contradictions of the individualism that underpins Big Society. Disability allows us to queer(y) the assumptions of ableist normativity upon which Big Society is premised (XXXXX). We suggest that through little processes of refusal, revision and resistance it may be possible to destablise the seemingly monolithic pressures of neoliberalism and that organizations of disabled people, as civil society actors, may be able to find the spaces to do just that. To queer is not to find an end state or to replace one hegemony with another, but to continue to question, and destabilize assumptions that marginalize, and exclude bodies and minds that are judged to fail to meet the expectations of ableist normativity.

Undoubtedly, disabled people and those close to them are facing a newly defined form of marginalization. This will have huge material impacts (finance, work, infrastructure). As importantly, the cuts in welfare threaten the idealist or cultural centres of disabled people's communities (arts, belief, counter-hegemonies). The cuts risk promoting infighting amongst disabled people's groups as they search for ever reduced funds to survive. We will witness a potential reduction of disability arts – the heartland of the creative industries of disability politics – as fewer and fewer funds are distributed to artists because the economic cupboards are bare. Furthermore, we will continue to witness within disability studies research an antipathy to new forms of theoretical work as we associate scholarship with

irrelevance in these difficult material times (see for example Sheldon, 2014). However, we believe that theory can help us to create opportunities for the urgent acts of refusal, revision and resistance needed to bring people in from the cold.

As the community, political and social lives of us all 'are continually generating a multitude of ways of being queer and crip and of coming together' (McRuer, 2012: 1) we need to ask, as a matter of urgency, are we now entering a time of crip civil society? In asking this question we are reminded of McRuer's (2006: 154) carefully considered questions 'who haunts the margins of the work that we do, the margins of the feminist, queer, and disabled worlds? What would an ongoing commitment to those spectral presences entail?'. We know that neoliberalism produces greater inequities but we wonder how it can be used and refused in ways that promote resistance and agitation. We must continue to ask: can we do something with what Power (2005) terms the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions of neoliberalism? Furthermore, what 'counter-tendencies' are produced by neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). We need to consider the imaginative ways in which neoliberalism is being appropriated and exploited. Too often disabled people with LD are left to occupy the borderlands of disability studies – now is the time for them to re-enter the fray in a new epoch of crip civil society.

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