Vulnerability in action: The role of the disabled body in shaping geographies of protest.

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Abstract

Protest has been a long-held concern of geographers who have examined the socio-spatial practices of activists and social movements. Yet, within this corpus of work, limited attention has been paid to the role and experience of the body among those involved in protest. Drawing on a study focusing on the experiences of disabled activists organising in response to austerity in the UK, the paper examines the use of the individual body in activism and explores how disabled people use their bodies for social change in a way that seeks to turn corporeal vulnerability into a site of defiant resistance. While vulnerability is often seen as anathema to direct-action protest, the study reveals that vulnerability can be a fundamental and inherent element of activism. The paper seeks to challenge the implicitly ableist and masculinist accounts of activism persisting in some geographic scholarship and calls for greater attention to be paid to more inclusive spaces for different embodiments.

Keywords: protest; embodiment; austerity; activism; disability.

Introduction

In its broadest terms, protest can be defined as an expression of dissent or discontent (Fox & Bell, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, protest is defined more narrowly as a public demonstration, direct action or strike. Protest has been the subject of much geographic enquiry, particularly within Marxist scholarship, typically presented as a public, 'spectacular' and antagonistic practice (see Harvey 2013; Mitchell, 2013). Protests have traditionally been regarded as high intensity and fast-paced (Routledge, 2019), relying upon numerous bodies occupying and moving through space in tandem. The ideal activist has been conceived as a mobile person (most likely that of a young, non-disabled man), who can respond quickly and defiantly to changing demands (Coleman and Bassi, 2011).

It has been extensively documented that austerity has brought about great hardship to the lives of disabled people, through reduced social care, health and public sector spending, along with increased conditionality and curtailment of disability and social welfare benefits (Cross, 2013; UNCRPD, 2016). Hande (2019) argues that austerity (and its links to poor resourcing and rapid privatisation of public services and housing) has led to an exponential growth of disablement, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, addiction and other forms of 'mental illness'. Austerity has brought significant social and economic impacts for disabled people and a regression of their rights (UNCRPD, 2016). Cuts to public expenditure have, for example, impacted upon disabled people's right to live independently, to work, and achieve an adequate standard of living (Cross, 2013; Power & Bartlett, 2015). These cuts have also been accompanied by a growth in media discourse around disability benefit fraud and a consequent rise in disability hate crime, impacting upon disabled people's everyday movements and mobility (Edwards & Maxwell, 2021). In 2016, the UN Committee on the rights of Persons with Disabilities found that austerity measures in the UK had brought about grave and systematic violations of disabled people's human rights (UNCRPD, 2016). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that we have seen various forms of (disability) protest in response to austerity measures over the past decade.

Geographers have engaged extensively with austerity politics and the everyday lived realities (Hall, 2018; Lowe & DeVerteuil, 2020; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). However, disabled people's protest in response to austerity has largely been overlooked within the field of geography or geographical analyses to date. Exceptions to this include Trevisan (2014) and Wagg's (2016) analyses of protests held between 2011-12 against the conduct of UK welfare benefit assessments, and Humphry (2023) who explores the activist strategies of the UK disabled people's anti-austerity protest group 'Disabled People Against Cuts' (DPAC). Humphry (2023) notes that DPAC's protests have been about reclaiming and transforming urban space, a key site of disabled people's exclusion. Meanwhile, Hande (2019) explores how poor and disabled people seek to challenge urban gentrification and precarity in Toronto and produce a disability consciousness at the frontlines of radical urban struggles. More broadly, this work explores the unique role of the disabled body in disability protest where individuals simultaneously exploit and challenge their designation as 'victim'.

This small body of work inherently explores disability protest through a spatial lens, looking at the interrelationships between people, place, and environment. This paper builds upon this body of literature, along with previous writing by the first author (Butler-Rees, 2023; Butler-Rees & Hadley, 2022) to explore how disabled people are organising and choreographing protest in response to austerity, drawing upon their bodies as an effective conduit for their actions.

Both the social geographies of protest and social movement studies have generally failed to take account of disabled people's political struggles. Disabled people have a long and varied history of direct action internationally, such as the National League for the Blind marches of the 1920s and 1930s (Kaczman, n.d.), accessible transport protests of the 1970-1990s led by ADAPT in the US (Shugerman & Wilts, 2017), Direct Action Network (DAN) in the UK (Moore, 2023) and echoed in places further afield such as Japan (Forui et al., 2008). At times this has involved the occupation of government buildings, for example, the more recent 2018 occupation of the Polish Parliament to demand greater social welfare for disabled people (Pamula and Szarota, 2023). Further high-profile actions where disabled people have put their bodies on the line also include the 1990-1992 British telethon protests (Lawri, 2020) and the 1990 Capitol Crawl (Carmel, 2020): all of which have challenged stereotypical images of disability and notions of able-bodied heteronormative masculinity in spaces of protest.

These actions have been informed by a long and varied history of disability studies which has examined the discrimination and oppression of disabled people. Withers (2012) traces the various ways through which disability has been conceptualised from the late nineteenth century to more recent times, including different models of disability, eugenics, rehabilitation, charity, rights and social justice. One notable feature across this conceptual engagement has been that a unified disability consciousness has never been realised, or in the ways in which scholarship purports it has (Hande, 2019). Nonetheless, three broad conceptual strands are evident.

First, the politically-inspired 'social model' of disability (Oliver, 1990) provided a clear distinction between (bodily) impairment and (socio-spatial) disability, which proved to be a powerful tool in the reconceptualization and politicization of disability. This sparked a long running debate regarding whether to highlight individual impairment as part of protest - as a means of calling for greater resources and state protection. Historically, founding members of the Disabled People's Movement and pioneers of the social model of disability (UPIAS, 1974) have been reluctant to acknowledge impairment and bodily constraints, in fear that emphasising impairment could weaken the collective strength of the movement and advocate for a return to more paternalistic and charitable forms of care. Further, by turning attention back to the body, there were fears this could diminish efforts to reduce disabling barriers and risk re-introducing what Oliver (1990: 78) called the 'personal tragedy theory' of disability.

Second, a relational turn emerged within critical disability studies, building on feminist disability studies (Morris 1996; Crow 2010), medical sociology (Thomas, 1999) and elsewhere. The differentiation between the sociological construct of disability and the physiological construct of

impairment was argued to have become a rigid ideology which had served to overlook aspects of lived experience relating to the body and impairment (e.g., pain, fatigue, depression, chronic illness). Further, this distinction had served to overlook the ways in which the personal is inherently political. This gave rise to a social relational model of disability, which has sought to acknowledge that both impairment and psycho-emotional and material oppression mutually shape the experience of disability.

A third strand has been concerned with 'cripping' the 'able-body', in an effort to unsettle how ability is privileged in ways that reproduce the oppression of the disabled 'other'. First conceived of by McRuer (2006) and expanded since (see Hall & Wilton, 2017), 'Crip Theory', has sought to resist the contemporary spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity by generating new visions of the body, desire, and community, which challenge and move beyond attempts to curb, contain and manage it. Crip theory has involved bringing the disabled body (including all its differences and 'abnormalities') to the forefront, exploring how 'compulsory able-bodiedness generates sites of containment, where disability [is] managed, contained, kept quiet.' (Peers et al., 2012: 148-9).

Echoing this call to recognise the physicality of the disabled body alongside societal constraints and norms governing disabled bodies, this paper brings the disabled body to the forefront of discussion. Drawing upon these theoretical contributions it takes a social relational approach towards the study of disability, seeing it as the culmination of both social and environmental factors and impairment effects (i.e., embodied experiences of pain and functional limitations).

Despite the flourishing academic fields of disability and 'crip' studies, relatively little academic research in the field of geography has explored disabled people's role as political actors, nor brought insights from disability/crip studies into conversation with work on protest in geography. Exceptions include Chouinard (1999) and Kitchin and Wilton (2003) who have explored the scaling up of disability movements in Canada and Ireland. Scholars from outside the field of geography have also at times engaged with a geographical/spatial analysis of disability activism (e.g Serlin, 2010; Humpry, 2023), as explored later. Within the broader social movement literature, there has been an enduring narrow reading of the political space of protest, as a primarily masculine able-bodied domain (Mitchell, 2013; Harvey 2013; Lange and Kiguwa, 2013) as has been echoed by feminist scholars (Hafez, 2015; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003). As such, very little geographical nor social movement research has focused on disabled people's political engagement in this space.

To address this omission, the paper draws on an empirical study exploring the experiences of disabled people involved in direct-action protest against austerity welfare reforms in the UK. The following research questions guided the exploration in this paper: what forms and spaces of

disability protest are emerging and adapting in the context of austerity and what motivating factors and experiences have encouraged individuals to become involved in disability activism?

This question sits within a larger doctoral study by the lead author. Through undertaking the research, the theme of vulnerability as a feature of protest came to the fore, resonating with the work of Butler (2016), which we build upon in the paper. The study involved participant observation at various public activist gatherings, meetings and events in the UK, along with biographical interviews with disabled activists. In the study, participants self-identified with the 'activist' label in different ways and were encouraged to tell their own story of what the term meant to them.

Political Space and the Activist Subject

The public and political space of protest has long been portrayed as one occupied by men, in which they may use their bodies to demonstrate power, strength and defiance (Coleman and Bassi, 2011; Langa and Kiguwa, 2013). For example, the Arab Spring (Fedele, 2016) and the 'Umbrella movement' for democracy in Hong Kong (Ho et al, 2018) are portrayed largely as spaces occupied by men and as choreographed performances of masculinity (Athanasiou, 2014). While the Suffragette movement, Reclaim the Streets and the Black Lives Matter protests serve as moments which have challenged this account, feminist geographers have long argued that the public sphere is widely perceived as a masculine domain, that has not been open to other bodies such as those of women (Siwach, 2020; Staeheli, 1996), children (Carroll et al., 2019; McKendrick et al., 2020), Black people (McCann, 1999, Hoover & Lim, 2021) or sexual minorities (Hubbard, 2001; Oswin, 2008). Consequently, when women and other minorities do take to the streets, they are often met with a different response – their actions overlooked or belittled and their demands ignored (Craddock, 2017). Disabled people have similarly frequently been excluded from participating in public forms of political action, due to various social, cultural and environmental barriers along with stigma (Gaete-Reyes, 2015; Imrie, 1996). We acknowledge though that disabled people themselves occupy different levels of privilege and intersectional forms of oppression. Gorman (2013, cited in Hande, 2019: 6) argues that disability studies has largely focused on ahistorical "white, middle-class narratives" of disability pride and empowerment, while abstracting poor, racialised bodies that become disabled through violent social relations.

This failure to engage with different bodies is arguably a symptom of the tendency within radical and Marxist geographies to focus on the collective body rather than that of the individual bodies which make up this mass (Hohle, 2009). There has been a failure to recognise the different ways in which individual bodies may occupy and engage in sites of protest. For some bodies (e.g., sick, frail or disabled), engaging in protest, which typically consists of energy-intensive activities such as shouting,

chanting, engaging in speeches, marching/walking, holding banners and standing ground, can be a difficult if not a near-impossible endeavour.

The body serves as a central part of protest and direct action; traditional conceptions of activism conjure up images of people taking their bodies 'to the street' in protest. However, the body has largely been neglected within analyses of protest and collective action in geography and social movement studies. As a result, scholarship in these fields has largely focused on the political actions of those who are able-bodied, mobile and often male. Such individuals are often conceptualised as 'all-powerful'. We, therefore, want to think about how individual bodies matter in protest movements. Serlin (2010) for example, analyses disabled people's occupation of federal offices in San Francisco during the 1970s, challenging the lack of accessible toilets. She discusses how the mere presence of their bodies in this space served as symbolic and material evidence of disabled people's exclusion from the public sphere. Humphry (2023) similarly recounts how DPAC's occupied the Department of Work and Pensions, used their positionality as disabled people to secure various advantages, demanding that they must leave through the main entrance due to other entrances being inaccessible. Consequently, the group exited the building straight into the media spotlight. While neither Serlin (2010) nor Humphry (2023)'s analyses are situated squarely within the field of geography, they discuss the myriad ways through which disabled people have sought to claim space and reappropriate public spaces and power relations through protest.

There has been little consideration as to how the very act of 'taking to the streets' may already be an act of privilege, with public spaces of activism not always being accessible or open to all. Mitchell (2013) has highlighted how the right to protest in public space is being curtailed, emphasising how the geographic governance and privatisation of space has restricted protest, but there has been little consideration of how the corporeal may serve as a barrier.

Resistance has traditionally been associated with masculine concepts of power, strength and defiance while being distanced from notions of vulnerability. Similarities can be seen here with scholarship on urban exploration, whereby discourses 'emphasize masculinity, fearlessness and physical strength, reinforcing older ideas about what sorts of bodies belong to explorer-subjects [and which do not]' (Mott and Roberts, 2014: 234-5). Vulnerability has rarely been understood as a feature of resistance. Instead, vulnerability has been conceptualised as a form of passivity, victimisation and the need for protection and support (Butler, 2016; Yeo, 2020). Butler (2016) argues that these commonplace understandings have led to the theoretical positioning of resistance as a site of activity and agency while vulnerability is placed as that of inaction. Through drawing upon these wider debates around the politics of vulnerability, this paper hopes to build upon the

scholarship of Judith Butler (2016) to dismantle the vulnerability/resistance dichotomy, through emphasising the numerous ways in which vulnerability might be mobilised, re-appropriated and utilised in disability activism.

Particular bodies are often presumed to be 'vulnerable' such as those of women (Ahiska, 2016), children (Brown, 2015) and disabled people (Slater, 2012). Disabled bodies may experience impairments and bodily constraints, however vulnerability as a social construct is only brought about through societal relations, hierarchies and structures. Morris (2011) discusses some of the issues associated with use of the phrase 'the vulnerable'. Within social policy, the word 'vulnerable' has increasingly been used to distinguish between those who are 'deserving' of state support (i.e., those who are 'really' disabled/sick) and those whose 'welfare dependency' is seen as a problem. Resources have therefore been targeted at the 'most vulnerable' while encouraging individual responsibility and 'independence' amongst the remaining others, often through the narrowing of welfare eligibility criteria. Titchkosky (2003) has further cautioned that use of the phrase 'the vulnerable' can serve to overlook structural inequalities and social relations, presenting it instead as the outcome of individual fates. The labelling of certain social groups as 'vulnerable' can thus serve to undermine their collective resistance and autonomy (Brown et al., 2017; Butler, 2016). As Fineman (2012: 84-85) notes, "[t]hose who are… herded together in designated 'vulnerable populations' are susceptible to monitoring, discipline, and supervision", often serving as a means of silencing and withholding agency.

Butler (2004; 2016) advocates for a move away from viewing vulnerability as simply indicative of certain population groups, contending that vulnerability is rather a shared universal human condition (i.e., we are all interdependent and vulnerable due to our human bodies being dependent on one another):

> I am insisting on referring to a common vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself… (Butler, 2004: 31–32)

Butler (2004) contends that bodies do not have an independent existence; they only exist under specific conditions that make them recognisable as human. Humans are susceptible to violence not just as physical entities that can be injured, but also because their existence depends on their formation within a social and political context, shaped by their interactions with other bodies. Butler (2004) therefore understands the human body as less of an entity than a relation:

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence (Butler, 2004: 26)

Butler (2004; 2016) revisits earlier ideas of gender as performative to emphasise her main point: when the body is both performative and relational, bodily vulnerability cannot be understood apart from social and material conditions (a concept embraced by disability theory and studies). Power structures such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and imperialism create hierarchical societies that dehumanise certain groups, disproportionately exposing them to harm - labeling some lives as disposable, unlivable, and ungrievable. At the same time, these structures protect privileged groups from danger. Butler (2004; 2016) focuses on these structural power relations and embodied differences, viewing vulnerability as a tool for governing populations.

Within this article we will draw upon the concept of 'corporeal vulnerability' to explore how some bodies are designated vulnerable and exposed to greater risk of harm because of socio-political structures, including e.g., societal responses to impairment and difference. We also make clear how vulnerability can be used as a political resource, as noted by de Beco (2021: 81), the dilemma is that '[h]ighlighting particular forms of embodiment may result in losing sight of vulnerability as a universal experience, but not doing so could lead to real needs being ignored'. Socially disadvantaged groups, like disabled people, become vulnerable when they must rely on paternalistic institutions for care and protection. The crux of this paper is therefore on how disability activists address vulnerability under neoliberal austerity, through political acts of resistance. In doing so, the authors urge readers to view vulnerability as more than solely that of the opposite of resistance.

The above section has sought to highlight the barriers different bodies face in accessing public spaces of protest, along with how vulnerability has often been seen in opposition to resistance. Our focus seeks to expand on this work by examining how disability activists in the UK have sought to challenge reductions in public services and welfare spending in the context of austerity and consider how the body is used and experienced within protest.

Methods

A qualitative, mixed-methods approach was taken towards this research, which consisted of participant observation at various activist gatherings and biographical interviews with disability activists. Together, these methods enabled a greater understanding of the reasons why individuals became involved in activism and the various forms of resistance they were engaging in. Our methodological approach was informed by an interpretivist lens to place a greater focus upon the participant's individual understandings and experiences of engaging in activism (Milligan et al., 2011; Svašek and Domecka, 2012).

Biographical interviews provide a way of shedding light on hidden, marginalised and/or 'silenced' lives (Goodson, 2001). Following ethical approval from University of XXX, a type of purposive, non-

probability sampling was used for the interviews. The sample comprised of those who self-identified as disabled and as engaging in anti-austerity disability activism. The fieldwork was conducted by the lead author (a visually impaired PhD researcher) and was supported by the second author (PhD adviser).

While the research does not claim to be representative, efforts were made to engage participants from a variety of backgrounds, age groups, geographical locations and disabilities. It is however of note that a large proportion of the accounts engaged with in this paper include those of people with physical disabilities given the paper's focus on navigating bodily vulnerability and im/mobility as part of disability protest. Similarly, while the first author sought to engage participants from across different racial backgrounds, unfortunately the final sample was exclusively white.

A total of twenty-seven biographical interviews were conducted, with the occasional follow-up interview for points of clarification. Interview length varied greatly, with the average taking approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to preserve participants' anonymity. Participants were given the option of being named in resulting publications and reports, in the form of a consent form. However, all those whose accounts are discussed in this paper - except for Liz, wished to remain anonymous.

Participant observation was conducted at nine street protests and demonstrations between October 2016 – April 2018. The extracts from fieldnotes presented in this paper are written in the first person, corresponding with the lead author's experiences. An opportunistic approach was taken towards the choice of events through a form of snowballing. The first author sought to attend a variety of events which captured the diversity of disability activist engagements. Interviewees also frequently informed the first author of events taking place. Experiences were recorded by taking photographs and fieldnotes. Ethical considerations included ensuring that the researcher was transparent with their intentions in participating in these events (i.e., informing organisers when deemed appropriate), removed oneself from situations of conflict and did not collect any identifiable information about individuals partaking in such events. In line with ethical approval, faces were blurred from photographs taken during activist events, where consent had not been granted for their use, through a photo consent form.

The principles of narrative and thematic analysis informed the analysis of interviews and fieldnotes. Narrative analysis was valuable in initially analysing life stories - enabling an understanding of how life stories are told and constructed, along with how they may be associated with social structures (McCormack, 2004). Thematic analysis was subsequently utilised to explore emerging themes. These

approaches in combination, helped to capture the overarching themes, while also being mindful of the nuanced accounts that demonstrate the complexity of individuals' lives.

Findings and Discussion

The disabled body: playing with notions of vulnerability

Through engaging in protest and direct action, participants reflected on the role of their body in protest, and how this intersected with perceptions of themselves as disabled people. Liz for example remembered a 1980s protest around disability welfare that she had participated in, that had been coordinated by disability charities and organisations (which were largely run by non-disabled individuals). The intention of the organisations was that the protest would be a relatively short and uncontroversial event, highlighting some of the issues being faced by disabled people. However, the protesters soon took control of the situation by sitting down in the middle of the roundabout near the then Department of Health and Social Security and refusing to move, to demonstrate that they were frustrated with being controlled and told what to do. They sought to articulate their agency and autonomy as independent political actors by putting forward an alternative, autonomous, and courageous body. Liz continues:

> … We stayed there, and it was really quite effective and the police didn't have any idea what to do with us, because they'd never come across disabled people doing that sort of thing before. They didn't know what to do in relation to our bodies back then, so we were able to do more with activism than a lot of non-disabled people.

Police officers were unsure of how to approach and breach disabled bodies like Liz's, giving them more time and freedom to perform their message. It provided activists with a sense of control and power, as Liz went on to explain:

> It was just this sense of us coming together that was quite magical and powerful, that refusing to move… and realising it was ours [disabled people in a position of power and 'owning' public space], probably for the first time, was really quite significant.

Similar practices can be observed within more recent disability protests in response to austerity, with wheelchair users often commanded to the forefront of protests due to police and enforcement officers often being unsure of how to approach the disabled body without inflicting harm. However, where disability protest of the 1980s and 1990s (as outlined by Liz) was about presenting a courageous identity and of being able to take over public space despite impairment, participants' accounts revealed a greater emphasis on highlighting one's impairment as part of anti-austerity protest to remind both the government and the media of the injustice brought about by austerity

measures. Vulnerability can therefore be either underplayed or exaggerated and used as a political tool (Butler, 2016).

This practice of placing 'vulnerable' bodies at the front and centre of disability protests can be observed within the following photograph, whereby wheelchair users (as emblematic of 'vulnerable' bodies) are found at the forefront of protest:

Figure 1: Photograph of protestors in wheelchairs gathered in a circle in the central lobby of the House of Commons during a protest against the closure of the ILF prior to the blockading of the chamber door, Westminster 19th July 2017. Source: author.

The imagery of protests whereby wheelchair and mobility scooter users are at the forefront of collective action is tactical, designed for mass media dissemination and increased visibility, with vulnerable and taboo bodies being placed at the centre (Tyler, 2013). Alex who is a wheelchair user in her early 40s noted that she often played with the notion of vulnerability as part of her engagement in disability protest and direct action:

> Blagging my way into buildings and things is one of my little skills... when you're a disabled person it just throws people, doesn't it? They all do that whole, I don't know what to do thing. So basically, whatever you say, they believe you. That's my tip for life. That prejudice, it causes us so much harm but if you know how to use it on a protest, it can be really helpful (laughs).

Alex attests to how she can challenge common perceptions of disabled people through her engagement in protest. While disabled people are not necessarily inherently vulnerable, Alex notes that she and others, actively choose to play on their perceived vulnerability for a strategic reason (e.g., to challenge the government's harsh workfare politics). This echoes Humphry (2023) observations of how disability activists may often draw upon their disabled bodies to secure various advantages in protest. This practice should therefore be recognised as agential with activists re-appropriating (or as Alex attests – weaponising) their bodies and stigma, as part of their activism (Butler, 2016).

The findings show how the disabled body can be actively mobilised and placed at the centre of direct-action protest. Participants' accounts of their activism reveal how the visibility of their disabled bodies is an act of defiance, a refusal to be hidden away, marginalised or silenced. And yet, through this, the participants engaged with ideas of vulnerability, either implicitly or explicitly, through their activism. Driven by the urgency and desperation of disabled people's experiences of austerity, the activists engaged in public forms of protest that often drew creatively upon their individual 'vulnerable' disabled bodies to convey their message. In many participants' accounts, it was felt that through re-appropriating and playing with notions of corporeal vulnerability as part of their protest, greater public visibility, understanding and support could be acquired. Through displaying what is often deemed the archetypical vulnerable body, participants felt that it helped them illustrate that government cuts to social welfare were unjust, impacting upon some of the most disempowered members in society, thereby conforming to what Melanie termed as 'the ideal disabled person – passive, submissive and dependent'. Given our sample was exclusively/primarily? white though, we acknowledge that not all disabled protestors are likely to be treated similarly by police (in all places). Some reports of protests, for example (e.g. Trumpcare protests in Washington D.C.), reveal police dragging disabled people out of their wheelchairs.

The scholarship of Butler (2016) helps highlight the need for new forms of collective agency, which do not deny vulnerability as a resource. This holds particular relevance to our paper, whereby vulnerability could be conceived as a political tool to help engender social change. Similarly, Kim (2014) in observing a crawling protest conducted by physically disabled activists in Seoul, notes how vulnerability can be utilised as a political tool to accompany a claim for social justice and human rights.

The Protesting Disabled Body

Rebecca and other participants saw direct-action protest as an important means through which disabled people could use their bodies to visibly express their objection to austerity policies and reforms:

> It's all about "We're still protecting the support of those who are most vulnerable" and when you've got people who look the stereotype of most vulnerable in wheelchairs out there campaigning then that's kind of visibly showing [this is not the case].

The disabled body in this instance is instrumental in carrying the political message of vulnerability and the right to a liveable life. This was further illustrated through the five disability protests the lead author attended in London from July 2017 to April 2018. During these protests, wheelchair users and those reliant upon walking aids and/or mobility scooters were prominent, taking a position at the forefront of protest. Their bodies here became central to their argument, in terms of demanding their treatment as full and equal citizens. Individuals sought to challenge the common misrepresentation and public perception of disabled people as passive and agentless. Protestors decorated their wheelchairs and scooters (as extensions of their bodies) with banners, badges, stickers and placards.

Connections can be made here to literature on the potential of the body to serve as an arena for resistance and self-expression (Carroll and Anderson, 2002). The body can be utilised as a space to protest normative codes and hegemonic identities (Tyler, 2013). Little research has however explored how mobility aids, technological or assistive equipment can be personalised and used to further articulate one's identity, beliefs or values. Methods such as using markers of disability – the wheelchair, cane or walking aid – as props for demonstrating vulnerability and as canvases for publicising personal stories were deemed particularly helpful in creating images that puncture norms determining which bodies are 'in place' (Kitchin, 1998; McRuer, 2006) and in attracting widespread voyeuristic media attention. Through occupying this space, disabled people were visibly articulating and performing their vulnerability as a right to equally occupy public space and be included within society.

Importantly, not every participant had a visible disability. Some activists with poor mental health, learning disabilities and/or other invisible disabilities noted that they often felt uneasy and 'out of place' (Kitchin, 1998) occupying spaces of disability protest, fearful of how the public may perceive them, particularly at a time when narratives of benefit fraud are rife. Simon for example noted that he was often confronted during protests by members of the public, due to not looking visibly disabled:

> You saw it on that [protest against CAPITA 21st July 2017, London] … when that bloke came up to me and he said to me, you're not disabled. But my disability is invisible. I have anxiety and depression, so I look like I'm healthy and strong but I'm not.

The man that Simon refers to here physically confronted him during the protest and sought to take his banner from him. Simon felt upset and infuriated because of this encounter. Such instances of prejudice were not uncommon with the lead author receiving several comments from members of the public during protests such as 'You look normal so what's your problem?' (14th July 2017, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park). It is not uncommon for activists to develop strategies to manage this prejudice, as illustrated in an observation from a protest against the closure of the Independent Living Fund in and around the House of Commons on 19th July 2017:

> I walk alongside one of the young female activists whom I had met previously. She is very excited and jumps onto the back of her 'walker' and glides down the slope in excitement to the security area. I talk to her once we are in the queue inside the foyer and she explains to me that "I am going to sign to you. I know you won't understand it but if I don't, they'll [security and police] think I'm a scrounger or faking it?". This was a practice which she said she adopted regularly.

The above accounts demonstrate the difficulty of campaigning and occupying spaces of disability protest as an individual with an invisible disability. They also raise questions around who is perceived as having the right to represent or speak on behalf of disabled people. Many were found to be engaging in practices that might be understood as 'inverse passing'. With the continuous circulation of media discourses such as 'scrounger', 'skiver' and 'shirker', there is an ongoing fear amongst activists (particularly those with invisible impairments) that they will be deemed inauthentic or 'faking it'. Appearing too 'able' was seen by some activists as having the potential to undermine their argument i.e., their call for welfare and support. To feel more comfortable and gain a sense of belonging/being 'in place' (Kitchin, 1998; Edwards & Maxwell 2021), some activists adopted strategies such as wearing t-shirts or clothing which indicated that they had an invisible disability, as seen in figure 2.

Figure 2: Photograph of invisible disability t-shirt at a protest against the closure of the ILF, Westminster 19th July 2017. Source: author.

While 'passing' or concealment in disability studies has been used to refer to practices which disabled people engage in, to be seen as 'normal' and undifferentiated from non-disabled others (Edwards & Maxwell, 2021; Southwell, 2012), within the findings we can see practices through which individuals conversely, actively seek to be recognised or emphasise their disability in order to 'fit in' to the disability activist community and strengthen their advocacy. The welfare benefits system has created a system where disabled people are having to demonstrate and highlight their weaknesses and vulnerability rather than their strengths, for fear of being deemed ineligible for support (Burke and Crow, 2017). This performativity thus extends to the streets.

While performing vulnerability was a key strategy of disabled activists, the participants talked about the delicate balance between this performance and the need to create supportive spaces to accommodate disabled bodies, which we turn to next.

'We sit, stand and roll with them in solidarity'[1]: How participation in direct action is shaped by individual bodies

Mobility impairments along with inaccessible transport, urban infrastructure (Waitt et al., 2024), and a lack of financial resources, meant that it was physically difficult for many disabled people to arrive at a space of protest, let alone participate - a finding echoed by Humphry (2023). Participants' accounts revealed how they were proactive in seeking to adapt such actions and spaces to accommodate for a wide variety of bodies and bodily capacities – often acknowledging the fragility and vulnerability of bodies in the design and orchestration of protest. The health conditions and disabilities of activists meant they often required equipment when protesting e.g., foldable camping chairs, accessible taxis/buses to get them to and from places. Some also required supporters or allies to help them while travelling and demonstrating e.g., guiding individuals, providing sign language interpretation or acting as a walking support. Tasks which may be easy for non-disabled protesters such as arranging or setting-up the site and creating protest banners would often take substantially longer for disabled protestors. Activists' disabilities were one of the main challenges that defined their forms of protest, with it being hard to convey how physically difficult it was for some individuals to attend such events. At times this meant slowing down the overall pace of a protest (despite the general resistance towards slowness in activism), to enable the full inclusion of protestors regardless of their bodily capacities (see Genz, 2016 on 'retiree rebels' and Evans et al, 2024 on 'crip time'). Protests would often be of a static nature (rather than consisting of a march from one location to another), allowing space for individuals to sit-down (when needed) and take regular breaks. In adapting such spaces of protest to cater for a variety of bodies - bodily vulnerability and impairment could be used as a resource in one's activism.

The consequences of a protest space not being accessible became evident in one which took place against the removal of guards from trains outside the Department for Transport's headquarters in London on 20th July 2017. Due to the limited available space outside the Department for Transport, there was not sufficient space for disability activists to sit down. As a result, some activists became frustrated and distressed, due to having difficulty in standing up for long periods of time. One woman, Rosalie, had to ask others to support her to stay upright, as she was beginning to wobble and gradually losing the ability to hold herself. Eventually, a place was located for her to sit down, however she was clearly in some pain. She told me that her usual strategy was to arrive late at protests, to avoid having to stand for long periods of time. Through the above, we can see how

[1] Anonymous disability activist quoted during a protest against disability welfare cuts, outside the World Para Athletics, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London 14th July 2017.

difficult it can be for some disabled people to occupy spaces of protest without appropriate adaptions.

While this performativity was an important strategy, the physical experiences of tiredness, pain and discomfort were expressed as real concerns. Protest therefore makes people additionally vulnerable; individuals open themselves up to violence, physical pain, hostility and abuse (as was seen during some of the protests). Resistance can therefore never be fully removed or distanced from notions of vulnerability. It should however be recognised that some groups are likely to be more vulnerable in their acts of resistance than others because of their intersectional identities (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class), bodily capacities and various societal structures. This can shape the spaces and capacities of individuals to resist. Vulnerability is not, therefore, to be understood as a condition which is equally inherent within individuals. Conversely, it should be acknowledged that certain marginalised groups may tactically play with and re-appropriate notions of vulnerability as part of their protest. It also highlights the ways through which the individual body is supported by the wider activist body (Crow, 1996), serving as a metaphorical example of how solidarity is enacted amongst disability activists within the space of a protest.

Having additional individuals at protest events to provide physical and emotional support was essential. Scholars from disability and crip (Gibson et al., 2012; Naude et al., 2022; Power, 2016), feminist and queer theory (Daly, 2021; Petherbridge, 2016) have critiqued notions of individual autonomy, noting how we are all interdependent upon one another for our livelihoods and survival (Watson et al., 2004). Gibson et al (2012) and Waitt et al (2024) note that this conceptualisation can also be extended to consider disabled people's interconnectedness with assistive technologies and mobility aids. Through this understanding, disabled people can be imagined as assemblages of bodies/technologies/subjectivities that together can enable self-determination. Further, interdependence highlights how disabled people may simultaneously receive and provide support to one another, establishing reciprocal relationships and mutual aid (Pipzna-Smarasinha, 2018).

Drawing upon notions of interdependency, non-disabled allies were particularly valued by protest groups, not just for their ability to provide physical support but also to increase the visibility of protests, as Rebecca notes:

> Because we know that we can't get disabled people out in large numbers it's very important to have those alliances with other groups that can come as well.

There were attempts to establish online solidarity initiatives where individuals could send someone else to attend a protest on their behalf. The presence of allies at protests was said to also relieve

some of the concerns that individuals (with non-visible impairments) had around whether they looked 'disabled enough'. Through attending protests, the first author became aware of how being there was for many an achievement in itself, as illustrated in the following observation from a protest which took place on 14th July 2017 outside the opening ceremony of the Para Athletics (Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London):

> Eventually, we find the group and I was greeted by a number of individuals, many asking my name and where I was from. A woman began to dish out gold medals to each of the activists. As she gave a medal to each of us, she congratulated us, "congratulations, you're here! You've made it!".

The symbolic presenting of the medal served to acknowledge how difficult it was for many disabled people to even arrive at/attend a protest and the challenges they may have faced in doing so. On a small scale (perhaps in comparison to some other activists), as a visually impaired researcher, the first author experienced some difficulty in attending such protests, often struggling to locate meeting points and/or identify other activists.

Practices of resistance had to be adapted in new hybrid ways, due to the often- deteriorating health of activists and their limitation in capacity, finances and time. Disability protests in response to austerity have deployed similar practices to those exhibited within the Millions Missing campaign, which sought to highlight the lack of financial resources invested into ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) research. As part of these protests, several empty shoes are laid out in a public space alongside the stories of those affected by the illness. Through this approach, individuals were able to engage in protest (through displaying their accounts) while not having to be physically present or leave their homes. Disability protests in response to austerity have at times embraced a similar approach with disabled people attending protests by proxy. An example of this was witnessed during a protest against Universal Credit (London – 18th April 2018) where activists held placards displaying pictures of those who supported the cause but were unable to attend due to ill health. Such initiatives were grassroots and small-scale, being driven by one or two individuals who freely offered to attend protests on others' behalf. Similar examples include the practice of sharing the personal accounts of those who are unable to attend. This is common practice at disability protests, where often those most severely impacted by austerity are unable to attend such events or may not have the capacity to advocate on their own behalf. Establishing supportive spaces and exploring alternative approaches to activism are therefore required to sustain engagement.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of critical disability studies, we recognise the importance as Goodley (2016: 157) argues of 'start[ing] with disability but never end[ing] with it: disability is the space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all'. This paper similarly has far broader relevance than to solely disability studies, making a clear contribution to the fields of geography and social movement studies by highlighting the disabling nature and everyday lived realities of austerity, along with the plethora of ways marginalised communities are reclaiming public space in order to resist both austerity and welfare cuts.

This paper has drawn attention to the role of the body, as an arena for resistance and a valuable tool through which disability activists have sought to convey their message. The body is front and centre of disability protests, as it concerns its care, treatment, recognition and freedoms. For too long, the corporeal body has been overlooked in academic scholarship on protest and social movements, while vulnerability has been readily dismissed. This paper has highlighted how disability activists may draw on their bodies and corporeal vulnerability to demonstrate the injustice of welfare cuts and stigmatisation, along with garnering greater media attention and visibility. While we acknowledge that disabled people occupy different levels of privilege and intersectional forms of oppression - by coming together these individual bodies use their vulnerability strategically in a bid to form a larger collective body of resistance.

Bodies can however also be sources of pain and discomfort, and must be carefully managed, looked after and configured into activism. This at times means, slowing down the pace of a protest, taking time to rest, and caring for oneself and one another (Evans et al., 2024). The Disabled People's Movement is based upon notions of interdependence, collaborative care and mutual aid, which we have seen deployed through the supportive spaces of disability protest. While disability activists have actively sought to adapt spaces of protest to make them more inclusive and accessible, we call upon wider social movements to consider how they might similarly make activist spaces more inclusive to a range of different embodiments, reflecting the diversity inherent in their movements and helping to build a wider and more inclusive politics.

For too long disabled people have been regarded as passive recipients of care, as opposed to active agents or political actors. Through this paper we have sought to challenge this, by documenting the unique nature of disabled people's protest in response to austerity, as an act of defiance, a refusal to be hidden away, marginalised or silenced. Scholars must however remain critical of the neglected voices and cognisant of the bodies who struggle to reach such spaces, let alone participate.

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