Disability, Austerity and Cruel Optimism in Big Society: Resistance and "The Disability Commons"[iii]

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Abstract

This paper draws on Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" as it manifests itself in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities living in England in a time of Big Society. We argue that Big Society offers a cluster of promises to disabled people with learning disabilities: citizenship, empowerment, community, social action and a route out of (or protection from) poverty. However, we suggest that these promises have been repeatedly offered and repeatedly denied and remain tantalizingly out of reach. While drawing attention to the injustices disabled people with learning disabilities face in Big Society, we also attend to the ways in which they are working the spaces of neoliberalism in order to resist "their designation as disposable bodies" (Tyler 2013: 224).

Keywords

Disability; Austerity; Cruel Optimism; Big Society

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Introduction

In this paper, we consider the ways in which Big Society creates disability as a form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011). We examine how disability, in particular learning disability, is made in a society that celebrates the neoliberal individual who "ensures their own self-care through market relations" (Fritsch 2013: 146) in a context of austerity. We explore cruel optimism in Big Society as part of a research project, *Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society,* which broadly asks how disabled people with learning disabilities are faring in Big Society. We argue that, in a time of austerity, the promises (citizenship, empowerment, community, social action and a route out of, or protection from, poverty) invoked within the Coalition government's Big Society narrative produce what Berlant terms cruel optimism: "the relation of cruel optimism is a double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing" (Berlant & Seitz 2013). We describe how cruel optimism might become a "politics of deferral for disability" (Fritsch 2013: 146) and warn that the promises of Big Society may stand in the way of the prospect of any "crip utopia" (Fritsch 2013: 146). Finally, we explore the ways in which disabled people can refuse "their designation as disposable bodies" (Tyler 2013: 224) by exposing the "radical inequalities and colonial history of neoliberalism" (Tyler 2013) when they come together as the "the disability commons".

A Neoliberal Big Society

> You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment, you can call it freedom, you can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society. (Prime Minister David Cameron 2010 cited in McCabe 2011: 2)

Big Society is underpinned by the United Kingdom's (UK) Coalition government's (2010 onwards) commitment to devolving state power to communities and to creating a "small state" (McCabe 2011) and a "Big Society". David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister, states that Big Society is his "mission" because he believes that we are living in "Broken Britain" (Gentleman 2010). However, critics of the Big Society narrative suggest that it is merely a cynical attempt to re-brand the Conservative Party (MacMillan 2013), while the Coalition government perpetuates neoliberal claims that the public sector is overly bureaucratic, and that the private and third sectors are, by contrast, by their very nature efficient. Moreover the government narrative has also failed to acknowledge the work done, over many years, in the voluntary and community sector.

The Coalition government has stated the aims of Big Society as follows:

I. **community empowerment**: with more power devolved to local councils and neighbourhoods; public services reform;

II. **opening up public services**: enabling charities, social enterprises, co-operatives, but also private companies, to compete to deliver public services, for example in employment services and criminal justice;

III. **social action:** programmes to encourage people to play more of an active role in communities.

The government tells us that Big Society 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).

Big Society releases "active citizens" to realise opportunities for participation in the

government of Britain (Conservative Party 2010). Here is the promise of a vibrant civil

society in which third sector organizations will be enabled to develop services and support as

Big Society promises increased social action premised on community participation through

volunteering. Big Society promises routes out of isolation and poverty as it offers to mend

"Broken Britain", but these promises are made in a context of economic austerity.

Austerity

Crucially, the Big Society narrative is constructed against the backdrop of the narrative of

"austerity"; indeed some commentators see the Big Society story as nothing more than a

justificatory discourse for cuts to public spending (MacMillan 2013). In 2009, the year before

he became Prime Minister, David Cameron announced that Britain was moving into an age of

austerity (Jensen 2012). Austerity has been characterized, by the UK Coalition government,

as a *necessary* period of "efficiency" and "thrift" in order for the state to recover from (its

self-imposed) "financial crisis" (Jensen 2013). Austerity is constructed as a rational antidote

to irrational obsession with spending by individuals and the state. The "austerity" narrative

allows the Coalition government to position the withdrawal of the welfare state as a virtuous

act; the removal of state support will "toughen up" those who have become dependent upon it

(Jensen 2013). In this account, the welfare state is blamed for causing worklessness by

trapping people on benefits, while, at the same time, worklessness is cited as the cause of

poverty (Jensen 2013). The contribution of the bankers (and their high-risk speculative capitalism as the cause of the "financial crisis") is hidden as lone parents, migrants and sick and disabled people are blamed for draining the state's financial resources (Jensen 2013; Tyler 2013). Austerity is being mobilized in ways that mask the structural disadvantages in contemporary contexts (Berlant 2011) as social problems are persistently individualised and psychologised (Jensen 2013). Take, for example, the recent UK television programme "Benefits Street" (McKerrow 2014). This programme is a form of "poverty porn", a well-established media trope, that is exploitative of the people whose lives are its subjects. On "Benefits Street" the focus is on the failings of the pathological, fecklessness individual residents rather than the systemic and structural forces that created social and economic disadvantage in their lives. Negative representations of disabled people in the media in the UK have also increased. Inclusion London (2011) found that the media coverage describing disabled people in positive terms had fallen, whereas there was an increase in the number of articles focusing on disability benefit fraud. These negative representations of "the poor" and "the disabled" situate "the turn to austerity" not within economic spheres but within affect: the realm of the social and emotional (Jensen 2012: 3). Jensen (2013: 2) argues the sermons of austerity are built on the language of emotion: "through envy, distrust, disgust and shame." Austerity is being incorporated into the affective components of citizenship - the "good" citizen is a thrifty citizen (Jensen 2012). This serves the government's argument that poverty is only ever a product of worklessness, and worklessness as only ever a condition of individual (moral) failure (Jensen 2012). Meanwhile, Berlant (2011), describes austerity is a fantasy constructed by the neoliberal state in order to justify its withdrawal from the provision of welfare, which offers a form of cruel optimism —the persistent attachment we have to the belief in the power of the market to liberate us. Belief in the power of markets and austerity measures are, then, examples of cruel optimism.

Cruel Optimism

Berlant (2006: 21) describes cruel optimism as

> …a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being ….

Work and consumption, for example, are two processes that appear to give access to some better life but, in actuality, oppress and stifle. Kaplan (2013) explains that what the subject desires is a promise, but inherent within the promise is deferral and disappointment. We can only work so hard and our rewards are limited; we can consume ad infinitum but will never feel fulfilled; we will always want more. Indeed, the object of desire "contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place" (Berlant 2006: 21). Despite disappointment, the subject remains optimistically attached to an object of desire or rather "a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make us and to make possible for us" (Berlant 2006: 20). This analysis resonates with Foucauldian understandings of the biopolitical constitution of desire. As one of us has recently argued (Goodley 2014), Foucault's conceptualization of biopower permits us to understand the ways in which the desires of the state and the individual around the self and the body merge in the "rational" machinations of self-governance. Rabinow and Rose (2006) have articulated the ways in which biopower refers to the making of individuals and the population held together by three practices. First, *one or more truth discourses are produced about the "vital" character of living human beings*, and an array of authorities are considered competent to speak that truth. It is right and rational to work. Indeed, work can set us free. Second, *strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health* intervene at the levels of the individual and the state around the working body: work is

the healthy and right thing to do. Third, *modes of subjectification*, through which individuals are brought to work on themselves; in this sense to work on their work.

Berlant (2006) brings something else to the table here: she seeks to unpack the cultural imaginary that underpins a (biopolitical) enchantment associated with the promises associated with work (in a time of austerity). We suggest that the Big Society narrative represents a cluster of promises to which we remain optimistically attached: citizenship, empowerment, community, social action and a route out of (or protection from) poverty, but that these promises manifest as cruel optimism in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities as the promises disappoint. Moreover, these promises actualize (or re-actualize) the inequalities they aim to resolve. The individual is asked to solve their problems that, at bottom, are not individual problems to solve. In this way there is an enhancement of the weight of oppression on individuals while many forms of social organization are left untouched. What is *cruel* is not only broken promises, but that the solution is reproducing and enhancing the weight of the problem.

The aim is not to show that disabled people with learning disabilities are delusional in their continuing desires and aspirations, but to unpack the power of these promises and to reflect upon the ways in which they are constructed (Jensen 2012).

Methodology

We are exploring the cruel optimism in Big Society as part of a wider research project *Big Society? Disabled People with learning disabilities and civil society.* The project runs from June, 2013 to June 2015 and is a partnership among four UK universities (Manchester Metropolitan University, The University of Sheffield, Northumbria University and The University of Bristol) working with partner organizations (SpeakUp Self-Advocacy, Independent Living Advisors, The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities,

Manchester Learning Disability Partnership, Mencap, Pathways Associates). The research is being carried out through seven overlapping and interconnected phases as follows:

Phase 1: Key stakeholder interviews: interviews with disabled people with learning disabilities, 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 organizations: circles of support; self-advocacy; "real" employment.

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.

Ethical clearance was sought and gained from the University of Sheffield. The names of the participants below are pseudonyms chosen by them. The research team, including the universities and partners, has extensive experience of working with disabled people with learning disabilities in research. This paper reports on the findings from phase one (key stakeholder interviews); phase two (longitudinal documentary analysis); and phase three (ethnographic encounters) of the research. Participants in phase one were interviewed once. Interviews were carried out at a time and place of the participants' choosing; supporters were present as the interviewee wanted. Phase three (which is ongoing at the time of writing) involves an extended period of ethnographic encounters (18 months) with our research

partners focusing on disabled people with learning disabilities' experiences of self-advocacy groups, employment and circles of support[iiiiv]. Accessible information and consent forms were shared with all the participants.

Analysis

In the course of the analysis of the interviews, the research team visited and re-visited the transcripts, searching for themes or "nodes" (Snow et al. 2003). This approach to analysis was formalized through weekly "node meetings," where we subjected the transcripts to points of analysis to draw out themes as the data were collected (Snow et al. 2003). The range of analysis and discussion allowed ongoing consideration of how the interviews were developing; it allowed us to capture some of the complexity of the issues we were exploring. It also encouraged us to reflect on our research questions, and through this discussion, we began to make the connections between the emergent themes and the broader literature.

Our analysis of the interviews revealed a deeply sophisticated analysis of Big Society discourse. While our analysis is neither discursive nor a form of discourse analysis, the analytical qualities of interviewees' reflections reminded us of Billig's (1996) suggestion that all subjective accounts are inherently and necessarily rhetorical. That is to say, we are aware that ideological or truth claims are made through the deployment of particular kinds of rhetorical devices with specific ideological ideas in mind. Our participants reminded us of the rhetorical complexity embedded within the dynamic discourse of Big Society.

A cluster of promises

Our conversations with informants revealed the Big Society narrative to offer what we term a cluster of promises: citizenship, empowerment, community, social action and a route out of (or protection from) poverty for disabled people with learning disabilities. We consider each

of these promises in turn and hypothesise about their potential influences on political and emotional life for those disabled people and their allies working at the coalface of civil society.

The promise: active citizenship

The promise of active citizenship in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities is one to which they remain attached, but has often proved elusive in their lives. Kittay (2011) describes how, in theorizing social justice, those with "severe cognitive impairments" have often been consigned to the category of "human nonpersons". Theories of social justice underpinning popular understandings of "citizenship" often couple dignity with the capacity for autonomy; and yet, autonomy has frequently been contested or denied in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities. So when, for example, the problem of social justice is seen as one for "those who are fully and active and morally conscientious participants in society, and directly or indirectly associate together through a complete life" (Rawls 1980: 546) the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities are pushed to the margins (Bérubé 2010).

Since the publication of *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) disabled people with learning disabilities have been promised the trappings of full citizenship in public policy discourse. In 2005, *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People* (DoWP & DoH 2005) set out the vision that by 2025 disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities and choices to improve their quality of life and be respected and included as equal members of society. In 2009, *Valuing Employment Now* (VEN) was introduced by the New Labour government (1997-2010) and was endorsed by the incoming Coalition government in 2010 (Beyer 2012). In a similar vein, *Valuing People* (Department of Health 2001) promoted four key principles:

rights, independence, choice and inclusion. Sadly, we know that these principles have often been far removed from the reality of the lived experience of some disabled people with learning disabilities. More still, there is a cruelty in the promises of "rights, independence, choice and inclusion" of individuals that still leaves the notion of care, and its institutional arrangements, highly individualised and unproblematised, and, in the case of Connor Sparrowhawk, which we describe below, deadly.

The report of inquiry into the abuse of disabled people with learning disabilities at Winterbourne View, an assessment centre for people with learning disabilities, also reiterated the importance of rights, independence, choice and inclusion (DoH 2012). And yet, 18 months on from the publication of the inquiry, another report offers a damning account of the preventable death of a young man with learning disabilities and epilepsy in another National Health Service (NHS) setting in England. "The Connor Report" or *Independent investigation into the death of CS* (Hussain & Hyde-Bales 2014) documents a catalogue of errors in the care offered to Connor which resulted in his death, but also documents the breaches of rights, lack of independence and choice and the exclusion that Connor was subjected to. In response to "The Connor Report", the NHS Trust responsible for his preventable death promised that "lessons would be learned"— just as it was promised, by another health trust, that lessons would be learned from the Winterbourne View inquiry. As these and, sadly, countless other inquiries into the abuse and premature deaths of disabled people with learning disabilities demonstrate (Mencap 2007) the promise of rights, independence, choice and inclusion may be repeatedly offered, but is also repeatedly denied, in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities in England.

Disabled people with learning disabilities remain invested in these promises. Self-advocates repeatedly told us they want "voice and choice" in their lives, and that they have a "voice" and can "speak up". During ethnographic encounters, we met disabled people with

learning disabilities who are speaking up for their rights on learning disability partnership boards, as Care Quality Commission experts by experience, as well as with Health Watch UK[v] as volunteers to improve the NHS. It would be disingenuous to suggest that such participation is nothing more than tokenistic, but there are reasons to be skeptical about the impact of such participation and the extent to which people with learning disabilities are more widely thought of as active citizens in their local communities. We find it especially cruel that in an optimistic appropriation of human rights, disabled people with learning disabilities continue to find themselves on the edges of ordinary life: work, education and love (Titchkosky & Michalko 2012).

Alison (IV8) spoke about her experiences of being the co-chair of a local learning disability partnership board. She described how she was asked to give feedback from a national learning disability forum meeting to the partnership board:

> So in a way I'm thinking they are listening to me but not like they're supposed to be listening, like they're not asking questions. (Alison IV8)

In the time that one of us (Katherine) spent at a self-advocacy organization during the ethnographic phase of the research, there were numerous stories about the behaviour of the local bus drivers towards disabled people with learning disabilities. One story was of a bus driver who took the disabled person's bus pass from a person with a learning disability and epilepsy because she "didn't look disabled". With support from the self-advocacy organization, a complaint was made to the bus company, but no one believed that anything would be done. These stories suggest that the promise of active citizenship for disabled people with learning disabilities has yet to be fully realized. Rights promise much but often give very little in reality.

The promise: a vibrant civil society

Big Society also promises a vibrant civil society. In Big Society, civil society stands for the

third sector: voluntary organizations, mutuals[vi], co-operatives (Powell 2009). At first, the rhetoric was welcomed by some in the voluntary sector who (wrongly) saw Big Society as new source of big funding (Murray 2012: 8). It is the case that the voluntary sector is expected to take a greater role in the delivery of public services, but, at the same time, sources of funding for their activities are drying up (McCabe 2011). In addition, the wider implementation of cuts, which has seen the closure of local libraries and community centres, has also impacted the ability of community groups to provide services. Elizabeth (IV7) and Timothy (IV4) both told us that their experiences were that local day services for disabled people with learning disabilities were closing, and that this was increasing the isolation of disabled people with learning disabilities.

In Big Society, outsourcing and privatization are seen as a way of both driving down costs and as a means of transferring public services to the private sector (Cartmail 2012). Community and voluntary organizations compete for contracts to deliver public services: promising much (in the way of funding) though often giving little (because the climate is so competitive and resources are scarce). This has had two main effects. The first is increasing pressure on the third sector to modernize and prove that they are "fit for purpose". This pressure manifests itself as cruel optimism for voluntary organizations as even when local organizations that "shape up" to meet the needs of the market, the promise of a contract to deliver services remains unfulfilled as larger, better-resourced organizations win local contracts. Tom (IV1), a third sector worker, told us "commissioners feel … it's easier, which it probably is, just to be commissioning one person or one organisation…." The second consequence of this sort of competition is that organizations are forced to compromise on their local agendas; we heard stories of organizations afraid to criticise the commissioners of poor services for fear of losing their own local contracts (Williams 2013). Political sharpness is blunted.

And so, the promise of a vibrant civil society acts as cruel optimism for organizations of disabled people because the object of desire (in this case, the promise of contracts to deliver services for disabled people) offers deferral and disappointment when contracts are awarded to large organizations, not run by disabled people themselves. Worse still, the object of desire itself "contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place…" (Berlant 2006: 21) as voluntary organizations feel forced to compromise their local agendas. In other words, voluntary organizations find themselves unable to oppose local decision making by local authorities: they dare not bite the hand that feeds.

The promise: social action, community participation and volunteering

Society has emphasized volunteering as a key mechanism for building community and individual capacity. Too often disabled people with learning disabilities have been seen as the beneficiaries of, rather than participants in, volunteering. For example, Louise (IV 5), a third sector worker, told us:

> There's a summer festival every year here in [local town] and they [local volunteers] decorate canal boats and everything. How do disabled people get involved in that, in just the general community stuff? And that's where they are the recipients if they're anything…. (Louise IV 5)

Bella (IV3), a lawyer, suggested that there was a lack of practical support for disabled people with learning disabilities to be involved in volunteering and that a risk-averse culture, concerned with health, safety and liability, posed considerable barriers to disabled people's participation as volunteers.

While the Big Society narrative promises volunteering as a means of increasing community participation and social cohesion, Tom (IV1) told us the object of desire (volunteering) could also prove illusive for and even damaging to disabled people:

…. there's always that friction at the bottom of anything when people start volunteering, they then stop volunteering when it becomes too onerous, but onerous in the notion of 'actually you've got to be inclusive of everybody in the community' and that's problematic. (Tom IV 1)

The ability to take part in voluntary work also depends on people having both the time and the resources to contribute. As Tom (IV1) explained:

[Voluntary ogranisations] have quite a lot of sort of middle class, or quite wealthy, people who are just looking for a bit of something to pass the time in between golf tournaments or whatever…. But whether…. you would get people down on those estates that we were talking about [areas of socio-economic deprivation] doing voluntary work…. (Tom IV1)

The self-advocates we met clearly told us that they desire voluntary work and community participation; they told us that they "have a lot to give" to Big Society and that with support they can participate in volunteering and paid work, and yet these opportunities remain deferred in Big Society. Just as something is offered, it is taken away.

The promise: work as a route out of isolation and poverty

In Big Society, paid work is crucial because it promises a route out of isolation and poverty. Employment matters; work is, we are told, "positive for health, for income, for social status and for relationships. Employment is a core plank of independent living and for many people work is a key part of their identity" (Sayce 2011: 17). In England, employment has a particular cultural significance as it is often used as *the* marker for an individual's social class and social status; indeed, it is used, by some, as a framework by which to measure the social value of a person (Humber 2013). Moreover, being a worker is also a key marker for being considered to be the sort of "active citizen" we discussed above. Employment is at the heart of our contemporary neoliberal capitalist climate.

Access to the world of work has historically been denied to disabled people and to disabled people with learning disabilities, in particular (Humber 2013). Indeed, the perceived unemployability of people with learning disabilities has been part of the way their identity

has been constructed (Humber 2013). Currently, only 10% of disabled people with learning disabilities are in paid work; this figure has changed little over the last 20 years (Humber 2013). And yet, disabled people with learning disabilities continue to remain attached to the promise of work and to desire the same employment opportunities as everyone else (Sayce 2011). The Big Society narrative suggests that employment promises disabled people with learning disabilities social and economic inclusion, self-determination, choice and independence (Beyer et al. 2000).

In 2009, *Valuing Employment Now (VEN)* (Department of Work and Pensions & DoH 2009) focused specifically on employment for people with learning disabilities (Humber 2013). It was intended to recognize and to address the continued exclusion of the majority of disabled people with learning disabilities from employment. However, as Humber (2013) has argued, *VEN* does not set out strategies or outcome targets by which to measure its success or failure. Instead it offers the somewhat limited goal of moving disabled people with learning disabilities "nearer to the labour market" — another example of a deferred promise. In an attempt to drive down the number of disabled people claiming out-of-work and sickness benefits, the Coalition government has introduced the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). Following the WCA, applicants are allocated into either the Work-Related Group (WRAG) or the Support Group. Members of the work-related group are expected to take part in work-focused interviews with a personal adviser. People in the support group will not be expected to work (DWP 2011).

The government has commissioned providers to move people in the WRAG into work. The providers sub-contract to others including voluntary organisations. The fear is that the prime contractors are cherry picking those people closest to moving into work. The work of providers was criticised by several of our participants; for example:

> Sue, who works at the self-advocacy organization, asked if I could pop into the office after the LD Forum. She wanted to tell me about Scott who is currently working at the

self-advocacy organization as a trainer. Scott is on the books of a large employment provider, who are supposed to be supporting him during his six-month work placement. The job coach from the provider has phoned Scott twice; no one has been to visit him. Sue has been supporting Scott herself. Sue was frustrated by the behaviour of the job coach. Sue explained that as a small self-advocacy organization, there was no way that they could go for the providers' contract themselves. Providers are paid by results and the risk of no payment is too great for a small organization. (Katherine's ethnographic notes)

Employment for disabled people with learning disabilities can be seen as another example of "cruel optimism": paid employment for disabled people with learning disabilities is desired, but it remains tantalizingly out of reach for many disabled people with learning disabilities. This points to another cruelty, expressed so well by Paul Hunt (1966), in which a scale of values (employability) is put over and against disabled people who are supposed to desire this more than life itself. In every broken or unfilled promise is also the cruelty: a cruelty that remains even if the promise is fulfilled.

A response to disappointment and deferral: the "disability commons"

Above, we have explained why we believe that the Big Society narrative offers a cluster of broken promises for disabled people with learning disabilities and is, thus, cruel optimism. We agree with Fritsch (2013:146) that cruel optimism can operate as a "politics of deferral for disability" for disabled people as they remain attached to promises that seem to be persistently illusory, and that this could mean that resources are diverted from creating the "crip utopia" Fritsch imagines (Fritsch 2013: 146). As we have said, the aim is not to show that disabled people with learning disabilities are delusional in their continuing desires and aspirations, but to unpack the power of these promises and to reflect upon the ways in which they are constructed (Jensen 2012). Even in the eye of the neoliberal storm, we need to think ethically in order to refuse the colonization of the hegemony of neoliberal ideas and resist the pressure to abandon the values embedded in a politics committed to exposing and challenging disablism. Disablism is defined by Thomas (2007: 73), as "a form of social oppression

involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being".

While we might be accused of merely succumbing to the very cruel optimism that we have sought to expose by refusing to let go of what is not working in Big Society (Lockwood 2011), we believe that there are spaces for resistance and possibility. And so, we draw from Power's (2005) analysis of the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions of neoliberalism; we look to the non-normative responses to the neoliberal moment that neoliberalism itself produces (Peck & Tickell 2002). We want to explore those moments when we can *work the spaces* of neoliberalism (Power 2005) through imagination, appropriation and subversion. We contend that disabled people can refuse "their designation as disposable bodies" (Tyler 2013a: 224) by exposing the "radical inequalities and colonial history of neoliberalism" (Tyler 2013a: 224) and as members of "the disability commons".

We draw on Tyler's (2013a) notion of the "maternal commons" to invoke the "disability commons". In Tyler's (2013a) harrowing account of the treatment of a Burundian mother who was separated from her six-year- old son and placed in solitary confinement at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, Tyler describes the protests as the mothers demanded to know what had happened to the mother and child who had been removed. As they protested, the mothers stripped naked "in a deliberate impersonation of their dehumanization" (Tyler 2013a: 215). Tyler describes the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the protest as the consequence of a politics of "natality" (Tyler 2013a: 220) — we are all born: in which a "maternal commons" emerges (Tyler 2013b: 107). Tyler argues that, through their protest, the mothers of Yarl's Wood insist that maternal origin is acknowledged and so refuse their constitution as "wasted humans" (Tyler 2013: 123). Tyler manages to emphasise the huge injustices that these maternal subjects face, while also concentrating substantial attention to resistant acts and agency (De Benedictus 2013).

By invoking the notion of a "disability commons", we draw on a long history of the politics of disability (Oliver 1990), through which disabled people have also refused their constitution as "wasted humans". Our task is to expose and challenge the injustices, and indeed, the cruel optimism that disabled people face, while also drawing attention to their acts of resistance and agency. And so we turn to these moments when we suggest that "the disability commons" are working the spaces of neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell 2002).

Working the spaces of neoliberalism

To explore moments of resistance and agency by the "disability commons", we return to the three sites of our ethnographic encounters: circles of support, "real" employment and self-advocacy. We offer three vignettes in which we see acts of both resistance and agency being worked at in the spaces of neoliberalism.

Vignette 1: Henry's Circle of Support

*Henry is an 18-year-old man with the label of learning disabilities. He is going through what is known as "transition" in English education policy[vii]as he moves from children's to adult services in education, health and social care. This is often a very fraught time for young people with learning disabilities, and their families have to navigate complex service systems and negotiate new support packages (*Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2011*). Henry's family were struggling to find out what would be available for Henry when full-time education finishes at the end of the year after his 18th birthday. Henry's mum found out about circles of support and, working with a third sector organisation that trains circles facilitators, Henry has been able to bring together a circle. Henry's facilitator is paid; the facilitator's flip charts are branded with the logo for the organisation she works for that supports and trains facilitators. The company is a thriving enterprise building, its networks of circles in the north of England and beyond, supporting Henry to commission his own services.*

Vignette 2: Chris's job

Chris is in his thirties; he is married and lives with his wife. He works five days a week in the offices of a meals delivery and welfare service. He is out most nights involved in his local community; his favourite activities are the local theatre group and the local country dancing nights. Chris is a paid employee who contributes to his local community.

Vignette 3: Jodie, the "expert by experience"

Jodie is an "expert by experience" working in a paid role for the Care Quality Commission[viii]. Several times a year she inspects services provided for people with learning disabilities. She has been involved in the assessment of the quality of the provision for a year. Jodie inspects supported living environments, day centres and assessment centres—anywhere that learning disability services are offered. She talks to people about their experiences or simply spends time with them, learning about their experiences. She reports back to the lead inspector who, in turn, reports back to the team of inspectors about findings and changes that need to be made to the provision.

We suggest that each of these vignettes work the spaces of neoliberalism. Through his individual budget, Henry brings together a circle of support to tackle advocate for better services for him to make the transition to adulthood. The organization that produces branded materials and trains, supports and employs the facilitator is the model of neoliberal entrepreneurship. Henry is a commissioner of services. Chris is the ideal Big Society citizen; he has a job and contributes in local community through his social activities. And yet, Chris was supported by a job coach before his job interview (in the form of a work trial) and in the first few months of his employment. When the meals service moves premises, Chris will have access to the support of a job coach again to help him with the transition to a new work place environment. Jodie is an inspector, but it is her experiences as a person with a learning disability that qualifies her for a role in which she is supported both by the presence of a

personal assistant and by her membership of a local self-advocacy organization.

Each of these vignettes works the spaces of neoliberalism through a process of both conformity and resistance by "the disability commons" that comes together to enable Henry, Chris and Jodie. In a time of Big Society, each of these stories is underpinned by precarity: Henry's budget is at risk of being cut; Chris's department is being "re-structured"; and the advocacy group that supports Jodie is facing funding cuts. Yet, these vignettes are certainly examples of disabled people with learning disabilities resisting their designation as "disposable bodies" (Tyler 2013).

Conclusion

In this paper we have described the contexts of Big Society and austerity in which cruel optimism emerges for disabled people with learning disabilities, and for us all as we invest in the promises of neoliberal capitalism and find that our desires are disappointed or deferred. We explored the way in which a cluster of Big Society promises have been broken in the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities. Yet, rightly or wrongly, through a commitment to the politics of disability and through the existence of "the disability commons", we remain optimistically attached to the idea that opportunities exist to work the spaces of neoliberalism and for disabled people to re-shape, re-fashion and resist the processes of neoliberalisation (Power 2006).

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iv A Circle of Support is a group of people who meet regularly to help someone achieve their ambitions in life. Visit: http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/help-information/information-for-teachers/transition-to-adulthood/building-circles-of-support/

v Healthwatch England is the national consumer organisation in health and care. Visit: http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/about-us

vi In the UK, a mutual organization or society exists with the purpose of raising funds from its membership that provide common services to all members of the organization or society. Profits are re-invested in the organization.

vii Transition is the term used in policy in England to describe the period of time in which disabled young people enter adult services in health education and social care.

viii The purpose of the Care Quality Commission is to make sure hospitals, care homes, dental and General Practice surgeries, and all other care services in England provide people with safe, effective, compassionate and high-quality care, and we encourage them to make improvements. Visit: http://www.cqc.org.uk/about-us