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Stepping Outside of Normative Neoliberal Discourse: youth and disability meet - the case of Jody McIntyre

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Abstract

In May 2010, amidst the 'global financial crisis' a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government succeeded a 12-year reign of New Labour in the UK, and ushered in massive welfare cuts. Although New Labour tabled major welfare and disability benefit reform, they arguably did not activate the harshest of these (Roulstone & Prideaux, 2011). This paper focuses on the backlash of youth and disability in the form of demonstrations; two groups that are being hit hard by the political shift to work-first welfare in an era of employment scarcity. The case of young disabled activist Jody McIntyre is used to explore parallels and divergences in neoliberal and 'populist' discourses of 'risky', 'troubling' youth and disability.

Along with the proposed massive cuts in disability services and benefits, young people have faced the end of Educational Maintenance Allowance (a weekly payment many young people rely on in order to go on to further education), rising tuition fees in higher education and mass unemployment. Since educational cuts were announced, young people, school, college and university students and their allies have demonstrated, including in national demonstrations in November and December 2010. Despite the unprecedented hardships involved, the majority of the centre/right media was unsympathetic towards protestors: demonising young people's political acts as 'riots' (McSmith, Garner, Wright, & Gonsalves, 2010). Some reporters from left-leaning press, and other political commentators and bloggers, however, condemned police tactics. Young people were 'kettled' for up to seven hours with no access to food, drink or toilets in near freezing conditions, and police violence led to many

hospitalisations, such as 21-year-old Alfie Meadows who received emergency brain surgery as a result of police brutality. Disabled activist, political blogger and journalist, Jody McIntyre was one young person attacked by police whilst attending the demonstrations. 20-year-old Jody and his younger brother were alongside other protestors when Jody was pulled from his wheelchair and dragged across the floor by police. The scene was caught on camera, uploaded to YouTube, and the story soon received wide media attention.

I stand in solidarity with Jody and others in both fighting cuts to public services and condemning police brutality. In this paper, however, I will concentrate on the resultant confused and contradictory rhetoric emerging as a result of Jody's police treatment. Although the injuries of Alfie Meadows and other young people were significantly more severe than Jody's, the story of Jody provoked much more public discussion. I argue that Jody, as a politically active young disabled person, disturbed the discourses of passivity which surround disability, converging with the demonising discourses of dangerous youth.

Discourses of youth, disability and the Jody McIntyre Case

UK government policy aims to consult with young people (Department for Education, 2011); encouraging young people to actively engage with services and politics (Wood, 2010). In neoliberal climates, however, young people's 'activity' is arguably only encouraged in two formats: when delivering the 'right' answers through adult-mediated consultation (Wood, 2010); and when harnessed to specific form of market activity (Barber, 2007; Giroux, 2009). As Barber (2007, 36) puts it, "she is permitted to choose from a menu of options offered by the world but not to alter or improve the menu or the world". Trying to rewrite the menu means 'activity' is rebranded disruption. This can be clearly seen within media coverage of education demonstrations: rather than celebrate young people's political engagement, media attention soon rebranded demonstrations as 'riots' (McSmith, et al., 2010). For example, there was media frenzy when Prince Charles and Camilla were (controversially) directed through groups of demonstrators, who threw paint onto the royal car; with UK tabloid Daily Mail reporting under the headline, "'They were lucky not to be shot': Police chief says armed officers showed 'enormous restraint' as mob attacked Charles and Camilla" (Shipman & Peev, 2010). We saw a similarly individualistic media response to the UK's 'riots' in August 2011, young people deemed criminals, rather than a group frustrated and let down by political

systems (Brand, 2011). Although government rhetoric wants to consult with young people, these consultations are searching for particular answers. Rationality and compromise are considered signs of adulthood maturity (Blatterer, 2010; Burman, 2008). Young people, on the other hand, are deemed irrational and naively idealist (Blatterer, 2010). We do not, therefore, want our young people to be too active: active youth without adult mediation leads to depictions of disruptive, risky, rebellious, scary, criminal, reckless, dangerous, volatile, manipulative, suspect, troubling, unstable, and, in terms of politics, naively idealist young people (Giroux, 2009; Kelly, 2003, 2006).

Responses to the Jody McIntyre YouTube clip reflect the discourse of passivity and vulnerability, whilst slipping into the language of “shirkers and scroungers” surrounding disability in neoliberal cost-cutting Britain (Garthwaite, 2011, 369). Perhaps the least surprising response was the general dismay towards the police’s treatment of Jody, and in some ways, the sentiment of this statement is ethically sound: how could the police treat a disabled man in this way? However, that Jody’s mistreatment was singled out and given more attention than that of other young people is telling: there is a frame, and that frame is one of disability. Jody was routinely introduced as a “cerebral palsy sufferer” (Bakhurst, 2010), meaning the more general question, ‘why are the police allowed to treat people in this way?’, was rarely asked, a notable exception being by Jody himself (for example, Bakhurst, 2010; Cochrane, 2010; McIntyre, 2011). Unlike other young people, portrayed as dangerous, disruptive rioters, deserving of police brutality, these portrayals saw Jody, a disabled young man, as helpless and vulnerable, undeserving of this treatment by the police. And many went beyond this, the general sentiment being: ‘what was this disabled man doing at a protest in the first place, putting himself in such a vulnerable position? A political protest is no place for a disabled man!’

The above illustrates what Deal (2007) terms aversive disablism: arguably well-meaning, paternalistic responses, resulting from the ingrained belief that disabled people are vulnerable and need caring for. Yet, in a competitive neoliberal climate, discourses of vulnerability and passivity soon slip into the scapegoating of disabled people as burdensome drains on society (Garthwaite, 2011). If we deem the above aversive disablism, other responses were overtly disablist. Comments included:

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“It’s a shame he wasn’t thrown off the roof along with that fire extinguisher” [a fire extinguisher got thrown off a roof in the heat of the protest, an incident not connected to Jody]

“He’s just a retard looking for attention”

“Stay at home and live off benefits”

“Depressing to think my taxes fund this nonsense”

(YouTube user comments reported in McIntyre, 2011)

When Jody, therefore, a disabled man (vulnerable, dependent), hit the headlines as a politically active youth (dangerous, disruptive), we saw a third, less predictable response. Jody’s case, according to some, was a sign of equality, a mark of disability rights.

“I am not sure what the problem is. The police manhandled you just like they did to other protestors who got in their face. They treated you equally. You seem to be arguing they should have treated you differently from everyone else.”

“Now what is it the author actual wants, to be treated like anyone else or to be treated 'differently' because of their disability? Now part of this being treated the same is that when your prat you get treated and called a prat in the same way anyone else does, indeed true equality comes when prat behavior is called out regardless of the nature of the originator.”

(comments from users 'fightheevil' and 'randstad' in response to McIntyre, 2011)

Discussion

Although responses to the Jody McIntyre case appear confused and contradictory, I argue they all have in common an individualising response to disability which is used to first hide, and later legitimise the wider politics of neoliberalism. In the first example, disability is ‘something’ residing within Jody which is a hardship on his life: Jody the ‘cerebral palsy sufferer’. Disability is sexy, it makes headlines, and the discourse of poor, vulnerable Jody can be used to deflect covering issues of educational cuts young people were protesting about. In the second response disability remains ‘inside’ Jody, yet its burden is not one on Jody, but one on society: Jody, the drain on the welfare state. The discourse of Jody-as-scrummer sets him as an Other to be watched out for and blamed for the financial mess (Garthwaite, 2011). The final response is arguably the most neoliberal. It twists a call for equality into a call for sameness: Jody says he is equal to the rest of us, so let’s treat him the same: no matter whether this is a sameness we should be aspiring to. In some circumstances

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‘same treatment’ is legitimate: the police should treat Jody the same as other people, but this treatment should be consist of dignity and respect, rather than violence and humiliation. More widely, the paradoxical poison in the argument of ‘same treatment’ is that it is used to legitimise removing the very support and assistance that allows for disabled people to be the ‘economically productive’, ‘autonomous’ individuals neoliberal rhetoric encourages us to be.

In a controversial BBC interview (Brown, 2010) Jody continually attempts to widen the debate: directing conversation towards the education cuts young people were protesting about in the first place, as well as highlighting the disproportionate impact of slashing other public services, questioning the police’s role at demonstrations, and in society more generally. The interviewer, however, ensures Jody remains the focus of conversation. Asked if he was surprised by the interview tone, Jody replied: "not at all [...] because it's state television. Why do we so heavily criticise state television in other countries and then suggest that our state television would be impartial? I was at a demonstration against the government, and I'm then interviewed on television that works for the government. Why would they question me fairly?" (Cochrane, 2010) Perhaps neither should we be surprised at the frenzied attempt to withhold an individualistic response when two groups threatening the politics of neoliberalism meet. It is in the government’s interest for political active young people to be discredited as dangerous and idealist and for disabled people to be constituted as dependent and burdensome. Volatile youth, especially those disrupting the discourses of passivity surrounding disability, therefore, must be taken in hand.

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