[Slide 1]

Our hope for these evening seminars is that they will contribute in some way to a critique of disablement in the present moment – a moment which, as I’m sure you all know, is a pretty bleak one for disabled people and in which our ‘movement’ (if we can still use that word) is weak and fragmented. It’s our belief that questions of how and why we got here, and by extension what we do now, are multi-dimensional and complex. There’s no single answer to what’s gone wrong, and no ‘silver bullet’ for putting it right (and, as I’ll argue, we should be sceptical of anyone offering anything of the sort). My presentation today will look at one dynamic that I believe has contributed to our current weakness, but I hope comrades will raise others in both the discussion tonight and in future sessions.

[Slide 2]

This presentation has three objectives. Firstly, I want to indicate some loose and provisional ‘rules’ to bear in mind when we try to interrogate the present. These aren’t systematic – I’m conscious of the need to keep debate open – but situate our current weakness in a wider social context and free us from some of the less helpful explanations usually offered. Secondly, I want to outline what I’m calling the critique of ‘spontaneity’ from the early disabled people’s movement; far from being simply a negative critique (a stick to beat opponents with), I hope to show that it generated an approach to self-organisation that stressed the need for independent analysis and strategy. In short, accepting the critique of spontaneity entails an understanding of what self-organisation is for that is dynamic rather than reactive. Finally, I want to apply this critique to the DPM itself in the mid-to-late 1990s. The date is significant for two reasons: firstly because it is (nominally) when the movement was strongest and I think we need to recognise that contradictions develop when things are going well; and secondly because that period in the movement’s life is now a touch point for a lot of the younger disabled people I talk to. Various aspects of the period have become the subject of TV shows, exhibitions, and charity propaganda over the last couple of years: with contesting interpretations as to its meaning and legacy emerging from that (although nobody is open that that is what’s happening). A serious and critical engagement semms in order, although I can only make a small contribution to that tonight.

]Slide 3]

There are different ways of asking the question ‘how did we get here?’; which usually have more to do with what someone wants from an explanation than with anything being discussed. The quote on the slide is from an episode of the comedy program Blackadder Goes Forth, set in the trenches of the first world war. In one episode, the buffoonish sidekick Baldrick asks his superior officers a question: before, there wasn’t a war and now there is, how did we move from the one state of affairs to the other? His commander snaps back ‘Are you asking how the war started, Baldrick?’ – the joke being that Baldrick is too thick to formulate the question properly. I think that Baldrick actually nailed it: where his superiors look for a single cause for why conflicts start, Baldrick was calling on us to look at how ‘states of affairs’ move – how change emerges from existing social situations.

[Slide four]

So what was the ‘state of affairs’ that we have moved away from, and which is now being celebrated? The most neutral description I can give at this point is that the DPM in the 1990s was a mass social movement with the capacity to mobilise and unify its membership in several arenas. Plausible membership estimates from the time indicate that just under half a million disabled people were in some way linked with it, and that roughly one-hundred thousand were ‘active’ at its height. This mass membership pursued a wide range of activities – from service provision and art fora to sustained direct action campaigns -, and it was a highly efficient collective actor (ie, when it decided to do something, its opponents were forced to respond to it). At the national level it was co-ordinated by a federal body; which supported both its ability to mobilise and the regional and political infighting that always come with national bodies. At the grassroots, it had a flourishing cultural and intellectual life. Disabled people developed in it as human beings – it’s where they produced and performed art, worked and socialised, developed ideas together, and met their closest friends and romantic partners.

[Slide 5]

Reading much of the literature, and talking to older comrades who were ‘there’, has revealed three common explanations for how that state of affairs fell apart. Many claims involved in these may or may not be true – but I don’t think they really explain anything, and they beg more questions than they answer. The first is a kind of betrayal narrative. Certain people (exactly whom changes with whoever you’re talking to) are accused of using leading positions in the movement to feather their own nests and stab their comrades to do so. There are shameless opportunists in every movement, and more of us act opportunistically on occasion than we care to admit, but you actually need quite a lot of power to betray half a million people. If the details of betrayal are true, the question becomes ‘why was so-and-so in a position to betray the movement, and why could nobody stop them?’. The second argument looks at the movement more widely, and argues that there was simply too much infighting and disagreement for it to survive. What was needed was unity to push the agenda forward, and what we got were petty squabbles and one-upmanship. This account is empirically unconvincing. If it were true, you’d expect the DPM to split into several smaller, ideologically distinct factions: when in reality it dissolved. If there wasn’t unity, the question seems to ‘what were people meant to be unified around, and what prevented them rallying to it?’. The third account widens the scope still further, but ends up even more unsatisfying. It argues that the state, the charity sector, and elements of the judiciary acted to crush the movement – imposing laws, funding restrictions, and policies that made it all but impossible to survive. This is more plausible – Judy Hunt has brilliantly outlined how the Major and Blair governments courted the DPM while laying a policy framework which restricted its activity – but isn’t that just what establishments do to social movements? If the DPM existed as an enemy to the disability industry and a disabling state, it can’t expect them not to act in an antagonistic and disabling manner to them.

[slide 6]

Ultimately, I think there are at three elements which any good explanation of a social movement’s rise and decline should take into account. The first is an appreciation that movements are dynamic things with an organisational frame imposed on them. Often, there are different demands, ideas, ways of working, or understandings of the world within them, which get (more or less) tied together and turned into collective actions by formal organisation or informal norms. You have to describe that process and understand whether the methods used to make a ‘movement’ out diverse activity are adequate: do they include people and ideas you need, and exclude ones that are damaging?; do they allow you to use tactics appropriate to the situation you’re in?; do they support or restrict your ability to mobilise your members’ talents?; etc. Secondly, you need to go through the same descriptive process for your antagonists – what do they want?; how do they get it?; how do they work?; etc. Thirdly, you need at least some kind of an analysis of the world this is playing out in – the society-wide trends that influence what you and other actors can do. Most obviously, these come in the form of big social and political events – changes of government, wars, crises of the capitalist economy (all of which we have experienced recently). But they also manifest in the subterranean changes in civil society (or how people interact with each other and what they expect from each other).

[Slide 7]

Obviously, different elements of an explanation will focus on one or another of these factors more or less than others. The element I’m focussing on here takes off on from the first – the internal organisation and dynamic of the movement itself. I’m going to argue that, by the early ‘90s, the movement had lost both an element of its social critique and an organisational principle, and found itself without adequate replacements for either – making it vulnerable to external attack, internal division, and rapidly changing social and political landscapes. Unfortunately, making this argument involves a slight historical detour, which I’ll make as brief as possible.

[Slide 8]

What I’m calling the ‘critique of spontaneity’ was a response by disabled activists to the reform movements of the 1960s. These were largely centred around mass, crusading care and welfare charities who recognised the inhumanity with which disabled people were treated in long stay hospitals and the benefits system. They developed parallel services outside the welfare state and pressured the government to change the way welfare was organised. Unlike today, and for complex historical reasons, they also involved thousands of disabled people as social movement actors: Organisations like the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, the Spastics Society, or the Disablement Income Group simply couldn’t function at the time without a large mobilisation of disabled people who were expected to make promotional materials, go public speaking, and do a lot of the ground level organisational work which kept the charities going. This gave disabled members influence, but most of the decisions about what these reform movements did or why were taken by a professional cadre of leaders, representing the new technical and social professions of the post war period (medical and rehab workers, social scientists) and the old charity elite (the upper clergy and demobbed officers). This unequal alliance was, however, very effective – it could build both local networks and actual institutions, and it could create some degree of political change through elite pressure group politics. For want of a better word, I’ve described the reform movements as ‘pseudo-movements’: things that act like a social movement but aren’t controlled by the people they’re for.

[slide 9]

These pseudo-movements were spontaneous in two senses. Firstly, they presumed that what you do about a social problem was obvious from how that social problem looks. If disabled people are treated inhumanely in long-stay hospitals, the obvious answer was to give them somewhere else to live – with big batch care homes the easiest road to take. If disabled people were in poverty, the obvious solution was to demand more generous benefits – regardless of whether poverty was part of a bigger problem around social exclusion. The important point was that one was doing something – regardless of whether that ‘something’ was good enough, sustainable, or even what anyone really wanted. Secondly, they embraced spontaneity as an organising principle. Not having a plan allowed pseudo-movements to take opportunities whenever they came up, with relatively little strategic baggage that could alienate potential partners – especially governments and large donors. It was also fairly sexy as legends go; impulsive but hard working dogooders appeal to people in a way five year plans don’t, and appear unthreatening and useful to governments and industrialists looking to soft-ball a social problem.

[slide 10]

Cheshire quote

[slide 11]

The more opportunities the pseudo-movements got to influence the commanding heights of government, the more they took. Keeping these opportunities required not pissing off anyone who might one day have the power to act on your program – which absolutely freezes your strategic flexibility. Soon, the pseudo-movements began demobilising their disabled base in more or less brutal fashions. This base wasn’t actually needed to negotiate with ministers, civil servants or industrialists; and every time it opened its mouth it went off-script. Of course, such tactics are only justifiable while important people are in any sense interested in reform: and the powers that be eventually got distracted by bigger problems. The reform movements were abandoned and, with no strategic options to fall back on, resigned themselves to becoming common-or-garden disability charities. Despite this obvious and abject defeat, their leaders did personally quite well for themselves out of the experience (knighthoods, government jobs, secure funding streams, etc).

[Slide 12]

The critique of the spontaneous approach which led to these failures, developed by members of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), had four planks. Firstly, spontaneity doesn’t work: it doesn’t reach the outcomes it wants, and leaves you with no plan b when it fails. Secondly, it doesn’t question the appearance of the problems it deals with: things like poverty, institutionalisation, or mobility are treated as separate because they look like different problems affecting different groups of disabled people. Where obvious remedies exist, they are called for without questioning their potential harms. This leads to a general failure to develop a social critique and, therefore, any cogent vision of society in which disabled people are included and equal. Finally, it hoards opportunities amongst the elite of social movement actors: who can apply their skills and influence without preparation or division of labour, and are likely to pursue strategic opportunities that don’t require mass engagement. The best this can achieve is a kind of progressivist paternalism – where a small group of people speak and negotiate on behalf of largely passive mass. At worst, it creates all the means and incentives for those who can to grift.

[Slide 13]

Finkelstein quote

[Slide 14]

The positive aspect of this critique was that self-organised groups of disabled people, already emerging at the time, had an epistemological role as well as a practical one. By this I mean that self-organised groups weren’t just ‘the authentic voice of’ disabled people (a phrase used often at the time), but were in a unique position to produce a new kind of objective knowledge about the world and a practice for changing it. By stripping away professional and institutional interests, self-organised groups both removed a barrier to clearsighted analysis of the world, and prevented useful tactics being shut off when they conflicted with established interests or ways of working. Self-organisation thus created, for the first time, the possibility of a social and political strategy for disabled people which wasn’t simply a strategy of the disability professions. Conversely, if self-organised groups failed to develop and utilise such an independent strategy, or fell back into spontaneity, they would reproduce the same dynamics of failure and demobilisation as the pseudo-movements; where an elite organises a mass and hoards the opportunities for movement development.

[Slide 15]

So, finally, to the movement’s heyday

[Slide 16]

By the end of the 1980s, there is something we can call a Disabled People’s Movement which is self-organised the whole way down. From the smallest local arts group to its national federative body; every organ of this movement is controlled by disabled people. Officers and committees are elected and, while individual roles or bodies may have more power than ideally they should, there are few complaints about relations between leaders and grassroots. Broadly, self-organisation is also fulfilling its epistemological role – with two separate strategies vying within this movement (albeit very politely, with few open conflicts). This debate is between those who think that liberation is measured by the freedom of the disabled individual – whether they have the same life opportunities and entitlements as non-disabled peers – and those who believe it is to be measured by the degree of social transformation. This latter view, at its most basic, argues for disabled people’s control of disability services in the same way as the socialist left argued for workers’ control of industry. It consequently requires a universalist welfare state to work, in the same way the socialist vision requires full employment. As the Major and Blair governments dismantle the social contract built around the welfare state and structure a new contract around citizenship, however, this latter position is at a natural disadvantage. The actual strategy that follows takes advantage of the opportunities presented by the new social contract, and in practice dissolves this disagreement by default – without a tremendous amount of discussion from either side.

[Slide 17]

Nationally, the DPM was absorbed in two campaigns for the bulk of the 1990s; for anti-discrimination legislation (ADL), and for direct payments (or cash grants for people to buy their own support packages). There were, initially, competing ideas over what both demands were for, and how they should be pursued. In the ADL case the demand came from outside the Movement, being initially dreamt up by right wing elements in the labour party and liberal elements in the charity sector, with movement bodies only getting involved a decade into the campaign. For the section of the movement interested most in individual liberty, comprehensive legislation was a huge step towards personal freedom. Outlawing discrimination, *prima facie*, went a long way to equalising opportunity and increasing choice over where one goes and what one does. For the socialist left, it was conceived as something purely secondary to building local and national power. The idea was that disabled people would build strong organisations and pursue their goals, and campaign on legislative change (on civil rights or anything else) only when they thought the law was getting directly in their way. The first group wanted a sweeping change in the law, the latter several limited changes led by the demands of the movement itself. These were in principle compatible, but unlikely to survive any actual draft legislation available to them.

[Slide 18]

The Direct Payments campaign follows a similar pattern. Just giving people money to buy services was technically illegal, but in pockets it had been happening since the early eighties (sometimes forced by the Movement, and sometimes by local and central governments who ignored the law then they were in a fix). The privatisation and marketisation of care services in the early ‘90s created an obviously unequal system for disabled people who needed support – with local governments and providers having market rights, while the citizen did not. Just releasing the money was an obviously solution to this imbalance and, in the climate, seemed immensely politically possible. For the liberal wing of the movement, again, this was freedom: disabled people, bossed around for centuries by policy makers, doctors, and professionals, would finally become the boss and call the shots for themselves. For much of the socialist left, it was cautiously welcomed as a way to solve a short term technical problem linked to the movement’s growth (one too complex to go into here), but must be a secondary concern to re-establishing universal services under the movement’s control. As marketisation became entrenched and more heavily policed, however, any possibilities for doing this began to vanish.

[Slide 19]

By the middle of the decade then, the national organisation of the movement – the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP) – was involved in two campaigns focussed on parliament and involved in two rather odd alliances to pursue its aims: with the large national charities for ADL, and with Tory backbenchers for Direct Payments. Some unease was to be expected, but nominally it should not have prevented the grassroots doing whatever they wanted – the BCODP was supposedly their vehicle, not the other way round. In practice, the logic of the campaigns overruled members democracy. Getting legislation passed requires very little mass action, but a lot of expert research, negotiation, and fact finding. Experienced organisers were sucked out of local work into the national campaign, and campaigners with professional experience were promoted (often without a vote) to positions of leadership. Newer and less experienced local groups were left without the strategic support they needed to develop, and more established ones felt that the national body was taking resources from them without taking an interest in their concerns or priorities.

[Slide 20]

Both campaigns got legislation, but legislation they didn’t want. The Disability Discrimination Act, passed in 1995, contained opt outs for the vast majority of businesses and was only enforceable by taking someone to court – which few disabled people could afford. The Direct Payments Act from a year later made it possible for users to buy support on an open market, but at the expense of removing all protections for when that market failed. The only palpable result for many disabled activists was a loss of democratic control. The national organisation had spoken on their behalf, but had steadily been drifting away from their concerns; it had taken their organisers’ time, but had failed to act in its basic function of co-ordinating their affairs. BCODP AGMs and national meetings became completely dysfunctional from around the year 2000, with a mass walkout of member organisations four years later, and an official winding up a decade afterwards.

[Slide 21]

Understandably enough, the whole course of events was understood as a political and personal betrayal by many at the time, summed up in Linda Laurie from the Direct Action Network’s open letter in 2003 where she argues ‘‘The fight is between those of us on the left who believe that independent living is about more than just employing personal assistants and a largely middle class, white group of liberals’ out for policies that benefit them personally. I should note, this is probably the mildest sentence from Linda’s letter. ADL and Direct Payments probably did help the middle class disabled professional more than their working class counterpart, and some of its proponents certainly did get good jobs and social status despite the campaigns’ failures. But if the objection is that national leaders were middle class right-wingers, it doesn’t explain much to say that they acted like middle class right wingers. If the objection is that they had a cunning strategy to undermine the movement, the question becomes whether their political opponents had a strategy, and why it wasn’t successful against them

[Slide 22]

What seems more plausible is that both sides were overtaken by events and responded more or less spontaneously to opportunities and threats as they emerged; responses which were more unplanned and instinctive than they were co-ordinated or strategic. The development of a new social contract around individual and consumer rights did entail a set of opportunities for the liberal wing of the movement – it opened up a path to further some of their demands and, on a personal level, was probably quite attractive to many of their cadre who were already empowered consumers in some markets and didn’t see why they shouldn’t be in others. Taking advantage of these opportunities required a major restructure of the national movement away from grassroots work. In fairness to the liberal wing, there’s no evidence that they consciously pursued this policy, and there were real attempts by the liberal leadership to right this wrong after the campaigns had failed (although by then it was far too late). It seems to have just happened in the background while the leadership pursued a strategy they thought would have massive payoffs for the movement. The grassroots left, unfortunately, don’t come out with a much better strategic record. With much of their traditional activity under attack from the marketisation agenda, the more socialist self-organised groups spent most of their time trying to adapt to the changing social context; with very little capacity to either formulate a more adequate strategy or rally the base around it – as can be seen when you go into organisational minutes and memos of the time. Ultimately, there reached a point where they couldn’t muddle through any more, and no longer had the infrastructure or base of support to launch anything different had they had a plan.

[Final Slide]

So I guess the final question is what was missing? What might have prevented the Movement being overtaken by events and strong-armed into other people’s projects? It seems to me that we could do worse than start with a basic, if largely a-theoretical, list of things that the movement’s opponents almost certainly had. They’re also things that our opponents today definitely have – whether they be the state, private companies, charities, education authorities or whatever; so it makes sense to ask ourselves if we’re sure that we’re utilising them to. The first is at least reasonably well defined outcomes: we need to know what a win and a loss look like to figure out how we’d respond to them, and how pursuing a certain course of action might change our movement for better or for worse. Related to that, we need an understanding of what our movements are for and what they can do: does putting our energies into one kind of activity mean we have to sacrifice others, and is that sacrifice worth it?; how does a given strategy complement and strengthen stuff we’re already doing, or open up ways to do stuff we’d like to? We obviously need a similar analysis of our opponents and people who might end up on the same side of the barricades as us for different reasons: what are they in this fight for, and how will they fight it?; what pressures are on them to act in a certain way?, etc. Finally, I think we need at least some idea of how the world works. We still talk about the social model of disability a lot, thank God, but we talk less than ever about why and how this society disables people. To be slightly provocative, focussing just on barrier removal has itself become something of a barrier; even when we get rid of one of the buggers three more immediately jump up. Unless we have at least some working understanding of what makes them appear, we’re going to be playing whackamole for eternity. These are all questions where I’d expect us to disagree on the answers – which I think is good and healthy. Frankly, I think it’s better to have open and comradely disagreement now than bitter recriminations later.