

**THE  
POLITICS OF  
DISABLEMENT  
&  
PRECARIOUS  
WORK**

**Identity, Work, & The  
Centrality of Disablement  
to the Reproduction of  
Capitalist Social Relations**

**IOANA CERASELLA CHIS**

Doctoral researcher  
University of Birmingham  
Department of Political Science &  
International Studies

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# Proposals

1/4

- tweaking (and building on) the impaired - disabled dialectic proposed by the UPIAS-inspired social modelists
- that we analyse how capitalism (not simply 'society') is disabling
- the analytical usefulness of my proposed terms 'subjects of disablement' and 'disabling capitalism'
- explore broadly the work undertaken by the research participants.



# About the project

2/4

Interviews, diaries & post-diary interviews (in 2020) with:

- gig economy workers in various industries & contracts;
- self-identification: disabled, chronically ill, experiencing mental distress, being neurodivergent, and/or having impairments.

The project's RQs relate to (1) identity, (2) empirical findings on waged & unwaged work, (3) benefits of synthesising different theories.

Contributions aimed at Critical Political Economy, activist spaces, Disability Studies.



# Identity: *its changing meaning*

Marie Moran's 'cultural materialism' (using the work of Raymond Williams)

3/4

'Identity' = historically contingent concept; it has undergone a 'significant change of meaning' since the 1950s (Moran 2015:22).

- 16th Century - marker of sameness and indivisibility of a person - i.e. despite changes in one's life, one continues to remain oneself;
- two centuries later - the 'legal' use of identity (which still persists) with the invention of identity cards; 'identity theft' started to be a practice;
- from mid-20thC - a historically novel and dual understanding of identity - personal identity and social identity (2015; 2018; 2020) (also - consumerism vs radical politics)

# 'Models' of (approaches to) disability

4/4

e.g. medical, cultural, liberal, postmodern, social, bio-psycho-social, posthuman, charity, tragedy (27-A. J. Withers)

## BUT – main distinction:

- individual model (regards 'problems' within individuals' bodyminds – but also 'solutions' within individuals, too, e.g. liberal model)
- social model (emerged from a –broadly socialist– activist group in the 1970s – UPIAS\*; the 'problem' lies in how society is organised); society **disables people with impairments**; 'disabled' = political, social identity.

However, the social model's language has been appropriated over time (inc. by the DWP & liberal academics).

## Vic Finkelstein:

- the 'social model' has become a 'potpourri' (losing critical edge);
- Disability Studies has become 'Disabling Studies'.



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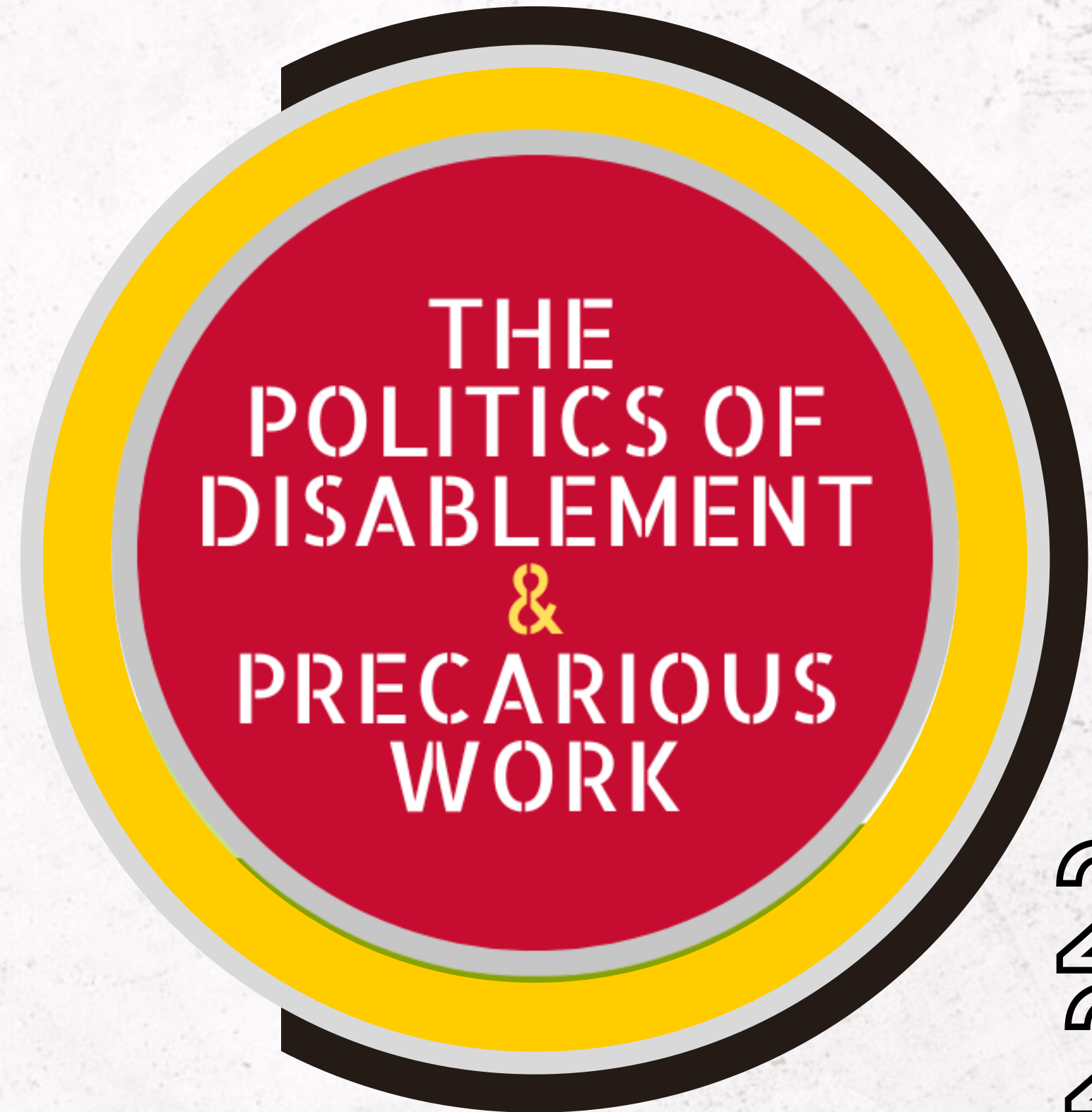
## Views on the 'social model'

Can discuss in the Q&A if this would be of interest.

*I build on the UPIAS-inspired social model.*

# Disability- & bodymind-related identities (1/6)

- 'disabled',
- 'neurodivergent',
- 'chronically ill',
- 'd/Deaf',
- 'experiencing mental distress'
- 'having impairments'



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# Disagreements in society & literatures (2/6)

- Different interpretations of 'disability' (models);
- Social modelists: 'disability' vs 'impairment'
- Some argue that chronic illness = 'energy impairment' & neurodivergence = 'social impairment'
- Some activists: mental distress is not an impairment; distress is problematically pathologised.



- In some literatures, neurodivergence is treated as an 'advantage' for productivity (reproducing 'productivity'-based hierarchies).
- In the UK, only 1/4 of those who are 'disabled' according to the law identify as such.
- Some people's claims to disability are being denied by the state, employers, 'professionals'.

*Rejection vs denial vs reservations*



# General Disagreements in academia (3/6)

The language and concepts used are 'all over the place'.



Even now, identity questions on disability mailing lists can lead to dozens of heated responses.

# Implications for activism (4/6)

- self-organised groups may focus on specific bodymind-related matters.
- siloed self-organising can result in unnecessary divisions;
- a divided language inhibits coalitional politics;



- language matters for groups' constitutions;
- differences over the naming of the coalition 'involved in monitoring the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' in 2017 led 'certain organisations to pull out' (Clifford 2020:311).

# Research participants' views (5/6)

## THE POLITICS OF DISABLEMENT & PRECARIOUS WORK

- No clear consensus among participants re. identification along disability and/or bodymind lines;
- 'Disabled' was used interchangeably with the other terms, exclusively; or not at all.
- Some participants did not use the term 'disabled' due to not wishing to 'claim' the term away from others;

However, all participants presented evidence of disablement-related oppression and exploitation - common material conditions of everyday life; they're subjected to disablement, which is central to the reproduction of capitalism.



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## Reasoning behind the search for a new concept: **subjects of disablement (6/6)**

- lack of consensus (everywhere);
- avoid long lists of different groups of people;
- avoid 'imposing' the term 'disabled' on those who don't use it;
- acknowledge the argument that 'mental distress' is not an impairment;
- not everyone who has an impairment, who is chronically ill, is aware of it;
- build on the (UPIAS-inspired) social model & combine it with recent Marxist work, link it to class & a theory.

# 'Class consciousness' & 'Class composition' theories (1/6)

Class-in-itself

Class-for-itself



The attention is on how to 'raise consciousness' – too psychologising & hierarchical; can lead to problematic practices.

# 'Class consciousness' & 'Class composition' theories (2/6)

Technical composition

Political composition

Working  
class people  
(exploited  
under  
capitalism)

How working  
class people  
organise  
themselves  
politically

# 'Disability consciousness' & the UPIAS-inspired social model (3/6)

I argue that the UPIAS-inspired social model adopts the following approach

## Disability-in-itself

Attention is on how to 'raise consciousness' (too psychologising & potentially hierarchical)

## Disability-for-itself

People with impairments

Disabled people

conscious of the fact that they are disabled

but 'impairments' is too restrictive (though it can be redefined)

# My 'disability composition' proposal (4/6)

Technical composition  
(how people are materially constituted)

Subjects of  
disablement

neurodivergent, impaired, chronically ill, d/Deaf, with experiences of mental distress, & other future identities/bodymind terms

Political composition  
(how people organise themselves politically)

Disabled  
people\*

\* and/or 'Mad', 'Crip' activism & other political groups

- how can *political* coalitions be built?
- what's the political difference between these political identities?




# Building on the UPIAS-inspired social model (5/6)

## 'Subjects of disablement'

= non-identitarian analytical concept that reflects the 'technical composition' of disability - for anti-capitalists to adopt;

= highlights structural subjectivation of people (neurodivergent, chronically ill, others) through disabling capitalism (point often missed);

= linked to the 'class composition theory'.



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# Key points (6/6)

**UPIAS-inspired social modelists argue that society disables people (BUT difficult to theorise 'society').**

**I would shift the focus to capitalism as disabling the subjects of disablement - disablement is central to the reproduction of capitalism.**

**Tweak the impaired-disabled dialectic and turn it into subjects of disablement-disabled instead.**

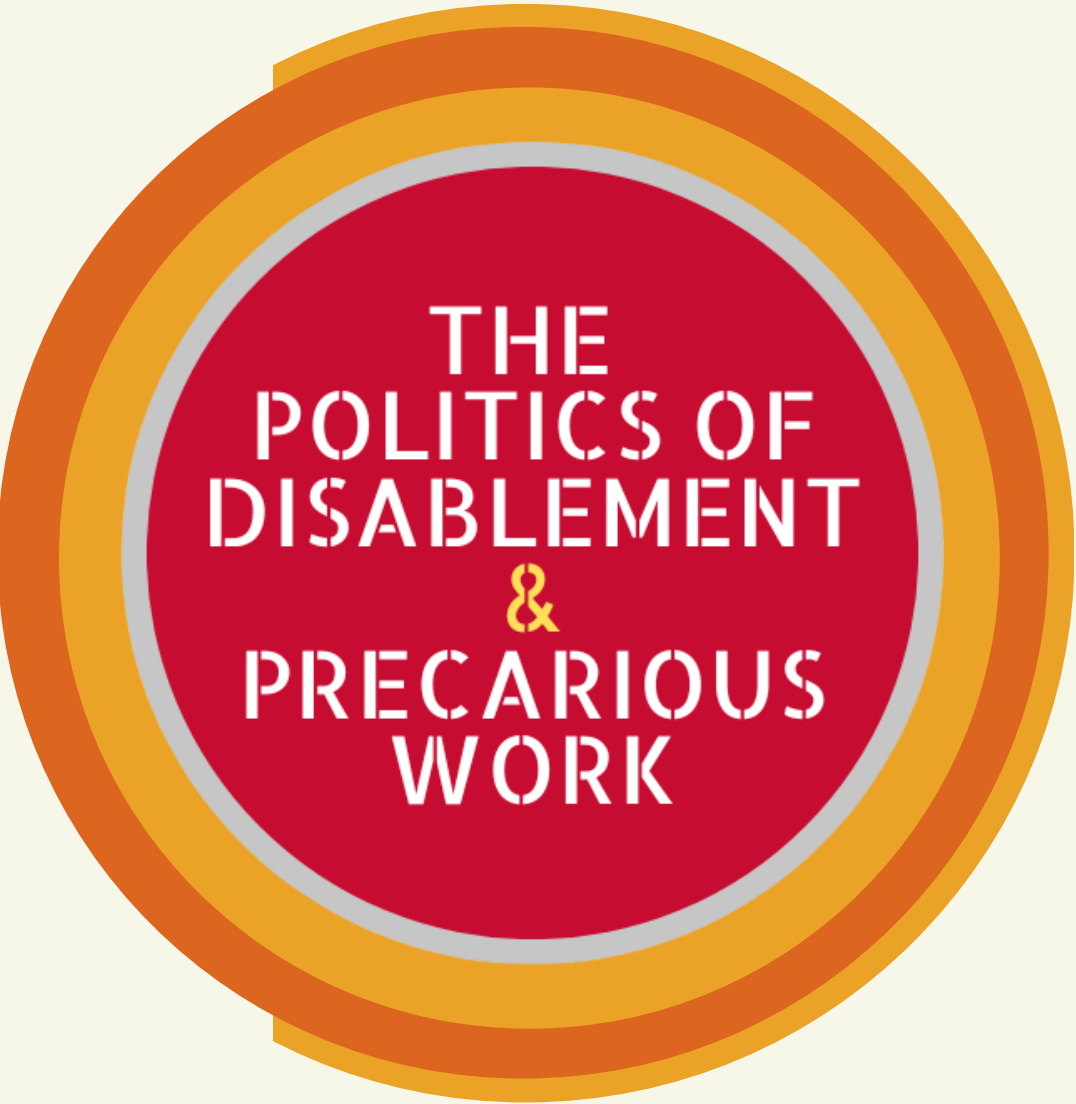
**Aim: the self-abolition of the collective identity 'disabled people' & disabling capitalism itself.**

# Navigating, negotiating, negating circumstances & demands of work (1/3)

I tried to overcome the privileging of waged work

## Spheres of activity:

- waged,
- working for the state and professionals,
- dealing with the individual model of disability through interactions with others,
- assistance and self-assistance work,
- subversion and collective self-activity,
- resting.



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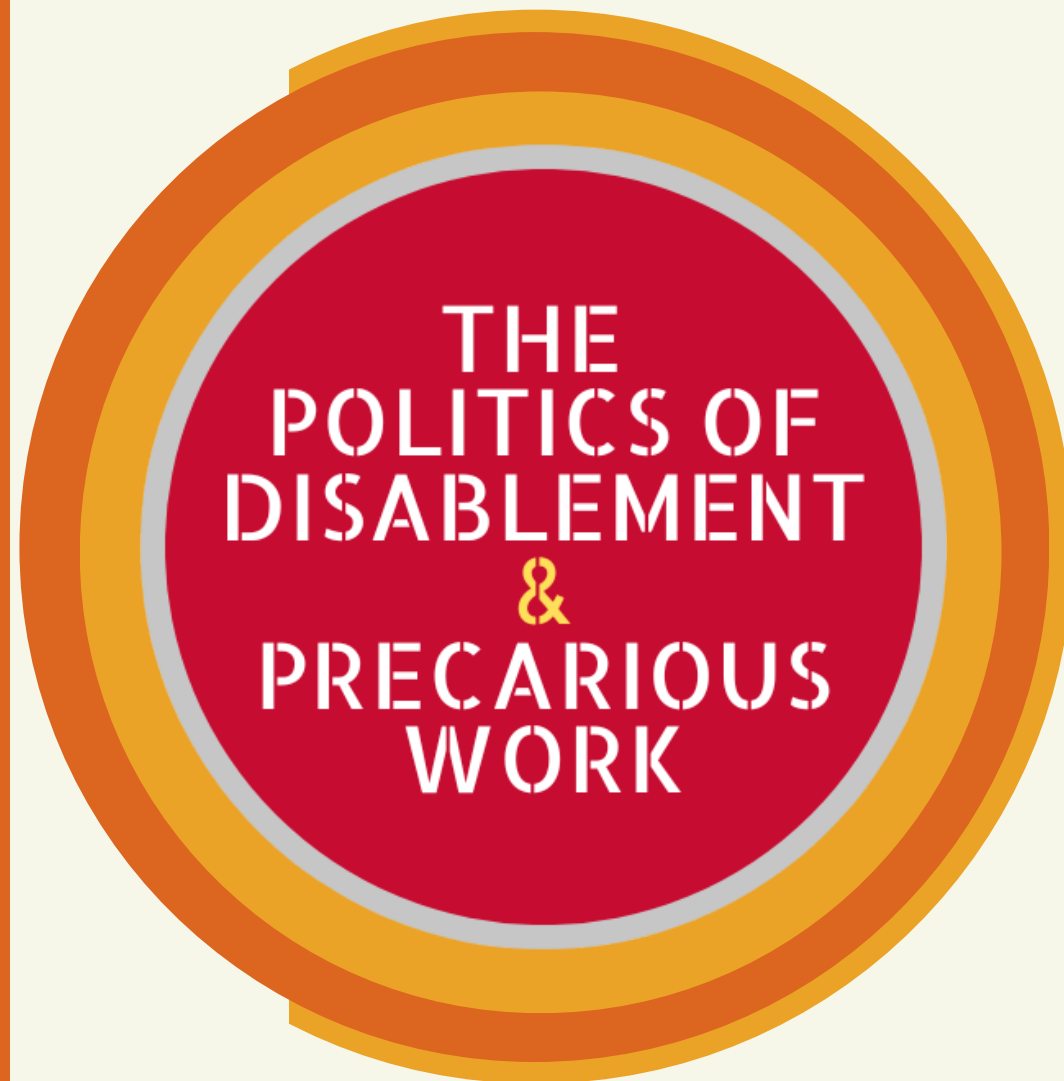
# What happens across the spheres (2/3)

## From the literature:

- 'work transfer' (Kirstin Munro & Nona Glazer);
- compelled to do more work as a mechanism of control (Harry Cleaver); less resourceful = more work.

## My proposals:

- work transfer – under constant struggle;
- resist work across most spheres of life (as it is imposed);
- expand prefigurative spheres of activity.

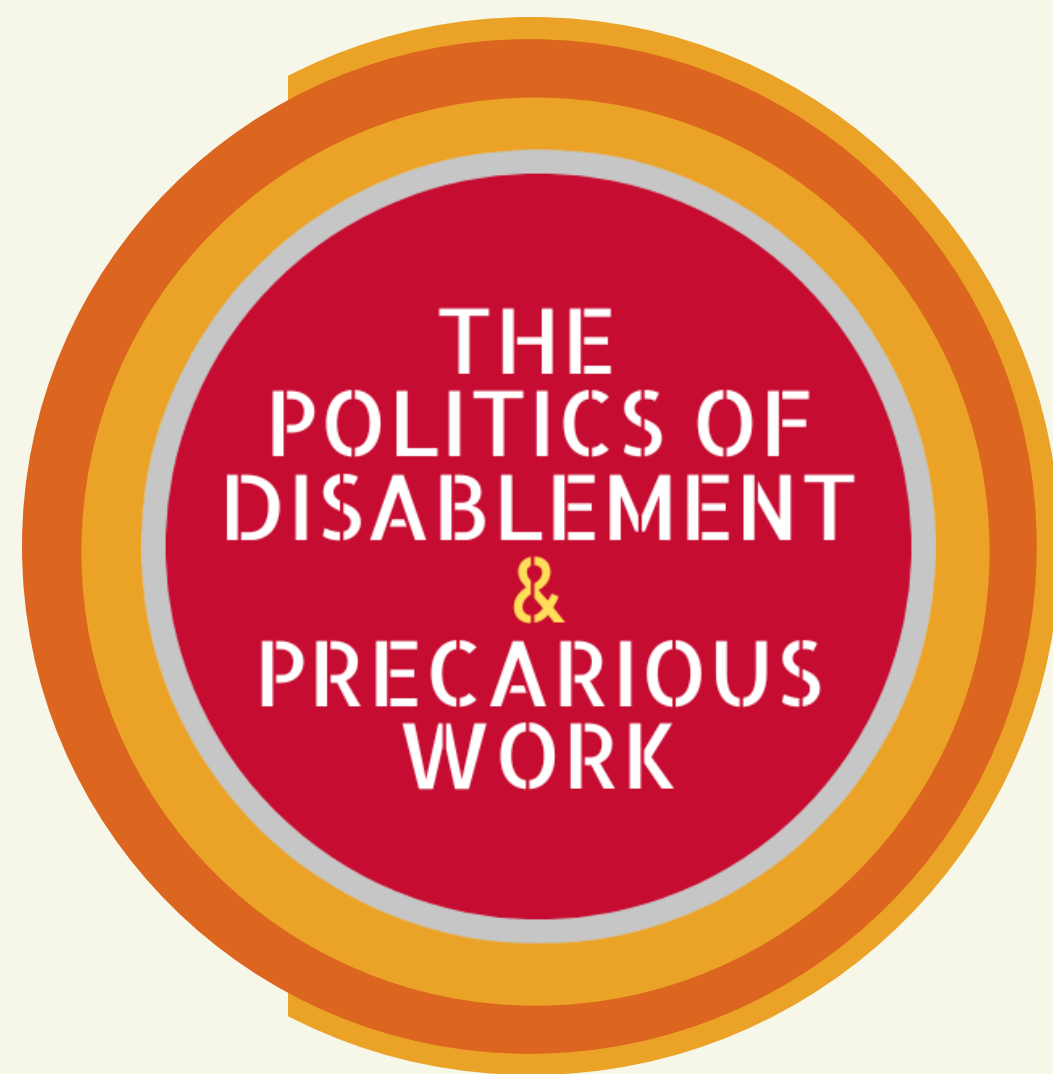


## What happens across the spheres (3/3)

Campaigns against social care charges (+ the closure of community centres, for Independent Living) are an active part of struggles over work, against disablement, and for prefiguration.

This should be recognised by trade unionists, Political Economy scholars & others.

Any struggles against capitalism are incomplete without embedding *structural disablement* and its subjection processes in analysis and praxis.



(optional)

## Views on the 'social model'

### Criticisms:

- 'old-fashioned and out of tune' (Goodley 2013:633),
- 'outdated ideology' (Shakespeare and Watson 2002);
- its adherents 'hijacked' the term 'disability' to 'render it into an indoctrination camp' and 'reintroduce it, under supervision, as part of the Politically Correct vocabulary of the day' (Miles 2011:10-11);
- the social model is underpinned by 'authoritarian Marxism and economic determinism' (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009:50).

### Adherents:

- Clifford - reinvigorating the social model & articulating a social model of impairment;
- Williams-Findlay - furthering the social interpretation of disability (UPIAS) & creating an eco-social model;
- Beresford, Graby, Chronic Illness Inclusion Project and others - expanded concepts and adapted the model to mental distress, neurodivergence, and chronic illness;
- Myself - creating a theory to accompany the UPIAS-inspired social model.