ABSTRACT
Despite solidarity being a central term in discussions about political struggle and allyship, the concept is rarely connected to disability in the scholarly literature. Historically, solidarity has often been theorised with respect to ideas of contribution through work, whereas disabled people have been presumed to be unable to contribute to the common good. Hence, there is a need to crip our understanding of the concept. Drawing on feminist and disability theory, I argue that a recognition of a shared vulnerability that implies mutual dependencies can be figured as the foundation of solidarity. This can serve as the basis for political alliances between different groups struggling together for societies where we carry our shared vulnerability as equals. This way of understanding solidarity has implications far beyond the field of disability studies, not least as an antidote to the ubiquity of austerity and workfare, targeting disenfranchised groups as well as the working class more generally.

KEYWORDS
solidarity, crip theory, vulnerability, disability theory, precarity, disability movement

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1. Introduction
How can disability theory and activism help us rethink the meaning of solidarity? Building on insights from critical disability studies and feminist political theory, and engaging with gaps within the theoretical literature on the concept, this article responds by advancing two arguments.

First, I show that dominant theoretical conceptions of solidarity, within historical and contemporary scholarship, neglect disability, since they tend to take for granted a norm-complying body that is able to work.

My second argument is that disability theory and activism offer resources that can help us to rethink solidarity. Not only will this counter the exclusion of disabled people\(^1\) from understandings of solidarity, but also contribute to resituating the struggles of the disabled people’s movement at the centre of a political current of permanent austerity, workfare policy, and far-reaching individualisation of social problems. A large number of studies have shown that these welfare policy trends institute and mobilise a division between working and non-working people. A crippled understanding of solidarity can counter this division by drawing attention to how vulnerability destabilises the boundaries between these groups.

Thus, the purpose of this article is not to invent a new version of solidarity, but to show how disability scholars and feminist theorists have provided us with tools to rearticulate our understanding of the concept, producing an understanding of solidarity that resonates with the social struggles of the disabled people’s movement. The analysis follows a long scholarly tradition of examining how common notions of societal belonging and citizenship is saturated with ideology regarding how bodies ought to function (see McRuer, 2006; Siebers, 2008; Vaahtera, 2012). Inspired by how Alison Kafer’s (2013) analyses ableist assumptions underpinning theorisations of time in order to rethink this concept beyond the dictates of normalcy, I believe that there is a need to draw on theorisations of disability to rethink political struggle and social cohesion. Crippling the concept of solidarity, then, is to reimagine the concept in light of what it has excluded.

The article is structured as follows. It opens with a review of historical understandings of solidarity. This section is followed by a discussion of the contemporary literature of the concept and its gaps with respect to disabled people. After a short discussion of austerity politics and the resulting amplification of precariousness, I explore how notions of vulnerability and embodiment, developed by disability theorists and feminist scholars, can be seen as a central aspect of what it is to be human. I go on to argue that the idea of vulnerability as a defining characteristic of humanity contains a vision of solidarity. In the concluding discussion, I consider how these arguments have implications for how we perceive the meaning of social justice more broadly.

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1. As argued below, I see disability as produced at the intersection of our bodily and social vulnerability, rendering the distinction between biology and society hard to uphold. Individuals are disabled by how social organisation and discursive categorisations relate to and make sense of different ways of functioning. Hence, I use the term “disabled people” rather than “people with disabilities”.

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2. Solidarity Theory and the Exclusion of Disability

2.1 Solidarity in the Marxist and Sociological Traditions

To introduce the ideas still shaping common notions of solidarity, it is useful to start by accounting for the origins of the concept. The word “solidarity” derives from Latin, denoting group liability of joint debtors. This is also the meaning of the concept that appears in Napoleon’s Civil Code of 1804 (Liedman, 1999, 15). During the first half of the 19th century, the substance would gradually shift towards emotional and normative readiness for mutual support, seen as a way of balancing individualism with a sense of community (Stjernø, 2004, 26–27). The relational component has been maintained in most understandings of solidarity since, distinguishing it from “empathy” and “charity” (see Bayertz, 1999), which are both commonly understood as one-directional in nature.

The first political thinkers to pick up the concept were utopian socialists. For Charles Fourier, in his vision of life in the phalanx, solidarity was figured as an all-embracing sense of community rooted in the division of labour. The fact that people specialised in producing different things created mutual dependencies among community members (Liedman, 1999, 16; Stjernø, 2004, 27–28). Another attempt to pin down the concept is found in Pierre Leroux’s De l’Humanité (1840) (see Bakunin, 1976; Stjernø, 2004). Here, solidarity is clearly distinguished from charity, but also contrasted against the idea of a social contract. Just like Fourier, Leroux understood solidarity as embracing society as a whole, although not in a future utopia. Instead, Leroux argued that a permeating ethos of solidarity could transform the existing society from within, where his version of socialism was figured as an increasing sense of companionship among the members of society (see Stjernø, 2004, 27–28).

Rather than dreaming of small-scale utopias or relying on rose-tinted idealism, Karl Marx understood society as developing through class struggle. Marx himself did not use “solidarity” as an analytical concept. For him, it belonged in the domain of propaganda (see Liedman, 1999, 19–20). However, in the inaugural address and general rules of the first international, co-authored by Marx, the term denotes the unity of workers, where the meaning of “solidarity” is akin to “class consciousness” (The First International Working Men’s Association, 1864). This interpretation strongly influenced how socialists came to use the concept. From this perspective, solidarity meant acting together in the interests of one’s class, against social classes of opposite interests. Importantly, class solidarity implied an adversary that the unity of the working class would eventually defeat (see Smith, 2015, 160). Hence, solidarity was seen as an instrumental concept: rather than a goal in itself or a fundamental building block of “the good society”, solidarity denoted social bonds between people united to overthrow capitalism (see Stjernø, 2004, 42; Smith, 2015, 160).

The early Marxist interpretation of solidarity presumed a subject incorporated into the capitalist mode of production (see Smith, 2015, 159–161). Although Marxist ideas certainly can be applied to understand disability as a social phenomenon (see Oliver, 1996; Abberley, 1998 for a critical commentary), early Marxists were not
overly concerned with groups not easily incorporated into the class hierarchy. As is pointed to by Staffan Bengtsson (2017), Marx himself excluded disabled people from the forces of social change, as he believed that they were unlikely to develop class consciousness. In the same period that the European labour movements developed, largely inspired by and developing Marx’s analysis, state concerns about unproductive groups with bodies and brains that defied societal norms accelerated, giving rise to classification instruments of disabilities and mental illnesses (Altermark, 2017; Stone, 1984; Rapley, 2004). Deborah Stone (1984) argues that the category of disability evolved in close relation to wage labour, being used to delimit groups that were seen as having legitimate reasons not to work. But these processes are largely a blank spot in Marxist analysis, also of later dates. Hence, when “solidarity” took shape in the European labour movement as a concept of social struggle, people whose bodily functioning excluded them from labour were not seen as subjects of solidarity.

In parallel with the advent of the labour movement, solidarity was developed in another direction by the first generation of social scientists. Throughout the 19th century, as traditional moral authorities lost influence and society underwent dramatic changes, a recurring problem occupying social theorists was the perception of a lost sense of community (Laitinen and Pessi, 2015; Liedman, 1999, 17). In this context, August Comte ([1852]1973) argued that one of the main tasks of governments was to instil a communal sense of togetherness (see Liedman, 1999, 17–18). Responding to the same problem, Émile Durkheim ([1893]1984) provided an elaborate argument concerning the threat of atomism in his book *The Division of Labour in Society* (see Smith, 2015, 160–161 for insightful commentary). In contrast to Comte, he believed that an old form of “mechanic solidarity” based on sameness and upheld by traditional moral authorities such as the church, was in the process of being replaced by what he termed “organic solidarity” (Durkheim, [1893]1984). This new form of solidarity was grounded in the division of labour, echoing Fourier’s ideas but scaled up to a societal level: increased specialisation created interdependence among the members of society, which gave rise to a new and less hierarchical form of social cohesion, not based on shared beliefs, but on interdependencies stemming from the fact that people produced different things. In contrast to Marxist interpretations, solidarity for Durkheim was not a transformative concept, but an integrative mechanism and guarantee of societal harmony (see Liedman, 1999, 40–41; Stjernø, 2004, 39).

Where does this leave us with respect to disabled people? Smith (2015) notes that “work” reappears in the most influential historical accounts of solidarity. In Marxist analysis, “labour” is a defining activity of human beings, closely linked to self-expression and perceived as necessary for social bonds to persist and human relations to flourish. In his writings on solidarity, Durkheim analysed the organisation of labour as central to the ideals that held societies together. The dominance of accounts of solidarity focusing on work is an expression of how the latter half of the 19th century was strongly influenced by industrialisation, making the organisation of work and the
economy central concerns. The flip side of this was a growing governmental interest in people seen as unable to work, groups which were often blamed for causing social unrest and burdening society with rising costs (see Altermark, 2017; Axelsson, 2007; Rapley, 2004). Following this, labour came to be seen as a moral duty, which allowed for the depiction of unproductive groups as morally inferior. The development of classification instruments categorising people who could not work allowed governments to target such “unproductive” groups with interventions, such as institutionalisation and sterilisation programmes (Altermark, 2017; Rapley, 2004).

In other words, the conceptual relation between solidarity and work was developed in a time period when governments were preoccupied with the regulation of groups perceived as unable to contribute to the common good. Whereas solidarity came to be seen as the unity of working people, within a class or society at large, disability came into being as a concept largely representing people who were perceived as problematic because of their inability to work. The conceptions of solidarity that developed in this period were not able to accommodate disability since they took for granted the separation of disabled people from the working force.

2.2 Solidarity and Labour: From Struggle to Social Cohesion

To understand the importance of the conceptual link between solidarity and work, it is necessary to consider how “solidarity” has been used to legitimise the formation of both labour movements and welfare systems.

In the first decades of the 20th century, most reformist parties and unions operated within the parameters of the two parallel conceptions of solidarity described above (Stjernø, 2004). Although class solidarity was the dominant version, the fact that prominent Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein also talked about solidarity in a Durkheimian way would allow for a gradual shift within the labour movements, towards solidarity as a notion of societal and national unity (Stjernø, 2004, 48). Over the course of the 20th century, most social-democratic parties came to embrace a view of solidarity as social cohesion.

This occurred first in Scandinavia, when the social-democratic parties expanded their targeted voters and political partners to include both farmers and segments of the middle class (Berman, 2006, 155–157, 166; Hort, 2014, 104; Stjernø, 2004, 101–102). The expansion of the Scandinavian welfare states required class compromises and the language of “class solidarity” was not conducive to achieving this strategy (see Wennerhag and Lindgren, 2018). Thus, as class struggle was toned down and class compromises took precedence, the view of solidarity as societal cohesion came to dominate from the 1930s and onwards (see Stjernø, 2004). In line with the discussion above, however, a strong focus on work was maintained: the welfare systems that were developed by Nordic social democrats were premised on a social contract that not only included social rights, but also a duty to work. Hence, whilst the Scandinavian social-democratic parties built expansive and redistributive welfare systems, they also targeted people who were seen as unable to work with repressive and paternalistic policies (Altermark, 2018; Grunewald, 2008).
In the rest of Europe, the shift towards solidarity as social cohesion would occur later as compared to the Nordics, but it was also less pronounced. Still, towards the end of the 20th century, there was a revival of the concept in several European countries, where solidarity was reappearing in public discourse as a concept of social unity. For example, in the UK, “New Labour” linked solidarity to the duty to work, inspired by the social theory of Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1998; Liedman, 1999, 30–33; Stjernø, 2004, 137–138). At the same time, Tony Blair’s government cut welfare expenses and enforced stricter controls on people relying on state support. In their 1989 programme, the German SPD described solidarity as a component of a prospering national economy, linking solidarity to labour (Stjernø, 2004, 103, 107), and under Francois Mitterand’s presidency in France, solidarity was a central ideological term related to national unity (see Schotters, 2017; Stjernø, 2004, 164). European socialist organisations insisting on a class-based conception of solidarity, on the other hand, tended to become politically marginalised and detached from the evolvement of the welfare systems.

In this way, the history of solidarity exposes a drift, where solidarity is increasingly detached from the Marxist tradition and from discussions of social struggle. Considered with respect to disabled people, however, solidarity continued to be intimately tied to labour and this was a problem, given that disabled people for the most part were preconceived as being unable to work. Despite the fact that the concept underwent a significant transformation within labour movements, the subject of solidarity continues to be that of the worker, unemployed worker, or temporarily sick worker. This obscures from view the fact that certain bodily functions are necessary to qualify as part of the labour force in the first place, given the ways in which work is currently organised.

2.3 Contemporary Conceptions of Solidarity and the Absence of Disability

Clearly, the conceptual history of solidarity cannot be reduced to the broad outline sketched above. First of all, we need to note that the historical struggles of disabled people have often used “solidarity” as a central concept. Yet, the history of the independent-living movement, the activism for de-institutionalisation, or current movements fighting austerity, are not part of the historiography of the concept. This is a result of the taken-for-granted exclusion of disabled people in prior historical periods, but it is worth stressing that new theorisations of solidarity may provide the basis for new empirical studies of disability activism that can remedy this neglect.

Second, influential theoretical work on solidarity also excludes important dimensions of the concept as in the history of working-class organisation. Solidarity as used by the labour movements has been considerably broader than that suggested by the most prominent theorists of the concept. Although dominant conceptions of solidarity have focused on work, class, and social cohesion, there is no doubt that the fragility of the human body was central to actual working-class activism and union organisation. For example, human vulnerability, and the unequal distribution of
precarity along the lines of class, were central in struggles for welfare protection and improved working conditions. However, as seen above, these insights were not developed by the prominent theorists of the concept.

These omissions still haunt current theoretical debates. Kurt Bayertz’s (1999) typology of conceptions of solidarity provides a useful way to map the contemporary scholarly literature on solidarity. First, Bayertz specifies human solidarity, embracing all of humankind. Here, we both find elaborations of solidarity as anchored in the view that we are all parts of God’s creation and secular ideas of universal moral responsibilities springing from our shared humanity (Bayertz, 1999). This tradition is primarily developed by Catholic social thought and related theological traditions. Secondly, there is solidarity as social cohesion within a particular society; what I refer to above as the sociological tradition. The influence of Durkheim is still strong in this literature (see Cladis, 2005; Pope and Johnson, 1983; Thijssen, 2012), but there are also attempts to theorise societal togetherness based on other grounds than employment. For example, Jürgen Habermas’s (1990) work on solidarity and justice has influenced a number of accounts of solidarity and the literature discussing solidarity with respect to nationalism, multiculturalism, and citizenship can also be seen as belonging to this category (see Banting and Kymlicka, 2017). These elaborations have in common that they do not see solidarity as a transformative concept linked to social struggles. Third, there is political solidarity, to a large extent developed in the work of Sally Scholz (2007, 2008, 2015), where solidarity denotes the relations between people united in struggles for a political cause. Class solidarity, as discussed above, falls into this category and is still central for scholars focusing on working-class organisation (see Morgan and Pulignano, 2020). Scholz’s understanding of the concept, however, is broader, encompassing all solidaristic relations between people acting together for a political cause. Fourth, Bayertz identifies civic solidarity in discussions about welfare arrangements as expressions of solidarity that protect citizens from harms that may hamper their civic engagement (see Scholz, 2007, 39). Traversing these categories, there are ongoing theoretical debates around matters such as whether solidarity is a motive, a practice, or a relation (see Thalos, 2012; Scholz, 2015); the nature of the relation between solidarity and justice (see Geary, 2012; Habermas, 1990; Heyd, 2007) and how the concept relates to equality and reciprocity (see Bayertz, 1999; Scholz, 2015).

As is evident from this overview, despite the fact that the link between solidarity and wage labour is less pronounced in the contemporary literature, disability is largely absent. Instead of work, much of the literature takes as its starting point the reciprocity of the concept, producing a recurring focus on mutual contribution. Since disabled people are still socially devalued, oftentimes excluded from labour by discrimination, and constructed as unproductive targets of charity (Watermeyer, 2007), their political struggles are still absent from the solidarity literature.2

2. My argument here is not meant to imply that disabled people cannot work or contribute. The point is that the group is commonly perceived in that way and my argument is that this perception takes us some way towards explaining why the group is neglected in theoretical work on solidarity.
This critique echoes how feminist socialists criticised orthodox Marxism in the 1970s:

To the extent to which capital has recruited the man and turned him into a wage laborer, it has created a fracture between him and all the other proletarians without a wage who, not participating directly in social production, were thus presumed incapable of being the subjects of social revolt (Della Costa and James, 1972, 10).

The point here is not that women (or disabled people) cannot work or contribute, but that the central place taken up by wage labour in our social imaginary, coupled with the construction of some groups as unproductive, have exclusionary effects.

Before proceeding, we need to pick up on one last point of the solidarity literature. According to Bayertz’s categorisation, throughout the 20th century, solidarity moved from primarily being understood in terms of political solidarity to increasingly being theorised as social cohesion. In this process, the transformative potential of the concept receded to the background, also in political discourse. Despite this, solidarity is still today being used in social movements to make sense of allyship in social struggles. Thereby, theoretical understandings of solidarity are increasingly detached from how it is productively used by social movements. This implies that the exercise of crippling solidarity also needs to revive the concept as a way of making sense of societal change.

3. Vulnerability as the Foundation of Solidarity

3.1 Welfare Retrenchment and the Need for New Conceptions of Solidarity

As evidenced by the historical exposé above, solidarity is socially and politically embedded. It is therefore useful to relate the theoretical discussions to our current political situation.

Welfare state retrenchment, austerity politics, and workfare have been important features of most developed capitalist economies in the last few decades, with profound impacts on disabled people as well as the general population. This has led to less generous social insurances, stricter eligibility criteria, and the introduction of activation requirements to be granted economic support. These developments have created immense pressures on groups that are unable to work as a result of sickness, disability, or the lack of accommodation and accessibility (see Malli et al., 2018; Norberg, 2019). Meanwhile, for the broad working class, welfare retrenchment and workfare have produced increasing labour supply, strengthening the bargaining position of employers, whilst social safety nets are eroded (see Jessop, 1993). This leaves large shares of the population in a more precarious position.

Welfare state retrenchment is commonly associated with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Pierson’s (1996) notion of a “new politics of welfare” highlights the dilemma of governments in this period. According to Pierson, governments faced a choice between unpopular cutbacks or economic recession. As a
consequence, welfare policy has been characterised by blame avoidance, where politicians construct arguments that avert responsibility for welfare retrenchment (Pierson, 1996). The ongoing discussion about benefit fraud in many countries (see Altermark, 2017, 2020) has been of special importance in the context of disability policy, where social insurance systems targeting disabled people are described as systematically targeted by overuse. This, in turn, delegitimise these systems and make cutbacks more acceptable.

These developments are useful to illustrate the need to crip our notions of solidarity. There appears to be a joint interest of the working poor, disabled people, and broader segments of the population, to counter these developments. However, unions and leftist political parties have all too often ignored the needs of people who are deemed to have “special needs”. This mirrors the exclusionary history of solidarity reviewed above: ideas of solidarity based on work and contribution cannot explain how non-disabled people can form solidaristic relations with people who are perceived as unable to contribute. Sometimes, appeals to the “suffering” of disabled people are mobilised in resistance against welfare state retrenchment. But this produces the risk that the group is represented as passive recipients of charity rather than being seen as citizens and allies.

Hence, austerity politics highlight the need for a notion of solidarity that traverses the boundary between disabled people and other groups increasingly exposed by austerity. At least in the Scandinavian context, disabled activists have argued that the fact that anyone can become dependent on disability services can serve as a ground for broader political alliances. The question now is what this idea would look like as a political theory of solidarity.

### 3.2 Our Vulnerabilities

What would happen if we reconsidered solidarity in light of what it has historically excluded, that is, disability as a lived embodied experience and as a category that divides people based on how their bodies and brains function?

In order to find out, we shall start with how feminist theorists have questioned some common presumptions inherent to the Western tradition of political theory. The reason for this is that the exclusion of disability from conceptions of solidarity is connected to a more general tendency in Western political thinking to make independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency central to how human beings are defined. Such ideas have recurrently been targeted by feminist critique. The mechanisms operating here are perhaps most clearly expressed in political thinking that hinges societal belonging on contribution. The feminist political theorist Carol Pateman (1988) argues that liberal democracies are entrenched by an imaginary of society as founded on a social contract. According to this model, the state is justified by being seen as the outcome of a fictional contract, where citizens willingly surrender themselves to laws and institutions in return for security, rule of law, or protection of basic freedoms.
Most versions of contract theory presume that contracting parties are motivated by self-interest, which has led many political philosophers to the conclusion that a contract only can be instituted between agents that are contributing to the common good, since there would be no reason for a self-interested person to voluntarily include people that are burdening the public. The logics of this argument is parallel to how solidarity operates in versions emphasising mutual contribution, which essentially see solidarity as a contract where partaking parties cooperate to achieve shared goals, excluding groups presumed to be unable to contribute.

Critically examining the premises of contract theory, Clifford Simplican (2015) argues that this tradition is premised on a capacity contract, where partaking citizens are presumed to be able to take care of themselves and provide for society. This is why prominent contract thinkers such as John Locke and John Rawls deal with these groups outside of their general contract theory. Rawls, for example, explicitly states the assumption that contracting parties have intellectual abilities that lie within the “normal range” (Rawls, 1971, 83–84), which has also been pointed out in Martha Nussbaum’s (2006, 104, 117) critical engagement. Similar exclusionary mechanisms are also found in the thinking of philosophers not working in the social contract tradition, exemplified by David Hume’s omission of people with “lesser bodies and minds” or John Stuart Mill’s exclusion of people that he perceived as suffering from deficient faculties of reason (Altermark, 2018).

This line of critique draws attention to the fact that Western political philosophy is inhabited by a subject presumed to have certain qualities and characteristics figured as necessary in order to be a full member of the political community. These characteristics are usually described as amounting to being independent and rational (Lemke, 2012; Read, 2009). From this perspective, our lives are seen as the aggregate results of the choices we make, ignoring that all of us are exposed to conditions and events that are far beyond our control. Meanwhile, groups that supposedly fail to meet these ideals are depicted as problems that need to be excluded from common notions of justice and citizenship. Hence, the relationship between independence, the capacity to contribute, and societal belonging, revealed by feminist critiques of the Western political tradition, mirrors the discussion about work and solidarity above: inclusion is premised on a yardstick that certain subjects are understood as failing to pass.

Against this tradition, feminist political theorists have argued that the ideals of independence and rationality constitute a mythology that ignores fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. For example, feminist work on the ethics of care, as espoused by Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Tronto (1993) among others, proposes that the ideals of independence and self-sufficiency need to be replaced with an understanding of humans as vulnerable and therefore interdependent (see Fine, 2004, 218; Pettersen, 2011, 55). Humanity is not defined by our presumed rationality or capacity to direct our own lives, but by a set of mutual needs that must be fulfilled for independence and self-determination to be meaningful. As a response to interdependency, theorists in this tradition argue that “care” should be understood as a
fundamental activity for any functioning society. Along the same lines, Martha Fineman (2010) argues that interdependency is constitutive of what it means to be human and that this needs to be reflected in our institutional architecture and legal frameworks. For Fineman, “the responsive state” serves as a way of discussing how public institutions can respond to our universal vulnerability. From a post-structural perspective, Judith Butler (2004, 2005) discusses human vulnerability as foundational for social relatedness, where our exposure and openness to the world also means that we are necessarily tied up with each other. Erinn Gilson (2016, 72) summarises the ethos of these and related feminist interventions, arguing that:

"vulnerability is not merely a condition that we are obliged to ameliorate but, when considered in the more fundamental sense, is also the ground for our responsiveness to one another."

Importantly, the point here is not to call for special support for groups that are figured as exposed and in need of help. As Kate Brown (2011) has noted, such discourses have often justified paternalism and reduced members of so-called “vulnerable groups” to being seen as passive victims, a tendency that Clough (2017) has pointed to as dangerous in the context of disability politics. In contrast, the feminist philosophers discussed here stress vulnerability as shared and fundamental in all human lives. In her discussion about disability and feminist perspectives on vulnerability, Scully (2014) calls this an “ontological vulnerability”, which detaches the concept from associations with passivity and helplessness, instead opening up for ideas of vulnerability as a source of political imagination (see Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, 2016). Thus, the mobilisation of vulnerability seeks to replace the fiction of independence and self-sufficiency with an understanding of human beings as vulnerable and therefore in need of social networks and institutions of support.

To see how this has the potential of informing a notion of solidarity that bridges the divide between “disability” and “normalcy”, we need to consider how vulnerability is figured as a grounding condition of all human lives in this tradition. In most of the accounts discussed so far, vulnerability is rooted in our embodiment; the fact that we live our lives in bodies that are unpredictable and open to injury means that our ways of functioning can change.

However, exposure and vulnerability can also be seen as related to our social roles and assigned identities. From this perspective, Butler discusses precariousness (which is the term she uses in her later work on the topic, as discussed further below) as related to her social ontology. In Excitable Speech, Butler (1997, 1–2) examines the implications of a social understanding of subjectivity, arguing that discursive frames of reference condition our identity and that this implies a fundamental vulnerability with respect to culture, norms, and language. We come to exist and understand ourselves provided a language that is prior to us. Butler (2005, 35–36) talks of this as an “exposure”, highlighting that other people, equally exposed, are always implied in processes of subject formation. For this reason, “the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own (Butler, 2004, 21)”; the categories that operate as preconditions for the social constitution of subjects—such as “normal”/“deviant”
and “male”/“female” – are never of our own choosing. Yet, from the day that we are born, social categorisations are used to recognise what kinds of persons we are.

Brought to bear on disability and disability politics, consider here how the authority of norms, institutions, sciences, laws, and regulations are involved when subjectivities are being shaped, epitomised by the calming utterance of the midwife nurse that “everything looks normal”. Consider how the division between “normal” and “deviant” is used to construct categories of disability, by standards, tests, and intervention schemes that prescribe how various deviances are to be handled (see Hettema, 2014, 495). In this vein, disability theorists have often analysed normalcy as a construction, based on the ideals of autonomy and independence discussed above (see Scully, 2014, 212; Verstraete, 2007), which simultaneously produces disabled people as deviant outsiders (Altermark, 2018; Goodley, 2014; Simons and Masschelein, 2005).

This means that there are two senses of vulnerability: on the one hand, the vulnerability stemming from encounters between fragile bodies and the world. On the other hand, the vulnerability resulting from the ways in which discourse preconditions how these interactions and their outcomes are made sense of. It is possible to interpret much work within critical disability studies as analysing how our vulnerability to discursive categorisations leads to stigmatisation and devaluation of the manifest expressions of our embodied vulnerability. From this perspective, the mythology of independence and self-sufficiency produces disabled people as an abject outside of how human beings ought to function (see Foucault, 1982; Goodley, 2014; Kumari Campbell, 2009). Disability, then, exists at the intersection of two dimensions of vulnerability; concerning the openness of our bodies and concerning the social valuation and categorisation of how this openness plays out.

3.3 Vulnerability in Disability Theory

Building on the insights of feminist theorisations of vulnerability, critical disability scholars have argued that the creation of disabled people as a distinct group that can be separated from normalcy misses central aspects of what is implied by having a body. To start with, the idea that disabled people are distinguished by being vulnerable is mistaken (Beckett, 2006a; Scully, 2014). Angharad Beckett (2006a, 3–4) discusses disability as one particular expression of vulnerability, which at the same time is a possibility in any human life. As Davis (2002, 3) and Garland-Thomson (2006) observe, all of us go through phases of dependency since our capacities and needs fluctuate over time. Despite this, there is a widespread neglect of how all human beings rely on relations and social structures that help sustain them (see Butler, 2016; Scully, 2014, 214). Whilst the needs of non-disabled people rarely are acknowledged as “dependencies” that undermine self-sufficiency, the needs of disabled people are prefixed as “special” in nature and understood as met by “benefits” provided by the state or by charities. This inconsistency is testament to a devaluation of certain ways of functioning that breaks with generally held conceptions of normalcy.
The insight of Scully’s label of “ontological vulnerability” is that our bodies are open, affecting and being affected by the world they find themselves in (see also Siebers, 2008, 7). Garland Thomson (2012, 342) has poetically described this latent potentiality as bearing “witness to our inherent receptiveness, to being shaped by the particular journey through the world that we call life”. The point here really is one of deconstruction; the very label of “disability” as a designation of a separate group, characterised by the inability to work and removed from normalcy, obscures how disability is a shared experience, constantly making inroads into normalcy. The categorisation of people as “deviant” with respect to ideals of normalcy is an expression of Butler’s discursive vulnerability, constituting subjects as defined by what they lack. Hence, disability is not a pre-political difference of kind, but rather the ontological vulnerability played out in a way that merits this categorisation. As Beckett notes (2006a, 4), this means that all human beings also share the risk of being subjected to the stigma, discrimination, and oppression that faces disabled people.

Along these lines, critical disability scholars have analysed the entanglement of how disabled people are oppressed and the social and cultural tendency to disavow vulnerability. In this context, the notion of “ableism” has been developed to name how societal structures and culture take the able and fully functioning body as its unquestioned starting point (Kumari Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008). For the ideology of ableism to hold up, disabled people need to be constructed as outsiders, separated and distinguished from the allegedly “normal” majority. “Disability threatens ideals of self-sufficiency and independence”, as Goodley (2014, 38) remarks, since “disability reminds ability of its vulnerability”. Similar points have been made in the work of numerous disability theorists; Susan Wendell (2006, 247–249) argues that the process of “othering” disability stems from our incapacity to confront our own bodies, Davis (2002, 3–4) states that the threat of disability in any life have led us to create “a firewall between them and us”, and Scully (2014, 219) refers to the “unconscious need on part of the nondisabled to disavow the embodied vulnerability of every human life”. From this perspective, producing disabled people as dependent outsiders serves the function of upholding the ideals of independence and self-sufficiency.

As indicated in the work of disability theorists, the fact that vulnerability is shared does not mean that we all experience vulnerability in the same way. On the contrary, authors such as Beckett (2006a) and Garland Thomson (2012) use disability to argue against the unequal distribution of vulnerability, reconsidering the role the concept can play in political mobilisation. These arguments resonate with how Butler has developed her position with regard to vulnerability and its political implications. In Frames of War: When is Life Grievable, Butler makes a distinction between precariousness, which is described as a fundamental insecurity linked to the fragility and unpredictability of life (that is, what Scully terms “ontological vulnerability”), and precarity, which denotes conditions in which certain populations are suffering as a result of political conditions, such as lack of social and economic networks or resources of support (Butler, 2009). This distinction illustrates that the consequence...
of vulnerability is a political question, hinging on social organisation. With regards to disability, social structures that disregard certain expression of human vulnerability also increases the precarity of people functioning outside of prevailing norms, whilst minimising it for norm-complying groups.

The intertwine of body and social order may for this reason result in radically different living conditions. As has been noted by Cole (2016), there has been a tendency to overlook such differences in theoretical engagements with vulnerability. In critical disability studies, however, the unequal exposure to harm and risks targeting people with certain bodily constitutions have been recurring targets of analysis, from first-generation social model analysis and onwards (see Goodley, 2014; Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006). Whilst the exposure of the norm-following body is minimised by a society structured to accommodate their needs, the precarity of lives outside of the norm is magnified by inadequate support systems, un-accessible environments, lowered expectations, and stigma. Here, it appears that one of the main sources of the unequal distribution of precarity is the systematised disavowal of the fact that we are all vulnerable; when precariousness is neglected as a fact of all human lives, precarity is magnified for those that exist outside of prevailing ideals of normalcy. In this way, the neglect of vulnerability as a constitutive and shared condition is also a system of distribution of vulnerability disadvantaging those who are understood as deviant.

Before moving on to discuss vulnerability as the foundation of political solidarity, I want to make two clarifications. First, many of the conceptions targeted by theorisations of vulnerability, such as self-determination and independence, have recurrently been proposed as important goals of the disability movement. Does recognition of vulnerability imply that these goals are discarded? Not necessarily, I would argue. First, I think it is important to note that the notion of vulnerability is complex. The critique advanced against autonomy and self-sufficiency targets how these ideals are preconceived of as defining characteristics of human beings, which relegates those that appear to fall short to an inferior sub-human outside. However, goals of independence and self-determination may still be worthwhile as a way of speaking about relations between disabled people and various external powers, such as the state or other actors. Hence, ideals of independence can both be an important goal for how disabled people should be able to direct their own lives and a problematic ideal if seen as a defining feature of humanity. This indicates that independence and dependency are not polar opposites, but that the ability to direct one’s own life, provide for oneself, make informed decisions, and so on, are always dependent on conditions that make such exercise of independence possible.

Secondly, the discussion on vulnerability advanced here not is meant to disqualify individual experiences of harm and pain, caused by the fact that our bodies are exposed and open to injury (for extended discussions on such neglect, see Cole, 2016; Mollow, 2014). The theoretical interventions discussed in this and the previous section rather point to the fact that our embodiment implies that such experiences are possibilities in all human lives. Although vulnerability on an individual level may
mean a painful and debilitating disease, as a political goal, our shared vulnerability should incite us to create a society where such harms to the farthest extent possible are remedied by support systems, accessibility, and care.

3.4 Solidarity Crippled

Where does this leave us with respect to dominating conceptions of solidarity? My suggestion is that the feminist and disability theorists discussed above offer a way of understanding solidarity as grounded in our shared vulnerability. This implies theorising disability, not as a tragedy or societal burden, but as an opportunity to set free political imaginations and potentialities.

In this spirit, Garland Thomson (2011, 597) argues that tensions between body and world can help us recognise aspects of the human condition that are easily forgotten:

"When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting."

Acknowledging the “political potential” of the moments where our bodily functioning and the world do not add up suggests that vulnerability can help us re-envision how we are inhabiting the world together. Think for example of David Mitchell’s (2014, 1–2) argument that disability subjectivities create new forms of embodied knowledge, collective in nature, which provide alternative ethical maps for how life is possible outside of or in opposition to prevailing ideas of normalcy and deviancy. Arguably, the insight that vulnerability is shared has been central to disability activism. Here, Beckett (2006b) notes that

["I"]mportant campaigns by organisations of disabled people based upon the notion that all people are vulnerable and interdependent to some extent during their lifetimes strike at the very heart of widely held beliefs about “difference”.

It is in a similar spirit I suggest the following understanding of what a crippled version of solidarity implies:

1. Solidaristic relations are grounded in the fact that vulnerability is shared.
2. Such relations can be the basis of alliances between different group in struggles for a society where we carry our shared vulnerability as equals.

Rather than seeing solidarity as a contract based on contribution, or a form of cohesion of people that resemble each other or exchange goods and services, understanding vulnerability as the basis for solidaristic relation sets free a mobilising potential, where the grounds of alliances between disabled and non-disabled people, is the fact that we are all fragile and exposed.

This understanding of solidarity also responds to the fact that theoretical understandings of solidarity have been increasingly detached from social struggles. The point of a crippled version of solidarity is that society can and should change, as the
unequal distribution of precariousness leaves large parts of the population worse off. Although vulnerability may play out in an immense number of ways, giving rise to social divisions based on how our bodies are situated in relation to prevalent norms and ideals, the openness of our bodies can serve as the grounds for political alliances that traverse such divisions. The drive to form such alliances halts only when we have achieved a society where we carry our shared vulnerability as equals. Such a society does not distribute precariousness along the lines of ability, class or some other social division. Such a society works to ameliorate suffering that stems from vulnerability, whilst recognising vulnerability itself as the grounds of political community.

This may seem like a fairly abstract theoretical exercise. Hence, we shall return to the example of welfare retrenchment in order to spell out the implications. In this context, I argue that solidarity as based on vulnerability can be understood as the basis of much-needed alliances between disabled people and other groups suffering from welfare cutbacks. The reason why non-disabled people should support disabled activists fighting against cutbacks on welfare services is not that disabled people deserve empathy, but that anyone might be reliant on accessibility for non-normative bodies, independent-living services, or financial relief. These arguments share an affinity to Butler’s (2016) broader suggestion that human precariousness helps us recognise and affirm the politico-ethical bonds between us, as she argues for a political ethics of relationality.

Two clarifications are called for here. First, the idea of cripping solidarity is not meant to imply that solidarity should be reduced to an insurance, where our self-interest urges us to create support systems or strengthen disability rights that we might need in the future. Although it is certainly true that anyone, by merit of having a body, can become disabled, the thicker social ontology suggested by Butler and shared by many disability theorists, can help us achieve a more thorough reconsideration of what it means to live together with others. If we do not shy away from our dependencies, vulnerability can incite us to make a leap, where the recognition of our own precarities can serve as a resource to recognise and act on the needs of others, as Gilson (2016, 73) argues:

[i]t is because we are vulnerable that we need ethics and social justice, but it is also because we are vulnerable – because we can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy – that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically or seek justice.

As noted above, a key insight of disability scholars is that certain populations are cast as outsiders, disproportionately exposed to risk, and financially burdened. Whether it is recognised or not, it follows that the struggles of the disabled people’s movement against this order of things are acts of solidarity also with people who are not disabled at the moment.

Secondly, the recognition of shared vulnerability does not imply that we are all similar or that disabled identities and experiences in actual fact are universal in nature. Rather, it is to suggest that the recognition of vulnerability offers a way of bridging differences in transformative political projects. Sven-Eric Liedman (1999)
has suggested that solidarity is the ability to see oneself in others. If we understand vulnerability as the basis of solidarity, what is recognised is precisely the openness and exposure of the other and oneself, despite whichever differences seemingly separate us.

4. Concluding Discussion

The overarching conclusion of this article is that feminist and disability theory can help us rethink solidarity as grounded in an understanding of human beings as vulnerable and hence connected in relations of mutual need and exposure. This means moving away from conceptions that exclude disabled people by the presumption that members of this group cannot work or contribute to the same extent as others. A crippled version of solidarity implies that societal responses to vulnerability is an absolutely central aspect of what politics is. Thereby, it offers a missing perspective that helps us see political alliances, mutual needs, and struggles for justice in a new light. It also reinvigorates solidarity as a transformative concept, against the tendency to understand it as a denotation of societal cohesion and harmony within the boundaries of the nation-state.

Throughout, welfare state retrenchment has been used to exemplify the benefits of this approach. Rather than basing resistance against austerity on the interests of working people, which reproduces the exclusion of disabled people, or on empathy with disabled and sick people, which is akin to an ethos of charity rather than solidarity, vulnerability can help us articulate a shared interest grounded in the facts that anyone can become dependent on social systems of support and thus have in common a shared interest of fighting the unequal distribution of precariousness. Distinctions between contributing and non-contributing citizens, and between deserving and undeserving welfare recipients, have been central to the legitimation of welfare retrenchment (see Chandler and Read, 2016; Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Understanding disability, or other labels serving similar purposes of categorisation, as a particular expression of our shared vulnerability exposes such divisions as arbitrary ideological tools that function to divide people.

This brings us to a broader question, concerning what kind of politics this understanding of solidarity points towards. Obviously, the scholarly and activist work on the notion of “social justice” is far too extensive to be properly addressed here. The same holds for questions about the institutional implications of my argument. However, without developing a full-fledged policy agenda, it is nevertheless worth concluding with a short discussion as regards some of the implications of committing to a future society where “we carry our shared vulnerability as equals”.

First, crip solidarity is relational rather than individualistic in nature. This has implications for social organisation. A common critique of welfare cutbacks, workfare, and the broader neoliberal policy agenda is that they rely on an individualisation of structural and collective problems. The targets of these policies are individuals, who are seen as governable with the right combination of carrots and sticks. This, in turn, follows from the mythology of the self-sufficient and independent subject; if we
are indeed in control of our lives and our own good fortunes, people always have it within themselves to get their act together and find a job. In our present societies, there is a strong tendency to view politics as the encouragement of such work-oriented discipline, whilst leaving intact any structural conditions that distribute wealth and harm. David Mitchell (2014, 4) observes that this rationality also pertains to the status of bodies, arguing that a key principle of present-day neoliberalism is that:

*those who don’t adequately maintain their bodies are held personally responsible for their descent into the chaos of ill health and non-well-being.*

In contrast, carrying our shared vulnerability as equals encourages us to see our lives as entangled and reliant on institutions and social structures that we also have a shared responsibility of building and maintaining. It does not make any sense, from this perspective, to see inability to work, social problems, or poverty as individual failures, precisely because solidarity requires that we accept a shared responsibility for how vulnerability plays out in the lives of all of us.

Second, vulnerability as the ground for social justice requires a distinction between equality and sameness. We have already touched upon this; whilst we are forced to attend to how bodies, subjectivities, and identities differ, we must also recognise that these stem from our embodied and discursive openness. Whilst it may seem that vulnerability easily turns into a form of essentialism, replacing “rationality” or “reason”, with “vulnerability” as the defining characteristic of human beings, it is worth noting that “vulnerability” denotes openness and change. Thereby, the problematic qualities often attributed to essentialism are avoided. Understanding vulnerability as a defining condition of humanity is to stress the open-ended nature and undecidability of what it means to be human. It is an embrace of mutuality as a response to the fact that life comes without guarantees. Hence, from this perspective, any notion of social justice requires the double-move of both recognising differences in how vulnerability plays out, whilst also seeking to overcome such differences in the formation of social and political relations that vehemently resist the unequal distribution of precariousness.

Lastly, the idea of cripping solidarity implies rethinking social justice beyond our present economic system. The history of radical disability politics is intertwined with a critique of capitalism, from the social movement and onwards. Recent work on the debilitating effects of late-modern capitalism, as developed by Jasbir Puar (2007, 2009) among others, shows how all people but a small economic elite suffer from how the global economy is organised to increase exposure to harm. Indeed, Marx’s analysis of how human relations are masked as relations between things rather than people, labelled “commodity fetishism” (Marx, 1976, 163–177), stands in sharp contrast to the relationality implied by social relations based on shared vulnerability. A political ethics based on vulnerability resists commodification. Furthermore, it may well be the case that the alienating effects of our economic organisation can be understood as intertwined with a form of alienation stemming from a widespread
neglect of our precarity. In parallel with the alienation produced when workers lose control of the product of their labour, sometimes picking up work-related injuries or burnout in the process, capitalist individualism also alienates us from our own vulnerability, weaving a mythology of self-sufficiency that none of us can live up to.

In these ways, the notion of vulnerability as the basis of political alliances has far-reaching consequences. Although not explored in this article, what kind of global society we will end up with, responding to crises of climate change, inequality, and capitalism, will depend on whether we will be able to acknowledge the relationality stemming from our shared vulnerability. Thereby, questions raised by disability theorists exist at the forefront of the most important political struggles of the 21st century.

REFERENCES


