
A Fragile Alliance: Disability Politics and Segregated Institutions as (pseudo-)Social Movements in Post-War Britain

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Résumé

Materialist historians of disability in Britain have tended to accept two premises about deinstitutional struggle: 1) that those running institutions were led by state policy and public opinion in their attitude towards disabled people (Borsay: 1986; Hampton: 2013); 2) that disabled people did not engage in collective emancipatory struggles until the mid-1960s, and initially only agitated on cash benefits (Campbell & Oliver: 1996; Hampton: 2016; Millward: 2014). Under these assumptions, *that* disabled people should be segregated (and what their ghettoization should look like) appear as largely uncontested questions until the mid-1970s. Recent activist accounts indicate that segregating charities had a more antagonistic relationship with the state and civil society than imagined, and that disabled people frequently organised to contest how their institutions were run (Hunt: 2019; Williams-Findlay: 2020). I extend this insight using material from the Leonard Cheshire Archives and the private papers of disability activist Paul Hunt, I argue that reforming charities such as the Cheshire Foundation and the Spastics Society conceived of themselves as social movements, with a mission to transform public attitudes and the helper/helped relationship. This project required the mobilisation of disabled residents as social movement actors, and charity bosses promoted forms of self-organisation within institutions (including resident edited journals, independent fundraising, and part management of resources) even while severely restricting inmates' life chances.

In these conditions, informal self-organised networks of disabled activists emerged around figures like Paul Hunt, Barbara Beasley, and Rosemary Dawson-Sheppard. Disabled activists initially identified strongly with the reforming charities and their philosophy, while pushing for radical change within the institutions themselves – including residents' control over staffing, admissions, and institutional routines. In the early 1960s, this contradictory alliance between campaigning 'care' charities and radical disabled people began to fray as it became clearer that institutional managers were unable or unwilling to address disabled residents' demands. The decomposition of this relationship led to increasingly antagonistic struggle, and a burgeoning critique of the place of institutions in modern societies and their role in the construction of disability. These forgotten battles have major implications for our understanding of both disabled people's later anti-institutional struggles, and the increasing conservatism and centralisation of reforming charities from the 1970s onwards.

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