

# Introduction: Crip theory in Scandinavia

**IN JULY 2002**, Swedish journalist and disability activist Finn Hellman reported home from a Queer and Disability Conference in California:

Trannies with mental diseases, stuttering dykes, deaf queers and blind bisexuals – the combinations of different sexualities and disabilities were impressive on the first international conference on queer and disability. More than 300 activists, scholars, and cultural workers met up during two unforgettable summer days to learn, be inspired, agitate, and enjoy.

Hellman (2002) was impressed by the scope and originality of a conference that treated sexuality and disability together. "When the conference was over," he wrote, "it was obvious that for politics as well as for art and research it is unbeatable to use queer theory to understand disability and vice versa – whether to analyse bodies or shame, invisibility, power, norms or anything else". Hellman's article was probably the first introduction of the thoughts behind Crip Theory in Scandinavia, and it shows how this coupling of Queer and Crip Theory was first brought over in a disability activism context.<sup>1</sup> In the following, I will present what I see as the most important elements of Crip Theory, inspired by reading theory and discussing

with activists and researchers. For although crip theorist Robert McRuer's book *Crip Theory* is an important source of inspiration, it is in discussions with activists like Finn Hellman and Susanne Berg, and with the people at the Crip Seminars at Stockholm and Lund Universities that I have developed my thoughts about what Crip Theory is and could be. The three concepts I most strongly connect with Crip Theory are: Performativity, Language, and Stigma Management.

### **Performativity**

Much the same way as gender expression builds on performativity, a person "is" not crip, but "does" crip in a number of situations in society. It is something one can be compelled to do, but also choose to do, as McRuer points out. He emphasises the collective resistance against the dichotomy able/disabled, a resistance that is to be understood as a consciously political action (McRuer 2006:36–37; cf. Butler 1993). That was exactly what the established disability movements did in the end of the twentieth century, when they dissociated themselves from their status as recipients of alms. In the 1970s, charity – which generated large sums of money – was more and more criticised, especially by young people with disabilities, and eventually it was phased out (Berg 2007).

In contemporary welfare states, everyone receives support in some way, in the form of education, public transport, roads, child custody and other kinds of social service. Most people take this support for granted and regard it not as support and assistance, but things they are entitled to as citizens. However, if a person between 10 and 65 needs assistance for daily life activities, the assistance becomes stigmatising and the person is categorised as "disabled" (Wendell 1996:40). A Crip way of understanding disability is thus that it is

structured by performativity. To access social services categorised as disability assistance, bodies with disabilities have to perform disability. There is not necessarily any sharp distinction between disabled and able-bodied, but the Social Insurance Administration and other authorities construct limits for social participation that exclude persons with disabilities. Accessibility is not only about automatic door openers, ramps and sign-language interpretation, even if this is important. Even more important is an including mentality that would help people get over their insecurity in front of disability. The most violent discrimination on the work market is a result of this, as well as the many barriers that crip encounter in the form of contempt and fear for the weak and the different. The roots of this are to be sought in categorisations that exclude and not include (Wendell 1996).

## Language

Historically, words for the disabled have varied, but most often they have been direct and brutal, words that captured the helplessness or physical deformity of a person. During the twentieth century, however, there has been a continuing adaptation of the designations for disability and impairment. Partly, it is a manifestation of an ongoing conceptual redefinition, as when the British Social Model insists to distinguish between *impairment* as the physical or mental condition and *disability* as the effects of an inaccessible society. But it is also a matter of softening, of creating euphemisms for an unpleasant reality.

Several Crip Theorists and activists have pointed out that the word "crip" is meant to fight euphemisms, for the use of a euphemism signals that the category in question is so repugnant or dangerous that we need to find an alternative, more considerate, word to designate it. As McRuer points out in an article published in Swedish: "Crip

is a word that points directly at what is hidden behind compassion. As an open insult it is used to diminish and depreciate" (McRuer 2005). This anti-euphemist approach is important also within Queer Theory. Judith Butler has emphasised that the word "queer" is a tool for protest, which can be used for political purposes as well as for the purely epistemological (Butler 1993:223; Sandahl 2003). Thus the insult can be used both as an analytical tool to understand the world, and as a political tool to redefine it.

A similar discussion about the usage of words has been ongoing for most part of the twentieth century. In the 1930s there was a debate in Germany about the use of the word *Krüppel* (cripple). Many thought it too hard and disparaging, but disability pedagogue Hans Würtz defended it:

The letters "Kr" are crisp, provoking, hard, and reject all sentimentality. The double-p underlines in a sweeping, cocky audacity the defiant in "Kr". The word "Krüppel" gives a pertinent description of the cripple's soul (Würtz 1934:1484–1485).<sup>2</sup>

About the same time, a member of the Danish "National League for the Invalids and the Maimed" (*Landsforeningen af Vanføre og Lemlæstede*) argued to keep the League's crude name. Voices had been raised to rename the association, but the member in question was opposed to obscuring a hard reality with soft words:

How stupid to cover hard facts with dusky words when you have set your mind to draw the same facts into the light in order to improve them. "National League of the Invalids and the Maimed" has a splendid ring in my ears. It is clear, consequent and honest; and I believe many agree with me on this (Madsen 1935).<sup>3</sup>

There is obviously a contradiction between pulling "a hard reality" into the light with hard words, and on the other hand to deconstruct disability as a category. In Denmark today, the disability movement uses words like "handicap", "spastic" and other words that elsewhere in Scandinavia would be perceived as offensive or outdated. The Danish discourse on disability is on the whole different from that of the rest of Scandinavia, in that it rejects the euphemisms that are common in the other Nordic countries (Kulick & Rydström forthcoming).

### **Stigmaphilia**

Another important element of Crip Theory is stigma management. Visible stigmas necessarily create situations in which they have to be managed. In mixed situations, i.e. when a person with a visible stigma meets a person without this stigma, the result is unbearable consciousness about it. The person without the stigma can react with exaggerated benevolence, or by pretending as nothing is there, and the person that carries the stigma can assume a hearty gung-ho attitude or silent denial. If the stigma is invisible, as when a person is homosexual, has a mental disease or has served time in jail, the responsibility for the management of the stigma is initially entirely placed on the stigmatised individual. The moment the bearer of the stigma decides to disclose it, its management becomes a shared problem. By using "disidentifiers", however, the stigmatised person can "pass", i.e. get the surroundings to accept her or him as non-stigmatised (Goffman 1963:44). In contemporary society, large efforts are made to conceal physical impairments, by training, prosthetics and other measures, but, in the context of sexual orientation, queer theorist Michael Warner suggests another attitude. He advocates a "stigmaphile" lifestyle, i.e. that people from a queer position should

display their deviance and confront majority culture. They should demand protection from hate crime, but not apologise for their "abnormal" tastes (Warner 1999: 43–44).

Crip Theory is decidedly stigmaphile as a theory and as a political idea. Instead of managing difficulties in social interaction with the majority culture by trying to conceal or get over one's impairment, the stigmatised can command the situation by embracing the stigma. Especially in the United States, this type of stigmaphile politics have resulted in crip interpretations being strong within performance art and cultural studies (Sandahl & Auslander 2005). But how useful is Crip Theory in social sciences?

### **Crip Theory in practice**

In this issue of *lambda nordica*, scholars from all Nordic countries, and one from Britain, apply Crip Theory to empirical research in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>4</sup> With few exceptions they are young scholars, in the beginning of their academic careers. This is the result not only of the fact that the field of Crip Theory itself is young, but also of a conscious effort from *lambda nordica*'s editors to give voice to new perspectives.

*Finn Hellman* opens the issue with his original article from 2002, followed by reflections on the political developments since then. His enthusiasm has been considerably toned down, and he breathes frustration over the sluggishness of queer and crip utopia in Sweden. Some good things have happened, like the inclusion of crips and Crip Theory in the yearly Stockholm Pride celebration and the founding of FHOBIT, a group for queers with disabilities. The Crip Seminar, first in Stockholm, and then at Lund University, is also a good sign, but the overall result after ten years is still bleak. "So how come that so little of what I experienced at the American conference



*Finn Hellman in Stockholm Pride Parade 2009.  
(Photo: Marijana Vodovosoff)*

ten years ago has spilled over to Sweden?" Hellman asks, and his guess is that it has to do with how the Swedish disability movement is organised and that there are no Disability Studies at Swedish universities. He also refers to legislation. Scandinavian laws are weak and disregarded by the authorities, and discrimination against persons with disabilities in academia is brutal and seldom talked about.

The first three research articles all scrutinise Robert McRuer's book *Crip Theory* (2006), in order to test whether the ideas presented there can be used for empirical disability research. *Elisabeth Apelmo* investigates Crip Theory's potential for bringing sociological disability studies forward. Her contention that a critical class perspective is missing in McRuer's book is perhaps the more provocative since McRuer consistently criticises contemporary neoliberal capitalism. *Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson* asks whether Crip Theory has anything to say to people with intellectual disabilities. There are a number of problems in this context, like Crip Theory's emphasis on agency and stigma management. What happens to agency when a person is in need of cognitive assistance? In a critical assessment of the Swedish de-institutionalisation reform, Löfgren-Mårtenson claims that the power that was to be transferred to the disabled person in reality has been co-opted by personal assistants and the staff in the group lodgings where most people with intellectual impairments now live. Her conclusion is that it is after all possible to use the insights from Crip Theory to improve practical work with people with intellectual impairments and secure that the power of decision rests with those concerned, but that much more work is needed to develop its ideas in that direction. A third critique of McRuer is presented by *Elin Vaahtera*. She investigates discourses around swimming education in Finland, and contends that McRuer's concept of compulsory able-bodiedness is inadequate for understanding the tensions and nu-



ances in able-bodiedness itself. Inspired by Fiona Kumari Campbell she calls on a new theoretical stance to destabilise able-bodiedness, and she highlights the non-swimmer as a Crip figure in Finnish twentieth-century discourses.

The epistemology of charity is investigated by two contributors. *Kristofer Hansson* presents an ethnography of everyday interaction between a number of young wheelchair users and the occasional passers-by. With a concept derived from Sartre, he discusses the "sticky benevolence" that places his research participants in an inferior position, which they deploy various techniques to avoid. By rejecting acts of benevolence they exit the social interaction of unproblematic power play and encounter hostility from the once smiling passers-by. *James Gordon Rice* re-interprets a previous project of his about an Icelandic charity organisation aimed at single mothers. Without abandoning his first analysis based on a materialist class perspective, Rice supplements it with a rich discussion about the role of normativity in charity work. To have an impairment automatically places one in the category of the deserving poor, thus upholding the socioeconomic and normative structures of society without changing the basic inequalities on which it is built.

Two of the contributions explore representations of the crip body. *Nora Simonhjell* presents an analysis of a Danish short film, *The defect human* (Nasser & Søgård Christensen 2007), which is a paraphrase of Jørgen Leth's 1967 short *The perfect human*. Leth's film displays a neatly dressed, well-proportioned actor, who through various everyday activities represents the perfect human. Although his film destabilises ideas about human perfection, it never questions how the "perfect human" is able to do what he does. This way, Simonhjell contends, it builds on a postulate that the perfect human is an objective magnitude. The crip paraphrase from 2007 follows

the same script as Leth's film, but instead it features one of the film's directors, Casper Søgaard Christensen, who uses wheelchair and respirator. While Leth insists on the generality of the human being, Nasser and Søgaard Christensen highlight the contrasting effects of physical uniqueness. Simonhjell concludes that a film like *The defect human* is a form for powerful visual activism that counteracts staring and promotes an activist regard. *Colette Conroy* discusses subjectivity and freakery in theatrical representations or citations of freak shows. Through close reading of two theatrical plays, Mike Kenney's *The last freak show* and Tennessee Williams' *The mutilated*, she explores complex relationships between disability, freakishness, spectatorship and performance.

The last contributor, *Denise Malmberg*, puts her own concept of "bodynormativity" into play with a gendered understanding of the disabled body. Using phenomenological terminology, she claims that the male body, as well as the "able" body, is transcendent, subject, while the female, as well as the "disabled", body is the immanent, the object. By withholding power from women and persons with disabilities, the male normate upholds a patriarchal power balance which can be challenged through a consciously crip subjectivity.

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## NOTES

1. I have chosen to use "Scandinavia" to designate what is most often known as "The Nordic Countries" in Scandinavia itself, since it makes more sense in a non-European context.
2. "Die Buchstaben 'Kr' sind krachend, aufreizend, hart und weisen Sentimentalität zurück. Das Doppel-P unterstreicht mit einem Zug von verschmitzter Keckheit das Trotzige des 'Kr'. Der Ausdruck Krüppel kennzeichnet treffend die Seele des Krüppels". Hans Würtz had problematic views, in that he divided 'cripples' in worthy and not worthy, i.e. the energetic and strong vs. the apathetic and weak (Musenberg 2002).
3. "Hvor taabeligt er det ikke at dække over haarde Kendsgerninger med dunkle Ord naar man netop har sat sig som Opgave at drage samme haarde Kendsgerning frem i Lyset for at bedre paa den. 'Landsforeningen af Vanføre og Lemlæstede' har en herlig Klang i mine Øren, det er klart, konsekvent og ærligt; og deri tror jeg, mange er enige med mig".
4. Admittedly a bit stretched statement, as one of the contributors comes from Norway and writes about Denmark.