Disability and Questions of the Human
A lecture for Disability History Month 2018

Dan Goodley (University of Sheffield)

12–1pm, Wednesday 21st November 2018
Hicks Lecture Theatre 10

This paper will draw upon some of my recent work with colleagues in Sheffield and Manchester and in response to some inspiring writers and writings. Drawing on research projects and intellectual moments of engagement, the paper considers the ways in which disability disavows normative constructions of the human. I use the term disavowal in its original psychoanalytic sense of the word: to simultaneously and ambivalently desire and reject something (in this case, the human category). I will then clarify and expand upon this disavowal – with explicit reference to the politics of people with intellectual disabilities – and make a case for the ways in which the human is (i) a category which social recognition can be gained and (ii) a classification requiring expansion, extension and disruption. Indeed, and under-girding contention of this paper is that people with intellectual disabilities are already engaged in what we might term a posthuman politics from which all kinds of human can learn. This paper outlines seven reasons why we should ask what it means to be human. Then we will move to focus on four very human elements – support, frailty, capacity and desire – and disability’s place in redefining these elements.

Dan Goodley is Professor of Disability Studies and Education in the School of Education and co-director of iHuman: the research institute for the study of the human. Dan is interested in theorising and challenging the conditions of disablism (the social, political, cultural and psycho-emotional exclusion of people with physical, sensory and/or cognitive impairments) and ableism (the contemporary ideals on which the able, autonomous, productive citizen is based). Recent work includes Disability Studies (2016, Sage, Second edition) and Dis/ability Studies (2014, Routledge).