Disability Rights Symposium: Introduction

written by Ravi Malhotra | May 28, 2012

ALL TOO OFTEN, socialists, like others, have regarded disability as a personal tragedy. Left publications rarely discuss it or debate it and activism by people with disabilities has been ignored by the left, notwithstanding the fact that Americans with disabilities are among the most marginalized of citizens in terms of income level and poverty rates. Yet in many ways recognizing the political dimensions of disability oppression—the fact that it is structural barriers that are primarily responsible for the marginalization of people with disabilities in employment, education, and other aspects of public life—is a fundamentally liberating notion that has deep implications for the organization of the workplace, the work day and the structure of the educational system. From a lack of wheelchair access in many communities to inflexible support systems that force people with disabilities to choose either employment or health benefits to barriers in education that have prevented many people with disabilities from reaching their full potential, barriers remain widespread in American society (and other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] countries).

A political theory of disablement, often known as the social model of disability, holds out the promise of a truly emancipatory politics by challenging ableism and incorporating respect for people with disabilities as a foundational praxis. It marks a shift away from the medical model which consigned people with disabilities to institutions, asylums, and worse. A society that truly empowered people with disabilities—a diverse group encompassing people with mobility impairments, blind and Deaf* people, people with psychiatric conditions, and more—would be one that radically reconsidered the concept of what it means to contribute to society. It would be one that provided health care benefits, including the funding of specialized medical equipment, to all regardless of employment status, and facilitated individuals, whether they had disabilities or not, to work part time without denial of access to benefits. Veterans with disabilities, both physical and psychiatric, would receive appropriate rehabilitation to retrain them to be able to participate in an economy retooled for a Green future and away from militarism. Effective and comprehensive measures, such as captioning and the dissemination of electronic texts, would be undertaken to ensure that information is produced in a manner accessible to blind and Deaf people to enjoy on an equal basis with their peers. It would ensure easy access to attendant services to allow people with disabilities to receive assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and toileting in their own home, while compensating the attendants appropriately.

Regrettably, despite the historic passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, Americans are a long way from achieving these objectives. Many in the business community continue to regard people with disabilities as unemployable and resist fervently any expansion of the diminished welfare state. As New Zealand disability rights advocate Chris Ford observes in his piece on disability politics in a time of capitalist crisis, the neoliberal attacks of capitalist states across the West have increasingly targeted disabled people who rely on welfare payments. He shows how these tendencies have markedly expanded in light of the 2008 global economic crisis and show no signs of abating. He reminds us that this devaluation of disabled people's lives has ominous consequences in light of the legacy of the Nazi Holocaust, in which large numbers of people with disabilities were exterminated. Ford usefully posits the emergence of a global disability rights movement as an alternative to any return to the horrors of eugenics.

Switching gears, Anne Finger's contribution dissects Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's 1926 essay on the enormous disparities between the industrialized North of Italy and the mostly peasant

South, “Some Aspects of the Southern Question.” As she illustrates, these divisions were often cast in racial terms with the Southern Italians regarded as inferior and dark savages. Focusing on Gramsci’s critique of anthropologists of the day, Finger shows how Gramsci’s contribution can be re-read through a disability rights lens. And while one rarely thinks about the physical disabilities of socialist political activists, Finger, quoting the historian Douglas Baynton, eloquently reminds us that they are everywhere once one starts looking. Gramsci himself, as Finger notes, had various disabilities, nor is he the sole exception. The literature on the socialism of Helen Keller, both deaf and blind, has increased in recent years. American-Canadian radical Eugene T. Kingsley, a double amputee, while little known, edited the Socialist Party of Canada’s newspaper, the *Western Clarion* for many years in the first decade of the twentieth century and had the unique distinction of running as an open socialist numerous times for both the House of Representatives and the Canadian House of Commons between 1896 and 1926.

Returning to a focus on public policy, Canadian disability advocate Jihan Abbas provides an analysis of a rarely considered issue, the exploitation of the labor of people labelled as having intellectual disabilities. She notes how institutionalized people with disabilities often were assigned jobs while incarcerated in these settings. Continuing in the form of “sheltered workshops” where people with disabilities work at segregated, repetitive jobs for wages below the minimum wage, this invisible labor raises important questions about the meaning of work and exploitation.

Concluding our symposium, Rachel Garaghty tackles the complex policy issues relating to the provision of quality attendant services for Americans with disabilities, focusing on policy in Minnesota. While the Independent Living movement has seen a shift toward more people with disabilities living in the community, there remain significant barriers to the provision of quality attendant services. Collectively, these four essays provide different perspectives on how to think about disability while bearing in mind that disability rights are ultimately questions about power and politics.

Footnotes

* I capitalize Deaf to indicate the fact that many Deaf people constitute a community with a common language.

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