

The Social Movement Left Out, by Marta Russell

It is disheartening, to say the least, when I can still pick up a book or read a call for unity to fight for social justice which omits or does not give equal weight to the disability social movement against oppression.

Here is one recent call for forming alliances with various groups in the struggle. The groups listed are "Greens, labor, people of color, feminists, environmental activists, students and youth, supporters of a death penalty moratorium, gay/lesbian people, people of faith, peace activists, senior and community organizations."

Can we call this anything other than disablism or ableism -- ableism being defined as "any social relations, practices, and ideas that presume that all people are able-bodied"? (Chouinard and Grant, 1995)

Nondisabled activists and scholars have fervently studied and challenged the rational explanation for oppression based on identity - in particular, gender, race, and ethnicity - but excluded disability. Disability activists and scholars, on the other hand, have fervently been supplying a plethora of disability social model theorizing which doesn't seem to be read or absorbed by many of the other activists and scholars.

Knowing what less than stellar past other social movements in this country have had regarding impairment, it is necessary to confront this history so that we can all move forward.

Here I am going to rely of the work of Douglas Baynton in his essay "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" (Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds, *THE NEW DISABILITY HISTORY: AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES*, 2001) to explain how other oppressed groups have situated disablement.

Baynton lays it out plain and simple. He writes, "Rarely have oppressed groups denied that disability is an adequate justification for social and political inequality. Thus, while disabled people can be considered one of the minority groups historically assigned inferior status and subjected to discrimination, disability has functioned for all such groups as a sign of and justification for inferiority." (Baynton p. 34)

The concept of inferiority is rooted in the late 19th century social creation of "normality." "The normal" was used as a means of measuring, categorizing, and managing populations. It informed hegemony, ranking order by the directive of the constructed "norm." In turn, normality established the universal, unequivocal good and right from which social, economic, and political rights were granted -- rights being a means in liberal democratic societies of mitigating oppression.

Simultaneously the concept of normality equated with a belief in western progress. Eugenics was its obvious "scientific" progeny. Under the eugenic view, perfection was attainable; by eliminating the abnormal; the defective could be eradicated from humanity.

Along with the conservatives and later the Nazis, Anarchist Emma Goldman, "friend of the oppressed" and a proponent of eugenic thought wrote that unless birth control was encouraged, the state would "legally encourage the increase of paupers, syphilitics, epileptics, dipsomaniacs, cripples, criminals, and degenerates." (D.J. Kevles, IN THE NAME OF EUGENICS, 1985) (emphasis mine)

What was not so obvious was that both blacks and women's liberation movements did not challenge the notion that disability was a legitimate reason for social, economic and political exclusion. "Disability served not just as an argument for the inequality of women and minorities but also in arguments against those inequalities." (Baynton, p. 43)

At the Woman Suffrage Convention in 1869, for instance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton protested that women were "thrust outside the pale of political consideration with minors, paupers, lunatics, traitors, and idiots." (emphasis mine)

Baynton shows that the suffragists arguments to refute such associations took three forms: women were not disabled therefore deserved the vote; women were being erroneously and slanderously classed with disabled people, with those who were legitimately denied suffrage; and women were not naturally or inherently disabled but were made disabled by inequality. "... suffrage would ameliorate or cure these disabilities." (Baynton p. 43, emphasis mine)

In order to socially, economically and politically discredit them, nonwhite races were routinely connected to disability. For instance, a most common disability argument for slavery was that African Americans lacked sufficient intelligence to participate or compete on an equal basis in society with white people. The assertion went that the African American's weak constitution was not suited for freedom.

Racism has operated from a biological framework -- "the experts" deeming blacks mentally inferior in order to justify their social and political exclusion. In retort, the Bell Curve dissenters vehemently have refuted the notion of biological inferiority in order to assert blacks equal status as a race.

Baynton points out that "...little has been written about why these attributions [impairments] are such powerful weapons for inequality, why they were so furiously denied and condemned by their targets, and what this tells us about our attitudes towards disability." (Baynton, p. 41)

What this history tells us is that these groups (or at least advocates for these groups) believed that being labeled with a disability was the worst fate imaginable. No one wanted to be associated with "disabled."

Historically, labor associations similarly found it shameful to be injured or impaired and "equated manhood with independence (bodily and financial)." (John Williams-Searle, "Cold Charity: Manhood, Brotherhood, and the Transformation of Disability, 1870-1900," THE NEW DISABILITY HISTORY, 2001)

It has been close to a century since US disabled peoples' first known disability civil rights group formed, the League for the Physically Handicapped. Some three hundred disabled pensioners in New York engaged in civil disobedience during the Great Depression to protest their discriminatory rejection from the employment offered by the Works Progress Administration.

Much later, in 1970, came Disabled in Action (DIA) which founded and adopted the tactic of direct political protest. There were many groups of all types of impairments involved in the 25-day occupation of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) federal building in San Francisco in 1977 to have regulations issued pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 making it illegal for federal agencies, contractors, or public universities to discriminate on the basis of disability.

In 1983 came Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT), established by disability rights activists in several important cities in the USA to highlight the inaccessibility of public transit for people with mobility impairments. It quickly became known for its confrontational and often successful tactics.

Movements for blind persons, deaf persons, developmentally disabled persons and psychiatric disabilities similarly evolved, the histories all too numerous to list in this brief commentary. There have been many groupings leading up to passage of the American's with Disabilities Act in 1990 and beyond.

Yet to this day class, race, gender and sexual oppression are often alluded to in developing vision and strategy for social change in leftist circles -- disability, too often, is not.

Scanning the internet I found numerous examples of sites where ableism gets left out of the -isms. Here is just one such statement. This group is "[in] opposition to racism, sexism, homophobia, economic class oppression and all other forms of oppression and discrimination."

What are "all other forms of oppression and discrimination"? Do they mean ableism? When the left leaves us out of its analysis, or includes us in a cursory manner as "other forms of oppression" this is clearly not sufficient. It only leads to the suspicion that there is no real understanding of disability oppression.

For example, on the most basic level - which we should be well beyond by now -- some still hold their events in inaccessible locations. Michael Moore did this in Cambridge when he was promoting his new book "Stupid White Men." Don't get me wrong, I like Michael Moore but please! It is so obvious that those disabled persons who could not attend his event due to it not being physically accessible to them would include him in the category of "stupid white men."

We leftist disability activists have been silent far too long. I would go so far as to say that the portion of the left which still excludes by not reporting, covering or identifying

disability in its platforms, programs, publications or web sites shows that it has not *fully* understood individualistic consciousness or institutionalized practices under capitalism.

Despite the fact that disabled persons to this day remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder being the most impoverished and degraded group of persons world-wide still segregated and institutionalized, some nondisabled persons and social movements have not accepted the idea that disability oppression really exists.

As Michael Oliver frames it when disablism does not merit inclusion "even those writers who have specifically examined oppression have internalised the dominant, individualised world view of disability and have failed to conceptualise it as social oppression." (Oliver, Understanding Disability, p. 133)

The dominant view that Oliver refers to is that the social and economic pain that disabled people deal with is a personal problem, an individual pathology, a personal tragedy and a personal failing. While other social movements have been granted the status of having a collective dimension and are viewed as the result of systemic social structures rather than personal shortcomings, the disability movement has largely been left out as an oppressed group.

Oliver writes "it is not disabled people who need to be examined but able-bodied society; it is not a case of educating disabled and able-bodied people for integration, but of fighting institutional disablism; it is not disability relations which should be the field for study but disablism." (Oliver, p. 142)

Radical disability theorists have posed that under capitalism impairment is socialized as a specific form of oppression -- disability. The defining feature of capitalism, commodity relations, has been a primary force behind the economic impoverishment of impaired persons. The material relation is primary and the ideology of superiority/inferiority serves the function of maintenance and perpetuation of this social relation.

Why cannot some elements on the left apply disablement to C. Wright Mills' observation that seemingly "personal troubles", are more appropriately understood as "public issues" which link to the institutions of society as a whole?

Ongoing exclusion of disability oppression unfortunately only contributes to the disabling society when what we do need is a "trajectory of change," as Michael Albert phases it, with everyone's contributions and energies working towards global justice.

Znet now has a Disability Rights section under the "Watch" heading on its home page at <http://www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm>. There are links and articles there worth reading. Get ahead of the curve (!).

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