

The Disability Studies Industry^[1]

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(From a commissioned report for the Social Affairs Unit, 2002.)

Introduction

This brief monograph was written in an attempt to discover the general situation of Disability Studies, given that this appears to have become a growth area in academia with various typically illiberal aspects. The findings bear out the initial impression. There is a style of argument, even propaganda (for there is usually little genuine engagement with opposing liberal views), that can be seen in many other areas of academia. It amounts to a relatively new ‘progressive’ industry with various fashionable keywords, phrases and ideologies—often not obviously related to disabilities in any serious way—indicating the nature of the beast: ‘progressive’, ‘radical’, ‘oppression’, ‘bourgeois’, ‘empowerment’, ‘rights’, ‘equal opportunities’, ‘discrimination’, ‘prejudice’, ‘citizenship’, ‘social justice’, ‘socially constructed’, ‘Marxism’, ‘Post Modernism’ and ‘Feminism’. The overall picture is that disability has become increasingly politicised along politically correct lines to the detriment of society as a whole and, eventually, even to the disabled themselves. This is largely caused by the endemic *trahison des clercs* in our tax-consuming^[2] and coercively monopolised university system.

The political approach is quite overt and even relished:

The exciting thing about disability studies is that it is both an academic field of enquiry and an area of political activity ... involving the classrooms, the workplace, the courts, the legislature, the media, and so on. [Davis, 1997, 1]

This is typically linked to ‘rights’ and ‘citizenship’:

...in the United Kingdom the evidence that disabled people are still denied their full rights to citizenship is overwhelming. [Johnstone, 2001, 24]

And underpinning these ‘rights’ is usually the modern leftwing battle cry of ‘social justice’:

Social justice is at the heart of disability theory and changing morality in the Western world. [Johnstone, 2001, 73]

The arguments

A main argument in the Disability Studies literature is that ‘disability’ is socially constructed, often for sinister (bourgeois) class reasons, rather than objective:

That disablement is a socially constructed concept in the service and shaping of power is now a generally accepted orthodoxy. [Johnstone, 2001, 164]

The idea is to turn the tables by explaining how markets and industrialisation are the real problem rather than those labelled as disabled:

... the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person. ... the social process of disabling arrived with industrialisation. [Davis, 1997, 9]

The idea of what is normal is supposed to be some kind of bourgeois conspiracy:

... the very term that permeates our contemporary life—the normal—is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is part of a notion of progress, of industrialisation, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie. [Davis, 1997, 28]

And so 'disability' has no objective meaning:

At the heart of disability studies is a recognition that disability is a cultural construction; that is, that 'disability' has no inherent meaning. [Davis, 1997, 29]

Disability is thus supposed to be at least on a par with gender in its social construction or possibly even race, the two main areas that lead the way in this kind of argument and industry (in fact, all three are usually physical with race and sex largely genetic):

Disability is not a biological given; like gender, it is socially constructed from biological reality. [Davis, 1997, 260]

Tendentious politicised definitions sometimes replace any serious attempt at argument:

Disability The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (UPIAS, 1976: pp. 3-4) [Quoted in Barnes, 1999, 28]

Contra the complaints about industrialisation somehow manufacturing 'disability', it is mainly the market that has eliminated a vast amount of disability through increased wealth and advances in medical sciences (which go hand in hand). Thus, polio and tuberculosis are things of the past. Where disabilities remain, things like electric wheelchairs and pain-killing drugs make life much easier for the disabled. But there is a grain of, vacuous, truth in the 'social construction' claim. It is logically necessary that if every aspect of everyday life were provided with full facilities to counterbalance every aspect of every type of disability (or 'impairments', as the latest PC approach now prefers to put it^[3]) then the disabled would, of course, be able to do everything that everyone else does. In this sense, people are only 'disabled' by an environment that does not fully compensate for their incapacities. But how relevant is this *a priori* point? It stubbornly ignores three obvious things: 1) the fact that a disability needs to be compensated for shows that it is an objective disadvantage, and it is mere PC Speak to deny it; 2) the unimaginably vast expense of creating such a logical possibility as universal compensating facilities for each impairment; 3) that this vast expense, or even any degree of movement towards it, must be at the proactively imposed expense of other people (to the extent that it is not paid for voluntarily, which must be relatively limited).

A second, related, main argument—often bound up with the first—is that the disabled are an oppressed group but, unlike women and non-white races, one not yet generally recognised as being so even among 'progressives':

Progressives in and out of academia may pride themselves on being sensitive to race or gender, but they have been 'ableist' in dealing with the issue of disability. [Davis, 1997, 1]

And so the main problems are the similar ones of 'prejudice' and 'discrimination':

...disabled men and women have been subject to the same form of prejudice, discrimination and segregation imposed upon other oppressed groups ... on the basis of characteristics such as race or ethnicity, gender, and aging. [Davis, 1997, 174]

But genuine oppression surely involves such *proactive* impositions as persecution, enslavement, and expropriation. What Disabilities Studies regards as 'oppression' is merely failing to provide the full benefits of opportunities completely equal to the non-disabled.^[4] And proactively to impose the costs of this provision to any degree, as they advocate, would itself be—and is now, in fact—an oppression of the able for the benefit of the disabled and the growing numbers of those employed in the Disability Industry (it might be enlightening to know what percentage of what is spent actually reaches the disabled themselves). Ironically, the 'helpers' of the disabled can actually oppress their clients in all sorts of ways from bullying to bossing them about. (These are examples of the two groups that live at the taxpayers' expense: the underclass, that the disabled are pushed into, and the professional overclass, that 'look after them'.)

These two general arguments, about the supposed social construction and oppression of the disabled, are applied to all the various areas of disability *mutatis mutandis*. However, the hearing impaired include a particularly vociferous vanguard interest group who wish to affirm their difference

as some kind of ‘equally valid lifestyle’ that is mainly inconvenienced by the attitudes of others. They are not really disabled at all but an oppressed “linguistic community”:

Nowadays, two constructions of deafness in particular are dominant and compete for shaping deaf peoples’ destinies. The one construes deaf as a category of disability; the other construes deaf as designating a member of a linguistic community. [Davis, 1997, 154].

With disabilities generally, though,

The Disability Rights Movement has shifted the construct of disability ‘off the body and into the interface between people with impairments and socially disabling conditions’ [Davis, 1997, 154]

Thus all disabilities tend to form a politicised interest group that is increasingly moving away from the traditional idea of seeking voluntary help for those in genuine and deserving need and towards blaming ‘society’ for their lack of complete equality and demanding their ‘rights’ to this.

The ideological context of the arguments

These arguments are primarily informed by a view of the state as enabling or, as they often say, ‘empowering’^[5] without looking too hard, if at all, at those at whose imposed expense all this is supposed to take place. This is a standard anti-liberal argument that is called some variety of socialism, notably Marxism, in modern times (but which also goes back at least to the pre-Socratics in various forms). Some still cite aspects of Marxism to explain why disability is ‘created’:

Clearly the process of industrialisation under capitalism is a major factor that has contributed to the prevalence of disability ... Central to this approach is what Marx called ‘the industrial reserve army’. [Davis, 1997, 172]

As mentioned, ‘Social justice’ in some socialist sense is the main modern ideology to which they now appeal; but usually in a more Marxian than Rawlsian version—to which they object:

The concept of social justice as a mutual consensus and cooperation in equal shares of any collective surplus managed by the state, is changed—to a perception of social justice as individual entitlement ... from right-wing political thinkers in the United States (e.g. Rawls 1971) [Johnstone, 2001, p. 158]^[6]

But these arguments have also been influenced by Post-Modernist gobbledegook and other ‘radical’ philosophies:

... the person with disabilities will become the ultimate example, the universal image, the modality through whose knowing the postmodern subject can theorize and act. [Davis, 1997, 8]

Particular interest lies in the impact of recent sociological debates, notably social constructionism and feminism, as well as the suggested shift towards a postmodern society. [Barnes, 1999, 37]

Radical theories—Marxism, feminism (as examples) and the like—offer a more constructive model for disabled politics because they seek to transform society and conceive liberty, rights and freedoms as socially constructed—rather than individually based—and socially denied by the exercise of power and oppression. [Johnstone, 2001, 103]

The impact of the arguments

The primary impact of these arguments is intellectual and on other academics, social workers, students and the vocal disabled themselves. But to be effective the secondary intellectual impact must be on the politicians, the ruling class, who will have to be converted in order to bring about any

desired changes. Ultimately, of course, ordinary members of the public will be forced to bear the real cost of these various things.

One relatively recent example of proposed legislation seems to epitomise the problem. This was that all new houses must be built without doorsteps and have such things as wide enough halls and doorways to accommodate wheelchairs just in case a disabled person might want to live there or merely even visit (as it ‘discriminates against’ wheelchair users otherwise). But doorsteps serve a useful function in keeping out water and dirt. And the extra expense of wider spaces means that it might be cheaper simply to build every wheelchair user a free house wherever he wants it. But as that might look too obviously like an absurd privilege, we are lumbered with the even greater overall expense. And universal wheelchair access to all buildings, which we seem to be rapidly approaching, is considerably more diseconomic (insofar as it is not a voluntary affair).^[7] According to Mindspring this has now become law:

In March ‘98, Parliament passed the mandate ... Among the requirements are an accessible approach to the dwelling, a zero-step entrance when topography permits, at least a half-bath on the main floor, wide halls and doorways and accessible switches and electrical outlets.
<http://concretechange.home.mindspring.com/uknews.htm>^[8]

It would be possible to produce an economic analysis of the diseconomies of every single aspect of what the Disability Studies industry demands. They sometimes vaguely recognise the need for economy, but the best they can usually offer is that the disabled would be more likely to be productively employed rather than on state benefits (at what cost, they do not try to calculate). In any case, it is an axiom for the industry that ‘social justice’ trumps mere ‘bourgeois’ economics.

Opposition to the arguments

There is not much obvious published opposition to this output. On the shelves of bookshops under Disability Studies, in particular, there is next to nothing. The usual Public Choice theory applies. There is no tax-money to be gleaned by opposing the appropriation of tax-money by others. But there is tax-money to be shared in joining them or campaigning for an alternative tax-consuming project. There is also the additional factor here that anyone questioning such arguments might appear particularly heartless and, especially in statist academia, possibly risk ostracism and professional difficulties. At the extreme, the opposition are sometimes even hysterically accused of Nazi eugenics and a form of attempted ‘genocide’ of the disabled, especially when the opposition suggests that—completely voluntary—genetics and abortions can help minimise undesirable disabilities:

Our present situation connects with the Nazi past in that once again scientists and physicians are making the decisions about what lives to ‘target’ as not worth living by deciding which tests to develop. [Davis, 1997, 200]

The interests involved

The academics, social workers and disabled form a loose interest group of sorts, but with significant differences of interest, along Public Choice Theory lines. Behind the apparently scholarly and moral debate is often the bottom line of ‘more resources’ (tax-funding) for this or that activity. With academics and social workers there is more interest in ‘empire building’ for themselves: more professionals with more control of more resources. The vocal disabled often express a desire to take more direct control of services and resources. In this they are competing with those officially employed to make these decisions: “...if disability groups can organise themselves effectively there is an opportunity for disabled people to be collectively in control of the services they receive for the first time.” [Hales, 1999, 95] However, it is unrealistic to overlook the active role of idealism in all this. In nearly every case this will be a bigger factor than financial interest. And many are just bored so actively look around for causes to champion.

The numbers of asserted disabled is enormous and questionable. Is it really plausible that as many as 15% in the US are disabled in any serious sense? [Davis, 1997, 1] 20% of the working population

in the UK are disabled according to the Disability Rights Commission (Disability Briefing: February 2001). One in five is remarkably high. Is it mere cynicism to think that these figures might be inflated by various special interests, combined with lenient testing of such claims?

Views of the disabled

Quite a few of the academics prominently involved in Disability Studies are themselves in one or more of the disabled groups. Many of the vocal disabled use the arguments in more popular literature, including newsletters. There is a current campaign slogan implicitly designed to politicise the disabled: ‘nothing about us, without us.’ Though ostensibly a modest demand that the disabled be heard, what this really amounts to is a demand that the disabled have some political influence in any decision that might affect them in any way whatsoever (rather as ‘stakeholder theory’, with respect to business activities, also attempts to do):

... there is a need for much stronger statutory underpinning of consultation, with enforceable legal rights for disabled people. [Hales, 1996, 17]

These would include comprehensive anti-discrimination laws ... and the appropriate resourcing of the nationwide network of organisations controlled and run by disabled people to ensure their implementation. [Hales, 1996, 44]

There is also now Disability Awareness Training, as ‘awareness training’ has long existed for race and ‘gender’. This embodies the idea that, “negative attitudes underpin discrimination against disabled people.” [Hales, 1996, 121] That discrimination in employment might be entirely rational, economic and a liberal right is rarely considered. But Disability Equality Training goes even further, with,

its routes in the struggles of disabled people to gain equal opportunities and social justice. Disability Equality Training is primarily about changing the meaning of disability from individual tragedy to social oppression ... and the links with other oppressed groups. [Hales, 1996, 121]

On the other hand, we have the likes of Evelyn Glennie, the famous percussionist, who does her best to fit in with normal life despite her deafness without making a fuss or wishing to impose on others. Her championing of this attitude has made her something of a *bête noire* among the disability lobby.

However, the average disabled person is probably no more politicised or vocal than the average, politically apathetic person. Despite this, they will not be indifferent to voting for the candidate who promises them things at others’ imposed expense: the form of vote-buying that is not merely legal but inherent to representative democracy.

The impact on medicine

There appears to be something of a power struggle between the medical profession, broadly conceived, and academics, particularly sociologists and political scientists but there are now some who are explicitly Disability Studies specialists. The medical professions, though they have their own Public Choice agenda to some extent, tend to want to treat the disabled to give them as normal a life as possible. The academics tend to wish to politicise the debate—disputing the very idea of what is ‘normal’, as we have seen—and seek more ‘resources’ and ‘rights’. As the academics are more or less professional arguers with an armoury of ‘isms’ and more of a specific interest group with respect to this issue, they seem to be getting the better of the medical profession and this is likely to continue. At times this must appear to the layman to go beyond parody:

Feminists have been challenging medicine’s authority for many years now ... I look forward to the development of a full feminist theory of disability. [Davis, 1997, 275]

A particular problem is that cures and even ameliorations for various disabilities are seen as threats by those who see the attitudes of society as the problem—and maybe who want to protect their

own empires. The laudable medical aim of reducing or eradicating various disabilities in various liberal ways, including entirely voluntary genetics and abortions, is sometimes opposed by disability groups:

The disability rights agenda opposes genetic diagnosis on the grounds that it devalues the lives of disabled people. [Johnstone, 2001, 89]^[9]

...genetic testing is a form of contemporary barbarism to which society has not yet awoken... [Johnstone, 2001, 89]

At their most extreme, they even seem to want to increase the population of those who are similarly disabled. A recent case is the deaf lesbian couple that sought to maximise the chances of having a deaf child, by insemination from a deaf man. Setting aside whether this might leave the child with a legal claim against the parents for intentional harm, why should he ever receive any subsidies from taxation for what was entirely deliberate and not even perceived as undesirable?

Possible future areas of research, conferences, and publications

Perhaps it would be a useful corrective to attempt some anti-Disability Studies in the form of research, conferences and publications explicitly criticising Disability Studies as it currently exists. In responding to Disability Studies, the medical professions are the natural allies of the intellectual opposition and their voices would have authority with both politicians and the public. They also have 'common sense' on their side. Of course, one should not rule out involving economists, philosophers, etc., and the disabled themselves (especially when they are economists, philosophers, etc.).

In addition to some general and much needed anti-Disability Studies research, here are three specific research proposals to tackle the problem.

1. One radical alternative approach is to produce a report arguing that it is possible to encourage people to take out proper private insurance; both for themselves and their children should they become disabled and possibly for their unborn offspring should they be born disabled (insurance would be higher if one declines or fails a genetic test). It ought to be possible to show that it is quite likely that the disabled will end up having a better deal than they currently do. After all, it is now generally recognised that pensions would have been significantly higher if the money supposedly taken for so-called National Insurance (really a tax on employing people) were properly invested like a real insurance scheme instead of being spent by the government so that later taxpayers bear the burden of state pensions. Even if this were a compulsory scheme, that would be an improvement. Such an approach could be phased in to ensure that no currently disabled are left without support.

2. Produce detailed calculations of the vast expense that the bureaucracy of managing disability costs, along with the expense of such things as universal wheelchair access, and then argue that we should instead offer the disabled more direct cash—but at a tax-saving, obviously—to spend as they wish. This might have significant support from the disabled themselves, whose opinions certainly ought to count for more than those in the Disability Industry who wish to 'administer' and 'help' them. Having seen how relatively inexpensive this ought to be, an eventual move back towards voluntary, charitable, provision of genuinely deserving cases might then become much more practical (or at least phasing in such a thing as far as politics allows).

3. More generally, there could be a well-argued attack on the coercively monopolised and tax-subsidised university system. This should show how it could efficiently be physically de-politicised (no imposed monopoly, no tax-money) so that its employees are more likely to become ideologically de-politicised. Fully free-market institutions tend to be pro-market. It will just take time to get rid of the old guard. This should help to destroy the source of much of the illiberalism that is generating all these various industries (and vast amounts of general anti-liberal propaganda besides, which is influencing the wider society as well as corrupting the minds of so many young

people who will become tomorrow's decision makers). A Public Choice School analysis of the various vested interests could be included.

Conclusion

Thanks mainly to the free market, the (dwindling proportion of the) objectively disabled have never had it so good. But this initial survey indicates the politically imposed harm that is currently occurring and the greater harm that is due. The very idea of Disability Studies ought not to presuppose that there is an 'oppressed' group that needs to be 'empowered' with its 'rights', though one could be forgiven for thinking this on looking through the mainstream literature. The severely disabled are rightly sympathised with and helped on a voluntary basis. The idea that any degree of disability gives you the automatic moral or legal right to compensation to bring you up to some normal level of welfare^[10] is both impracticable and immoral. It also creates perverse incentives and moral hazards that inflate the numbers of the 'disabled' in a variety of ways. With ever more rights to be included at others' imposed expense, and rights to things paid for with other people's money, the disabled are in danger of being changed from the proper object of decent voluntary help, where there is genuine need, into a privileged and growing interest group of oppressors of more ordinary people—who will rightly regard them with a certain scepticism, at the very least.

Notes

[1] The original version of this paper was commissioned as a report with set headings and style of approach. Thus it is not how I would otherwise have written it and might read somewhat awkwardly in places. But rather than beginning afresh, which would be time-consuming, or abandoning a piece that seems to say something not said elsewhere, which is a contribution to the debate even if it were entirely mistaken, I present it more or less as I finally submitted it.

[2] This tax-consumption is on balance, or net, even where universities might also have substantial non-tax funding as well—such as the Open University. That academics are not (net) taxpayers but always tax consumers, cannot but influence their attitudes to calling for more 'resources' (tax funding). [\[http://212.67.202.149/~articles/tax.htm\]](http://212.67.202.149/~articles/tax.htm)

[3] But why stop at the possibly denigrating idea of 'impairments'? They might yet go on to assert that they are not even objectively impaired but merely different. For which differences are impairing depends on the social and technological conditions.

[4] It sometimes clarifies matters to consider these things at a personal level. Taking this conception seriously, one would apparently be actively 'oppressing' (all?) disabled people if one were biased in favour of marrying an able-bodied person.

[5] An irony that is clearly unintended here is that such 'empowering' is indeed an illiberal power over other people, proactively to force them to fund and accept the disabled/impaired/different. It is, then, a licence rather than a liberty they seek.

[6] Apparently Rawls's views on coercive redistribution to help the worst-off group are 'right-wing'—compared to these academics at least.

[7] It also leaves the country wide open to Dalek invasion, of course [this was written before the new flying Daleks].

[8] I cannot locate a more definite reference for the relevant legislation, but the main point is that this is the sort of diseconomic thing we have and that we can increasingly expect.

[9] Unless, perhaps (see the next paragraph), it is deliberately used to create a disabled person.

[10] Cf. Ronald Dworkin and Will Kymlicka, *passim*, extending John Rawls's arguments on Social Justice.

Bibliographical references

There is a plethora of books on Disability Studies. It might be possible to compile a bibliography of recent books alone as long as this article. I have mainly restricted myself to quoting from the following four books, as these appear to be in every way typical of the literature in the area while offering a broad selection of writers (though I have always cited them by the first editor or contributor), disabilities dealt with and academic disciplines.

Barnes, C., Mercer, G. & Shakespeare, T. (1999) *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity.

David, Lennard J. (Ed) (1997) *The Disability Studies Reader*, London, Routledge.

Hales G. 1996 (Ed) *Beyond Disability: Towards an Enabling Society*, London, Sage.

Johnstone, D. (2001) *An Introduction to Disability Studies*, second edition, London, David Fulton Publishers.

Relevant websites of interest

The following are the URLs of only a handful of websites that are of particular interest, but these link to many others as well.

British Council of Disabled People: <http://www.bcodp.org.uk/>

Centre for Disability Studies: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies>

Disability Awareness in Action:

http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepage.DAA_ORG

Disability Net: www.disabilitynet.co.uk

Disability Rights and the law: www.disability.gov.uk/

Evelyn Glennie: www.evelyn.co.uk

Inclusive Education: www.inclusion.uwe.ac.uk

Independent Living: www.independentliving.org/forums/forumframe/html

New Deal for Disabled People: www.dfes.gov.uk/nddp

The Disability Archive: www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/

Tom Shakespeare: www.windmills.u-net.com