

# The Disability Reader

## *Social Science Perspectives*

Edited by

**Tom Shakespeare**



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It is appropriate, therefore, to conclude by reiterating that the social model of disability is, first and foremost, a focus on the environmental and social barriers which exclude people with perceived impairments from mainstream society. It makes a clear distinction between impairment and disability: the former refers to biological characteristics of the body and the mind, and the latter to society's failure to address the needs of disabled people. This is not a denial of the importance of impairment, appropriate medical intervention or, indeed, discussions of these experiences. It is, however, a concerted attempt to provide a clear and unambiguous framework within which policies can be developed which focus on those aspects of disabled people's lives which can and should be changed (Barnes, 1996a) – something which hitherto sociology has failed to provide.

### Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that theorizing about the experiences of both impairment and disability within the context of sociology has spanned the latter half of the twentieth century. However, it is clear that the bulk of this work, particularly that produced by medical sociologists, has tended to adhere, at least implicitly if not explicitly, to traditional wisdom and policy solutions. In spite of this, a more radical approach, commonly known as the social model of disability, has emerged from within the disabled people's movement. In theoretical and policy terms this has far-reaching implications both for disabled people and for society as a whole. Yet hitherto the phenomenon of the social model of disability has escaped the attention of most sociologists. For me this raises a number of important and uncomfortable questions about the nature and role of the discipline which have yet to be answered.

### Further reading

- Albrecht, G. L. (1992) *The Disability Business*. London: Sage.  
Oliver, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.  
Oliver, M. (1996) *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

## The Spectre at the Feast: Disabled People and Social Theory

*Paul Abberley*

The first thing you need to do when writing about disability today is to clarify your terms, and this immediately gets you into the realm of theory, since the most fundamental issue in the sociology of disability is a conceptual one. The traditional approach, often referred to as the medical model, locates the source of disability in the individual's supposed deficiency and her or his personal incapacities when compared to 'normal' people. In contrast to this, social models see disability as resulting from society's failure to adapt to the needs of impaired people.

The World Health Organization, for example, operates in terms of a four-part medically based classification, developed by Wood (1980), known as the International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap (ICIDH). This functions to link together the experiences of an individual in a logic which attributes disadvantage to nature. A *complaint*, like a spinal injury, causes an *impairment*, like an inability to control one's legs, which *disables* by leading to an inability to walk, and *handicaps* by giving the individual problems in travelling, getting and retaining a job, etc. Thus the *complaint* is ultimately responsible for the *handicap*. A social model of disability, on the other hand, focuses on the fact that so-called 'normal' human activities are structured by the general social and economic environment, which is constructed by and in the interests of non-impaired people. 'Disability' is then defined as a form of oppression: 'The term "disability" represents a complex system of social restrictions imposed on people with impairments by a highly discriminatory society. To be a disabled person in modern Britain means to be discriminated against' (Barnes, 1991b, p. 1).

Such a model is advanced by the Disabled Peoples' International, of which the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People is a

member, and is increasingly utilized in the field of disability studies. For a social model, both the notion of normality in performance and the disadvantage experienced by the 'deficient' performer are oppressive social products. Thus the meaning attached to 'disability' here spans the area covered by the two WHO terms 'disability' and 'handicap'. It is such a definition, with its bipartite distinction between impairment and disability, that I employ and discuss in this paper.

The political impetus for the development of new sociological approaches to disablement in Britain has doubtless been the increase in the self-organization of disabled people. Amongst disabled and non-disabled sociologists who see their work as supporting this process, this development has involved a re-examination of and reorientation towards the general social theory in terms of which they have hitherto seen the world. Insofar as the process has involved dragging the study of disablement from a quiet backwater of medical sociology or deviancy theory into the mainstream of social enquiry, it equally entails the interrogation of mainstream theories as to their adequacy for the task of providing the groundwork for a liberative analysis of disablement. The most common response of modern social theory to the disabled person's enquiry 'What about me?' is silence. This very silence is itself telling, but we may go further than this. For while a theory may make no explicit reference to disabled people, we may derive implications from its general approach and analysis of social existence. If we find these implications unacceptable, we are obliged to criticize the aspects of them from which they derive as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a reflection of reality (Alcoff, 1988). The alternative is to regard the disadvantage of disabled people as inevitable, to regret it emotionally but accept it intellectually. This is a recipe not for social change but for Quixotic posturing. The disability movement needs to develop views of what it would mean for impaired people not to be disabled at all, if it is to move beyond the first stages of the struggle to abolish disablement. And this requires social theory, developed by the activist, the academic or a symbiotic relationship between the two.

### **Functionalism and disability**

The founding father of functionalist sociology, Emile Durkheim (1964), posits a fundamental distinction between non- or pre-

industrial societies and industrial ones. In the former social integration is characterized as based on the similarity of roles in the social division of labour, 'mechanical' solidarity. After industrialization, with a growing separateness and distinction of the individual from the group as the division of labour is increasingly specialized and individuated, a good society is one with strong bonds of 'organic' solidarity. These bonds are constituted through the recognition of the role of others in the complex division of labour that makes up that society. The venue where this solidarity is to be forged is the occupational associations. Thus to be deprived of such a role is to be deprived of the possibility of full societal membership. Whilst some of his polemical writing like the essay 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' (Durkheim, 1971), written as an intervention in the Dreyfus Affair, places great stress upon the necessity for the good society to recognize diversity, there is no suggestion that this extends to the incorporation into society of those unable to work.

It is then as a consequence of theoretical consistency that Topliss, operating from a functionalist perspective ultimately traceable back to the work of Durkheim, comes to advance the following argument for the inevitability of discrimination against disabled people:

While the particular type or degree of impairment which disables a person for full participation in society may change, it is inevitable that there will always be a line, somewhat indefinite but none the less real, between the ablebodied majority and a disabled minority whose interests are given less salience in the activities of society as a whole.

Similarly the values which underpin society must be those which support the interests and activities of the majority, hence the emphasis on vigorous independence and competitive achievement, particularly in the occupational sphere, with the unfortunate spin-off that it encourages a stigmatising and negative view of the disabilities which handicap individuals in these valued aspects of life. Because of the centrality of such values in the formation of citizens of the type needed to sustain the social arrangements desired by the ablebodied majority, they will continue to be fostered by family upbringing, education and public esteem. By contrast, disablement which handicaps an individual in these areas will continue to be negatively valued, thus tending towards the imputation of general inferiority to the disabled individual, or stigmatization. (Topliss, 1982, pp. 111-12)

For Topliss the inevitable disadvantage of disabled people, in any possible society, stems from our general inability to meet standards of performance in work. This can be contrasted to other perspectives, like interactionism, where some writers (Haber and Smith, 1971) suggest that the core 'deficiency' of disabled people is an aesthetic one. However, aesthetic judgements may themselves be related, albeit in a complex manner, to the requirements of production, so it seems unlikely that the aesthetic explanation, however attractive it may be in certain cases, possesses the irreducibility ascribed it by its proponents.

### Marxism and disability

Given the political unacceptability of the implications of such perspectives as functionalism and interactionism to sociologists committed to the liberation of disabled people, one major source which we have drawn upon is Marxism. This has occurred in part because of the theoretical and political backgrounds of the sociologists involved. But equally, I think, because Sartre's 1960 judgement that all thinking has to operate in relation to the dominant philosophy of the age, Marxism, still holds correct (Sartre, 1963). However, this utilization has occurred at a fair distance from the fundamental economic and philosophical basics of the theory. Such notions as oppression (Abberley, 1987; 1992a) and hegemony (Oliver, 1990; 1996), the former owing its initial credentials to Lenin's analysis of imperialism and the latter to Gramsci's work on ideology, have been found useful by some researchers and members of the disability movement. But as far as the nuts and bolts of the critique of political economy are concerned, we have largely been silent. For my part this has been not accidental, but because I have come to see profound problems in utilizing a Marxian model of human beings for the liberation of disabled people.

The clearest and most explicit reference to disabled people to be found in the Marx/Engels corpus occurs in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, written in 1844-45. Engels argues that the Industrial Revolution creates the proletariat in a gigantic process of concentration, polarization and urbanization, and with it, despite expansion of the whole economy and an increased demand for labour, a 'surplus population' which Marxists were later to refer to as the 'reserve army of labour'. He was concerned to explore the conditions of life and the

collective and individual behaviour that this process produced, and the greater part of the book is devoted to the description and analysis of these material conditions. His account is based on first-hand observations, informants and printed evidence, such as Commission reports and contemporary journals and periodicals. 'Cripples' are cited as evidence of injurious working practices: 'The Commissioners mention a crowd of cripples who appeared before them, who clearly owed their distortion to the long-working hours' (Engels, 1969, p. 180).

He cites the evidence of a number of doctors who relate particular kinds of malformation and deformity to working practices, as an 'aspect of the physiological results of the factory system' (p. 181). He continues: 'I have seldom traversed Manchester without meeting three or four of them, suffering from precisely the same distortions of the spinal columns and legs as that described . . . It is evident, at a glance, whence the distortions of these cripples come; they all look exactly alike' (p. 182). He continues for some pages to relate particular forms of impairment to factory working conditions and to condemn 'a state of things which permits so many deformities and mutilations for the benefit of a single class, and plunges so many industrious working-people into want and starvation by reason of injuries undergone in the service and through the fault of the bourgeoisie' (p. 194). He concludes his description of 'the English manufacturing proletariat' thus: 'In all directions, whithersoever we may turn, we find want and disease permanent or temporary . . . slow but sure undermining, and final destruction of the human being physically as well as mentally' (p. 238).

Engels here establishes the main form of Marxism's concern with disabled people. We are exemplary of the predations of capitalism and, as such, have propaganda value as one of the things socialism will abolish: the significance of disabled people is as historically contingent victims. The analysis is not then one of disablement but of impairment, and rates of impairment.

A hundred years later Hannington uses a similar analysis and sources of evidence, this time to condemn not factory work but the lack of it: 'These youths . . . meet problems which render them increasingly conscious of the way in which their lives have been stunted and their young hopes frustrated and of the results of the physical impairment which they have suffered through the unemployment and poverty of their parents' (Hannington, 1937, p. 78). Doyal (1979) refines this general thesis, and documents a relationship between 'capitalism' and



impairment on a wide variety of fronts, adding consumption, industrial pollution, stress and imperialism to the labour-centred concerns of Engels and Hannington.

Now I in no way wish to dispute the general accuracy and pertinence of these studies. My point is rather that such an analysis, linking impairment to capitalism as a very apparent symptom of its inhumanity and irrationality, is of little use in the struggle against disablement. All it implies is that, with the state, impaired people would wither away in a society progressively abolishing the injurious consequences of production for profit. But there are two crucial objections to the notion of the problem of disability ending up in the dustbin of history. First, whilst socially produced impairments of the kind outlined by Doyal *et al.* may decrease in number, it is inconceivable that the rate of impairment should ever be reduced to zero. Second, and of significance for disabled people today, it is an issue whether such a situation, could it occur, would be desirable. As long as there is a general eugenicist consensus between left and right that impaired modes of being are undesirable, disabled people must challenge such views as, in essence, genocidal.

Why, when in practice the propagation and implementation of right-wing theories of disability are a real and ever-present problem for disabled people, should I criticize Marxism? Is this a matter of getting on a popular bandwagon and exhibiting the spurious maturity espoused by so many ageing radicals? I think not. The social models of disability propagated as liberative of disabled people by the disability movement are necessarily perspectives 'of the left' since they involve the radical overhaul of the status quo. Thus, in developing our understanding of disablement and working towards its abolition, it is with perspectives which claim a critical and oppositional standpoint that we must come to grips. In particular, we need to understand the failure of Marxism to provide concepts which we may employ to develop further a liberative social theory of disability.

I have argued above that Marxist analyses, since they address impairment rather than disability, are exclusively concerned with prevention and cure. However, this emphasis is no accidental consequence of the marginality of disabled people to Marxism's primary concern with production relations under capitalism, rather it is deeply grounded in Marxist notions of humanity. It will thus apply across modes of production and historical eras. To see why this is the case, it is necessary to

consider the Marxist model of human beings, and in particular the role labour takes in the constitution of humanness. For Marxism, whilst all human societies must produce their own material conditions of existence, the commodity is the form products take when this production is organized through exchange. The commodity has two aspects. First, it can satisfy some human want – it has use value; second, it can be exchanged for other commodities, a property Marx calls simply 'value'. Since a commodity has both a use value and a value, the labour producing it has a dual character. Any act of labour, 'productive activity of a definite kind, carried on with a definite aim' (Marx, 1974a, p. 49), is useful labour productive of use value. This can be contrasted to pseudo-labour (familiar to many who have undergone occupational therapy): 'Nothing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value' (p. 48). This 'is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself' (*ibid.*, ch. 1).

In analysing capitalism, however, he goes on to explore that aspect of labour which endows its product with value, and this is linked to the idea of the average worker:

Any average magnitude . . . is merely the average of a number of separate magnitudes all of one kind, but differing as to quantity. In every industry, each individual labourer, be he Peter or Paul, differs from the average labourer. These individual differences or 'errors' as they are called in mathematics, compensate one another and vanish, whenever a certain minimum number of workmen are employed together. (Marx, 1974a, ch. 1)

This abstract labour, productive of value, is equivalent to socially necessary labour time:

the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society . . . which exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any

article is therefore the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production.

Approximation to this norm serves to define the normal worker. Thus the whole project of capital resting on the notion of abstraction from real data on wages, prices, profit, etc. involves the construction of a norm of 'human being as worker'. Marx's and Engels's description of capitalism captures the way in which capitalism creates both disabled people and a concept of disability as the negative of the normal worker. But this is not an aspect of capitalism Marx seems to present as transcendable. So, whilst Marxism provides powerful theoretical tools for understanding the origin and nature of the oppression of disabled people, it seems of less use in conceptualizing a future for those impaired people unable to work. Thus if we remain within the problematic which has served us well in analysing the oppression of disabled people in the present era, we seem to be obliged to propagate what appears in terms of that theory to be a myth, namely that a society is possible in which all impaired people could have a meaningful role in production.

This becomes clearer if we consider the way in which Marx and Marxists present human freedom, the condition supposed to develop through the transcendence of capitalism and its vestiges. Marx occasionally seems to reduce the problem of human freedom to free time, in for example the 1847 'Wage-Labour and Capital' (Marx, 1969). On such a view there should be no problem for those unable to labour: free time would occupy the whole of life. But this position is more generally ridiculed and in the 1857-58 *Grundrisse* it is asserted that 'Really free working is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion' (Marx, 1973, p. 611).

In the 1875 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' Marx makes the well-known statement that 'in a more advanced phase of communist society . . . when labour is no longer just a means of keeping alive but has itself become a vital need . . . [we may then have] from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' (Marx, 1974b, p. 347). But this implies that impaired people are still deprived, by biology if not by society. Impairment, since it places a limit upon creative sensuous practice, is necessarily alienatory, for those who accept that this term should be seen as an element of a Marxist terminological canon. This is not perhaps a problem in relation to free

time, since even in Utopia people would not be expected to take part in all possible recreational and cultural activities. It does however constitute a restriction in relation to work, which is an interaction between agent and nature which results in production of social value.

Whilst the distinctions between productive, reproductive and unproductive labour are crucial to the analysis of capitalism, rather than the exploration of a Marxist Utopia, the ability to labour in some socially recognized sense still seems a requirement of full membership of a future good society based upon Marxist theory. Whilst children as potential workers, and elderly people as former ones, may be seen as able to assume a status in a paradise of labour, it is hard to see how despite all efforts by a benign social structure an albeit small group of impaired people could achieve full social integration. Following Marxist theory thus understood, some impaired lives cannot then, in any possible society, be truly social, since the individual is deprived of the possibility of those satisfactions and that social membership to which her humanity entitles her, and which only work can provide. For impaired people to be adequately provided for in the system of distribution, but excluded from the system of production – that is, on a superior form of welfare – would be unsatisfactory, since we would still be in the essentially peripheral relationship to society we occupy today. There is then for Marxism an identity of who you are with the work you do which transcends capitalism and socialism into the concrete utopia of the future to constitute a key element of humanity, and a key need of human beings in all eras. Whilst other needs can be met for impaired people, and this can perhaps be done in a non-oppressive manner, the one need that cannot be met for those unable to labour is the need to work. This appears to be true for a whole range of Marxist thinkers.

William Morris, whose *News from Nowhere* envisages a profound erosion of barriers between necessary labour and the rest of human life, therefore attributes to work a crucial role in human happiness and identity: 'I believe that the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of pain in labour to a minimum . . . the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself' (cited by Levitas, 1990, p. 108). Marcuse, whilst believing that work can be more pleasant than it is today, points to a deep coincidence of analysis between Marx and Freud: 'Behind the Reality Principle lies the fundamental fact of scarcity . . . whatever satisfaction

is possible necessitates work, more or less painful arrangements and undertakings for the procurement of the means for satisfying needs' (Marcuse, 1955, p. 35).

Andre Gorz, at the opposite pole from Morris in his advocacy of the minimization of socially necessary labour and the maximization of free time, still sees purposive activity and competence as a condition of social inclusion: 'the abolition of work does not mean abolition of the need for effort, the desire for activity, the pleasure of creation, the need to cooperate with others and be of some use to the community'. He continues: 'the demand to "work less" does not mean or imply the right to "rest more"' (Gorz, 1982, pp. 2-3). But this is precisely the kind of right that impaired people do demand, today and for the future.

This suggests that Gouldner was correct in his judgement that

Marxism never really doubted the importance of being useful . . . Its fundamental objection to capitalist society was to the dominating significance of exchange-value, not to use-value. It objected to the transformation of men's labour into a commodity, but it continued to emphasise the value and importance of work. (Gouldner, 1971, p. 406)

It seems that Marxism, on these interpretations, along with allopathic medicine which has been so tied in to the disablement of impaired people in the modern era, can never be other than a project of the Enlightenment. It shares with other such enterprises a rationalist adherence to aspirations of 'perfection', and can identify non-workers only with the historically redundant bourgeoisie, one aspect of whose alienation is their failure to participate in social production.

### Work and disability theory

How does this feed back into analyses of disability in society today and the needs of the disability movement? With less than one-third of those in the relevant age-group in employment in Britain today (Martin, Meltzer and Elliot, 1988), for many disabled people the demand for access to work is seen as a crucial component of the struggle for equality. This is reflected in the focus of the government's feeble proposals to 'tackle' disabled people's oppression which focus on the workplace. Equally BCODP, in fighting the government's cutbacks on

the Access to Work scheme, asserts 'The right to a job is a fundamental Human Right' (BCODP, 1996, p. 3). Recent work (Lunt and Thornton, 1994) has surveyed some of the issues involved in implementing employment policies in terms of a social model of disablement – but the aim itself is left unexamined.

At the level of more general theory, Finkelstein has pointed out repeatedly (1980; 1993a) 'that the predominant factor contributing to the disablement of different groups is the way in which people can participate in the creation of social wealth' (1993a, p. 12). He goes on to argue that since

assumed levels of employability separate people into different levels of dependency . . . By trying to distance themselves [groups of people with particular impairments or degrees of impairment] from groups that they perceive as more disabled than themselves they can hope to maintain their claim to economic independence and an acceptable status in the community. (1993a, p. 14)

He cautions against doing this for what are essentially political reasons, that it will divide the movement, and points out that those who did this would be surrendering to the logic of the medical model, which they claim to reject. Now this appeal to unity and theoretical consistency, whilst appropriate to its context, seems to me to pass over an essential issue for disabled people – that, even in a society which *did* make profound and genuine attempts to integrate impaired people into the world of work, some would be excluded, by their impairment. Whatever efforts are made to integrate impaired people into the world of work some will not be capable of producing goods or services of social value, that is 'participating in the creation of social wealth'. This is so because, in any society, certain, though varying, products are of value and others are not, regardless of the effort that goes into their production. I therefore wish to contend that, just because a main mechanism of our oppression is our exclusion from social production, we should be wary of drawing the conclusion that overcoming this oppression should involve our wholesale inclusion in it. As Finkelstein recognizes, a society may be willing and in certain circumstances become eager to absorb a portion of its impaired population into the workforce, yet this can have the effect of maintaining and perhaps intensifying its exclusion of the remainder. We need to develop a theory of oppression which



avoids this bifurcation, through a notion of social integration which is not dependent upon impaired people's inclusion in productive activity.

### Feminist analyses

One area where the analysis of oppression has become rich enough to deal with this issue is feminist theory. Feminism has pointed out that Marxism is deeply marked by the maleness of its originators – and never more so than in the key role assumed by work in the constitution of human social identity. It is argued that the apparent gender-neutrality of Marxist theoretical categories is in reality a gender-bias which legitimizes Marxism's excessive focus on the 'masculine sphere' of commodity production. Whilst some approaches in feminist sociology have reproduced, though from a broader perspective, the concern with work as definitional of social inclusion (Abberley, 1996), others have more profoundly disputed labour-dependent conceptions of humanity.

One aspect of this involved feminist conceptions of the human body, far less abstract than classical Marxist formulations. In exploring the politics of human reproductive biology, feminism opens up other aspects of our biological lives, and thus impairment, to critical reflection. Another is that it has pointed out that the traditional technological solutions have not resulted in a better society for women. 'One fact that is little understood . . . is that women in poverty are almost invariably productive workers, participating fully in both the paid and the unpaid work force . . . Society cannot continue persisting with the male model of a job automatically lifting a family out of poverty' (McKee, 1982, p. 36). In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hill Collins quotes May Madison, a participant in a study of inner-city African Americans who has pointed out that

One very important difference between white people and black people is that white people think you ARE your work . . . Now, a black person has more sense than that because he knows that what I am doing doesn't have anything to do with what I want to do or what I do when I am doing for myself. Now, black people think that my work is just what I have to do to get what I want. (quoted by Collins, 1990, pp. 47–8)

Whilst white male non-disabled sociologists may interpret this as evidence for the thesis of the alienated or instrumental worker, we should perhaps see it as documenting the social basis of an alternative theory of social membership and identity. This negative evaluation of the significance of 'work' and 'technology' in the present is not construed as explicable in terms of 'deformations under capitalism', but is carried forward into a critique of the viability for women of a society organized around 'work' and the 'technofix'. Such issues are, I think, of significance to the development of theories of disablement. Schweickart, amongst many, represents another strand in arguing that 'The domination of women and the domination of nature serve as models for each other. Thus, science and technology have a place in a feminist utopia only if they can be redefined apart from the logic of domination' (1983, p. 210).

This debate seems an important one for disability theory, both in terms of such detail as the desirability of care activities being performed by machines and in terms of wider issues of how far it would be correct to transform impaired people to give us access to the world. Thus amongst the 'deep' issues of the relationship between human beings and nature raised within feminism are many which echo in disability theory.

### Conclusion

The theoretical perspectives I have considered above seem to me to imply an important distinction between disablement and other forms of oppression. Whilst the latter involve a utopia in which freedom can possibly be seen as coming through full integration into the world of work, for impaired people the overcoming of disablement, whilst immensely liberative, would still leave an uneradicated residue of disadvantage in relation to power over the material world. This in turn restricts our ability to be fully integrated into the world of work in any possible society. One implication that can be drawn from this, which finds most support in classical sociological perspectives, with their emphasis on the role of work in social membership, is that it would be undesirable to be an impaired person in such a society, and thus that the abolition of disablement also involves as far as possible the abolition of impairment.

The work-based model of social membership and identity is integrally linked to the prevention/cure-orientated perspective of allopathic medicine and to the specific instrumental logic of genetic engineering, abortion and euthanasia. Ultimately it involves a value judgement upon the undesirability of impaired modes of being. However, this logic allows for the integration of perhaps a substantial proportion of any existing impaired population into the work process, but only insofar as the interface between an individual's impairment, technology and socially valued activity produced a positive outcome. Thus the abolition of an individual's disablement is ultimately dependent upon and subordinate to the logic of productivity. Recent events in China, where a genocidal eugenics law and state-sponsored infanticide have been accompanied by significant equality legislation for some disabled people, exemplify this logic, which I suggest is perfectly consistent with that state's ideology.

An alternative kind of theory can be seen as offering another future insofar as it reflects work as crucially definitional of social membership and is dubious about some of the progressive imperatives implicit in modern science. But such perspectives are not mere piecemeal modifications to existing ideas of the good society. They also involve a distancing from the values of 'modern' society in so far as they involve the identification of persons with what they can produce in such a system. A liberative theory of disability requires the posing of values counter to the classical sociological and revolutionary consensus, the assertion of the rights of the human 'being' against the universalization of the human 'doing'.

This is by no means to deny that the origins of our oppression, even for those with jobs, lie in our historical exclusion as a group, from access to work, nor is it to oppose campaigns for increasing access to employment. It is, however, to point out that a consistently liberative analysis of disablement today must recognize that full integration of impaired people in social production can never constitute the future to which we as a movement aspire. If we must look elsewhere than to a paradise of labour for the concrete utopia that informs the development of theories of our oppression, it is not on the basis of classical analyses of social labour that our thinking will be further developed. Rather it involves a break with such analyses, and an explicit recognition that the aspirations and demands of the disability movement involve the development and proselytization of values and ideas which run profoundly counter to

the dominant cultural problematic of both left and right. This is a matter not of choice but of the future survival of alternative, impaired, modes of being. I am thus arguing that we need to develop theoretical perspectives which express the standpoint of disabled people, whose interests are not necessarily served by the standpoints of other social groups, dominant or themselves oppressed, of which disabled people are also members.

Such sociology involves the empowerment of disabled people because knowledge is itself an aspect of power. Disabled people have inhabited a cultural, political and intellectual world from whose making they have been excluded and in which they have been relevant only as problems. Scientific knowledge, including sociology, has been used to reinforce and justify this exclusion. New sociology of disablement needs to challenge this 'objectivity' and 'truth' and replace it with knowledge which arises from the position of the oppressed and seeks to understand that oppression. It requires an intimate involvement with the real historical movement of disabled people if it is to be of use. Equally, such developments have significance for the mainstream of social theory, in that they provide a testing ground for the adequacy of theoretical perspectives which claim to account for the experiences of all a society's members.

### Further reading

- Abberley, P. (1996) *Work, utopia and impairment*, in L. Barton (ed.) *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*. Harlow: Longman.
- Engels, F. (1969) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. St Albans: Granada Publishing.
- Gleeson, B. J. (1997) Disability studies: a historical materialist view, *Disability and Society*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 179-202.