

# DISABILITY AND MATERIALIST EMBODIMENT

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Physical and intellectual disability emerged in the twentieth century as a major public policy concern in Western states (Stone, 1984). The exclusions that face disabled people are held to arise from discrimination – essentially a mode of individual behaviour – rather than from the fundamental economic, social and cultural arrangement of society. Prior to the 1960s, state concern was largely focused on providing support for dependent citizens whose labour power was diminished by impairment (Oliver, 1990). From the 1960s a more reformist approach began to emerge, at least partly because disabled people's social movements demanded it. New rights mechanisms were set in place that sought to guarantee certain citizenship entitlements to disabled people. Two broadly distinct approaches to rights based reform for disabled people have emerged. First, countries such as the USA, Australia and (more recently) Britain have framed special legislation that seeks to counter the particular exclusions that disabled people encounter most commonly, including inaccessible built environments.<sup>1</sup> The other major approach has involved the explicit inclusion of disability in general human rights legislation and policy.<sup>2</sup>

Both approaches share an implicit aim of changing social attitudes towards impairment. Rights legislation aims to change certain discriminatory practices and encourage a culture of inclusion and respect. The aim is to reform the mindsets of individuals and groupings, premised on the idea that attitudes animate discriminatory behaviour. In seeking to

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1 The *Americans with Disabilities Act 1990*, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* in Australia and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* in the UK are the relevant examples of this approach.

2 The *New Zealand Human Rights Act 1993* exemplifies this approach.

challenge this liberal reformist and individualist framework, the aim of this paper is threefold. First, to highlight and critically evaluate the socio-political framework of human rights that has guided legislation and policy approaches to disability in Western countries over recent decades. Second, to outline a materialist conception of disability and explain its historical and geographical significance. Such a conception is regarded as the principal radical alternative to the 'conventional' reform perspectives adumbrated above. In concluding, we sketch an alternative transformative framework and policy focus that is guided by the materialist conception of disability.

## **The Rights Perspective and its Limitations**

### **The Limits to Welfare**

Most Western states have used some form of rights legislation to reform the practices and representations that oppress disabled people. There is mounting evidence, however, that much of these reform efforts, especially those based on rights legislation, have not directly influenced the social structures that constitute a disabling society. A recent critical appraisal of the last twenty-five years of disability policy development in Australia (Clear, 2000) suggests that, in spite of considerable progress in making governments and some organisations less discriminatory, disabled people still experience profound socio-cultural and economic exclusion (see also McElwaine & Ford, 1994; Meekosha & Dowse, 1997; Gleeson, 1998). The picture of progress of disabled people in Western countries is not easy to document and assess, and it is marked by major differences of approach by the various states and other social policy governance actors (Hurst, 1995). Nonetheless, disabled people remain one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in any Western community (Imrie, 1996a; Oliver, 1996). Alcock (1993:175), citing Groves, observes that 'Poverty is disability's close companion'. From Europe, Barnes and Oliver write:

...[t]he evidence that disabled people experience severe economic deprivation and social disadvantage is overwhelming and no longer in dispute, whether it be from the governments own

commissioned research, from research institutes, academics or disabled people themselves (Barnes & Oliver, 1993:267).

In Australia, the Commonwealth *Commission of Inquiry into Poverty* in the early and mid 1970s drew considerable attention to the problem of disability poverty in Australia (Fincher & Nieuwenhuysen, 1998). The Commission provided important new data on disability poverty, stressing many dimensions that lay outside the realm of the established official view. In the subsequent decades there emerged a new reformist framework embodying additional social supports and rights legislation. In a contribution to the story of Australian poverty in recent decades, Gleeson observed that:

...[d]espite many gains for disabled people since the 1970s legislation and support services, it is difficult to measure precisely the socioeconomic impact of these initiatives and impossible to deny that disability poverty remains a critical social problem in Australia (Gleeson, 1998:332-333).

The current experience of disabled people in the Australian labour market highlights their continuing socio-economic disadvantage. Using 1993 Australian Bureau of Statistics data it was estimated that only 228,900 disabled people (44 per cent of those disabled aged between 15-64 years) living in households in NSW were employed (ABS, 1995:10). These figures highlight the persistence of disability poverty despite the many reformist initiatives that followed in the wake of the 1970s Poverty Inquiry.

The 'costs of disability' add to the economic burden borne by disabled people and both reinforce and reflect the labour market exclusion that they endure. These include the costs of transport, personal care and, depending on the type of impairment, medical and home aids. A recent report, based on a study of 200 people with quadriplegia for the Australian Quadriplegia Association (AQA), indicates that the average unavoidable 'costs of disability' amounted to \$143 per week or \$7,494 per annum (Hughes, 2000). People who relied on the Disability Support Pension as their only source of income spent 59 per cent (an amount of \$96 per week or \$5,054 per annum) of that income on disability related costs (Hughes, 2000). These findings have been reflected in an

international literature which has concluded that Western welfare systems have failed to both address the costs of disability and provide adequate income support and social infrastructure for disabled people (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Jenkins, 1991).

A major reason for the intransigence of disability poverty has been the weakness of the welfarist reform project relative to contemporary political economic reform currents, notably neo-liberalism. A range of authors (Hamilton, 1994; McElwaine & Ford, 1994; Walker, 1993) have pointed to the deleterious consequences for disabled people of the national economic reform agenda pursued by the Australian State and Commonwealth governments during the 1980s and early 1990s. Largely informed by neo-liberal ideology, this reform project deregulated labour markets and restructured (in some cases reduced) social supports (Stilwell, 2000). McElwaine & Ford (1994) point out that pursuit of this agenda has also created a new non-working, marginalised class, including many disabled people. Although specific disability policies have sought to place disabled people in open employment, restrictive macroeconomic policy has made the mainstream job market a more hostile place for 'less competitive' workers (Saltmarsh, 1994). The contradictory policy position of stressing social justice objectives at the same time as reforms that have elevated competition and efficiency above all other concerns was a hallmark of the federal Labor governments that held office after the Poverty Inquiry. The task of reducing disability poverty cannot be left to the realm of welfare policy alone.

#### **The Limits to Justice**

Although national systems of protective rights legislation have made some domains of human affairs less discriminatory, the weight of evidence points to a powerfully disabling capitalist culture that has not been significantly challenged by such frameworks (Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Colker, 1998; Davis, 1997; Hurst, 1995). The underlying structural causes of disablement in Western society have resisted legislative reform frameworks such as those identified in the Introduction.

Under recent neo-liberal conceptions and policy in Australia, the commitment of government to rights has been diminished. This has been amply demonstrated by significant funding cuts (up to 40 per cent since 1997) to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). Also the shift to a Federal Court system for complaints resolution on discrimination matters has rendered the process less accessible (Banks 1997; Darcy & Daruwalla, 1999). Potential litigants must now consider the enormous financial risks that individuals must bear when seeking relief from discrimination. Given the costs of unsuccessful challenges, many individuals doubtless now decide not to challenge.

Events surrounding both the Sydney Olympics, and the Paralympics that followed them, highlight important ways in which legislation and policy of recent reforms have both failed to produce substantial and sustainable changes for disabled people and often institutionalise their exclusion. Thus, the Paralympics has developed as a fully separate (parallel) sporting organisation. This has occurred at the same time as rights based policy and legislation reforms propose equality and inclusion. Goggin and Newell (2000) suggest that the Paralympics represent a form of 'apartheid' in which athletes are separated on the basis of impaired and non-impaired status. The Olympics themselves mirrored the wider exclusion of impaired bodies from the mainstreams of social and economic life.

The case of Bruce Maguire, a blind man wanting equal access to the Sydney Olympic Games, illustrates the limitations of the rights process and the general weakness of the reformist agenda (Maguire, 1999). After a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) that the Sydney Organising Committee for the 2000 Olympic Games (SOCOG) had discriminated in failing to provide information for blind people, SOCOG, had an interim determination made against them. SOCOG's response was to establish a telephone line so that blind and vision-impaired people could have the information read to them. This was hardly a serious gesture because, as SOCOG themselves noted, 'it would take 410 minutes to read the book from beginning to end' (Maguire 1999). Due to the HREOC directions not being enforceable without the substantial cost of a Federal Court ruling, Mr Maguire was unable to obtain tickets to the Olympic Games unless he took his case to

this higher court. This he did and despite a successful Federal Court ruling in his favour, SOCOG was still able to use its power to avoid the time and expense of making its processes truly accessible. In a further development, Maguire was awarded \$20,000 damages following a case to the HREOC that SOCOG had failed to comply with an order to provide accessible information and, specifically, an accessible website.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the explicit issue of non-accessible information systems, the case illustrates the essentially individualising and defensive position in which disabled people are placed, both by discriminatory social structures and by the legal processes that putatively address these sources of disadvantage. The case is apposite given the critical assessments made by disabled people of the Paralympic and Olympic movements (Goggin & Newell, 2000).

In another illustration of the tenuous nature of the rights approach the US Supreme Court recently handed down a decision that gives immunity to the States from prosecution by State employees under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990) (Greenhouse, 2001:5). As one disability writer commented:

Although the decision highlighted here is, indeed, one of particular relevance within American constitutional law it seems clear to me that there is a lesson here for disability activists worldwide no matter in what particular political-legal context they find themselves ... . Namely, that disabled people's rights are neither safe nor secure ... (Handley, 2001).

The workings of the criminal justice system also show the persistent socio-economic disadvantage of disabled people and the way in which pervasive cultural and economic forms disadvantage and exclude them in spite of protective rights legislation. A New South Wales State parliamentary inquiry on law and justice was recently told that intellectually disabled people are up to 10 times more likely than the general population to be imprisoned. The State's criminal justice system was partly to blame for this. The NSW Community Services Commissioner, Mr Robert Fitzgerald, said people with intellectual

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3 <http://www.it.fairfax.com.au/e-commerce/20001121/A63564-2000Nov20.html>;  
<http://www.it.fairfax.com.au/e-commerce/20001121/A96-2000Nov21.html>

disabilities were no more likely to commit crimes than others: "They are more likely to actually be detained and incarcerated than other people" (Jacobsen, 1999:7).

Such findings confirm earlier work of the New South Wales Law Reform Commission that has shown the disproportional representation of intellectually disabled people both in local courts and in the prison system (Byrne, 1995). As with disability poverty, the problem of exclusion and incarceration seems to be both systemic and international. A recent report from the University of California, Berkeley, by Joan Petersilia, entitled *Doing Justice? Criminal Offenders with Developmental Disabilities*, shows that even though developmentally disabled people represent no more than three percent of the general United States population they make up 10 percent of that country's prison inmates.<sup>4</sup>

Any benefits of supportive rights legislation depend on the goodwill of government and the politics of the court system. This support can change or be readily extinguished. Accessibility to the law depends on a range of life circumstances, including one's financial means and access to knowledge of one's rights and to the procedures for exercising them. Further, socio-cultural dynamics, including gender and race, play powerful overdetermining roles in the disabled person's experience of the law. The existence of protection in statute might be seen as a necessary but insufficient step towards freedom from discrimination (Oliver, 1990; Barnes & Oliver, 1995; Jones & Basser-Marks, 1998). A leading British disability scholar recently remarked that the rights approach offered disabled people only piecemeal change through 'long, slow and costly litigation' that eventually wore down even the best resourced and most committed activists (Shakespeare, 2001).

Analysis of the reformist record has drawn attention to the significant gap between its legislative, policy and rhetorical claims, and the substantive material interests of disabled people. The range of evidence described here highlights the experience of human rights legislation, viz., the law in practice, as distinct from abstract ideals. Campbell (2001) finds that the rights approach to disability reform in Australia has rested

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4 [disability-research-request@mailbase.ac.uk](mailto:disability-research-request@mailbase.ac.uk) accessed 2/8/2000

upon a 'collusion' between the legal and medical discourses which together have constituted the disabled person as a 'defective corporeality' that must constantly seek remedy for its 'ills' from the law. In the following section we elaborate the position of embodied materialism. We argue that such ills are largely social in origin and are sourced in the deep and disabling structures of market societies.

### **The Materialist Social Model**

A materialist explanation of disability highlights the way that people with impairments are made dependent, excluded and marginalised by the arrangement of socio-cultural and economic life. Physical impairments are fundamentally socialised as disability; a state of socio-spatial exclusion from the mainstreams of social, economic and cultural life. The materialist perspective challenges two significant myths. The first is that disability is primarily a problem of individual impaired bodies. This view has been challenged by variants of the 'social model' of disability, not all of which stress the role of material conditions (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). Some social models emphasise ideational forces – ideology, discursive practices, symbols – as the principal source of disability discrimination (Oliver, 1990). The ideational model, which has found favour in many quarters, including policymakers, rests on what we regard as the second disability myth. It assumes that inappropriate and discriminatory social attitudes and cultural phenomena are the central problem for people with impairments and that such dynamics should be the principal focus of reformist political change.

The materialist social model sees cultural and ideational constructs as real forces that shape the experiences of disabled people but which are nonetheless rooted in and inseparable from material life. The view echoes the cultural materialist framework advanced by radical social theorists, notably Raymond Williams (1978; 1980). When Finkelstein and Stuart (1996) point to the 'disabling culture' of contemporary capitalism, they refer to an ensemble of materially-evident relations and representations, including political economic systems. Davis (1995) elaborates the cultural materialist view, pointing out how disability is



socially produced through two interdependent modalities — 'function' and 'appearance'.

The materialist model of disability recognises the role of time and space in the production and reproduction of discrimination and exclusion. Gallagher and Laqueur state the historical materialist position succinctly:

Not only has [the body] been perceived, interpreted, and represented differently in different epochs, but it has also been lived differently, brought into being within widely dissimilar material cultures, subjected to various technologies and means of control, and incorporated into different rhythms of production and consumption, pleasure and pain (1987:vii).

References to exclusion and marginalisation go to the crux of disability policy and politics. They highlight issues of social space and socially produced boundaries that deny some bodies their lived potential. Central to the materialist account is a spatio-temporal focus on changing 'modes of production'; for example, the shift from feudal to capitalist society and the associated rise of commodity relations and exchange. Several materialist analyses have shown how this change set up exclusionary boundaries in domestic, work and institutional dimensions of social life to the great detriment of impaired bodies (Davis, 1995; Gleeson, 1999; Oliver, 1990). The historical geography of feudal life was indeed harsh and limiting on impaired people but nonetheless structurally conducive to patterns of everyday life that were inclusive, interdependent and personalised. Capitalism destroyed the spaces that were evident in feudal society, in which impaired people made valued contributions to labour and community life (Gleeson, 1999, chapter 5). Contemporary urban space, in work, leisure and institutional forms, bears witness to a way of life that does not, at its core, include or value impaired bodies (Hahn, 1986; Imrie, 1996a).

Within this explanatory framework we can describe the way an *ableism* is constituted somewhat like sexism and racism, as fundamentally a product of the material realities of capitalism, including its system of commodity labour and its dominant cultural and discursive forms (Oliver, 1990). These cultural forms produce and express a system of normality, and a social order that excludes people with impairments (Hahn, 1988).

The Marxist tradition of historical materialist inquiry has largely ignored the question of embodiment (Gleeson, 1999). An embodied materialism recognises the material nature of impairment and its lived experience. It interrogates the complex ways in which impaired bodies are socialised through the interrelationship of particular moments of time, space and embodiment (Gleeson, 1999:195).

Disability analyses of the type we have described, in concert with other critical currents, notably feminism and racial studies, have suggested the contours of a cultural materialist account of the body (Davis, 1995; Soper, 1979; 1995). The approach is used then, to explain the spatially and temporally conditioned *production* of a specific embodiment; namely that of disability. It does this by reference to the empirical details of historical-geographical transformations of material life such as the fundamental shift from feudal to industrial production and the rise of modern urban space. It also endeavours to explain the continuing *experience* of people with impairments by critical examination of the cultural, social and economic conditions of material life that reproduce disabled embodiment. This is not a simple determinism, but a complex ecological view of the social relations of disability. The diverse, multi-scalar relations of contemporary capitalism define a mutually constituted economy and culture that produce exclusionary and disabling social spaces and cultural representations. These continue to produce and define a constrained and alienated experience of embodiment; the daily experience of being disabled.

### Some Historical Influences

There are limited but important references to disability in early historical materialist literature. These include references to the ravages of early capitalist modes of production on workers' bodies, and to a 'surplus population' (reserve army). In one report, Engels (1969) writes:

The Commissioners mention a crowd of cripples who appeared before them, who clearly owed their distortion to the long-working hours (1969:180).

This was a reflection on the way capitalist production directly created impairment. For Marx, the body and its world were interrelated and mutually creating. In earlier times, life and labour seemed to be one and the same thing (Davis, 1995). With the changing mode of production the body became reified and alienated; a commodity rendered vulnerable to oppressive social determination. Recently a number of authors (Finkelstein, 1980; Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990; Gleeson 1999) have provided varying materialist analyses of disability. The evidence of the social and economic production of *impaired* bodies in advanced capitalism and oppressive patriarchy provides recent confirmation of important tenets of the commentary of Marx and Engels on capitalist exploitation (see Doyal, 1983 cited in Davis, 1995; Abberley, 1987).

Most impairments are caused by malnutrition, war, land mines, stress and occupational accidents, motor vehicle accidents and pollution. These phenomena are all, to varying degrees, environmental and political burdens carried largely by the subordinate strata of all societies. Poverty is a cause of disability and disability is a cause of poverty. This is so, in spite of a dominant discourse that would have us believe that impairment is sourced primarily in biology and genetics (Morris, 1991).

Consonant with the growth of industrial production, there emerged an institutional response to impairments that fixed this form of embodiment as an individual problem of an incapacitated body, unfit for 'normal' systems of productive life. During the nineteenth century, this impaired body became increasingly normalised and objectively categorisable by the developing systems of medical and measuring sciences. As Michel Foucault has so comprehensively described, the disciplinary requirements of industrial life had begun to crystallise before the onset of capitalist production (Foucault, 1976). The rise of asylums to house impaired bodies, however, was closely associated with the new requirements for a 'normal' worker who could now be measured for the needs of production (Davis, 1995). Once embedded, the exclusionary space defined by capitalist production and exchange labour changed forever the life opportunities of impaired bodies (Gleeson, 1999). Davis summarises the historical aspects:

One could go so far as to say that disability, in our sense of the word, did not exist in such a world. Of course, impairments existed, but the

impaired body was part of a lived experience, and in that sense functioned. It was not defined strictly by its relation to the means of production or a productive economy. But by the mid-nineteenth century, the body *an sich* [the body as such] had become the body *für sich* [the body for a purpose] and the impaired had become disabled – unable to be part of the productive economy, confined to institutions, shaped to contours defined by a society at large (1995:73-4).

Foucault's (1973) account tells us that, within the context of feudal economic production, social and spatial segregation was simply not necessary. The emergence of 'modern' categories of dependency is consistent with the increasing pattern and discourse of differentiation and objectification uncovered by Foucault's analysis. The process captured here is the creation of the subject of an increasingly studied and managed population. Through this Foucauldian lens disability might be viewed as a particular form of objectification (or embodiment), and this was associated with the wider scientific developments and differentiation of disease, and the systematic diagnosis, treatment and practice regimes that followed from this Foucault (1975; 1977). Although Foucault's interest was in the creation of the subject and the practice of power through the disciplinary technologies of knowledge specialisms, he did not view these technologies as the result of industrialisation or the growth of capitalism. He saw them as part of the disciplinary formations that were a necessary *pre-condition* to the successful emergence of capitalist modes of production (Foucault, 1979).

The onset of industrialisation and the progress of science merged and resulted increasingly in objectification and differentiation of individuals. Central to this was the emergence of an able-bodied workforce to meet the demands of the changing social and economic world (Foucault, 1973; Rabinow, 1984; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). As Foucault documents in *Madness and Civilization* (1973), the era of systematic confinement from the second half of the seventeenth century throughout Europe was associated with 'the universal necessity of labor' (Rabinow, 1984:136). The link between madness and 'imaginary transcendencies' of earlier times was broken in the classical age in which:

...for the first time madness was perceived through a condemnation of idleness and a social immanence guaranteed by

the community of labor. This community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness. It was in this other world, encircled by the sacred powers of labor, that madness would assume the status we now attribute to it (Rabinow, 1984:136).

This economic imperative for confinement was sustained by the moral necessity for discipline and order, as the public decrees of the time made clear. Foucault, however, highlights the conditioning power of the demands for a particular sort of disciplined labour force as a defining dimension of the emergent and later excluded category of disabled person.

### A Historical-Geographical Perspective

The discussion has highlighted the complex conditioning forces – language, culture, knowledge interests, politics and economy – that largely constitute any modal (structural) change. It has revealed aspects of the existentials of body, time, and social relations. It has also emphasised the predominant role of social and economic forces in the creation of dependency and disablement. As a theoretical account of the embodiment of disabled persons, however, the explanation lacks a *socio-spatial* view. This is true of many accounts that, from the perspective of a putative ‘social model’, directly challenge the dominant medical and rehabilitation account. Recent literature in the disability field has begun to include a geographical treatise of the embodiment of disability. New ‘geographies of disability’ have emerged (e.g., Chouinard, 1994, 1997) that explore the socio-spatial origins and experience of disablement. Several of these accounts (Gleeson, 1995; 1999; Imrie, 1996a; 1996b) have drawn together two key strands of materialist enquiry: historical-geographical accounts of space and its social constitution (Harvey, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989), and materialist accounts of the socialisation of impairment as disability.

Gleeson (1999) provides a detailed account of an embodied historical-geographical materialist understanding of disability. The work challenges individualising, pathologising and naturalised understandings on disability. It sets out to extend and reframe the social view of

disability with knowledge about its spatial production. Gleeson applies the embodied materialist framework to a set of historical-geographical case studies, focusing upon the experience of impairment in feudal and industrial capitalist societies.

Other historical materialist accounts of disability ( Hevey, 1992; Oliver, 1990) show how the emerging industrial mode of production eventually destroyed the feudal social spaces in which impaired people made valued contributions to labour and social life. From these historical-geographical moments we can understand the interrelation between the reconstruction of social space and the changing embodiment of impairment. The analysis suggests that the role of competitive labour systems (commodified labour) and the increasing disjuncture of home and work are critical to the production both of a new geography of life and to unique social embodiments, including disability. This is not to swamp the agency of disabled people in the emergent oppressive spaces of industrial capitalism. Gleeson, for example, adapts Lefebvre's (1991) typology of social space to include 'the street' of the industrial city, not just as a site of despair and exclusion for 'abject' bodies, but as a public space of resistance outside the boundaries of confinement and the non productive places now defined by the asylum and the home.

Careful spatial remapping provides an important challenge to conventional historiography which has depicted impaired people as predictably tragic and excluded (Hevey, 1992). The critique also engages a naturalised view of history where the past was ineluctably bad for impaired bodies whose salvation was promised by a progressivist vision of a 'humane' future. Embodied materialism demands a different historiography rooted in the careful description of both the structure of social life and a fine grained analysis of daily experience in feudal and the emergent industrial landscapes. Several such analyses have charted the rise of the contemporary Western city that is strongly disabling of impaired people (Davis, 1995; Hahn, 1986; Imrie, 1996a;1996b; Oliver, 1990). Most urban environments are inaccessible settings for production and consumption. They exclude a range of people, render them 'non productive' and create dependency. Hahn writes:

In terms of ease or comfort, most cities have been designed not merely for the nondisabled but for a physical ideal that few human beings can ever hope to approximate (1986:273).

Certain general characteristics of the contemporary Western city — notably city design, urban employment patterns and the distribution of land uses — entrench social discrimination against disabled people (Imrie, 1996a; 1996b). Disabled people, their advocates, and occasionally governments, have identified two main urban dimensions of disability oppression: physical inaccessibility and socio-spatial exclusion in institutionalised forms of social care (Campbell & Oliver, 1996). These aspects of oppression take specific socio-spatial forms in different cities, but they have a common genesis in the economic and cultural devalorisation of disabled people in capitalist societies.

### **Grounds to Transform**

The conceptual and empirical critiques of rights based 'solutions' to disability oppression suggest the need for alternative transformative socio-political agendas that would attempt to address the roots of discrimination. Such alternatives need to take into account the embodied materialist conception of disability and the consequent need to strive for a substantial and sustainable transformation of the social spaces that exclude disabled people. Such an agenda would create social relations and socio-spatial conditions conducive to enhanced choice for engagement in work, community and private life.

The project would not ignore discriminatory attitudes and cultural forms. Rather the focus and direction of transformation would target the cultural material origin of oppressive symbolic representations and practices. Spaces, practices and social milieu, newly opened to participation by a variety of embodiments, including 'non-productive' bodies, would incubate and produce inclusive cultural and symbolic forms. This would manifest itself in easy access to community life through accessible transport and built environments. People with impairments would enjoy a full and equal participation in a range of education and work settings and cultural life would accept, not confront people with impairments by oppressive and devaluing representational stereotypes.

Disabled people themselves should inform, define and manage the policy agenda more directly. In the reformist framework this is not always the case. A voluminous, and at times angry, discourse has pointed to the ways in which disabled people are constructed, diagnosed and contained by professionals, by public officials and by researchers and academics (Barnes & Mercer 1997; Clear, 1999; Oliver, 1996). In the 'post-radical' era of Western politics, the issue of self-determination may appear a little clichéd, but it is proposed as an important element in a political project that would transform the power relations that go to the core of disablement. In any transformative process there needs to be a careful focus on the strategies and activities that constitute such self-determination.

Substantial undertakings are needed to overcome the significant costs of participation by disabled people, not merely in redistributive transfer payment systems. A framework of 'enabling justice' (Gleeson, 1999) would aim to generalise emancipatory practices, conditions and environments for people with impairments. It would build social and environmental infrastructure to support disability inclusion within the mainstreams of society. This should define supportive education, employment, housing and transport systems and coordinated social planning that directly addresses and opens up exclusionary social spaces. A focus on enabling environments would act to establish healthy work and living conditions that do not themselves contribute to impairments. This would be an effective and progressive preventative measure that would contrast, for example, with the billions of dollars spent on genetic technologies. Progressive material prevention would recognise that the primary causes of impairment are social and economic, not genetic or biological (Hubbard, 1997; Shakespeare, 1999).

But 'enabling environments' cannot be conceived through the lens of crude materialism, as simply physical artefacts that determine life chances. The poor record of built environment access regulations – another element of the reformist project – suggests clearly the political and social limitations of such a 'technical solution' to disability discrimination (see Imrie, 1996a; 1996b). This, of course, exposes the historical-geographical perspective to the charge of political impracticality – if access regulation and environmental modification cannot solve disability discrimination in the city, what will? An obvious



target for change is the social system through which the labour of individuals is valued (and devalued). This suggests that a commodity labour market might either be dispensed with, or at least radically restructured, so that the principle of competition is displaced from its central role in evaluating fitness for employment (Barnes, 1993).

The current paradoxical state of chronic unemployment and high levels of overwork suggest that the capitalist market system needs to be transformed to create more flexible and inclusive relations of work and social life (Jamieson House Employment Group, 1996). Such general changes may produce opportunities for inclusion of those impaired people who have hitherto been excluded from the labour market. The transformative project underlines the need to frame diverse ways of valuing human participation and human effort. This case is also made persuasively in recent decades by feminist scholarship and activism (eg Waring, 1988). It also highlights the need to account for the costs of exclusion (Hamilton & Denniss, 2000).

The commodity labour market uses the lens of competition to distort and magnify the limitations of impaired people: a just society would seek to liberate the bodily capacities of all individuals (Young, 1990). There have been some encouraging examples in Australia and elsewhere, where governments during the 1980s pursued a series of active interventions in employment markets to enhance the value of labour by disabled people (Kinnear, 1989; Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1992). These 'supported employment' models demonstrate some useful results, but they are considerably under-resourced by governments (Baume & Kay, 1995). The important point here is that the state has intervened in labour markets to ensure the revaluation of disabled labour-power. This active labour market policy contrasts with a 'rights-based' approach that merely guarantees the prerogative of work for disabled people without providing the institutional means for such a goal to be realised.

### **Conclusion**

Disabled people are not simply legal subjects divorced from their impairment and other life circumstances, such as their gender or class.

The model of rights may serve as a necessary framework for understanding some essential political and ethical goals in a civil society. However, without fundamental change in the material conditions of people's lives, oppressive systems are left largely untouched. The evidence is that rights-based frameworks have not significantly challenged the systems and practices that oppress disabled people and create exclusionary social spaces of work, community and home life. The legal framework of rights has defined a system of 'reasonable accommodations' in which difference is not accepted in principle, but very often accommodated in practice. The effect of this is that the social practices and social spaces that constitute liberal democratic societies remain relatively unchanged (Oliver, 1990;1996). More generally, our claim echoes an older general critique of liberal reformism that goes to the core of materialist theorisation and politics (Marx, 1977; Colker, 1998).

Relying simply on reforming devices directed at changing discriminatory behaviours is demonstrably misplaced. These behaviours are themselves the product of the exclusionary spaces created by capitalist economy and culture. The key elements of the reformist project need to be reframed and reset in a larger, more resolute transformative agenda, and not abandoned. The protective frameworks of human and civil rights that exist in all Western countries need to be retained as an important condition for security in a context where the rights of people with impairments continue to be greatly abused. But rights alone will never suffice: the goal of substantive inclusion requires that we create a new material world that embodies – literally – the aspirations and values of every human being.

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