

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WORK FOR THE CITIZENSHIP OF DISABLED PEOPLE.

PAUL ABBERLEY.

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Address for correspondence with author- [paul.abberley@talk21.com](mailto:paul.abberley@talk21.com)

## **ABSTRACT.**

In this paper I outline and indicate the implications of a social model of disability. Operating from such a perspective I go on to consider how two forms of classic social theory, one generally classified as conservative, the other as radical, understand the relationship between work and citizenship. I argue that despite their differences, they converge insofar as they both imply the inevitability of the social exclusion of some impaired people in any possible society. I indicate where other kinds of social theory, particularly certain forms of feminism, can provide a vision of a more inclusive society in which work is not regarded as the defining characteristic of full social inclusion. The practical implication of such a view is the advocacy of a dual strategy, of work facilitation for those who want it and can meaningfully take part in the labour process and the general valorisation of non-working lives for those, including impaired people, who are unable to work.

## WHAT IS DISABILITY?

**The first thing you need to do when talking 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 Organisation, for example, operates in terms of a four part medically based classification, developed by Wood (1981) 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 ones legs, which disables by leading to an inability to walk, and handicaps by giving the individual problems in travelling, getting and retaining a job et cetera. 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 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 the mainstream of social activities' (UPIAS 1976: 3--4).

'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 1991:1).

Such a model is advanced by the Disabled Peoples International, of which the British Council of Disabled People is a member, and is increasingly utilised 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 far-reaching consequences of such a change of definition can be seen if we look at the different ways in which we would design questionnaires to investigate the incidence of disability employing the social perspective.

Type 1 individual model questions (taken from OPCS survey of 'disability' in England, Scotland and Wales)

- 1) What complaint causes you difficulty in holding, gripping or turning things?
- 2) Do you have a scar, blemish or deformity which limits your daily activities?
- 3) Have you attended a special school because of a long-term health problem or disability?
- 4) Does your health problem/disability affect your work in any way at present?

Type 2 The above questions reformulated to investigate 'disability' from the perspective of a social model

- 1a) What defects in the design of everyday equipment like jars, bottles and lids causes you difficulty in holding, gripping or turning them?
- 2a) Do other people's reactions to any scar, blemish or deformity you may have limit your daily activities?
- 3a) Have you attended a special school because of your education authority's policy of sending people with your long-term health problem or disability to such places?
- 4a) Do you have problems at work as a result of the physical environment or the attitudes of others?

(Abberley 1996a: 174)

The first set of questions is taken from the 1988 OPCS survey of disability in England Scotland and Wales and employs the traditional 'medical' approach. The 'problem' is seen as residing within the individual- in terms of the social model this is not in fact a survey of disability at all, but a survey of impairment. In contrast to this the second set represents the same topic areas as they would be investigated in terms of a social model. What is being investigated here is the structure of socially produced disadvantage and discrimination experienced by disabled people. This perspective locates the problem of disability firmly within the context of social inequality on a par with gender and race issues and analysable and redressable in similar ways.

If we are to look at disability as social rather than biological in origin, we need to develop views of what it would mean for impaired people not to be disabled, in order to develop effective policies to combat social exclusion. And this requires Social Theory since if we are to understand how we might overcome social exclusion we must have some ideas about what it is that brings about social inclusion.

### ***FUNCTIONALISM AND DISABILITY.***

What are the preconditions of citizenship? The classical conservative viewpoint in social theory is embodied in the work of the founding father of Functionalist sociology Emile Durkheim (1964). He posits a fundamental distinction between non- or pre- industrial societies and industrial ones. In the former social integration is characterised as based on the similarity of roles in the social division of labour, 'mechanical' solidarity. After industrialisation, with a growing separateness and distinction of the individual from the group as the division of labour is increasingly specialised 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 recognise diversity, there is no suggestion that this extends to the incorporation of those unable to work into society.

Following this view the modern English sociologist Ida Toppliss came in 1982 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 able-bodied 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 able-bodied 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 stigmatisation.’ (Toppliss 1982: 111-2)

For Toppliss 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 compared to other perspectives like Interactionism where writers (e.g. Haber and Smith 1971) draw a similar conclusion but 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 that its proponents ascribe to it.

## THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISABILITY.

Now whilst Toppliss’s conclusion is to me an unacceptable one, her analysis does point to an important truth about the social exclusion of disabled people today- that it is intimately related to our exclusion from the world of work. And it seems fair to contrast this to pre-industrial societies, where for all their negative features they ‘did not preclude the great majority of disabled people from participating in the production process, and even where they could not

participate fully, they were still able to make a contribution. In this era disabled people were regarded as individually unfortunate and not segregated from the rest of society.’ (Oliver 1990 p27). Indeed certain important occupations like shoemaking and repair seem to have had a disproportionately large number of disabled practitioners, as disabled people or their relatives who could afford to do so bought in to suitably sedentary occupations. Now this is not the whole picture and there are clearly many salient differences between feudal societies and our own, and this makes disability today a very different thing from disability in the past (Gleeson 1999, Bredberg 1999). Historically, then disability can be understood as a changing social experience arising from the specific ways in which society organises its fundamental activities like work transport, leisure, education, domestic life etc as they relate to the impaired individual, so disability differs not only between historical eras but also within eras and between societies. It is above all a relationship, between impaired people and society. It follows that changes in society as a whole, which may not be directed at disabled people at all, can have profound implications for disability. This certainly seems to be what happened in Britain in the nineteenth century, as the juggernaut of industrialisation crushed all previous social arrangements that resisted its progression. And to examine this I turn to what is often regarded as the polar opposite of conservative social theory, Marxism.

### ***MARXISM, INDUSTRIALISATION AND IMPAIRMENT.***

In ‘The Condition of the Working Class in England’, written in 1844/5 Engels argues that the Industrial Revolution creates the proletariat in a gigantic process of concentration, polarisation and urbanisation, 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’ came into being. 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 1969:180) 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’ (ibid: 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’ (ibid: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.” (ibid: 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” (ibid: 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.

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 1937:78)

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 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. Firstly, 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. Secondly, and of significance for disabled people today, it is an issue whether such a situation, could it occur, would be desirable. If Marxist analyses are exclusively concerned with prevention and cure, 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.

That aspect of labour which endows its product with Value, is linked to the idea of the average worker—

“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 ch1). This labour 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...what 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 *Das Capital* involves the construction of a norm of ‘human being as worker’. Marx and Engels’ description 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 in Capitalist societies, it seems of less use in conceptualising a future for those impaired people unable to work.

To see why this is so we can look at some of the indications Marx gives of what life would be like if the Capitalism whose negative consequences he made it his lifework to criticise were abolished.

In the 1857/8 Grundrisse it is asserted that—

‘Really free working is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion’ (Marx 1973:611).

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: 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. 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. The ability to labour in some socially recognised 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 the whole range of subsequent 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 (sic) 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 Levitas: 108).

Marcuse, whilst believing that work can be more pleasant than it is today points to a deep co-incidence 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: 35).

Andre Gorz, at the opposite pole from Morris in his advocacy of the minimisation of socially necessary labour and the maximisation 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: 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 labor into a commodity, but it continued to emphasise the value and importance of work.” (Gouldner 1971:406)

## ***WORK AND DISABILITY THEORY.***

The purpose of this trip around what are today rather unfashionable social theorists has not been simply to register their inability to help with the problem of overcoming disabled people's social exclusion. Rather it has been to give some indication of how deeply the notion of work as a requirement of social inclusion is embedded in social theory in both radical and conservative incarnations. How does this feed back into analyses of disability in society today and the needs of disabled people?

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. Both the British government and European programmes put entry to the workforce at the core of their strategies to combat social exclusion. At the level of more general theory, Finkelstein has pointed out repeatedly (1980, 1993) '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' (1993:12). The British Council of Disabled People sloganise 'The right to a job is a fundamental Human Right' (BCODP 1996:3).

Research (Lunt and Thornton 1994) has surveyed some of the issues involved in implementing employment policies in terms of a social model of disablement. Direct discrimination and lack of suitable educational and training opportunities have been and continue to be a barrier. Just as importantly, the structure of employment has implications for disabled people. Jobs designed around the capacity, stamina and resources of the average worker, nine-to-five, five day a week employment, what we might call 'job shaped jobs' are inimicable to the needs of a wide variety of citizens. This first became apparent in relation to women, but is equally relevant to disabled people, whatever their gender. But it is important to ask whether anything other than job-shaped jobs can provide for social inclusion. In Great Britain, despite a torrent of data indicating economic downturn, the number of people out of work and claiming benefit was at its lowest since June 1980 and in October and November 1998 the number employed rose to the highest figure ever ( Labour Market Statistics Feb 1999). But it is dubious that this is the result of more long-term job-shaped jobs. With accelerating technological change and the globalisation of markets, for the less skilled future prospects of stable employment look bleak, whilst for those possessing qualifications three or four career changes in forty years do not seem unlikely. Both of these tendencies make the prospects of inclusion in the permanent labour force, and consequent citizenship more problematic for disabled people. As

technological advances and increased globalisation combine to make permanent employment an increasingly rare phenomenon for the majority of the workforce, disabled people will continue to be in the forefront of those groups who cannot provide the versatility and work rates demanded by the labour market.

Beyond this though is an underlying problem: even in a society which DID make profound and genuine attempts, well supported by financial provision, to integrate impaired people into the world of work, some would be excluded. Whatever efforts are made 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 recognises, 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 that avoids this bifurcation, through a notion of social integration that 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. Feminists have 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 legitimises Marxism's excessive focus on the 'masculine sphere' of commodity production. Whilst some approaches in Feminist sociology have reproduced the concern with work as definitional of social inclusion (Abberley 1996b), others have more profoundly disputed labour-dependent conceptions of humanity.

One aspect of this involves 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 policy solutions for dealing with inequality- 'get a job', and 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: 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 Collins 1990: 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 organised around 'work' and the 'technofix'. Such issues are, I think, of significance to the development of theories of disablement.

Schweickart, amongst many, represents another significant strand of feminist thought 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' (1983:210).

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 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 steps 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 any possible society, and thus that the abolition of disablement also involves as far as possible the abolition of impairment. This 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 there is a happy conjunction between an individual's impairment, technology and socially -valued activity. Thus the abolition of an individual's disablement is ultimately dependent upon and subordinate to the logic of productivity.

An alternative kind of theory can be seen as offering another future in so far as it rejects 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 piece-meal 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 conservative and radical consensus, the assertion of the rights of the human 'being' against the universalisation of 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 recognise that full integration of impaired people in social production can never constitute the future to which all disabled people can 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 disabled people involve the development of values and ideas which run profoundly counter to the dominant cultural problematic of both left and right. This is not a matter of choice, but of the future survival of alternative, impaired, modes of being. One practical implication of this view is to caution against the over-enthusiastic espousal of work-based programmes of overcoming the exclusion of disabled people which leave welfare systems unchanged, or worse still depleted. They must be maintained, enhanced and above all democratised if disabled people as a whole are to experience any degree of emancipation.

I am thus arguing that we need to develop theoretical perspectives that express the standpoint of disabled people, whose interests are not necessarily served by the standpoints of other social groups, dominant or themselves oppressed (Abberley 1987, 1992) 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 that 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 that claim to account for the experiences of all a society's members.

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