

Book review

Disability studies: Emerging Insights and Perspectives.

Edited by: Thomas Campbell, Fernando Fontes, Laura Hemingway, Armineh Soorenian and Chris Till

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When I was trying to learn English, I remember that the first book that I read was a literary short version of David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*. I had not watched the film, but I had heard about it and the story portrayed in it. The book begins with the following words: 'A hundred years ago, the world was very different [...]. And if you were poor and very, very ugly...' Today, I wonder if the world has changed. I would like to stress two main ideas from *The Elephant Man*. First is that Joseph Merrick lives hidden from society. He lives in a room and when he goes out he tries to hide his face.

Apart from other provoking thoughts, this book about Disability Studies holds something about this idea. For instance, about the common view of disabled people: 'the personal tragedy model is the cultural expression of the medical model [...] impairment and disability are shameful' (p. 17). It is because of this shame that Joseph is secluded from the world and must hide his face when in the street. One of the chapters in this book tells the story of a woman who demanded a partial refund of the money that she had spent in her holidays because she had stayed in a hotel where some disabled people were also vacationing, which thus ruined her holidays. The *different* must be hidden from public spaces.

The second idea that I would like to stress is about Doctor Trives' surprise when he discovered that not only could Joseph read, but he reads a lot. Joseph Merrick had been labelled as 'a disabled person': 'This process of categorization implied the construction of ideas and meanings attached to disability' (p. 84). Other people think that an individual with a disability is a person without capacities to do activities such as reading, writing, studying, thinking for her or himself and so on. In short, a disabled person is seen as a limited one. This is why doctor Trives was very shocked when he discovered Joseph reading a book.

This kind of common thought edifies a specific hegemonic view about disabled people and disability. For instance, as this book explores in its last chapter, the dominant view and prevailing ideas about anorexia make it difficult to consider this as 'biopower to understand how an anorexic subjectivity is constituted through a concern for the management of the health of population through risk' (p. 138). Deriving from this hegemonic view, one of the most perverse mechanisms is the construction of labelling. This labelling is always done in a social way and it tries to mark people: 'The socio-political nature of the production of impairment categories can be emphasised' (p.43) because this process, as a social construction, has as its major goal to limit the opportunities and people's rights to become citizens: 'The anorexia goal is not to lose weight; rather, it is the transformation of the self which in contemporary Western culture is most obviously achieved through bodily practices' (p. 129). I think

that the social model of disability which drives this collection helps us to explore those social views built on the marginalization of people. This social model allows us to have ‘analytical tools for both the academic analysis of disablement and for political action’ (p. 31) - and not only related to disabled people in a strict sense. In our experience, adult women in an Adult Education School discovered that the reason they couldn’t attend class was not that an illness in their legs limited their possibilities to go to school, but rather, the lack of a lift that would have enabled them to reach a class not held on the ground floor.

We have the same problem in our cities, at least in my own, Seville. Two or three years ago, an elderly woman asked me to help her cross a street. The street has a traffic signal, but the problem is that the traffic signal is only arranged to allow cars to pass as quickly as possible, not to facilitate people walking. Plus, the woman had difficulties walking, not only because of her age, but also due to impairment. So, when the woman and I reached the middle of the street, the lights changed and we were caught, but we could not stop there because of traffic. I thought that our days – the days of the old woman and my own days – were finishing. At the end, thanks to a considerate driver, we reached the other side of the street, safe and alive. But the most impressive thing about this awful experience is that this old woman needs to cross the street every day, like the rest of us. I think that non-disabled people are not conscious about these kinds of difficulties, because we *can* cross the street every day. I am wondering if she considers herself as ‘irrelevant’ or invisible’ (p.119). I only know that the major slogan of my city is ‘Seville, the city of the people’, but some people can’t cross a street without both help and danger.

This book is a compilation from various contributing authors. It has been written by people committed to both the research of disabilities and actions against marginalization. It holds diverse and different perspectives and territories. Some chapters explore the social model of disability or the social construction of subjectivity – as the case of chapter 9 devoted to Anorexia Nervosa. Other chapters explore specific cases in diverse territories such as chapter 5 (Germany) or chapter 6 (Portugal). Finally other chapters merge the geographical territories with the individual experience of the authors (chapter 8). Each chapter is a part that enriches the totality of the book and gives us a lot of elements to reflect on.

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos links a participatory democracy with a redistributive democracy that aims to achieve a more equal Social Justice. This Social Justice must avoid the despair of people, and must lay bridges over the streets of the injustice and marginalization that people socially considered as *disabled* are now suffering.

In their book about ‘Participatory Citizenship’, Mohanty & Tandon argue that it is very urgent to bring people from marginalized groups – or labelled groups, I add – into the political arena, in order to guarantee their rights. To imagine that things could change is a path of hope.

As I have previously said, this compilation contains plenty of suggestions and actions for making real the dreams that another world is possible, and then we could indeed affirm that a ‘hundred years ago, the world was very different...’