

**Ryan, F (2019) *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People*, London: Verso, 2019, paperback, 256pp, ISBN 9781788739566**

**Review Book Author:, First name, Surname, (date of pub.) Title in italics, place of publication, publisher, hardback or paperback, number of pages, ISBN, cost.**

*This book review is structured around a set of questions which have been devised specifically to encourage students to offer reviews for publication. **Concept** welcomes such contributions. If you are interested in reviewing a book contact [mae.shaw@ed.ac.uk](mailto:mae.shaw@ed.ac.uk)*

In 2018 the United Nations released the findings of a secret inquiry into state-level violations of the human rights of disabled people. Its conclusion was that a 'human catastrophe' was underway. In every aspect of civil life, from employment and housing to education and social security, disabled people are hugely disadvantaged. You might easily assume this report was conducted in a country with a minimal policy commitment to human rights but, in fact, it was conducted in Britain.

**WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT THE BOOK AND WHY?**

In *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People* Frances Ryan, a journalist and campaigner for disability rights, explains the destruction of the rights, dignity, independence and mental health of the UK's disabled community. That is some 14 million people. Ryan argues that, in order to distract attention from the extent of the impact of these inhumane measures and to reduce public spending, disabled people have been demonised and labelled as scroungers or portrayed as not really disabled. What's more, UK media have exacerbated this so-called 'poverty porn'. Meanwhile, the welfare state has become an instrument of punishment rather than a safety net of support for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. This book highlights the treatment of people in the disabled community due to austerity policies, but the issues it raises could be applied to almost any community that finds itself at the raw end of austerity, poverty, work, housing; women, children. Sounds familiar, right?

**WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST USEFUL?**

Ryan's book highlights how historical reasons for, and responses, to social issues such as poverty are still very much being used by modern UK governments to explain the need for austerity as a necessary response to 2007/8 financial crisis. For example, the book shows how disabled people are grouped into the 'deserving' or 'undeserving' poor, and how stereotypes are used to justify this; where individuals are to be either pitied for their inability to live 'normal' lives or vilified for being lazy undeserving scroungers. Ryan details the very real everyday experiences of disabled people, and demonstrates the devastating outcomes of austerity, a political decision portrayed as a financial 'no-brainer.'

The book not only highlights the financial strain on the disabled community due to austerity policy, but also the roll-back of hard-fought gains for human rights since 2010. Ryan explains that cuts to social care budgets mean that, for many, the right to lead a fulfilling and independent life has been taken away, the horrific result of which has seen people living isolated, undignified lives or placed in care facilities rather than supported to live independently in their own homes. This seems to point to government policy that no longer strives to support human rights, but is actively reversing them and placing the blame on others. Ryan argues that:

Shipping off disabled people into care homes is the inescapable consequence of a political climate that puts a price tag on certain people's lives and, at the same time, fans the belief that disabled people are a cost that the so-called hardworking taxpayer shouldn't have to pay. (p.88)

**WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST CHALLENGING – IF ANYTHING?**

There is little I disagree with and much that I found challenging. If anything, it was difficult to read descriptions of people's experiences of austerity and the impact it has had on their lives. It was difficult not to be sad, horrified and enraged that human beings are, at best, not able to live the independent and dignified lives that they have the right to, and, at worst, have died directly due to austerity policy. This book shows the reader how disabled people, along with the rest of society, have been asked to accept that austerity is necessary to save money and will result in a fairer society when, in fact, dignity and compassion for the disabled community have been erased in the name of

balancing the UK's books. Ryan describes and evidences the brutal experiences of austerity and the disastrous roll-back of human rights that have ensued. That disabled people have disproportionately suffered so much is a fact that I find challenging, to say the least.

### **WHY DO YOU THINK ANYONE ELSE SHOULD READ IT?**

Ryan rejects the idea that disabled people should be protected because they are somehow vulnerable. She writes that,

contrary to the cultural myths surrounding disability, it is not inevitable for people with disabilities to be afraid, desperate or isolated. Vulnerability comes when politicians choose to pull the support disabled people need in order to live dignified, fulfilling, independent lives – knowing full well the misery it will cause.

Austerity politics, Ryan argues, is a choice. And since it is a choice, it is one that could have been made differently, and can still be changed. She ends the book with maybe her most powerful words: 'The rallying cry for our time is clear: how things are is not how they need to be. Disabled people's lives depend on it.' (p.200)

Ryan's book calls for a change to 'solidarity politics' which ensures that disabled people are entitled to better and more humane lives in a compassionate society, NOT punishment by the state. Many links to community education can be drawn from this - after all, community education should be in the business of change for the better. This book details, through the often-harrowing experiences of some of the people who have suffered most, the need for such change. Moreover, its argument applies not only to the disabled community and those who work with them, but also to society as a whole.

**Catherine Wishart**

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