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CURRENT ISSUES

The social model of disability: thirty years on

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This year marks exactly 30 years since I published a book introducing the social model of disability onto an unsuspecting world and yet, despite the impact this model has had, all we now seem to do is talk about it. While all this chatter did not matter too much when the economy was booming, now it no longer booms it is proving disastrous for many disabled people whose benefits and services are being severely cut back or removed altogether. In the article I restate my view of what the social model was and what I see as its potential for improving the lives of disabled people. Finally I focus on the unfortunate criticisms of it and the disastrous implications these have had for disabled people.

Keywords: individual model; social model; disabled peoples' movement; cut-backs in benefits and services; disabling barriers

The idea behind the social model of disability stemmed from the Fundamental Principles of Disability document first published in the mid-1970s (UPIAS 1976), which argued that we were not disabled by our impairments but by the disabling barriers we faced in society. A couple of years later I was teaching the first master's course in what has now come to be called disability studies in the United Kingdom. The course was for qualified social workers and other professionals, and I wanted to help my students develop a means of translating that simple idea into their everyday work with disabled clients and their families.

So in the early 1980s I introduced both the individual and social models of disability (Oliver 1983) aimed largely at professionals. I suggested that until that point those working with disabled people had operated largely within a framework based on the individual model, and that in order to make their practice more relevant to the needs of disabled people they needed to re-orient their work to a framework based upon the social model. At no point did I suggest that the individual model should be abandoned, and neither did I claim that the social model was an all-encompassing framework within which everything that happens to disabled people could be understood or explained.

Subsequently, however, the social model took on a life of its own and it became the big idea behind the newly emerging disability equality training. It also soon became the vehicle for developing a collective disability consciousness and helped to develop and strengthen the disabled peoples' movement that had begun to emerge a decade earlier. Armed with the idea that we needed to identify and eradicate the disabling barriers we had in common, the disabled peoples' movement

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forced the media to change their images of us, transport providers to open up many of their services to us, public buildings to become much more accessible and the legal system changed to make it illegal to discriminate against us.

Of course there were some barriers that proved, and continue to prove, much more intractable. The hegemony of special education has barely been challenged in schools, although in further and higher education some disabling barriers have been removed. The social model has also barely made a dent in the employment system because, although it has identified many of the disabling barriers in the international labour market and with the behaviour of employers, the solutions offered have usually been based on an individual model of disability.

Almost from the beginning, critics of the social model began to emerge. Initially these came from the major disability charities and many professional organisations who felt that their dominance of our lives was under threat. Ironically many of them now see the social model as central to their operations and often act as if they invented it in the first place. Some years later, some disabled people and academics involved in the newly emerging disability studies also began to question the value and relevance of the social model.

It is not my intention to reprise these criticisms here but basically they can be divided into two main areas of concern. The first of these suggests that there is no place for impairment within the social model of disability. The second alleges that the social model fails to take account of difference and presents disabled people as one unitary group, whereas in reality our race, gender, sexuality and age mean that our needs and lives are much more complex than that.

Overall these critics have argued that the social model is only a limited and partial explanation for what is happening to disabled people in the modern world. In recent years it has sometimes seemed as if these criticisms have received more prominence than the social model itself. Many academic papers and some books have been published whose main concern has been to attack, reform or revise the social model, and reputations and careers have been built on the back of these attacks.

My own response to these attacks has always been fairly relaxed because I have never seen the social model as anything more than a tool to improve peoples' lives and I have been happy to agree that it does not do many of the things its opponents criticise it for not doing. Indeed, in 1990 I published a book that attempted to develop a more all-encompassing explanation of what was happening to disabled people in the modern world (Oliver 1990).

It is this that is often referred to as the book which promoted and developed the social model when, in fact, it was only discussed in three pages in the whole book. Even when I and a colleague updated this text, the social model did not play a significant part (Oliver and Barnes 2012). I can only assume that those who have argued that central to my work has been the promotion and policing of the social model have based their evidence solely on inaccurate commentaries and that they have not bothered to read what I actually said.

However I, and others, have often pointed out that focusing on impairment and difference will only de-politicise the social model and will not lead to the development of any approaches or alternative models that are likely to be useful in developing campaigns to improve or defend the lifestyles of disabled people. Essentially these arguments between academics and political activists mattered very little while the global economy was operating in boom mode, but when it went bust

in 2008 things changed very quickly for the vast majority of people throughout the world, disabled people among them.

Just as we had predicted, emphasising impairment and difference was a strategy that was impotent in protecting disabled people, our benefits and services, from the economic firestorm that was raging around us. In fact government policy has now begun to use these criticisms of the social model by bringing impairment and difference back into their economic and social policy while steadfastly ignoring the barriers we still face.

Hence cuts in our benefits are being justified on the grounds that the intention is to give more to those who are severely impaired (and hence deserving) and not to those who are not (and hence undeserving). Our differences are being used to slash our services as our needs are now being assessed as being moderate, substantial or critical and many local authorities are now only providing services to those whose needs are critical.

The disabled peoples' movement that was once united around the barriers we had in common now faces deep divisions and has all but disappeared, leaving disabled people at the mercy of an ideologically driven government with no-one to defend us except the big charities who are driven by self-interest. As a consequence of this, most of the political campaigning that has taken place in defence of our benefits and services have forced disabled people back into the role of tragic victims of our impairments and has involved others undertaking special pleading on our behalf. In fact it has taken us back more than 30 years to the time before the social model came into existence.

Those who have talked down the social model while failing to replace it with something more meaningful or useful must bear a heavy burden of responsibility for this state of affairs. Remarkably they have been rather silent in speaking out or building alternative models to address what is happening to disabled people now. Surely it is time to either re-invigorate the social model or replace it with something else. One thing is for sure; the talking has to stop.

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