



# **Michael Oliver**

**1945-2019**

## **A Tribute**

If I had a hammer  
I'd hammer in the morning  
I'd hammer in the evening  
All over this land

~

It's the hammer of Justice  
It's the bell of Freedom

It's the song about Love between my brothers and my sisters

All over this land

~ Seeger & Hays ~

## Introduction

On 3rd March 2019 Michael Oliver, the first Professor of Disability Studies in the United Kingdom, passed away. It was with great sadness that we learnt this news at the Centre of Disability Studies (CDS), University of Leeds.

Michael (Mike) Oliver was a pioneer in the field. The influence of his work has been profound within and beyond academia. As a scholar, teacher, mentor, activist and friend he has influenced and supported the disabled people's movement in the UK and around the world. His ideas have challenged professionals in health and social care, education and design to recognise the disabling nature of institutions and their own practices and learn what it really means to be an 'ally'.

Having given the name 'social model' to UPIAS's social interpretation of disability, Mike played a significant role in developing, explaining and communicating this important oppositional device/tool. He truly was, if not the Father of the Social Model, certainly its Godfather and leading sponsor!

Mike always made clear that the Social Model was not a theory of disability. He never confused models and theories and was evidently frustrated when others did so. Alongside his work on the model, he developed a theory of disability which he felt complemented it. His historical materialist account of disability, which understood disability to be the creation of capitalism, is a classic in the field. Importantly, his was no crude reductionist perspective. He applied a Marxist perspective that recognised the entanglement of economic, cultural, political and many more factors that conditioned the lives of people who have impairments, resulting in their disablement. Whilst his ideas (as those of any thinker) have not gone uncontested, his perspective is likely to continue to be a key point of reference for academics and activists concerned with exposing disabling processes and practices and building an inclusive society.

In this Tribute to Professor Oliver we bring together a series of reflections on his contribution and legacy, written by some of his many friends, by disabled activists, CDS members and overseas colleagues of the Centre.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed and most importantly, thank you to Michael Oliver for his kindness, his commitment and for being a great social scientist and teacher. His legacy will be a set of powerful ideas etched into the minds of many and applied with powerful effect.

**Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds.**

No matter what people tell you

# **WORDS AND IDEAS**

**CAN CHANGE THE WORLD**

~ Robin Williams ~

## **On the Social Model**

“I want to make three general points about the social model. Firstly, it is an attempt to switch the focus away from the functional limitations of individuals with an impairment on to the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures.

Secondly, it refuses to see specific problems in isolation from the totality of disabling environments: hence the problem of unemployment does not just entail intervention in the social organisation of work and the operation of the labour market but also in areas such as transport, education and culture.

Thirdly, endorsement of the social model does not mean that individually based interventions in the lives of disabled people, whether they be medically, rehabilitative, educational or employment based, are of no use or always counter-productive.”

~ Michael Oliver ~

by Barbara Lisicki

**There's a crack, a crack in  
everything  
That's how the light gets in'**  
~ Leonard Cohen (Anthem) ~

"The social model was a way of getting us all to think about the things we had in common, and the barriers that we all faced."

~ Michael Oliver ~

Mike Oliver was, and remains, a theoretical genius, who coined the term 'the social model of disability' and made it real, accessible and comprehensible.

For Mike, it was his original thinking that framed the social model as an invaluable tool for analysis.

He taught it and he lived it.

We met in the 1980s. I was a young teacher and youth worker looking for answers. I met Mike and it all fell into place. Crucially his Marxist class analysis informed his social model thinking, which made perfect sense to me as someone who saw and experienced inequality and injustice all around. The last piece of the puzzle was where and how impairment and disability fitted into the picture, including my own experience as a woman struggling to comprehend the exclusion of disabled people - the discrimination I had come across personally - and to accord it a political explanation and context.

Mike helped me to complete that puzzle.

We were united in working class roots, a mutual contempt for the traditional disability charities and in a love for the mighty Leonard Cohen. We went to Cohen concerts, sometimes separately and latterly together. Pure bliss.

**Block Telethon 1992** was one of the most powerful and joyful demos we ever organised. Over a thousand strong, disabled protesters blocked the entire street outside the ITV television studios all day and evening.

We partied and we revolted. Mike Oliver's speech on that day was a superb and motivating cri de coeur and call to action.

He said that there was only one place where disabled people could feel proud on that day ...and it was *right there*. With us. Disabled people needed to organise collectively, be part of a movement and challenge our oppression. We were out of the charity closet and loud and proud. Wearing the Piss on Pity T-shirts we had made for the demo, that message could not have been clearer or more powerful.

Mike is a legend.

I will miss him every day.

**Mike Oliver was the crack where the light came in.**

by Alan Holdsworth aka Johnny Crescendo

## Me and Mike, the party animal and intellectual giant



'I don't want your charity

Or holidays by the sea

I want Choices and Rights in our  
lives'

~ from Choices and Rights by Johnny  
Crescendo ~

Photo LtR Alan Holdsworth (singer/songwriter), Barbara Lisicki, Michael Oliver & Dennis Queen. Taken by Jasia Lisicki for The Still Tragic (but Brave) Show

I was 'famous'; on TV almost every week, living with Barbara (Lisicki) and Jasia (our child) who was one year old. Barbara said we were invited to a party at Mike Oliver's. There was a condition - I had to bring My Guitar. I had already learned how important Mike was to the disability movement along with the young leaders like myself, Barbara, Jane Campbell, Sian Vasey and his disability studies crowd of Len Barton and Colin Barnes.

I may be wrong but I don't think I had met him yet.

"What's he like?" I said to Barbara who had known him for years, since her days as a youth worker in Hackney in the 1980s. "Common as muck - you'll like him," she replied. She was right. I did.

The party was great. Mike had just bought a karaoke machine and was doing rather good Elvis impressions. Colin Barnes did a passably decent version of John Lennon's 'Working Class Hero' and Len Barton took charge of the barbecue. I sang.

By the end of the night we were at the 'She'll be coming round the mountain' stage, making the lyrics up, as we slipped into a collectively drunken state.

From the day we met we have been friends and comrades in the struggle for disabled people's liberation. Mike became my mentor, champion, counsellor and probably one of the biggest fans of my music. He has been a crucial figure for many disability rights activists and students. He has changed the world as we knew it, given it a new understanding and created tools for change and personal support which I have lived by since that wonderful party when we first met.

**Mike Oliver: Intellectual giant and party animal. He fed our stomachs and he fed our minds. I will always remember how he embodied this unique and wonderful way of being. Only Mike.**

by Professor Roger Slee



After Mike's retirement he generously accepted a request from Julie Allan and me to interview him as part of a project on approaches to inclusive education research. As we had expected the interview was rich in detail about the development of the social theory of disability and the disability rights movement in the UK. What surprised us was Mike's strong assertion that he felt that his contribution to positive changes in the lives of disabled people was negligible. We picked him up on this as a point of disagreement. He was not feigning humility as he argued that he was the beneficiary of his academic work, as it had afforded him a comfortable life and opportunities beyond his early expectations as a person with a disability living in England.

On the trip back from Kent I felt saddened by what I regarded as his gross underestimation of the value and impact of his work. At this moment people around the world are grieving the loss of Mike, England's first Professor of Disability Studies. This is a measure of the reach and impact of his work. *The Politics of Disablement* and *Understanding Disability: From Policy to Practice*, are required reading for disability studies courses, and they will remain so into the future.

Following Princess Anne onto the podium at the International Congress of Special Education in Manchester in 2000, Mike declared in his keynote that he was there to "dance on the grave of special education". A fearless activist and respected scholar we will miss Mike as we continue to draw benefit from his work.

Research Professor, School of Education, University of South Australia.

**A fearless activist**



## by Michelle Daley

Mike Oliver encouraged us to dismantle the negative ideology about Disabled people and created liberators.

I have always struggled with the societal discourse of Disabled people's existence being depicted as helpless and the need for us to be warehoused in institutions. I also struggled to articulate my dissatisfaction with how I and other Disabled people were viewed until I came across the work of Mike Oliver, which helped to crystallise my thinking. There is something unique about Mike Oliver's work.

He was not pompous, which I believe to some degree created the opportunity for him to engage and draw the attention of an audience beyond academia.

He was able to successfully use his work to create a paradigm shift from a notion that did not recognise the inequality and injustice experienced by disabled people. Through Mike Oliver's genius thinking and introduction of the Social Model of Disability he gave new meaning to our experiences which fundamentally changed the focus to help us to challenge and reject the dominating negative ideology.

I often make reference to Mike Oliver's work and we have seen the rhetoric and principles of his work in government and policy. I was fortunate enough to have met Mike Oliver once, this was last year at one of the screenings of 'Defiant Lives'. I will take away from Mike Oliver's work that our lives are not just about us existing, it is about the recognition of our identity, dignity and freedom as Disabled people.

Thanks Mike Oliver for introducing the Social Model of Disability.

You will be missed.

**Mike Oliver's genius thinking**

by David Hevey

## **I Knew Mike Oliver Well, Back In The Day**

I knew Mike Oliver well back in the day, I knew him when he trail-blazed the social model, giving regular credit to Vic Finkelstein and others who went before. It was Mike who took Vic Finkelstein's 'social view' of disability, into a developed model. Hence, the social model, in which it's barriers, not bodies, which disable.

I totally agree and it changed my life.

But Mike and I argued, too, mainly about representation, which I was pioneering back in the day; like some on the left, he had no time for identity and visibility and so on – me, I thought then and I still think they are vital.

But there was never a cross word. **Mike was thoroughly practical, generous with his thinking and great fun. And he had that key ingredient of progressive change - he was kind.**

He created a model which drove a movement which achieved rights.

When I saw him recently, he was annoyed about that - it was the overthrow of capitalism he was aiming for, 'rights' were paltry in comparison!

**he was kind**

There's a battle outside and it is ragin'

It'll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls

For the times they are a-changin'

~ Bob Dylan ~



by Dr Vickie Gauci, Amy  
Camilleri Zahra and Dr  
Anne-Marie Callus



**Vickie Gauci:** As an occupational therapist, I had been trained to view disability and disabled people through the perspective of the individual/medical model. When in 2003 I had a road-traffic accident which left me paralysed and a wheelchair user, I changed jobs and started working at the National Commission Persons with Disability. There I met with the social model of disability and it gave me a new pair of eyes through which to view my own disability and the phenomenon of disability in general.

In Malta, this model required a cultural shift from one of charity to one based on social justice/equity and human rights principles. I will be forever grateful to UPIAS who put forward this revolutionary vision and to Mike Oliver (and others) who proposed this model as a political tool with which disabled people can reclaim their rights in all aspects of their lives.

**Amy Camilleri Zahra:** Before acquiring an impairment in my early twenties, I had little to no contact with any disabled people. My knowledge of disability studies was non-existent. However, after acquiring my impairment I remember telling myself that this was not my fault and that the lack of accessibility to get around my usual spots was society's fault. A few months later, I remember borrowing the book *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* by Mike Oliver from a friend.

I remember relating to the social model of disability. I felt that my thoughts were validated. Thank you Mike Oliver and UPIAS for giving us the social model of disability through which disabled people can claim their place in society and live full and satisfying lives.

**Anne-Marie Callus:** I encountered the social model of disability when I started working at the National Commission Persons with Disability. This was quite a few years after I had started working with disabled people. The social model really helped me make sense of the difficulties encountered by disabled people. One of my first jobs at the Commission was taking care of the library and this enabled me to encounter the work of Mike Oliver and the other Disability Studies pioneers from whom I learnt so much.

The social model remains the best way to explain the causes of disabled people's difficulties. I continue to use it in my work and in my daily encounters with disabled people as colleagues and as friends.

## Ideas that changed lives

I was first introduced to Mike Oliver's writing at a peer support group, which later became the Coalition of Disabled People Birmingham. I then meet him in person when he was studying the implementation of the Social Model of Disability in Birmingham City Council. His work and the Social Model of Disability thinking set me on a personal journey exploring my own politics; it helped spark my curiosity about thinking differently and challenging authority.

Mike Oliver will never be forgotten. His legacy has touched the minds, hearts, and actions of so many people, and his influence is felt whenever we talk about the Social Model of Disability. Mike Oliver, to me, will always be remembered as the roots and inspiration of this fundamental change in how we see and challenge our world. **Clenton Farquharson MBE**

Mike Oliver ought to be remembered as the architect of the social model of disability. The word architect derives from both Latin and Greek; it means chief builder. Mike didn't invent the individual and social models of disability, he created them through a study of ideas from mainstream academic thought and employing the social experience of disabled people.

The social model broke new ground, but it is not a complete explanation of all things to do with people with impairments. It was liberating because it shifted the focus away from seeing 'the problem' within an impaired individual towards viewing social restrictions as stemming from the nature of society itself.

When Mike and others were developing the radical analysis of disability, it was still during the liberal-social democratic phase of capitalism; today global neoliberal-corporatism is seeking to roll back the 'progress' made since the 19th century. Whilst the structures and workings of capitalism remain in place, and maintain disablement, dangerous radical policy and practical shifts have occurred. Our socio-political approach towards combatting disablement currently has to be more a case of resisting than advancing. We have lost our architect, but the tools he helped fashion and his legacy will live on. **Bob Williams-Findlay MA**

Mike Oliver, a man I never met, revolutionised my life and identity and that of many other disabled people globally. While it is widely acknowledged that the development of the Social Model was a collective effort, Oliver's role in the articulation of the Model was key to its dominance today. What Oliver has given me and every other disabled person is a way of taking control of our lives and a means of acknowledging our oppression, which continues to be revolutionary.

**Zara Todd**

## by Ruth Gould

The Passing of Mike Oliver has hit those of us in the disability community hard. Yes, death comes to us all – but when someone like Mike dies, who has had such a profound effect on our lives, personally and collectively, it puts our struggle into an even sharper focus.

Those of us in the community know that Mike's coining of the phrase, 'The Social Model of Disability' from UPIAS's Fundamental Principles gave us a context, a collective and a personal epiphany that truly saved us from a life of despair, exclusion and oppression.

I came across it in 1995 and it gave me a voice, a purpose and I found a group of people I could resonate with, share with, get alongside and support. Yet, I know he did much more: he got alongside people, he mentored many and he made an undeniable mark on changing society. Those of us left need to follow on his in wake, watch his videos, read his books and ensure we act in the justices he so brilliantly articulated. Rest in Power you amazing man.

Ruth Gould MBE, DL, FRSA

**Mike gave us a context, a collective and a personal epiphany that truly saved us from a life of despair, exclusion and oppression**

"I have argued that the social model of disability is a practical tool, not a theory, an idea or a concept. Furthermore, I have suggested that too much time has been spent discussing it rather than attempting to use it to produce social and political change.

If we imagine that throughout human history the carpenters and builders of the world had spent their time talking about whether the hammer was an adequate tool for the purpose of building houses, we would still be living in caves or roaming the plains."

~ Michael Oliver ~

## An excellent legacy

Since the 1970s disabled people have campaigned to bring about changes to systems and practices which are created by and for people who are not disabled, from which those of us with impairments are overlooked and excluded. At the core of this activism is the social model of disability.

Many of those who took part in the campaigns have since died. Few of our organisations remain as funding is given to large charities which claim to act on our behalf, but they actually contribute to our exclusion.

Prof Mike Oliver has left us an excellent legacy. He wrote a book in 1983 which described and named the social model of disability which challenges those systems and practices which disable us. I am honoured to have updated the book for its 4th edition. Mike wrote a great deal, including articles for GMCDP's Coalition magazine in the 1980s and 90s, this magazine was a leading edge of activist's debate on the social model of disability.

**We have lost a truly great man, RIP Mike.**

**Dr Pam Thomas**

Mike Oliver's *The Politics of Disablement* was not only instrumental in my career but changed its direction and emphasis. Thus, it is safe to say that Mike Oliver has defined and steered my life's work, without him even knowing it, through that one book. The few times we met we talked about Horse Racing (of which he was a fan) and various race courses in Surrey (LOL).

I came across the Social Model as an undergraduate in the mid-1980s studying humanities (politics, economics, literature and cinema): it was an eye opener not just for me but also the lecturers who were often stuck in a very conventional way of thinking (especially about impairment/disability). As I progressed on to an MA and PhD (and social work in the middle) on American Literature and Cultural Studies (Film), it became the core structural basis of my work.

As Barthes and Foucault said: "the author is dead". **Our ideas and thoughts are a distillation of all the thoughts we have come across. Mike Oliver's framed mine, inspired mine, structured mine; and, for that, I am eternally grateful.** Mike Oliver's legacy is more than just an idea: it is a movement - a way of thinking - and a liberation from centuries of oppressive thought to a new enlightenment of disablement: the Social Model. The king will never die.

**Dr Paul Darke**

by Tony Baldwinson



Mike Oliver was one of those very few academics who shake the ground around the world. His genius was in taking the social analysis from UPIAS and not just explaining it but more importantly popularising it - the social model.

So many disabled people can remember the first time someone told them about the social model - the "lightbulb moment" - just as important a memory to hold as when you had your first kiss.

I first heard about it in the early 1980s in Manchester through friends in our campaigns around radical mental health and distress. Radical medic allies were already running campaigns using a social model of medicine versus a medical model of medicine, and this is all within a year or so of Mike Oliver's book truly *hitting the streets*. He should have had a letter from the Queen offering him a knighthood or whatever, for services to lightbulbs everywhere.

For all this great social impact, when you met Mike you realised how kind, gentle and unassuming he was. He wasn't the pompous, high-ego and insecure person that we, perhaps unfairly, had come to expect and fear of academics who wrote about disabled people, those parasite people that Paul Hunt had warned us about. Above all for me, Mike had that wicked humour tempered with kindness, starting with his own foibles. So many people rightly loved him for it.

Mike, yours was a life well done.

**Mike had that wicked humour tempered with kindness, starting with his own foibles**

## by Dr Miro Griffiths, MBE

As a young disabled person, I really struggled with my identity. I felt embarrassed to ask for assistance, awkward because I used a power wheelchair, and apologetic because I believed the daily barriers I experienced were my fault, they were my responsibility and mine alone.

It was in my teenage years when I first came across Professor Oliver's work and through his ideas and commentary, my outlook changed considerably. I read about his conceptualisation of the Social Model of Disability, which in turn led me to explore the Fundamental Principles as articulated by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. My experience of disability became a political statement; I was not to blame because Oliver, through his collaboration with disabled activists and their organisations, illustrated that it is the organisation of society that creates the disabling barriers.

Subsequently, I came across two books that would change how I articulate who I am, my career aspirations and my perception of how the social world should be: *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) and *Disability Politics - Understanding Our past, Changing Our Future* (co-authored with the excellent Baroness Jane Campbell, 1996).

Professor Oliver's work was the catalyst for my personal trajectory into disability activism, and cemented my aspirations to research disabled people's oppression. I identify proudly as a disabled person, an identity which is inherently political and serves to remind me and others that we must challenge social injustice.

He remains an essential figure in the development of Disability Studies and Disability Politics. His work continues to influence scholars, activists, social movements, and social policies in the UK and across the globe. The path towards disabled people's emancipation will be littered with various perspectives, competing strategies, and alternative arguments, but Professor Oliver's work will forever be part of those narratives.

Mike Oliver, thank you.

**His work continues to influence scholars,  
activists, social movements, and social policies  
in the UK and across the globe**



by Professor Heng-hao Chang

**Mike Oliver's legacy will live on  
in disability studies all over the  
world**



I have never met Prof. Michael Oliver. I only knew him from his writing. As a researcher conducting disability studies in Taiwan, I started to read his work when I collected my references on the disability rights movement as a Ph.D student in University of Hawaii, Manoa.

There is no doubt that Prof. Oliver brought that revolutionary idea - the social model - to the academic and to the world. The social model has inspired scholars to conduct research from a different perspective.

When I started my career in Taiwan in 2006, the social model was still fairly new to us. Since then, Taiwanese scholars, students, social workers, service providers and disabled people have organized studies groups, forums and seminars to discuss the meanings and implementation of the social model.

In particular, a group of students, social workers, and scholars, including myself, formed a study group to read *The New Politics of Disablement* chapter by chapter. We discussed the social model/disability politics in UK and contextualized the social model for Taiwan. It further fuelled our passion to found the Taiwan Society for Disability Studies in 2018, with purposes to promote disability studies and social model in Taiwan.

Professor Mike Oliver was a pioneer for the disability field and a true mentor for us. His legacy will definitely live on in disability studies all over the world.

Heng-hao Chang, Professor, Department of Sociology, National Taipei University  
President, Taiwan Society for Disability Studies

I assign his writing in my disability and society seminar tomorrow.



How appropriate and timely. A touching memorial

# Thank you Professor Oliver



As students undertaking the MA in Disability Studies at Leeds University, we remember the first moment we learned about the social model of disability. Whether that was in an activist setting or upon embarking on our current course, hearing Mike's translation and exploration of UPIAS's Fundamental Principles of Disability was one of those rare occasions where you could pinpoint a moment that fundamentally changed your understanding.

Oliver's writings precipitated a profound shift away from a medical or individual model thinking, towards more emancipatory approaches and understandings of disability. His early politicisation of disability oppression was and is a powerful tool for describing and challenging inequality. For students on the MA Disability Studies course, Oliver's academic writings have underpinned so much of our learning, and stimulated lively debates both inside and outside of our academic classes.

For students on the course who are ourselves disabled, his work led to a personal and powerful revelation: that the 'problem' of disability was not located within ourselves, but instead lay within a disabling society. The liberating impact this has had on our understanding of disability and our sense of self is difficult to overstate.

Speaking about his time at university, Oliver stated that he could "only remember five other disabled people on campus" during his undergraduate studies beginning in 1972. **What a seismic shift there has been then, when we consider that Oliver's articulation of disability has contributed to making a culture where disabled students now not only form an essential part of the fabric of university life, but can study courses about their experiences and their oppression.** Thanks to him, current and past MA students can all conceptualise disability through the social model and thus strive towards contributing to a better and fairer society.

Oliver's uncompromising manner and pioneering approach leaves a rich legacy. The term 'seminal' is frequently used, but is undoubtedly relevant when applied to his impact on disability politics and research. Those of us who attended Theresia Degener's recent talk on disability and human rights heard her acknowledge the impact the social model of disability had on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - that without it, it would look very different.

Mike Oliver transformed the way we think about the world and thus the world we live in. We owe him a huge debt. All Disability Studies students who come after him must endeavour to continue his remarkable work. Thank you for showing the way.

MA Disability Studies Students, 2018/19, University of Leeds

# To End

We are told by friends that Michael Oliver would probably not want too much 'moping' about him and would instead want us all to 'get on' and 'get busy' resisting oppression, challenging disabling barriers, working for social justice.

And so we shall.

We do hope, however, that this Tribute will be seen in the light that it was intended. As a series of reflections on, as Tony Baldwinson says, "a life well done". Such lives are for celebrating and that was our goal.

Our thoughts are with Professor Michael Oliver's family and friends, to whom we wish heartfelt condolences.

All quotations from Mike Oliver are from:

2004 'The Social Model in Action: if I had a hammer' in *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, (Ed. Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer), Leeds: The Disability Press, pp. 18-31. This can be accessed here:

<https://bit.ly/2EWTxBI>

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