CHAPTER 8

One World, One People, One Struggle? Towards the global implementation of the social model of disability

Alison Sheldon

Introduction

> The production of ideology is... in general, the production of ideas within the intellectual framework of existing social relations, in such a way as to obscure the totality of which they are a part and thereby, the possibility of changing these relations (Shaw 1975: 64).

Disability in the majority world is big business. Western controlled disability non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have spread their reach to almost every corner of the globe. Disability Studies courses in western Universities spew majority world practitioners off their production line in growing numbers. Libraries and academic journals are bursting with pronouncements on the plight of majority world disabled people – predominantly written by western and western-trained academics and practitioners. There is much of value in many of these texts (e.g. Charlton 1998; Coleridge 1993; Stone 1999). Others – whilst well intentioned – leave a bitter taste in the mouth. Myth-making is there in abundance, and the current solutions proposed to the problem of disability in the majority world seem unlikely ever to produce their stated objectives.

Since disability is 'increasingly influenced by the escalating processes of "globalization"' (Barnes and Mercer 2003: 133), its complexities cannot be fully understood except on a global scale. This is a vital challenge for disability studies. Disability researchers have been urged to examine disability in the context of the global economy, and the need for 'a contemporary political economy of disability' has been stressed – one that

is informed by the global mode of production (Thomas 2004). Whilst one short chapter cannot do justice to this complex task, it can raise questions about the ideological springboard from which researchers and practitioners might best launch themselves.

This chapter then will interrogate current ideologies in academic thought concerning disability in the majority world. It will explore the common cause between disabled people globally and the people of the majority world, and suggest that the insights of the social model of disability might effectively be used to challenge the root causes of their disadvantage. It will firstly consider the creation and position of the so called 'majority world' in the global economic system; before moving on to examine social model thinking about disability in the majority world and the way in which its insights have been translated in practice. The main players who are seeking to ameliorate the effects of disability and underdevelopment in the majority world will then be identified and the role of western academics in the process of change considered. In conclusion, the need for a response to the social model's insights that is material in nature will be reiterated.

Global economics and the majority world

The world we inhabit is not an equitable one. Current trends suggest that this situation can only become more extreme. The capitalist mode of production now 'shapes social relationships over the entire planet' (Castells 1996: 471), and recent years have witnessed massive increases in both poverty and economic polarisation. As the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. Of the world's population – which is rapidly approaching 6.5 billion people, over one billion live on less than US $1 a day (UNDP 2005) and around 50 per cent survive on less than $2 a day (Castells 2001). At the turn of the millennium, 20 per cent of the world's people disposed of 86 per cent of the world's wealth, leaving the other 80 per cent of the global population struggling to survive on the remaining 14 per cent (Castells 2001). This economic polarisation is happening both within and between nations, and the people of the majority world and disabled people worldwide are feeling its effects. Those disabled people who are part of the majority world are thus 'the poorest, most isolated group in the poorest, most isolated places' (Charlton 1998: 43).

The global inequality that exists today has been illuminated through a variety of theoretical frameworks – a detailed analysis of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, many writers have argued convincingly

that the roots of the biting poverty found in the majority world are located in the global capitalist system and its inequitable distribution of wealth. It is not natural or inevitable (Hoogvelt 1997). The development of capitalism is itself rooted in colonialism, which is thus blamed for 'almost all the imbalances that now cripple the economies, societies and politics' of the majority world (Harrison 1993: 45).

The European colonial powers wiped out indigenous industry and forced the colonies to buy their goods. They furthermore undermined the self-sufficiency of majority world countries and transformed them into a source of raw materials for western industry (Fanon 1967). These raw materials, it is argued, were taken primarily because they were necessary in order for the industrial revolution to take place (Anthony 1972). Indeed without this exploitation it is questioned whether Europe would have industrialised at all (Harrison 1993).

Clearly, 'the development of capitalism had a global dimension from the beginning' (Bernstein 2000: 44), and the system has a logic 'that tends to its expansion and internationalisation' (Panitch and Gindin 2003: 4). The European states not only established 'the legal and infrastructural frameworks for property, contract, currency, competition and wage-labour within their own borders', they also generated the process of uneven development that continues to plague the majority of the world today (Panitch and Gindin 2003: 5). While Europe prospered then, colonised parts of the world were kept in an underdeveloped state (Thirlwall 2002). Even when the colonial powers retreated from the colonies, leaving unstable states with artificial and arbitrary borders 'condemned to futile border conflicts and secessionist troubles' (Harrison 1993: 46), their control over them was little diminished. Whilst the question of colonialism should still be 'central to our thinking today' (Ahmad 2003: 52), there are now more insidious forms of global control. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – western controlled and set up under the sponsorship and direction of the United States – now dictate economic policy-making in much of the world. Many of the policies that countries are forced to pursue are detrimental to the interests of the populace. In addition, those multinational corporations that operate in the majority world 'often introduce consumption patterns and techniques of production which are inappropriate... and to that extent impair welfare' (Thirlwall 2002: 3).

Arguably then, we are at a stage in the development of capitalism which is 'dominated by giant corporations, each of which controls a relatively

high proportion of the local or world markets for its products' – what can be called monopoly capitalism (Bernstein 2000: 250). This seems to support Lenin's (1947) theory of imperialism – 'the process of capitalist accumulation on a world scale in the era of monopoly capitalism' (Weeks 1991: 252). Whilst Lenin was confident in his assertion that imperialism was 'the highest stage of capitalism', it is now suggested that what he was observing was 'a relatively *early* phase of capitalism' (Panitch and Gindin 2003: 6). Imperialism 're-invents itself... as the structure of global capitalism changes' (Ahmad 2003: 43), and it is argued that the world system is now dominated by one leading country 'with historically unprecedented global power' – the United States (Ahmad 2003: 43). To maintain relevance in this new world order, our analyses of disability must become less parochial. A task for disability studies scholars is thus said to be:

> to locate the tap-roots of contemporary disablism in the imperatives of the system(s) of production and exchange that exist in any region, functioning as they do under the tutelage of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the US treasury (Thomas 2004: 36).

As yet, few have risen to this challenge. The social model of disability could be an invaluable tool in the process. Current trends in social model thinking, especially where the majority world is considered, may not however provide the necessary answers.

The social model and the majority world

The social model of disability has been, *is*, and will continue to be a hugely important tool. It gives insights into the mechanisms and processes that disable those with certain impairments, and hence into ways in which this disablement can be challenged and eradicated. UPIAS's (1976) seminal statement of disability's *Fundamental Principles* has spawned differing interpretations of the problem however. Increasingly, people are talking about social *models* (Finkelstein 2002; Horsler 2003; Priestley 1998). Broadly speaking, these fall between two positions – the materialist and the idealist. This crude distinction is *crucial*, especially when thinking about disability in the majority world.

The 'materialist' or 'radical' social model understands disability to be a logical outcome of the capitalist mode of production. Using the insights of this model, an important critique has been developed of the root cause of disablement – the capitalist system. Disability in its current form is said to have emerged at the time of the industrial revolution, with the growth of

the commodity labour market a key factor in the process of disablement (Finkelstein 1980; Gleeson, 1997; Oliver 1990; Russell 2002). This version of the social model insists that 'the fundamental relationships of capitalist society are implicated in the social oppression of disabled people'. Logically then, 'the elimination of disablement... requires a *radical transformation*, rather than a reform of capitalism' (Gleeson 1997: 196).

These vital descriptions of the role of capitalism in disablement have as yet been largely confined to examinations of minority world states. Whilst skewed economic development is acknowledged to create *impairment* on a massive and unnecessary scale in the majority world (Elwan 1999; Stone 1999), all too often the link between disablement and the capitalist system is severed. Instead of connections being made between disability and the global economy, it is widely argued that religious ideas and traditional belief systems 'are the main determinant of what is socially acceptable in non-western contexts' (Barnes and Mercer 2003: 135). This is an idealist approach to the problem, which can never get to its roots. For effective change to occur, 'disability cannot be dematerialised and explained simply as the product of discriminatory beliefs, symbols and perceptions' (Gleeson 1997: 196).

The idealist or 'rights' interpretation of the social model, whilst generally acknowledging the realities of the materialist model, understands disability to be the irrational product of deep-rooted cultural beliefs, attitudes and prejudices. Hence the claim that:

> people with impairment are disabled, not just by material discrimination, but also by prejudice. This prejudice is not just interpersonal, it is also implicit in cultural representation, in language and in socialization (Shakespeare 1994: 296).

Such analyses have definite appeal for western researchers reporting on disability in the majority world. This has major implications, both ideologically and practically as will now be considered.

It encourages analyses that are racist in nature and hark back to our colonial past. We are told that understanding traditional beliefs about disability is fundamental for those who wish to foster effective change in the majority world (Groce 1999). However, this arguably does little more than encourage a judgmental focus on indigenous belief systems and practices. Benedicte Ingstad (1999: 757) for example examines western myth-making about the plight of the 'hidden disabled' in the majority world. She highlights that whilst there are reported cases of disabled people being hidden away and abused in the minority world, these are not used

to 'create a general picture of behaviour in Europe or the USA'. Such cases are viewed as 'unfortunate exceptions', not as indicative of attitudes arising from traditional beliefs. Joseph Kisanji (1995: 54) raises similar concerns about much of the published material on majority world cultures, branding them 'anecdotal', 'impressionistic' and 'written for a western audience'. He highlights that many majority world professionals are themselves the products of 'non-indigenous western education' and thus they too may misinterpret indigenous practices.

Clearly then, 'caution needs to be exercised when reviewing findings on attitudes in non-western cultures' (Kisanji 1995: 55). Indigenous beliefs and attitudes, when described and interpreted by western/western trained researchers often illuminate more about western prejudices and belief systems than they do about the societies of which they claim to be gaining an understanding. This arguably represents a cultural racism – racism where 'the object... is no longer the individual... but a certain form of existence' (Fanon 1972: 15).

It is acknowledged that disability 'is very much a development issue shared by north and south' (Coleridge 1993: 65). However, an idealist focus on cultural differences separates disabled people one from another, suggesting that we are *not* one people, and are *not* involved in the same struggle. Furthermore, in conceptualising the world 'as divided into cultures and groups defined largely by their difference with each other' (Malik 2002: 3), not only are disabled people isolated from each other, separation is also encouraged from other oppressed groups (Horsler 2003). Thus any common cause between those who live in the majority world and disabled people globally is obscured. Ideology of course informs practice, and unless the roots of global inequality are questioned and addressed, only partial change will ever be possible. How then have minority world thinkers and practitioners risen to this challenge?

The global implementation of the social model

> ... to believe the global oppression and pauperization of billions of people does not have a direct relation with the state of the human condition, a condition involving 500 million people with disabilities and a condition dominated by the political economy of international capitalism, is a political dead end (Charlton 1998: 165).

The materialist model of disability poses intensely challenging questions, and its insights are thus increasingly dismissed as 'politically

naive' (Gleeson 1997: 197). How should we go about radically transforming capitalism? Putting this model into practice then is an ambitious project that the disabled people's movement has not as yet attempted. The idealist interpretation of the social model asks simpler questions and thus suggests more obvious 'practical' solutions. Its implementation has involved challenging prejudice through the courts, seeking equal rights and equal opportunities within the existing, inequitable system. Instead of facing up to the challenges that the materialist model implies then, short-term policy reforms and sticking-plaster solutions are sought to the problem of disability – an orientation that has been described both as a weakness *and* a strength of disability studies (Gleeson 1997). Whilst such attempts are indicative of an important concern with praxis, and have undoubtedly improved conditions for some, disability shows no signs of disappearing. The materialist social model however holds 'great potential for a more theoretically-informed praxis' (Gleeson 1997: 181) – one which will focus on the causes of disability, not just treat the symptoms. Thus far, symptoms are all that have been attended to, and any suggestion that this may be insufficient seems almost heretical. This is amply illustrated through a brief consideration of the ideology of 'rights'.

The rights and wrongs of 'rights'

> The term 'human rights'... is used as a collective noun as if 'human rights' was a given, uncontested principle or part of the order of things, standing above and apart from ordinary life but always present. Such discourses are oppressive because they close down questions, arguments and critical examination, rather than opening them up (Armstrong and Barton 1999: 214).

Whilst the contemporary ideology of rights is largely a product of the widespread outrage at 20th century genocide in Europe, the notion of rights is not new (Young and Quibell, 2000). Early ideas of 'natural rights' – rights bestowed on the human species by God or nature – have mutated into the notion of human rights, as outlined in the 1948 United Nations (UN) *Declaration of Human Rights*. These rights are held by individuals simply by virtue of being human and are – in theory – 'enshrined in the protective guardianship invested in bodies such as the United Nations or governments' (Armstrong and Barton 1999: 214).

A distinction can be drawn between human rights and civil rights – claims made within a specific state which are upheld by specific legal

systems. In this country, human rights violations are generally associated with 'uncivilised' foreign states – a dangerous and racist discourse 'rooted in English colonial history' (Armstrong and Barton 1999: 215). Civil rights however have been demanded by various disenfranchised groups at home – disabled people included. The notion of 'rights' has definite popular appeal, and a rights-based approach to disability is generally assumed to be a 'good thing' (Armstrong and Barton 1999). Rights are preferable to 'charity', and to the professionally-dominated focus on disabled people's deficiencies and 'special needs' (Drewett 1999). The rights-based strategies championed by many within the disabled people's movement are also said to have had a positive effect on practice, diverting it 'from a medical approach to a socio-political, or civil rights framework' (Young and Quibell 2000: 748).

'Rights' have indisputably been an important campaigning tool for the movement – as evidenced by successful calls for civil rights legislation in the UK and elsewhere. In the wake of disabled people's activism, and international initiatives like the UN's *Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons*, more and more states are now adopting anti-discrimination legislation. Whilst the effectiveness of such legislation is a matter for debate, at the very least, rights are acknowledged to have a vitally 'important symbolic value' (Drewett 1999: 127). We are warned then that we should tread with caution when employing arguments which undermine the 'valuable work' carried out by rights activists (Brown 1999: 121). Whilst the intention is not to undermine what disabled people and their allies have achieved, it seems clear that 'rights' alone will not eradicate disability on a global scale. Neither will documents like the UN's *Standard Rules* succeed in 'equalising opportunities' for the majority of the world's dispossessed and impoverished disabled people. There is perhaps something a little simplistic about 'the entire conceptual structure that underlies the oratory on human rights' (Sen 2000: 227); and civil rights, 'although necessary to counter discrimination, may not be radical (get to the root) enough to change our predicament' (Russell 1998: 127).

Various writers have questioned 'the dominant ideology of a rights-based approach to bring about social change for disabled people' (Handley 2000: 324). The goal of the approach is a fairly limited one – that of 'making sure that each disenfranchised group has the rights of white middle-class males' (Davis 2001: 535). Furthermore, 'rights' present an individualistic, legalistic approach to tackling disability, and are notoriously difficult to enforce. Most importantly, because of their essentially reformist nature,

through demands for rights, we can never attack the root cause of disability, only its symptoms. Whilst the social model of disability embraces the notion of rights then, it is stressed that it is not 'dependent on rights – it is not a rights model' (Finkelstein 2002: 15).

Rights are a product of western liberal individualism. Hence in the UK, it is argued that the recent focus on disabled people's civil rights has helped justify a shift from 'policies of social obligation' to those 'rooted in individualism' (Thornton and Lund 1995: 1-2). Civil rights legislation represents 'a legalistic approach to emancipation' (Finkelstein 2002: 14), and hence acknowledges only those individuals 'who make a claim against the collectivity' (Robertson 1997: 431). Furthermore, such claims can be made only 'after the horse has bolted'. As such, rights are described as:

> a 'band–aid' solution, which, far from stopping the injury in the first place, are often unable to even find the wound (Young and Quibell 2000: 751)

At an international level, organisations such as the UN are firmly committed to the ideology of rights, producing a number of rights guidelines, which, in theory, offer much to disabled people worldwide. However, the onus is on individual states to implement these guidelines, a particular problem in poorer countries where 'governments have very limited resources to bring about radical changes in the lives of disabled people' (Barnes and Mercer 2003: 145). South Africa, for example, ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1995. Implementation of the Convention is subject to available resources however, and '"lack of resources" has become the rationale for ignoring, or failing to implement, policies for disabled children' (Tomlinson and Abdi 2003: 54).

Rights then are all very well on paper, but 'what is a "right" when it means nothing legally?' (Young and Quibell 2000: 752). Others question the universality of rights, suggesting that the western focus on rights 'rooted in the ideology of individualism' often runs counter to 'cultural and social norms' in other parts of the world (Lang 1998: 9). Perhaps though, the most significant critique of the idealist interpretation of the social model is that in breaking 'the theoretical link between disability and capitalism' (Horsler 2003: 39), it can offer only reformist solutions – solutions that 'can only ever ameliorate the effects of a disabling society yet leave capitalism as a system untouched' (Horsler 2003: 54).

Whilst a focus on rights might improve the situation for some more fortunate individuals, the liberal rights model 'serves to forestall criticism of relationships of power at the centre of the exclusion... and inequality

that disabled persons face' (Russell 2002: 121). There is a strong argument then that liberation for disabled people cannot be achieved through 'rights' alone, but only by 'questioning the very basis of the rules of the market' (Russell and Malhotra 2002: 5). What is needed then is a radical social model of disability which 'has to do with the creation of a society which enables us to be 'human' – not just access our 'rights' within an existing competitive market society' (Finkelstein 2002: 14). Since both the oppression of the majority world, and the oppression of disabled people are intimately related to the current global mode of production these arguments cannot be dismissed as naïve. If common cause is to be found between the people of the majority world and disabled people globally, this area *must* receive more attention both from theorists, activists and other 'agents of change'. It is to these agents of change that we will now turn our attention.

Nothing about us without us?

Global capitalism is on the whole regarded in a positive light by the world's decision makers. At the same time though, a need is perceived for non-market intervention 'to "ameliorate" its "disordered faults"' (Thomas 2000: 45). The responsibility for non-market intervention in 'development' was initially exercised by states within their own borders, 'or by colonial states on behalf of the colonized' (Thomas 2000: 41). The state however is now only one of various agencies playing such a role. The term 'trusteeship' is often used to describe the situation where 'one agency is "entrusted" with acting on behalf of another, to try and ensure their "development" – whether or not they have asked to be developed' (Thomas 2000: 41). Many agencies claim trusteeship over both the people of the majority world and disabled people globally – local, national and international NGOs, the United Nations and its agencies, and other international (yet western controlled) organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF.

The notion of trusteeship is highly problematic, and it is increasingly asked what right such agencies have to speak for anyone. Some have rejected the notion of trusteeship altogether. Oppressed people it is argued should become their own trustees and be enabled to solve their own problems however they see fit (Thomas 2000) – a sentiment encapsulated in Disabled People's International's eloquent slogan "nothing about us without us". Furthermore, a distinction can be made between trustees who work alongside capitalism (such as the World Bank) and those who work against it. Social movements like the disabled people's movement are seen

to be working 'against' capitalism (Thomas 2000), and as such may offer the most fruitful way forward. However, disabled people's organisations often lack the necessary resources to move forward (Hurst 1999) – especially with the increased emphasis on aid conditionality (Tomaševski 1993).

If indeed we need revolutionary change, 'disabled people in isolation' are not going to lead that revolution (Brenda Ellis cited in Horsler 2003: 27). For the international disabled people's movement to grow and prosper, it must make links with other oppressed people who are engaged in the same struggle (Charlton 1998). The people of the majority world could be valuable allies in this process. The development of a global political economy of disability would make the commonalities between such seemingly disparate groups more transparent and such alliances more feasible. It is here that academics in the minority world could make a significant contribution to the struggle.

There are obvious concerns that western academics are prescribing solutions on behalf of others and thus claiming trusteeship for themselves. However, the aim of majority world writers like Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James was not simply to reject western ideas 'but to reclaim them for all of humanity' (Malik 2002: 2). Others however have suggested that academics can do little to further the interests of 'the victims of underdevelopment', and that the most their studies can do to 'try not to obscure the structures of exploitation and oppression which underdevelopment produces, and which in turn sustain it' (Leys 1975: 275).

This is exactly what much theorising about disability in the majority world has done. Whilst it may not change the world in the short term, the adoption of the materialist version of the social model, and the development of a global political economy of disability would certainly be a step in the right direction. It seems vital then for disability studies to hang on to this radical version of the social model in order to suggest meaningful strategies and solutions to the interconnected global problems of disability and uneven development.

It is important to remember that capitalism is not an 'eternal period'. It is a mode of production that belongs to a specific period in human history. Hence, just as feudalism was superseded by capitalism 'capitalism will be superseded by a higher form of organization of production and distribution' (Navarro 1984: 45). It is suggested that contemporary factors such as increasing technological progress and social polarisation may well constitute, 'Marx's formula for revolution' (Hirschl 1997: 172). Perhaps

then, academics can ally themselves with the world's poor in speeding this radical change in the mode of production and in envisaging the system that could take its place. As Marta Russell reminds us, capitalism is not god-given. Instead 'the socio/economic inequalities it generates are created by men and can be changed by the people' (1998: 142).

Conclusion

The entire world is now part of the same system of domination and oppression and disabled people everywhere are united by their shared oppression within that world system. The people of the majority world are similarly disadvantaged by imperialist capitalism, and thus have much in common with the world's disabled population. However, despite the fact that disability and uneven development are intimately related to the capitalist world system, materialist explanations of disability are rarely sought in relation to the majority world. Instead colonialist notions of the majority world as savage, primitive and hostile to those with impairments are widely propagated, and 'rights' are championed as a suitable means of securing justice for disabled people on a global scale. This situation must be redressed if academia is to contribute anything to the struggle of the poor and the disadvantaged both here and abroad.

It is clear that the practical solution to the deprivation of majority world people and the oppression of disabled people is the same. Perhaps, this solution can be implemented using the insights of the social model of disability. Systemic problems require 'systemic solutions' (Charlton 1998: 165). Hence, if the social model is ever to be effectively implemented on a global scale, we must hang on tightly to its 'radical' formulation. We need a response to the social model's insights that is both material in nature, and informed by those with a direct interest in the liberation struggle. Successful action to eliminate both disability and underdevelopment will not disregard the roots from which both spring and any ideology that serves to obscure these roots must be vigorously questioned. Idealist interpretations of the social model of disability cannot lead us to what must be our ultimate goal – the creation of a world where disability and uneven development are of merely historical interest and books such as this would no longer need to be written.

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