

## OUTSIDE, 'INSIDE OUT'

*Vic Finkelstein*

Published in

*Coalition*. GMCDP April 1996 pp.30-36

An edited version appeared in *Disability Now*, 1996

For some time now I have had nagging doubts about the message contained in the title '*Inside Out*' for Channel 4's latest series on 'disability'. It was, however, during a discussion about possible future television programming that the comment of a commissioning editor stimulated me into sorting out my worries about this title. We had been discussing some of the issues that affect the lives of disabled people and the possibility of new programmes to cover these topics. I had suggested that in addition to covering ongoing issues, such as anti-discrimination legislation (ADL), television should present new interpretations of emerging issues which perhaps are not yet in people's consciousness. In my view, I said, this would also enable television to make some contributions at the leading edge of disabled people's struggle for emancipation. This view was strongly rejected by the commissioning editor with the comment that television is not good at taking a *leading role* in developing new ideas.

I could not have disagreed more. My thoughts went straight back to the first regular broadcasts of the Sunday morning LINK programmes with Rosalie Wilkins as presenter. In my view those early Central Television programmes not only led the way for television broadcasts on disability issues but also provided some of us with a platform to develop our idea that disability is created by a world designed for able-bodied living rather than by the way our bodies are impaired. There can be little doubt that the first LINK series played a significant, and sometimes leading, role in promoting the social construction of disability long before disabled academics expropriated this idea, transformed it into the '*social model*', and then presented it as if it were their own invention. I held my peace and said no more in the discussion. I worried, however, why this view of television's apparent limitation could be expressed with such conviction and remain unchallenged by the disabled people participating in the discussion.

It then occurred to me that this current media reluctance to sometimes take a leading role in the present stage of our struggles for social change perhaps reflects the lack of new ideas coming from the disability movement rather than any real television inability to innovate with new ideas. As I see it the leading edge of the disability movement (through its important national and local organisations of disabled people and recognised disabled public figures) has not only lost its vision for change during the past five years but has, with what seems to be increasing momentum, actually been moving backwards. Without this vision there can be no 'bursting enthusiasm' to inspire creativity in the media; and here I include the disability arts movement as well as television. No wonder then, that we find a loss of excitement spreading in the arts movement:

'LDAF, the London Disability Arts Forum, held its Annual General Meeting in the beginning of last month. It was a disappointing affair. Only a handful of disabled people turned up and the atmosphere was tense. The inaugural meeting of LDAF, nearly a decade ago, when there were more than 200 people bursting with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose, seems a distant dream. Yet that enthusiasm was by no means misplaced. So much has happened and is still happening 'out there' in terms of disability arts. So why does it seem that LDAF has gone stale? What new directions should LDAF be going in? What is stopping it fulfilling its role as promoter and supporter of disability arts?'

What was the difference between a decade ago and now? Well, there are at least three important differences that come to my mind. Firstly, we had very firmly shifted the focus of our activities from parliamentary pressure group politics, so favoured by the Disablement Income Group (DIG) and the Disability Alliance (DA), onto grass roots work within the disabled community. This heightened the need to address the issue of 'identity' and inspired the development of the disability arts movement. Now, sadly, the central organs of the disability movement have very firmly returned to pressure group politics in its concentrated campaign for Anti-Discrimination Legislation.

Secondly, we had engaged in a vigorous debate to take control over the way 'disability' was interpreted and understood. This involved encouraging disabled people (more so than 'the public' or professionals) to focus our attention on changing the disabling barriers 'outside there' rather than focusing our attention on the attitudes and emotions we held 'inside ourselves' about our experiences of discrimination. This was an attempt to encourage an objective, practical and 'hands on' approach towards the struggle for social change rather than merely pursuing pressure group politics appealing to others to allow social improvement in the quality of our lives. In other words the focus of attention was 'outside in' rather than 'inside out'. Since those exciting early years in advancing the movement of disabled people there has been a creeping re-interpretation of this radical concept of disability. In this 1990s interpretation disability is no longer regarded as the creation of a society organised for able-bodied living but rather as complex of 'experiences':

'... disability concerns the way that a society reacts to impairment. ... the concept of disability explains the social, economic and political experiences associated with impairment.'

Jenny Morris 'Gender and Disability' in Sally French (Ed.) (1994) 'On equal terms: working with disabled people'. Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd. page 207

In this approach 'subjective experiences' become 'subjective realities' and these, in turn, are promoted as if they were 'our reality':

'Disabled people ... have little opportunity to portray our own experiences ... This lack of a voice, of the representation of our subjective reality, means that it is difficult for non-disabled feminists to incorporate our reality into their research...'

Jenny Morris (1991) 'Pride against prejudice'. London, The Women's Press. page 8

Gone is the original social interpretation that the reality of disability can be most appropriately understood by focusing on the disabling barriers out there. Now insight is to be obtained by focusing on the subjective reality of our disabling experiences. This is nothing less than a return to the old 'case file' approach to our oppression dressed up in the developing jargon of what Mike Oliver originally identified as 'the social model of disability' ('A new model of the social work role in relation to disability'. Published in Jo Campling (Ed.) (1981) 'The Handicapped Person: a new perspective for social workers?' RADAR. page 19). It is also, in my view, a new and distinctive variation of the model according to the viewpoint of a rising faction in the disability movement.

Thirdly, disabled academics and disabled researchers had not yet had an impact on setting the movement's agenda in terms of their own priorities. In practice this has meant that over a period of time the political and cultural vision inspired by the new focus on dismantling the real disabling barriers 'out there' has been progressively eroded and turned inward into contemplative and abstract concerns about subjective experiences of the disabling world.

'The latest British developments in this "indigenous" tendency came at the 1992 Researching Disability Conference, when disabled people told non-disabled researchers that they had no right to be researching the disability experience...'

Tom Shakespeare 'Disabled People's Self-organisation: a new social movement?'  
*Disability, Handicap and Society* (1993) Vol.8 No.3, page 255

This is far removed from the original so-called 'social model of disability' which saw the disabling barriers 'out there' in the real and objective components of our social structures. In my view it was precisely because disability was identified as a creation of certain aspects of our society, a society in which all disabled and non-disabled people live, that made it possible for any non-disabled researcher to analyse and comprehend the nature of disability. It is quite a different story, of course, when we refer to the 'experiences' of disability *and* impairment. But focusing on experiences rather than the causes of disability is the surest way to return to the confusion between impairment and disability that bedevilled the 'medical model of disability'. No surprise then that the growing 'inside out' orientation is critical of 'the tendency to downplay the role of impairment, of the physical condition' in the approach of those who started the modern disability movement (Shakespeare, page 256). I cannot agree with this or the view that 'Recent work has begun to rectify this gap' (Shakespeare, page 257). On the contrary, I think this new group of *rectifiers* are returning us to a previously discredited and sterile approach to understanding and changing the world 'out there' that is disabling us.

I believe that the return to 'pressure group politics', the re-emergence of a focus on 'disabling personal experiences rather than disabling social barriers' and the influence of 'disabled academics and researchers in setting a struggle for *models* high on the agenda for the disability movement' have all contributed to the acceptance of an 'inside out' view of disability. If *Channel Four*, then, finds it difficult to make some space for the exploration of leading ideas in the *disability world* it seems to me that perhaps this is indeed a realistic mirror of the declining vision of the disability movement. This is more than merely an echo of the recent criticism of the television channel for commissioning its programming on 'ranking first rather than remit first' (*The Guardian*, 11 December, 1995). The 'remit' here refers to minority interests and innovation in presentations.

There is, of course, a profound difference between struggles based upon an analysis concerned with the processes leading to the creation of disability (the social construction of disability as a socio-economic relationship) and struggles based on reflections of the experience of disablement (or our conscious reflections on living with an impairment in a disabling world and interpreting the state of disability as a psycho-social experience). What we have now in the disability movement, at the beginning of 1996, is a clear split between the *rectifiers* who approach their understanding of disability from the 'inside out' and those who approach it from the 'outside in'. There are now two versions of the social model of disability. In the original model, what I will call the '*active social model of disability*', the focus is on actively removing the disabling barriers created by a world designed for able-bodied living. In the *rectifier's* model, what I will call the '*passive social model of disability*', the focus is on the way we reflect upon, and react to, the barriers that disable us. It is a *passive* model because actions following from this viewpoint are secondary to our experiences of discrimination. We never take a leading role in general movements for social change because this would require looking at disabling barriers *beyond* our immediate experiences.

The adoption of Anti-Discrimination Legislation (ADL) is about to drive a wedge through the heart of the disabled community as the artificial alliance promoting ADL predictably falls apart. The

disability movement with its adoption of pressure group politics campaigning for this legislation not only followed all the mistakes of yesterday's DIG but is threatening to end up the same way, having started full of enthusiasm and ending up as, in the words of the DAIL Magazine editorial, 'a disappointing affair'.

The period concerned with establishing the legitimacy of the social approach to disability that focuses on changing society rather than people with impairments has ended, the period of consolidating this approach through the spread of the 'social model of disability' and growth of democratic organisations of disabled people is ending. Now begins the third phase which is surely concerned with identifying those structural aspects of our social system which make it into a disabling society.

This is no less a task than 'mainstreaming' disability and should involve disabled people up front with other important sections of the community, addressing problems in the major institutions of social life which affect the quality of life of **all** citizens - such as the foolishness of trying to create an effective National Health Service, or the disablement of all citizens by introducing a market in the education system. This is not only an exciting perspective but faces us with the same unknowns that confronted us when DIG's parliamentary campaigns ended in a flop. No wonder people are tending to retreat into the safe haven of an 'inside out' approach to the experience of disablement.

## OUTSIDE 'INSIDE OUT' 2

*Vic Finkelstein*

Published in  
Disability Now 1996

In November 1972 the Disablement Income Group handed the Labour MP Jack Ashley a petition signed by 258,404 people demanding a 'disability' pension as of **right** for all disabled people. Within a few years of this impressive achievement this leading organisation of disabled people played no further role in the development of our movement. DIG had allowed its single-issue campaign for legislation to become its top priority and paid the price for neglecting its grass roots membership.

A revitalised disability movement will no doubt be grateful to Richard Wood (*Disability Now* April 1996) for giving us the 1989 date when BCODP made 'the campaign for comprehensive anti-discrimination its top priority' following DIG's error in downgrading the priority of grass roots work. For me failing to see the signs (so painfully learnt from DIG) - that numbers (112 member organisations) mean little without reflecting on the actual strength behind these numbers, that disability arts and culture 'not thriving' is not just sad but a mirror of the lack of *movement* in the movement, that pressure group politics taking priority over grass roots work creates an elite who enjoy personal growth and advancing careers while the membership is increasingly left behind - all reflect a weakness in the vitality of the whole movement. I'm not against a campaign for civil rights legislation as long as this is secondary to, and increases, grass roots work.

The problem is that the 'social model of disability' does not seem to guide our vision. We treat our oppression as if this is a collection of single-issue disabling events and we then try to tackle each of these as if they were not created by mainstream social structures. Thus we campaign for anti-discrimination legislation (ADL) at the same time as other legislation is making the health, welfare, education and employment sectors of society more disabling for people with impairments. The education system, for example, is going to become more competitive and selective with fewer educationalists per student and this, together with greater competition in the labour market, is bound to isolate the next generation of disabled kids whatever ADL is in place.

I cannot do better than end with a quote about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which, more than anything I have said so far, invites us to stop and think about the direction of our movement:

According to the Current Population Survey conducted by the US Department of Commerce, combined rates of labor force participation and employment for people with disabilities have actually decreased from their 1992 levels, when the ADA became effective. During the same time period, nondisabled people have enjoyed higher levels of labor force participation and employment.

American Society of Disabled Professionals