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Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, "Exploring Disability. Second Edition". Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, 341 pp.

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## Book Review

**Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, *Exploring Disability. Second Edition*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, 341 pp.**

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*Exploring Disability*, by Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, is the second, updated, edition of a relevant contribution to the development of a social model of disability. The thread of the book considers experience of disability not as an individual phenomenon, but as the result of social relationships, in line with the international debate and policy during the last decade, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, brought into force on 3 May 2008 [UN 2008], and the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, adopted in 2010, with the aim of promoting the right for persons with disabilities to fully and equally participate in society and the economy [see Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions: “European Disability Strategy 2010–2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe”; European Commission, Brussels, 15/11/2010: COM (2010) 636 final].

People with some kind disability represent about one out of four EU citizens, and almost 50% of them are elderly [see Stefanos Grammenos, 2013, “Task 6: Comparative data and indicators - Year 1 – 2012, Centre for European Social and Economic Policy (CESEP ASBL) on behalf of the Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED)]. Despite the increasing attention on disability studies, this is one of the areas in which sociological debate still has to be developed. Just over a decade after the first edition [1999], the second edition of the book contributes to the development of disability theory within a sociological framework, focusing on its societal, political and cultural developments, transforming disability from a personal tragedy in a social constructed state, and offering an excellent overview of the literature in the area.

The book analyses the historical path of disability in society and in policy in recent decades, through the current cutting-edge debate in the area, focusing, above all, on the British experience. The deep insights into the British regulative context and policy are investigated in comparison to those in the USA. The first chapters, 1–4, focus on the historical development of disability in Western societies, investigating the role of grass-roots movements of associations of people with disabilities, and their role in promoting changes in the paradigm through which the majority of society considers disabilities. The analysis starts with the classical functionalist approach of the “sick role” by Parsons, then deals with the “stigma” perspective developed by Goffman, and concludes with the post-structuralist examination of illness.

The socio-historical perspective highlights the dominant role of “personal tragedy,” and of a medical approach that has been challenged by the bio-psychosocial model of disability and by the separation between *impairment*, as a medical term, and *disability*, representing the exclusionary relationship between people with impairments and the wider society. Nevertheless, the introduction of a social model of disabilities has supported the development of different social theories of disabilities, highlighting structural factors

or personal experiences and also, recently, a renewed attention for the contribution of medical sociology and social sciences in general.

Chapter 5 discusses disability policy in the context of welfare states, highlighting the multiple and social inequalities affecting people with disabilities, focusing on institutional discrimination in education, employment, environment (such as housing and transport), leisure, and limiting social participation. Structural factors are, therefore, related to discriminatory attitudes and practices.

Chapter 6 presents a critical analysis of policy for people with disabilities: despite the formal political effort to overcome inequalities and support deinstitutionalization, such as community care, the authors highlight the limits of recent policy in terms of approach and resources allocated, stressing the oppressive and objectifying underlying ideology of “care” [p. 139]. Focusing on UK policy, the increasing attention on independent living is outlined. The grass-roots organizations have contrasted the paternalistic approach that dominated up until the 1990s, and have supported activism that has influenced part of the mainstream political parties and policy-makers in most Western societies, and which has increased the attention from international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations [Ch. 7].

Chapter 8 investigates the different representation of disability in culture and the media, and how they shape disability identity, presenting a cultural studies approach on art masterpieces such as the film “The Elephant Man” [p. 197], and stressing the role of the media in confirming existing opinions consolidating stereotypes and prejudice [p. 201].

The last two chapters represent the new contributions in this second edition. Each deals with a cutting-edge debate. Chapter 9 discusses the right to life in relation with ethics, euthanasia, eugenics and biotechnology. The critical analysis sheds light on the limits of these debates, which seem to reinforce the traditional *personal tragedy* view instead of promoting effective political and social change towards a more inclusive and equitable society. Chapter 10 considers disability in a global perspective, focusing on the majority of the world’s population, living in poorer countries. It highlights the relationship between poverty, inequality and disability in developing countries in the wider framework of capitalist industrialization and globalization, and supports the importance of bottom-up movements and policy instead of international standardized interventions, contrasting the unique globalized disability identity and culture [p. 264].

The 266 pages, supported by 53 pages of references, guide the reader towards the analysis of disability theories and approaches. The authors’ active involvement with disability organizations and movements makes the book one of the more structured and academic products giving voice to disabled people. The authors have had, indeed, an important role in establishing disability studies as a field of sociological inquiry in the UK, owing to their role in the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds, and in the Disability Press, which is an independent publishing press dedicated to the area of disabilities.

The book focuses on a sociological analysis of theory and approach regarding disabilities, contrasting the dominant *micro* level analysis that presents disability as “an individual failing and a personal tragedy” [p. 1], and supporting a wider investigation considering *meso* and *macro* levels. It represents a crucial resource for students, as well as

for researchers exploring disability studies. The deep analysis is based on rich references clearly supporting the argument in favour of disability as a social construction, assuming a critical position on different professional points of view, such as medical or psychological, and avoiding a multidisciplinary approach. Within the framework of economic crises and austerity, the economic aspects of disabilities might have been discussed in greater depth. Moreover, the book presents a homogeneous consideration of the identity of people with disabilities, while the increasing attention in the literature for intersectional analysis would have enriched the book, interweaving disability with gender, class and ethnicity, which are only marginally considered in the text [see Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree, 2010, *Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities*, *Sociological Theory*, 28 (2), pp. 129–149].

The focus on the British context, in comparative historical perspective with experiences in the USA, presents a lesser-known part of the path that has contributed to the development of social model of disability, and, from this point of view, the main emphasis is on the crucial role played by civil society movements. The authors thereby share a clear perspective on the roles of agency and self-determination that make people with disabilities active protagonists and sharp critics of policy at local, national, and international levels. A European level of analysis is completely absent, confirming the British propensity towards USA experiences. In the final chapter, however, we do see a wider approach, considering internationalization of disability policy.

A deep commitment towards the rights of people with disabilities within the social model of disability shines throughout the entire book, and drives the reader in exploring disability theories with interest and passion. Nevertheless, readers – and particularly less expert readers – would have benefited from a more detailed division in paragraphs.

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