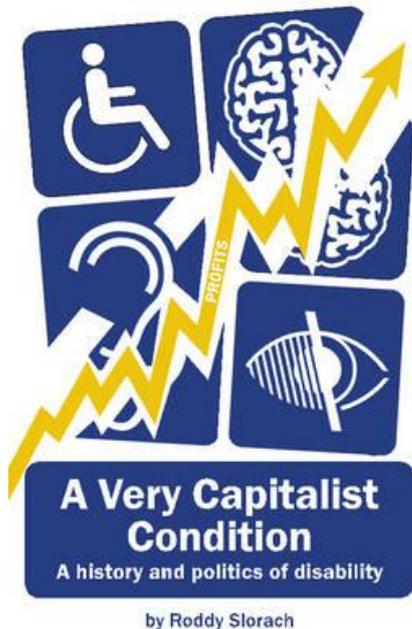


Review: Roddy Slorach, *A Very Capitalist Condition – a History and Politics of Disability*

Tina MacVeigh



Roddy Slorach, *A Very Capitalist Condition – a History and Politics of Disability*, Bookmarks, 2015. £12.99

The Meaning of Disability

Some two years ago I received news that a life long friend had suffered a horrendous cycling accident, which had left one of his arms severed from just above the elbow.

I met with him some time later and his attitude to his new situation was positive and hopeful. He was lucky to be alive. He had a loving and supportive network of family and friends. He had a good, well paid, professional job. No doubt his bosses would be understanding; he had worked hard for them over the years. He had private health insurance.

Some months later the story was different.

While he had expected to be able to return fully to work once recovery had completed and prosthetics fitted, his bosses had turned out not to be so understanding and after some time had begun to question the time he needed to take for specialist appointments, eventually offering him a job 'more suited to his new circumstances', which was essentially a significant demotion and he be-

lieved a subtle push towards forcing him to leave altogether.

The private insurance, as it turned out, would not cover his prosthetics, something to do with his accident and injuries not being life threatening.

We discussed this and concluded that it was not his injuries and newly acquired 'disability' that was preventing my friend from returning to his work, becoming again a fully participative and contributing member of society. Rather it was his bosses' evaluation of him as a less than valuable economic commodity and the refusal of the private health insurance company to cover very expensive prosthetics that would return functionality to his limb.

This is the central thesis of Slorach's outstanding tour de force of the relationship between an individual, their innate or acquired impairment and capitalism: that an individual with an impairment whether born with it or acquired is disabled by society rather than by their impairment. The impairment is individual and private while disability is social and public. Barriers are put in the way of people with impairments participating in or contributing to society in any egalitarian or inclusive manner.

To underpin his thesis, Slorach demonstrates how in nomadic pre-Feudal societies, when seasonal work was divided and shared more broadly in communities and through extended family networks, evidence exists that suggests that impaired individuals were cared for by community and family networks and lived in some cases for many years beyond acquiring their injury. In those nomadic societies, people must have been carried as communities followed sustenance. Where they may no longer have been able to hunt or fetch water, they have taken on other roles in the collective, certainly as elders in the group their knowledge and experience would have been revered.

All of this of course changes in late Feudalism as societies become settled, home

based craft industries develop and people with impairments become more isolated and hidden behind closed doors. With the industrial revolution comes the most fundamental shift of all. The growth of factory production had two profound effects. As production shifted away from the home or small land holding, the mass of labourers lost control over production as well as over the products of their labour. To survive an individual had to sell their labour power. To maximize surplus value and then profits, capitalists extend the working day and divide further and further the labour process into repetitive mechanical tasks. No longer is labour or its value determined by what is deemed socially necessary. Those with impairments who cannot exchange their labour can no longer be cared for by those who can, who now find themselves increasingly occupied by the demands of new capitalism. This gives rise to the rapid development of institutions such as workhouses and special schools where those who cannot work are increasingly separated from the rest of the population.

This atomization of the individual as wage labour firmly entrenches the position that people with impairments, or disabilities, who have no labour value, represent a 'cost' to the capitalist and to society.

Slorach discusses the complexities in attempts to define disability with all of its distinctive features – a broad range of physical and/or mental disabilities that range in severity and the extent to which they debilitate. The degrees of limitations that an impairment may or may not impose on an individual are exacerbated and further complicated by varying experiences of social and economic discrimination and the extent to which either medical or social factors contribute to cause or cure. Taking us through a discussion of eugenics and the treatment of war veterans, Slorach leads us then through an important discussion of the politics underpinning the disability movement.

Ironically, it is the inclusion of many impaired people in the labour force in war times and the booming economies of the sixties that give rise to the disability movement. Economic expansion, technological

and scientific advances and the foundation of the welfare state allowed more people to live longer and carry out activities of which they had been considered incapable. Attitudes shift to consideration of individuals with impairments and their social position rather than simply a medical one. Disability movements couched in slogans of rights, not charity, culminate in legislation, funding for independent living and UN conventions on the rights of people with disabilities, albeit as late as 2006.

Applying his central thesis to mental health, deafness, education and neurodiversity, Slorach draws analogies affecting many communities of disabled: the closures of institutions, the economic changes which helped many to join the workforce for the first time, the contradictory role of charities, the realities of official integration versus genuine resources to promote diversity, the gains and shortcomings of anti-discrimination legislation. Slorach argues that the rights and services won for people with impairments are fragile and winning genuine equality and inclusion demands unity against those who seek to dismantle them.

In the final chapters of the book, Slorach describes how neoliberalism continues to discriminate in particular against disability. The labour power of people with disabilities is more expensive to purchase than that of their non-disabled peers. Neoliberalism not only imposes savage cuts on public services which affects all workers and unemployed, but as for people with disabilities there are further costs associated with their impairments, they are even further discriminated against in contemporary society.

Despite the fact that 15% of the world's population are categorized as 'with disability' there is a wide range of communities within this population who are segregated by differences of impairment or perceptions of impairment. This presents a difficulty for each of these groups challenging the issues directly affecting each of them. Despite gains won neo-liberal austerity attacks on disability have been harsher than on any other group.

In this book, Slorach lays bare the cen-

tral Marxist arguments of alienation for any oppressed group in society. Couched in a very informative discussion of disability in the broadest of historical, social, political and economic terms, it demonstrates thoroughly the limitations of movements, legislative changes, charity models.

Slorach reminds us that, in pre-capitalist societies, the labour required for survival was divided among all individuals and

groups in communities and that there is a shared struggle between people with disabilities and other minority groups. He leaves us in no doubt that, for all oppressed and marginalized groups, power over the forces of production and the meaningful inclusion of people in the decision making structures that directly affect their lives are fundamental pre-requisites of genuine egalitarian participation.