

Forward

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I am delighted to present this selection of papers originally delivered at a conference on disability organized by the International Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in the Human Sciences (ICIRHS) during Laurentian University's research week on February 6-7, 2012. The aim of this collective work is to bring together authors from various horizons in order to provide an interdisciplinary forum to study and research issues surrounding visible and invisible forms of disabilities. Its purpose is also to raise social awareness regarding concrete problems faced by the people with disabilities in the hope of shaping a different world for the future. The disability conference and this publication fit perfectly with ICIRHS' aim which is to facilitate and nurture interdisciplinary research in social sciences and humanities.

Disability studies is a relatively new field considering that it finds its origins about forty years ago in the civil rights movements and in the neo-Marxist critics of society. The chapters that follow explore various practices, interpretations and subfields that fall under this young area of scholarship. Authors discuss disability in connection with mental health, cultural representations, families, school and education, theories and policies. This short list already shows the interdisciplinary character of disability studies which indeed stands at the crossroad of the humanities

and the social sciences. One of its starting points consists in considering that disability excludes people with impairments, and thus acts as a form of social oppression. This social model of disability was at the core of the conference, and remains here a fundamental concern by challenging the medical model which tends to conceive disability in terms of a limitation that has to be cured or in terms of an in-capacity that has to be managed by health professionals. Many chapters discuss the obstacles and pathways to the social model by arguing in favor of a collective responsibility for inclusion of people who are facing disability issues. Other chapters take into account the inseparability of the social perspective and the concrete physical impairment or the lived experience of mental health conditions.

On a more biographical note, I would like to share briefly a personal story that put into question what could be called the “ableist myth of perfection”. As I was studying philosophy in Paris more than a decade ago, I had a strong interest in all the readings that dealt with “depsychiatrization” and “demedicalization” (Deleuze and Guattari's schizo-analysis, Foucault's history of madness, antipsychiatric movements, etc.). I was fascinated by these topics, but at the same time I deeply felt that gaining this type of knowledge from books alone might be insufficient and even inadequate. So I decided to pay a visit to the psychiatric ward of *Hôpital de la Salpêtrière* close to the *Gare d'Austerlitz* with the firm, yet naive, intention of volunteering in order to encounter people classified as mentally ill. At that time, I didn't know the meaning of the word “professionalization”. When I opened the heavy door of the psychiatric department, I saw about 10 nurses in white uniforms. Without any specific background in health care, I asked foolishly: “Can I volunteer in your institution? I would like to take walks in the park with the patients at lunch time.” The nurses stared at each other in a peculiar way without knowing what to say. After a few

seconds of desperation, one of them answered me in deadly earnest: “Come back tomorrow. The psychiatrist is not here today.” I understood that they thought I was crazy. After all, only a mad person can offer to spend time with other mad people without getting paid! I never made an appointment with their psychiatrist. Instead, I went to Unafam (*Union nationale des amis et familles de malades psychiques*) which is an association that brings support to friends and families of people classified as mentally ill. They showed a much greater openness and immediately understood my desire to meet with so-called mad people, gain a more concrete experience of madness, and potentially make a small contribution to their well-being. Unafam referred me to IRIS-Paris which is a non-profit organization located close to *Gare de l'est* that offers accompaniment services to social life to people who are facing psychiatric difficulties. Not only were they pleased to allow me to volunteer, but the director proposed to have regular meetings with the IRIS members who, she said, have strong philosophical needs and capacities. So I found myself organizing monthly philosophical debates for two years with people classified as mentally ill! These fantastic encounters gave me the opportunity to get to know more about the complex relationships between the social life and the medical life, broaden my philosophical horizons and also to build strong friendships with outstanding people. It became clear that disability, far from being a form of inability or inability, can express a full capacity in itself. Realizing this in return can increase one's own capacities for humility, modesty and wisdom. What it also shows is that, contrary to the sovereign power of exclusion which is often simplistic and one sided, the capacities of adaptations are infinite. To paraphrase Spinoza, the *potestas* is the lowest degree of *potentia*...

The public event on disability at Laurentian offered a unique opportunity to investigate further some of these interests shared by a wide range

of scholars, and to explore new territories. I was thrilled to feel a real enthusiasm generated by the organisation of this conference which rapidly and joyfully became bigger than what was initially planned. All the sessions were well attended and very stimulating, including the presentation of the historical documentary *A Life Worth Living: The Great Fight for Disability Rights* (dir.: Eric Neudel, 2011). I am especially proud of the participation by the graduate students (a total of ten for the conference) who were involved in every aspect of the conference, either as presenters, session chairs or by bringing technical assistance. It is always exciting to have these kinds of intergenerational exchanges.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank community members from Sudbury and North Bay who expressed their interest in this conference through their attendance and correspondence with us. It is my hope that this publication will continue the important discussions that began at the conference.