

The Social Model

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In the early eighties I had just been kicked out of university for being a disabled person — it was legal back then. I lost my way really; what I'd been brought up with, the idea that if you're determined enough you can do anything, had been turned on its head and I didn't know how to root myself. So, I was very aimless for a while.

Then one day, I went to a community action workshop about disability equality, an area I'd been interested in, but at the time I didn't know where to place myself in relation to all that. Was I a disabled person or wasn't I? There were two women there who talked about the Social Model of Disability and in the space of seconds the whole trajectory of my life changed. What they provided was an explanation of my life. What I'd known at gut level but didn't have the language for, so I couldn't understand myself, or organise, in relation to it. Once they explained the Social Model, everything changed. What it did was separate impairment from disability — the body from social structures — and suddenly the reasons I'd been asked to leave school at 15, all the experiences of discrimination, particularly in education, took on a different light. It wasn't about my impairment; it was about the decisions people made, their idea of the body, how the education system was constructed, and the deepest values and ideologies within society.

I came from a background that wasn't political, and I had no political understanding at all, but the Social Model explained my life to me and created a whole new community and focus for political activism. It became a kind of theory of everything, a map of the world. Once I'd understood that idea of social construction, and the possibility that if something is constructed it can be deconstructed, I could see that it gave a route to reinterpreting and changing any number of mechanisms and injustices. Since then, everything I've done, every campaign, every new idea I've come across, new voices or communities expressing their experience, I've brought that lens to it.

It offers a deeper sense of understanding to me of classism, racism, homophobia, sexism and so on in a way that I would never have understood at a visceral level. I am certain that the Social Model has saved lives over the years because of that understanding of self-in-context that it gives. It's

created a framework for disabled people to organise as a social movement, leading to widespread material changes in society - even as those changes are perpetually under threat. However, I also think its success opens it to exploitation.

I was talking to Dr Rebecca Yeo recently about the power of the Social Model and how the original Model was not simply about surface level barriers, such as a building excluding people with certain bodies, but was a profound critique of capitalism — which makes it a dangerous thing. What we have seen over the years, which she articulates really well, is that the Social Model has been co-opted by governments and local authorities and written into a lot of pivotal policy documents, in ways that dilute its radical foundations. So, what you get is terms like inclusion, where a primary driver is opening economic productivity to disabled people; making adjustments to capitalist society to bring more disabled people in, but complete avoidance of any questioning or disruption to the construction, and values, of that society.

What that means is that we fiercely need to protect the meaning and intent of the Social Model. Amongst all the shifts in political context, in the disabled people's movement, in new generations' perspectives, the Social Model remains that solid core, as relevant and necessary as ever for all the work left to do.