

**Review: *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare, and the Making of a Human Catastrophe* by Ellen Clifford, Zed Books, 2020, 365pp, ISBN 9781786996640, £12.99 (Paperback)**

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Following a considerable lull of publishers' interest in radical analyses of disablement after the collapse of the UK Disabled People's Council in the early 2010s, the last three years have seen a remarkable increase in book-length interventions into the politics of disability in Britain. Aimed at popular (non-academic and non-specialist) audiences, and often published by activist or civil society presses to circumvent the ambivalence of publishing houses, these works present descriptions of the social processes which cause and sustain disabled people's exclusion from civic life, contradicting the paternalistic narratives of dependency, malingering, and vulnerability associated with recent social policy.

While all generalisations are crude, and generalisations about social and political interventions doubly so, it is possible to divide these recent works into two (very) broad projects. The first of these – best represented by Frances Ryan's *Crippled* (2019) and Stef Benstead's *Second Class Citizens* (2019) – provide social histories, influenced by feminist thought and social-democratic commitments, of disabled people's experience in the 2010s. In these works, the personal is made political in the dual sense that disabled people are encouraged to view the poverty and hardship undergone as resulting from politically motivated government decisions, and non-disabled people to contest the ideological and policy frameworks which disadvantage their disabled compatriots. As Jenny Morris (1992: p.161-2) has already pointed out, however; accounts which equate the personal and the political are better at describing the impact of social processes on passive individuals than capturing the collective agency or dispersed resistance of an oppressed population. This problem is particularly acute for disabled people, whose

passivity and dependence is often assumed; and it is a severe limitation of this project that disability policy is unquestioningly characterised as something done to disabled people rather than a site of struggle.

The other project, conversely, begins with disabled people's own self-activity to construct a nuanced critique of a disabling society. Exemplified by Judy Hunt's groundbreaking *No Limits* (2019), and including other publications linked to the Disabled People's Archives in Manchester (Finkelstein: 2018; Davis & Davis: 2019; Baldwinson: 2019); this trend traces the formation, activities, and theoretical contributions of the mass Disabled People's Movement (DPM) in Britain from its inception in the 1970s to its demise in the 2000s. Here, disabled activists' analyses of the nature of the society they sought to change are prioritised, explained, and evaluated in light of the success or failure of the strategies they inspired. While re-centering the activity of disabled people in discussions of disability, and presenting the oft-forgotten critical thought of one of Britain's most important social movements, this historical project is naturally limited to the period of the Movement's existence. For much of its lifespan, the DPM and its theorists could presume a social context made up of strong social movements, quasi-autonomous local councils, and a welfare state active to the point of domineering. As DPM founder Vic Finkelstein argued (2007: pp.2-3), the DPM fractured towards decline once this context was dissolved under assaults by the ruling class against alternative sources of social power. The DPM literature preserves and illuminates a liberatory tradition, inspiring and informing today's disabled activists; its lessons for us, however, remain indirect and rooted in a world whose terrain has been transformed.

*The War on Disabled People* synthesises these two trends in order to overcome their respective limitations. Clifford's work is a social history of austerity insofar as it recounts and analyses policies, institutional responses, and the effects on individual disabled people and their communities. It is also an account of disabled people's organised resistance, alongside an attempt to build a working political and theoretical approach to the problem of disablement in 21st century capitalism (or 'the neoliberal era' in Clifford's parlance (p.7)) that retains the core analysis of the DPM while addressing distinctly modern barriers to disabled people's liberation. This project is ambitious: and Clifford undertakes not only a comprehensive description of the policies and practices that denied disabled people social and civil rights since 2010, the

responses of disabled people and their allies, and the fallout from this struggle on both parties – but also an analysis of disability under capitalism capable of accounting for the changing forms of disabled people’s oppression.

It is testament of Clifford’s expertise and skill that she weaves these accounts together into a coherent and readable work, and one which offers original and valuable insights into each topic. The empirical studies in the book are impeccably researched and clearly presented. As a leading member of Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) – one of the larger grassroots organisations of disabled people – Clifford has a masterful grasp of how austerity measures were justified and implemented, the strategies pursued to enforce or frustrate them, and the human cost of the all-out assault on disabled people’s welfare and autonomy. This allows her to astutely identify tactics used to obscure the extent of that assault to the general public and disperse disabled people’s resistance: such as farming out of independent living cuts to local authorities, despite their mandate from central government (p. III), and the deployment of baroque welfare regulation to wrong-foot anti-cuts campaigns (pp. 140-1).

When describing the impact of austerity and evaluating her and her comrades’ contribution to the fightback, Clifford is aided by an admirably clear writing style and a respect for human dignity which captures the brutality of the assault without giving in to sentimentality. In rightly celebrating DPAC and its sister organisations’ flexible use of protest tactics to mobilise their members; Clifford is able to emphasise that such mobilisations were often required earlier than they came – a tactical failure for which she recriminates nobody, but starkly lays out the consequences of (p. 283). Even when describing cases of suicide following benefit assessments (cf. pp. 149-50), Clifford’s prose shrinks from the rhetoric of victimhood. In her vivid recounting we do not encounter objects of pity, but real human beings left with nowhere to turn.

It is in Clifford’s account of the relationship between capitalism as a mode of production and disability, however, where her real contribution to theorising disability is found. Following Mike Oliver (1990), Clifford traces the origin of the disability category to the rise of industrial

capitalism; in which workers with impairments were excluded from increasingly standardised labour processes and divorced from agricultural communities in which they were previously integrated. From that point on, the meaning of disability and the social position of disabled people becomes an area of struggle between disabled people and their supporters – whose demand social provision of the goods and services which allow disabled people personal freedom and a reasonable quality of life – and the state and bourgeoisie who wish neither to fund unproductive citizens nor risk labour indiscipline by allowing a means of subsistence independent of the wage (Clifford: 2020. pp. 40-2). This ‘enduring struggle between oppression and resistance’ (p. 12) exposes capitalism’s brutal disregard for those it cannot put profitably to work, and must be constantly obscured from the non-disabled public by ideological constructions of disability as an insurmountable individual flaw (pp. 24-5). The fierceness and comprehensiveness of the attack on disabled people by the British state after 2010, on this conflict reading of disability, is ascribed to Conservative politicians’ commitment to a residual and marketised welfare state to drive down wages and costs (p. 261), slander of disabled people as scroungers to dissemble from this project (p. 108), and the inability of Disabled People’s Organisations (many of whom had become dependent on state funding during the Blair years) to offer meaningful resistance (p. 60).

While capitalist production is the sufficient cause for disablement on Clifford’s account, it appears a peculiarly static beast in her analysis. The limitations on disability liberation it imposes remain unchanged from its period of ascendancy, and alterations in the management in the disability problem owe their impetus to the conscious objectives of whoever wins out in the conflict. Thus the economic crisis of 2008 in Clifford’s text doesn’t represent a fundamental rupture in the mode of production – necessitating a realignment of the state, civil society, and labour – but a handy excuse for the Tory government to pursue projects they had always desired (p. 221). This constitutes an unfortunate political determinism in her work; albeit one infinitely more dynamic than the accounts of victimisation and victimhood described by Ryan and Benstead. It must be hoped the emerging liberation movement can overcome this limitation. While explorations of the dynamic impacts of capitalism’s contradictions and crises on disablement were common in the old DPM; analyses which explained the changing face of exclusion by reference to tensions between forces and relations of production (Finkelstein:

2018) or institutional actors in long business cycles (Russel: 2001) have limited application in a present where technological progress is uneven and accumulation stunted and precarious.

If the omission of capital's dynamism makes part of Clifford's analysis one-sided, she deserves immense credit for theorising that side with lucidity and insight. After the Covid-19 crisis – In which tens of thousands of disabled people in Britain were killed by discriminatory health policies, warehousing in care homes, and lack of access to necessities – her reading of disablement as a conflict at the heart of bourgeois society still provides a rich explanatory framework and guide to coming struggles. While the last year has aged some of her peers' writing by decades – Ryan's insistence that greater welfare spending (2019: p.200) can solve disability oppression seems quaint now, and Benstead's vision of a resurrected Keynesianism to the same end (2019: pp.264-5) simply fanciful – Clifford's prescription of conscious struggle for control over our lives and the dismantlement of the economic system which excludes us remains vital.

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