

Book Review

Title: *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law*

Authors: Dianne Pothier and Richard Devlin (Eds.)

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Reviewer: Carrie Griffin Basas

This volume of essays is joined by the thread that people with disabilities experience “dis-citizenship” in Canada, having been denied inclusion, equality, and power Canadians without disabilities enjoy (p. 2). The authors consistently reinforce the message “disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor just is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion” (p. 2). They use a sociocultural model of disability that goes beyond disability as a construct to look at ways disability status affects political rights, economic status, and community integration. Tools from various disciplines are useful as the authors create an approach they call critical disability theory. Critical disability theory goes beyond documenting the existence of oppression, and asks what purposes it serves and how it can be overturned? This quest is often in conflict with even liberalism’s approach to disability, which has depicted the experience as a monolithic, unfortunate aberration.

While largely academics, the authors do not offer their chapters as mere reflections on formal equality, but rather, they call for substantive equality – tangible changes in the everyday interactions of people with disabilities and their interfacing with cultural, economic, and political institutions, such as medicine, law, employment, nongovernmental organizations, and the state. They suggest these changes can be made from various approaches, including empowering individuals with disabilities at the community level, educating judges about critical disability theory, creating coalitions with other minority movements, and further documenting barriers people with disabilities face in Canadian society. Purposefully, they divide the book into four sections—“Setting the Context,” “Conceptual Frameworks,” “Policy Analyses,” and “Legal Interrogations.”

The book will appeal to readers interested in interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the marginalization of individuals with disabilities, and in particular, to American Studies scholars, comparative human rights researchers, policy analysts, higher education teachers, critical theorists, and civil rights lawyers. Canadian professionals in these fields may be more immediately drawn into the arguments and analysis, but the work has value globally. As Canada is often conjured as the image of social progress and liberalism to neighboring

American scholars, this book removes some of that veneer and suggests opportunities for productive comparison and shared dilemmas.

The chief strength of this collection is its breadth. Authors touch upon such topics as Rawlsian justice, feminist theory, neo-liberalism, multiculturalism, hybrid identities, reproductive rights, gender stereotyping, and employment strategies. They bring together qualitative and quantitative research, textual deconstruction, legal analysis, personal narrative, and policy critique. In each chapter, the contributors demonstrate commitment and passion for their subject matter, adding layers of knowledge to the experience of disability in Canadian society.

As with many volumes of essays, the primary weakness with this book is one of organization. While the introduction provides an inspiring segue into the remainder, as the chapters build, the reader could use a short reintroduction to the separate sections and how they are intended to tie together. With just the addition of a few pages, the book could have better flow and the arguments advanced in each essay could be linked meaningfully and cohesively. A conclusion would serve the same purpose, but one is not included.

An appendix, detailing Canadian disability rights cases in the last twenty years, is provided. This section, however, comes as an abrupt ending. The background material it contains would be better placed in the introduction or a separate chapter. This volume, with its calls to action – both theoretically and politically – deserves a strong finish. As it stands now, the reader has difficulty understanding the chronology of the chapters and what linkages are intended. She returned to the introduction upon completion to cement what she had read in the essays.

With these minor suggestions for improvement in future iterations, *Critical Disability Theory* could be a catalyst for similar comparative projects, gathering scholars in the United States and abroad. The synergy these Canadian scholars model can be a positive force for social change because it increases awareness about work being done in other fields, while also establishing conduits for collaboration and goal-setting. That kind of effort takes scholars and people with disabilities beyond their established lenses to suggest alternatives and action.

Carrie Griffin Basas, J.D., is an Assistant Professor at the The University of Tulsa College of Law.