

Book Review

Title: *Sociopolitical Aspects of Disabilities*

Author: W. V. Bryan

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Reviewer: Mark Sherry

This book focuses largely on American experiences of disability. Chapter One, “Foundation of Beliefs and Treatment of Persons with Disabilities”, begins with a brief history of discriminatory attitudes and practices towards disabled people and concludes with a short description of the development of rehabilitation. Chapter Two, “Concepts of Disabilities” discusses two perspectives on disability – one which Bryan calls a “sociopolitical concept” (a mélange of British and American work) and the other which he labels the “functional limitation concept” (which might more appropriately be called a medical model). Bryan is keen to emphasize the value of both approaches, though he does not shy away from stressing the horrors of eugenics and the medical model. Chapter Three, “The Landscape of Disabilities”, discusses the increasing size of the disabled population, and also emphasizes the degree of ethnic and racial diversity within the disability movement. Chapter Four, “The Oppressed”, analyses some of the psychological reasons for prejudice, forms of discrimination, and the impact of discriminatory and paternalistic attitudes on disabled people.

Chapter Five, “Social Environment”, highlights a number of myths that prevent equal employment opportunities for disabled people, and discusses various types of employment opportunities (such as supported employment and sheltered workshops). Bryan suggests that criticism of sheltered workshops for paying low wages and inadequate training is “unfair for many workshops” because they “operate on a limited budget and work with individuals who have limited skills” (p.106). Though this is not a major part of his book, I certainly felt that Bryan’s treatment of this issue was inadequate and his conclusions questionable. Chapter Six, “The Advocates”, identifies individuals and groups who have been important historical figures in the development of the US disability rights movement, such as Dorothea Dix and Ed Roberts, the National Organization on Disability, and the National Federation of the Blind. Chapter Seven, “Disability Rights Movement”, discusses the ideas behind independent living, and identifies important historical protests such as the Section 504 protest, and the Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet University.

“Political History”, Chapter Eight, contains a description of American vocational, rehabilitation, employment, educational and anti-discrimination legislation. While

largely descriptive, this is still one of the better chapters of the book, collating a large amount of useful information. Chapter Nine, “Family”, seems to sit uneasy with the rest of the book, as it moves back to a more psychological examination of family responses to disability as a “crisis”, and rehashes traditional psychological adaptations to loss (shock, anger, disbelief, and so on). Even the positioning of this discussion – well after previous (more sociological) discussions of cultural responses to disability seemed puzzling.

Overall, this book will probably be a useful introductory textbook for undergraduate students. It provides a fairly basic introduction – each chapter contains a chapter outline, a set of learning objectives, and review questions which examine whether students have carefully read the text. It is easy to read and free of jargon, though it tends to be simplistic at times.