

Politics, disability and social inclusion: People with different abilities in the 21st century

Peter Gibilisco. VDM Publishing, Saarbrücken, 2010, 168 pp.
ISBN 978-3-639-29355-5 (e-book)

Reviewed by Eric Paul Tudzi

Department of Land Economy, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology,
Kumasi – Ghana

Policy makers cannot help but be touched to reconsider their policies for persons with disabilities (different abilities) as they read this book. They will literally be walking side by side with Dr Gibilisco as he recounts the story of his life to make his voice heard for social inclusion. His style of providing personal narratives, interviews and analysis, interspersed with aspects of his autobiography, vividly and forcefully brings out the issues at stake and promotes the objective to inspire empathy. Although the contexts may be different, the 168-page book clearly echoes the lyric of Bunny Wailer's song 'who feels it, knows it'. The book is recommended for every serious student of political economy and every policy maker who seeks to practically demonstrate a concern for persons with disabilities, and desires far-reaching social policies that will promote social inclusion.

The organisation of the book is apt. It gradually introduces the reader to key debates that provide the context for a political economy of disability. It starts with social democracy, progresses through neoliberalism, and ends with the third way. It touches on the impact globalisation has on political economy and zeroes in on the practical implications for persons with disabilities. The uniqueness of the book lies in considering what is intended by social policies, especially in the thinking of those wielding political power and how these policies are 'felt by' those at whom they are targeted: Persons with disabilities. In short, society is not doing much, and the effects of policies are not far-reaching enough, to guarantee social inclusion. The author demonstrates these points using practical examples (mostly his own experiences) in the fields of education, employment and access to social services.

The book is divided into ten chapters. With the exception of the introduction and the conclusion, each chapter begins with a quote that sets the tone for what ensues. This is a distinctive literary style. Gibilisco discusses each of the three political traditions (social democracy, neoliberalism and third way) in an orderly and consistent manner, so as to allow for the easy comparison of views under each sub-heading. He concludes with a synthesis of the key issues discussed in the book.

Though disability is generally addressed, the book's emphasis is on severe disabilities – such as the author is experiencing. He touches on the (bio)medical model and the social model of disability. Interestingly, he identifies and explains the rightful place of each of these models which should be appreciated by those who make key policy decisions, so as to help promote social inclusion, which also brings out a balanced perspective for students in the area of disability. The author contends

that medical attention is important, but that this should not be emphasised over and above the social concerns of disability.

Gibilisco traces the history of social democracy with developments in Australia as the primary focus, touching on the differences between social democracy and democratic socialism and their associated changes in meaning over time. He moves on to neoliberalism and issues pertaining to meritocracy, among others, before discussing the ‘third way’ in an attempt at amalgamating the positive aspects of the two earlier political traditions. He interlaces his analysis with relevant developments and issues in especially Europe and the United States. The upsurge of globalisation and its implications for persons with disabilities is also discussed. So, the book definitely gives impetus to the adage, ‘think globally, but act locally’. The author demonstrates how globalisation impacts persons with disabilities especially in the areas of employment, education and social services.

The author further advances convincing reasons why governments should support persons with disabilities, and provides evidence to dispel negative views/myths about employing such individuals. He also addresses the relevance of legislation and judicial precedents, and touches on decisions with respect to pension funds that are inimical to persons with disabilities – especially those in the pursuit of higher education. Ironically, higher education is one area which could boost the self-esteem of many persons with disabilities. Further, he clearly illustrates that the digital/technological age, which could have aided the education of those with disabilities, also comes with challenges among which are the high costs *vis-à-vis* their meager pension support. His desire for the development of policies that seek to appropriately meet needs arising from progressive disability is clearly evident in this book.

The book is filled with references, critical analysis, discussions and the views of great academics and authors such as Frank Stilwell, Macintyre, Stretton, Botsman, Anthony Giddens, John Lloyd, Lionel Orchard, Latham, Chris Pierson, Charles Leadbeater, Don Parsons and Geoff Gallop. For example, on pages 25–26 he cites authors like Milton Friedman and Adam Smith in his discourse on neoliberalism. He presents an interesting interpretation of Smith’s views in the book, *Wealth of nations* which contrasts with the mainstream interpretation of Smith as an early advocate of neoliberalism. Gibilisco contends that Smith believed in the wellbeing of individual persons and of society. The critique, contrasting views and expatiating on other publications, undeniably places the book on an appropriate intellectual pedestal, regardless of its intent to promote the agenda of empathy.

Following the empathetic nature of this masterpiece, Gibilisco (who suffers from Friedreich’s Ataxia) also presents views from others like him, who have ‘been in the trenches’ and yet have beaten the odds to make an impact. Marta Russell (an American disability author and activist) who was disabled from birth, is an example, so is Professor Yvonne Singer, who has cerebral palsy. The book is therefore definitely a source of motivation for persons with disabilities who, as a result of social exclusion and other related challenges, are on the verge of giving up.

This book is a must-read for social workers, since it glaringly presents the lack of empathy on the part of some who work with persons with disabilities. Even though

the author stresses the importance of personal support workers, it is unfortunate that such people are undervalued by much of humanity. Financial and logistical support for them is at times sacrificed on the altar of political expediency in certain developing countries. This is akin to the scenario being painted here, where Gibilisco correctly questions the rationale behind the preparedness of politicians to 'waste' public resources while constantly indicating that there are no funds to fund disability social services. He contends that such services are needed to provide the essentials for the disabled.

He also talks about the importance of a synergistic relationship between the support worker and the persons with a disability, highlighting how institutions such as Disability Services (set up to advance the cause of PWDs) themselves restrained his attempts to help shape the future of public policy. On this score, however, it will be expedient to hear the story of agencies or organisations such as Disability Services, in order to arrive at an informed opinion on the political economy and on disability issues in the 21st century.

The book contains relevant discussions on disability and contemporary issues arising from the views of political leaders such as Gordon Brown, Barack Obama, Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and Kevin Rudd. It brings out the need for persons with disabilities to be placed in relevant positions within policy circles, in order to be able to advocate for issues affecting their welfare. The challenge is who to put there, knowing that there are various types of disability and varying degrees of disability. Intriguingly, Gibilisco demonstrates that paradoxically, persons with disabilities who have had a major say in policy have not amply demonstrated their preparedness to advocate policies favouring the disabled.

In chapter 9, the book touches on a very important contemporary subject, which is introduced with an appropriate quotation: '...what we think we know and what is really so can be very different things' (Snow in Gibilisco, 2010, p. 118). What do political authorities propagate and what do persons with disabilities really feel? This is certainly a pertinent issue. Thomas (2012), for instance, reports on research conducted in a school environment where parents and staff had different perspectives on health and safety from that of the students. There is indeed a current paradigm shift in built environment research which attempts to focus on the user in terms of usability, rather than the perspectives of professionals or those in power to call the shots with respect to the design and resources needed for developing the built environment (Lindahl *et al.*, 2012). Persons with disabilities understand their condition better than others do, and better appreciate the implications of social policies than most decision makers do.

The way forward is action that will enable those with disabilities to push the agenda of inclusion, to the point of requiring legislation or reforming social policy. Affirmative action for equal opportunity must be on the agenda of political economy, both locally and globally.

Overall, this book succeeds in its mission. Using himself and the examples of other persons with disabilities who have attained great academic feats, Gibilisco illustrates that if the issue of social inclusion is properly addressed in policy at a

Reviewed by Eric Paul Tudzi

local and an international level, society can also benefit from the different abilities of persons with disabilities. I think the intention of the author to promote empathy has been achieved.

About the reviewer

Eric Paul Tudzi is a lecturer in the Department of Land Economy, College of Architecture and Planning, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology (KNUST), Kumasi – Ghana. He can be contacted at erictudzi@yahoo.com

References

- Lindahl, G., Hansen, G. and Alexander, K. (2012). ‘The usability of facilities: Experiences and effects’, in Alexander, K. and Price, I. (eds.). *Managing organizational ecologies: Space, management and organization*, Routledge, New York, pp. 105–116.
- Thomas, J. (2012). ‘Creating effective learning environments’, in Alexander, K. and Price, I. (eds.). *Managing organizational ecologies: Space, management and organization*, Routledge, New York, pp. 212–221.