Disability and Political Theory

Although disability scholarship has been robust in history, philosophy, English, and sociology for decades, political theory and political science more generally have been slow to catch up. This groundbreaking volume presents the first full-length book on political theory approaches to disability issues. Barbara Arneil and Nancy J. Hirschmann bring together some of the leading scholars in political theory to provide a historical analysis of disability through the works of canonical figures, ranging from Hobbes and Locke to Kant, Rawls, and Arendt, as well as an analysis of disability in contemporary political theory, examining key concepts such as freedom, power and justice. *Disability and Political Theory* introduces a new disciplinary framework to disability studies, and provides a comprehensive introduction to a new topic of political theory.

Barbara Arneil is Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia and the author of *John Locke and America* (1996), *Feminism and Politics* (1999), *Diverse Communities: The Problem with Social Capital* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), and a co-edited anthology entitled *Sexual Justice/Cultural Justice* (2006). Scholarly recognition includes the Harrison Prize (best article published in *Political Studies*), the Rockefeller Fellowship in Bellagio, C. B. MacPherson Prize (shortlist), and Killam Research and Teaching Prizes.

Nancy J. Hirschmann is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and has published many books and articles in feminist theory and disability theory, including *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (2003), *Gender, Class and Freedom in Modern Political Theory* (2008), and *Civil Disabilities: Citizenship, Membership, and Belonging* (2015), co-edited with Beth Linker. She has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Institute for Advanced Study.

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For Carter McGuigan and Jasbir Uppal, two former students who have taught me so much about disability, both in practice and theory. BA

In memory of Nancy Hartsock and Dick Flathman, with gratitude and love. NJH

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Foreword

Deborah Stone

When I was growing up in the 1950s, I knew disability as a boy with cerebral palsy. Robbie was in a wheelchair, very disabled, able to talk but in a way that took some getting used to, like a thick foreign accent. His father worked at some kind of professional engineering job and, as far I could tell, spent all his free time carrying Robbie and designing what we'd now call adaptive devices so Robbie could feed himself and even type. His mother spent all her time tending Robbie and teaching him in a way we'd now call home schooling. She had to do that, she told us neighborhood kids, because no school would accept Robbie. Not public school, not private school.

I could see and feel how isolated Robbie was. He couldn't play with kids unless the kids decided to go to his house to play with him. He couldn't even call us to invite us over unless his mother dialed and held the phone for him. I could see and feel how his mother's life had been hijacked by the need to provide for Robbie what society provided for the rest of us and we took for granted. I understood the family's isolation too, because I caught how uncomfortable adults were around them and how our parents avoided them, while subtly praising us kids for spending time with Robbie. I knew that we were somehow letting them off the hook. I sensed the injustice of Robbie's exclusion from school. And yet, in spite of all that I saw and felt, disability wasn't something political for me. It was just a tragic birth accident, bad luck for Robbie and his family, their burden to bear.

When Barbara Arneil and Nancy Hirschman first told me about a book on disability and political theory, I thought to myself, this is one of those topics so obvious, so staring us in the face, how can it possibly be that political science has virtually ignored it? Then I remembered Robbie and my total obliviousness to disability as a political issue. It was the 1950s, the time of the Cold War, and politics, I gleaned, was about elections and wars, not personal troubles. Only now, looking back through the lens of disability rights and my own scholarship, can I see the cultural obliviousness we all shared.

It wasn't until halfway through graduate school, while I was researching German national health insurance for my dissertation, that I first noticed disability as a policy category. Something in the German healthcare cost figures jumped out at me: half of all health insurance expenditures went to pay wage replacement for people unable to work because of illness or disability. Doctors, in addition to treating their patients, were the gatekeepers to this vast economic redistribution system. They held the power to certify patients as unable to work, or in the colorful phrasing German exudes, doctors "write people sick." This was the early 1970s, when the US was going through one of its periodic spasms over the welfare rolls. It dawned on me that German doctors were presiding over a cash welfare system as vast as the American one, and I thought, how strange that physicians, not social workers, were empowered as its arbiters.

Eventually, I wrote a book to figure out that puzzle for myself (Stone 1984). Because *The Disabled State* was the book on which my tenure case hinged, I was haunted by departmental ghosts whispering, "What's political about disability? Where's the political science in it?" There was good evidence for the existence of my ghosts, beyond the usual tenure neuroses. Several years earlier, I had gone on the academic job market with a dissertation on health insurance. After every job talk I was asked, "What's political about medical care? Why would a political scientist study it?" Thankfully, with the Reagan purge of the disability rolls in the air and the winds of the disability rights movement at my back, disability-as-political was an easy case to make.

Alright, disability as a *policy* issue now seems obvious, but what about as an issue for *political theory*? I had been teaching John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* for many years before I noticed the passage that could exclude people with disabilities from the right to liberty. Mill famously put forth the guiding tenet of classical liberalism and, arguably, contemporary American libertarianism: government is never justified in interfering with individual liberty except to prevent harm to others. Then he went on: "It is hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children and very young persons… *Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others* must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury." That all seemed pretty natural and unremarkable to me, especially in light of Mill's subsequent exception for "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered of nonage" (Mill 1974 [1859]: 69). As a child of the civil rights era, race was the exclusion that grabbed my attention.

I don't know whether Mill was thinking of people with disabilities when he mentioned the need for care, but in the context of my newfound disability-rights consciousness, those words conjured up Robbie and people like him. And in the context of my post-1970s feminist consciousness, those words conjured up Robbie's mother and people like her. In no sense did disabled people and their caregivers, whether unpaid relatives or poorly paid wage workers, enjoy the freedom to set their own life goals and pursue them, to live the good life as the giants of political theory imagined the ends of government. While I and my siblings and friends were worrying about where we'd like to go to college and what we'd like to do with our lives, Robbie lived in perpetual dread of the life plan he saw as his fate: when his parents were no longer able to care for him, he'd be placed in an institution.

As the authors in this book show, political theorists have shunted disabled people aside with a scarcely an intellectual hiccough, the same way society once packed them off to warehouses where they wouldn't bother anyone's glorious, if deluded, sense of autonomy. There have been many critical victories in the disability rights movement, and surely this book is another one. These authors are asking all the right questions and unmasking ableist assumptions left and right. No longer will political theorists be able to consider the big questions of citizenship, justice, equality, and freedom without caring about and for people with disabilities.

Still, our work isn't done. As feminists have long argued, and these authors as well, the real victory will come when "people who still need taking care of" aren't treated as a separate category, different from everybody else. We all need help, and we need it all the time, not only when we are young, elderly, or disabled by injury and illness. That's what's so wrong with the movement idea that the world is divided into people with disabilities and the "temporarily able-bodied." We live constantly in webs of helping relationships, some people more than others, but no one lives without being helped, all the time, in everything we do. Every time you walk in a pair of shoes, read a book, use a computer, ask a friend for advice, drive a car, borrow a tool, make hot oatmeal for breakfast, send a text, use your bank account, or vote in an election, you are being enabled by the thousands of people who made such activities possible for you, some of them no longer living, some of them living on the other side of the planet, some of them people you might not dream of inviting to your home. They're all helping you and you couldn't live your life without them, any more than Robbie could live his without his parents' help.

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This is the continuing challenge for political theory, politics, and public policy. We need to go beyond understanding "the universality of dependence," as this book does so compellingly, to acknowledging that mutual care and help are the air and water of our human existence.

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