

Chapter 2

The Politics of Mobility

Language activates oppressions. Therefore, there is power in recognizing of how words limit and restrict individual and social capacity. Understanding the nature of freedom and choice is important. Higher education is moving through a period of deep economic cuts. If early decisions are made about enabling online and offline architecture for a multiplicity of users, then money is saved. Universal design is (much) cheaper than retrofitting if there is a recognition of impairment and diverse users at the start of the planning process. Such decisions also widen the scale and scope of students who can enrol in courses. However—particularly when mapping the analogue inadequacies of rooms, buildings and campuses as displayed in the last chapter—it is clear that retrofitting is necessary and important, even though it is inefficient.

These strategies to create change are not based around disability ‘politics’ but the necessity for disability policy. This is not only a question of rights.¹ There are seeping structural problems. Our goal must be to address what Michael Oliver described as, “the institutional discrimination that is faced in the disabling society.”² Much of our educational and working lives are based around movement. Transportation systems shift our bodies through cities, regions and nations. Communication systems move ideas and contacts through space. Popular cultural platforms allow us to take music wherever we go. But attendant with this mobile connectivity—moving through space and time—is mobile failure. The threat of terrorism makes it more difficult to move around streets, transportation systems and educational institutions.

¹ The question of rights is an important one. As Diana LaRocco and Danielle Wilken realized, “the challenges faced by postsecondary institutions in supporting students with disabilities cover a broad range of issues, among them helping students and faculty to understand students’ legal rights and providing accommodations and specialized services that cover a multitude of disability related challenges that students might face,” from “Universal design for learning: university faculty stages of concerns and levels of use,” *Current Issues in Education*, Vol. 16, No. 1, March 2013, p. 1.

² Oliver (2009).

It is not surprising that in the last 10 years, Mobility Studies—an interdisciplinary paradigm derived from sociology, cultural studies, cultural geography, media studies and internet studies—has increased its profile. John Urry is particularly associated with this area of study. The Centre for Mobilities Research, (CeMoRe) is part of Lancaster University in the United Kingdom.³ They hold conferences⁴ and run a journal.⁵ This level of interest provides an entrée into a key truth of our time: mobility is a new marker of class and power. Those who hold power have the choice to move. Those who lack power are immobile. Powerful companies, corporations and individuals are able to move through space and gain profit from exploiting an immobile labour force. Once these immobile workers with few choices are exploited, the goods and services they produce at a low cost can then be exported around the world. Corporation can move. Money moves. Poor workers cannot.

Mobility is also popular. Most of the technological platforms that have become part of popular culture, such as cars, mobile phones or ipods, exist at a node or point where humans encounter technology in their daily lives. Most often these products affirm individuality and the right of the individual to consume without consequences or limits.

A new way to think about inequality is mobility or immobility. The displacement of traditional working class communities to the edges of cities was enacted at a time when effective public transport was available to carry employees to a workplace. These local services have declined and public transportation provisions reduced. Men and women living in these areas were and are disconnected from education, health, leisure and employment services. They are trapped. Generational disadvantages result. Living in a poor area, which is difficult to leave, has consequences for health. Finding healthy food is difficult. There are few places to exercise. These structural challenges are exacerbated in areas of poor weather, where the availability of high quality and affordable aerobic centres are required to assist health and wellbeing. Instead, in poor areas, there is little access to gyms or health care, but junk food is easy to find. Such a lack of enabling provisions, institutions, services and assistance impacts on all citizens, but are particularly serious for men and women with impairments.

Recognizing this dripping decline in public health and transportation, new models and theories of inequality are emerging after the Global Financial Crisis. The excesses of finance capitalism shredded particular economies and sectors.⁶

³ Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/centres/cemore/>.

⁴ “Events,” Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/centres/cemore/event>.

⁵ “Publications,” Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/centres/cemore/journals.html>.

⁶ Andrew Deaton described this inequality in stark terms. He stated, “financial services have played an important role in financing innovation throughout the economy, and the efficient allocation of capital is one of the most valuable tasks in a market economy. But there is widespread

Angus Deaton, in *The Great Escape: health, wealth and the origins of inequality*, argued that “inequality is often a consequence of progress.”⁷ This interpretative knight’s move acknowledges that the world is a healthier place than 50 years ago, but social injustices have increased. While economic growth is a strategy to reduce poverty, that growth is stagnating at the same time as—particularly in the United States—inequality is increasing.⁸

The ideology of progress since the industrial revolution has fashioned two lies: (1) economic improvement inevitably leads to social improvement and, (2) what benefits one group (via ‘trickle down economics’) benefits all. The meritocratic illusion that ‘everyone’ has access and opportunity is corrosive in education. The assumption that everyone has a car and is able to walk from it to schools, universities, shops and a workplace means that immobility is often a structured characteristic within most buildings, cities and institutions. There is attention on individuals and their cars (and car parks) rather than the structures that may make a car redundant. Such assumptions dove-tail into the policies that individualize disability, based on ideologies of victimhood, suffering and sympathy. This means, instead of enabling doors, buildings, car parks and interfaces, the attention is on individual ‘modifications’ and ‘accommodations.’ This compounding of individualized ideologies of disadvantage means that there is rarely a recognition, consciousness and imperative to act on what Barnes and Mercer confirmed: “disabled people are particularly under-represented in the professions and management.”⁹ This means that the men and women making decisions and maintaining budget responsibilities have no personal experience with discrimination and injustice. Obviously personal experience is not the only determinant of social change in the public and private sector. Experience and expertise are different. However with so few men and women with impairments in universities, there is no power bloc or agitating community lobbying for change. Therefore, managerial blind spots are perpetuated. Assumptions like this are not sustainable and crush the development of social justice strategies for those with different mobility needs.

(Footnote 6 continued)

suspicion that some highly profitable financial activities are of little benefit to the population as a whole, and may even threaten the stability of the financial system—what investor and businessman Warren Buffett has called financial weapons of mass destruction. If so, the very high payments that come with them are both unjust and inefficient. The heavy recruitment of the best minds into financial engineering is a loss to the rest of the economy, likely reducing innovation and growth elsewhere. What is much less controversial is that the implicitly guarantee that the government would bail out the largest and most highly interconnected institutions led to excessive risk taking that was highly rewarded, even though it led to collapse and to misery for the millions who lost their jobs, faced reductions in incomes, or were left with debts that they could not hope to repay. That people playing with their own and their clients’ money should get rich is one thing; that they should do so with public money is quite another. If these activities cause widespread social harm, the situation is intolerable,” from Deaton (2013).

⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

⁸ Ibid., p. 327.

⁹ Barnes and Mercer (2003).

Mobility matters to discussions of impairments and disability because, as Hensley shows,¹⁰ driving is linked with a suite of ideologies like freedom, speed and independence. Freedom of movement overlays other freedoms in the configuration of citizenship. One of the signs of injustice is a lack of a freedom of movement.¹¹ While some groups gain from automobility, others do not. Therefore, any consideration of impairment, disability, ability, mobility and immobility, necessitates recognizing and confronting assumptions about how and why people move. Whenever there is a discussion about a decline in public services, it impacts on those with the fewest choices and the least ability to move through space.

Considering mobility and immobility, how does an institution of higher education become an online and offline place and space that welcomes, employs and enrolls citizens, academics, administrators and students in a way that is accessible and equitable, proactive rather than reactive, and deploying the principles of universal design rather than retrofitting the structural detritus from more unjust times? This imperative extends beyond legal compliance, a Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP), or a 5 year scoping document.¹² In the Australian case, public and private enterprises engage with and extend the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020¹³ and Disability Care Australia.¹⁴ In the United States, there is a necessity to work with the Americans with Disabilities Act.¹⁵ In the UK, it is the Disability Discrimination Act.¹⁶ Yet such national policies and guidelines tend to be reactive rather than proactive and prescient. The aim of this Enabling Universities project—of which this short book is a part—is to move beyond the baseline of a legal checklist and activate initiatives from the social model of disability, moving towards the universal model and universal design. The start of our discussion should begin with honesty, consciousness, openness, accessibility, dynamism and reflection. If we commence with discrimination and its consequences, then disability remains ‘a problem’ to be solved. Therefore, a compassionate conversation should explore and promote enabling structures, rather than focus on an individual with a disability suffering through discrimination, bullying, poverty and a cap on their expectations and aspirations. By monitoring structures and not individuals and empowerment rather than discrimination, it is not necessary for a man or woman with an impairment to ‘declare’ a disability for a socially just, respectful and adaptable workplace, leisure facility or educational institution to emerge.

¹⁰ Hensley (2010).

¹¹ An obvious example of this maxim is the loss of freedom of movement by Australian indigenous peoples through legislation in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Refer to Chesterman and Galligan (1997).

¹² For example, the *Murdoch University DAIP Report*, 2011, http://our.murdoch.edu.au/Student-life/_document/Equity/MUR_DAIP_report_july2011-web.pdf.

¹³ *National Disability Strategy*, 2010–2012, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy>.

¹⁴ Disability Care Australia, 2013, <http://www.disabilitycareaustralia.gov.au/>.

¹⁵ Americans with disabilities Act, <http://www.ada.gov/>.

¹⁶ Disability Discrimination Act, <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/the-disability-discrimination-act-dda>.

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