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Research Paper

Rethinking disability: Lessons from the past, questions for the future. Contributions and limits of the social model, the sociology of science and technology, and the ethics of care



Repenser le handicap : leçons du passé, questions pour l'avenir. Apports et limites du modèle social, de la sociologie des sciences et des techniques, de l'éthique du care

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze one evolution in disability research over the past 30 years: the shift from an individual to a social approach to disability. While most disability research has currently “socialized” disability or at the least situates disabled people within a social context, not all do so in the same way nor based on the same assumptions. They lead to different concepts of the person and society and different concepts of disability and normalcy. I analyze this evolution by looking at three approaches to disability: the social model, the approach taken in the sociology of science and technology, and the ethics of care. I show how each, by renewing the analysis of disability, has brought about changes for disabled people

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and transformed ways of “living together” and “making society”. I also show the limits of these approaches and propose lines of thought for the continuation of our research, notably around the question of autonomy. I propose that we re-think autonomy from the standpoint of the notion of “recalcitrance”.

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R É S U M É

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Dans cet article, j'analyse l'une des évolutions des recherches sur le handicap depuis 30 ans : le passage d'une approche individuelle à une approche sociale du handicap. Si actuellement, la majorité des recherches sur le handicap ont « socialisé » le handicap, ou du moins, situent la personne handicapée dans un contexte social, toutes ne le font pas de la même manière, ni à partir des mêmes présupposés. Elles aboutissent à des conceptions différentes de la personne et de la société, à des conceptions différentes du handicap et de la normalité. J'analyse cette évolution en m'intéressant à trois approches du handicap : le modèle social, l'approche de la sociologie des sciences et des techniques, l'éthique du care. Je montre la manière dont chacune, en renouvelant l'analyse du handicap, a été porteuse de transformations pour les personnes handicapées et d'une transformation des formes du « vivre ensemble », de « faire société ». Je montre également les limites de ces approches et propose des pistes de réflexion pour la suite de nos recherches, notamment autour de la question de l'autonomie. Je propose de repenser celle-ci à partir de la notion de « récalcitrance ».

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Since the 1970s, disability research has grown considerably in the various social sciences. An entire field of research was formed (Davis, 2013; Shakespeare, 2015; Watson, Roulstone, & Thomas, 2012), either as disability studies, notably in Anglo-Saxon countries, or in the form of an interest in disability within certain established disciplines (sociology of health, sociology of science and technology, history of social movements, etc.). While this field of research has remained diverse and heterogeneous in terms of issues, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, etc., it is also built around a shared conceptual evolution: the shift from an individual to a social approach to disability. Initially defended by Anglo-Saxon movements of disabled people (in different forms ranging from the English version centered around oppression processes to the American version centered around rights), this social approach to disability has now become the subject of consensus.

In this article,¹ I examine this evolution by analyzing the contributions and limits of three approaches: the social model (section 1), the sociology of science and technology (section 2), and the ethics of care (section 3). Each of these approaches has its own vocabulary in connection with its theories on disability. In my analysis, I will use the vocabulary specific to each approach and explain it because it is part of the proposed analysis and how it defines the reality of disability. These three approaches have “socialized” disability and by so doing have redefined the notion of disability; however, they have not done so in the same way nor based on the same assumptions. We can therefore question what this “socialization” of disability means and what, in disability, has been socialized. In what follows, I explore how each of these approaches have “socialized” disability, analyzing two aspects. First, I examine how, in redefining disability, each model articulates the natural difference and

¹ This article is based on my keynote speech at the 2015 Alter Conference in Paris (July 3, 2015).

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