

Book Review

Working towards Equity: Disability Rights Activism and Employment in Late Twentieth-Century Canada. By Dustin Galer. University of Toronto Press, 2018. 309 pages. ISBN 9781487501310

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Introduction

Dustin Galer's *Working towards Equity: Disability Rights Activism and Employment in Late Twentieth-Century Canada* is an ambitious scholarly project that explores the complex relationship between disability identity, activism and work in the form of a comprehensive historiography. Galer successfully blends archival records, governmental documents, media sources and participant interviews to create a uniquely reflective and factually detailed narrative describing the central role of paid employment in the development of the individual and collective identities of peoples with disabilities. A balanced exploration of both personal stories and narratives from community organizations, the book encourages the reader to adopt a more nuanced perspective of disability activism to highlight the "existence of multiple, overlapping movements" within disability rights – a fitting metaphor when understanding the complicated nature of disability in and of itself (Galer, 2018, p. 9).

A discussion on the themes and structure of *Working towards Equity*

The book is divided into eight themes beginning with a rich discussion on the critical role of employment in the development of a sense of self for individuals with disabilities. Quotes from interview participants reveal their motivations and frustrations in the pursuit of paid work and how they construct an identity outside of the disability movement. Following this discussion, Galer delves into the efforts of parents of children with disabilities to advocate on their behalf by challenging the status quo, combatting institutionalization, and fighting for greater inclusion for their children in the community in post-war Canada. In moving away from formalized institutionalization, Galer describes the medicalization of the rehabilitation industry and its central role in generating employment through the provision of services to the disability community. Galer also outlines the opposition to the overwhelming control of professional rehabilitation networks in the creation and delivery of supports and the growing consumer-led disability rights movement through the formation of the Coalition on Employment Equity for Persons with Disabilities (CEEPD). The 1970s and 1980s saw the development of sheltered workshops as a form of "workplace therapy", and Galer examines how the prejudicial attitudes of employers were key barriers to workforce integration. The final chapters investigate some of the challenges faced by the disability movement in the early twenty-first century, including the development of international and federal "special disability offices" and the shift of activism into the political sphere, especially given the turbulent relationship disability rights activists and union leaders

shared in the wake of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The book concludes with a look at the persistence of stigma, poverty, and low employment numbers in the lives of individuals with disabilities, highlighting the need to examine the past in order to meaningfully progress towards the future for disability rights activism.

One of the book's most notable strengths is its inclusion of a diverse number of dynamic, relevant images that provide the reader with a visual glimpse of some of the important actors, moments, and messages from each time period. The images and their detailed captions are not only a meaningful tribute to key players in disability activism, but they also increase the accessibility of the text through contextualizing the information of each chapter. This was particularly useful in chapter six when Galer juxtaposes employer attitudes with archival images of various employer handbooks and awareness campaigns. This offers an effective material view into the discursive evolution in societal approaches to individuals with disabilities.

Canada or Toronto? An examination of the book's context

This book is a major achievement in the fields of labour, law, and disability – addressing a growing interest and blatant gap in the scholarly literature regarding the interconnections of disability and employment (Ellis, 2019; Malhotra, 2018). *Working towards Equity* is the first exhaustive account of Ontario's, or - more specifically - Toronto's labour history, with disability rights as the central site for analysis (Ellis, 2019; Galer, 2018; Malhotra, 2018). While the book does reference national coalitions and conferences such as the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Galer's implied coverage of the larger Canadian context is perhaps too zealous an assertion. Participants were located exclusively in the Greater Toronto Area, and Galer acknowledges the study's "particular emphasis in the province of Ontario and city of Toronto" which he translates to the "national story" of disability rights activism in Canada (p. 7). However, this generalization demonstrates a lack of recognition of the specificity of the Ontario and urban Toronto settings. Galer does not address the potential differences that arise in the distinct settings of rural/suburban communities and in other provinces. Indeed, disability activism in Yellowknife, Timmins, or even Toronto's neighbouring region of Halton all likely face vastly different barriers when compared to activism in downtown Toronto. This contextual generalization is a contradiction and injustice to the otherwise meaningful attention Galer pays to heterogeneity and acknowledgement of difference throughout the text.

Understanding the "Why": A case for interrogating neoliberalism and independence in the text

Galer makes a conscious effort to retain a practicality in the text with his grounded epistemological focus on tangible sources of data, such as documentation and disability advocacy campaigns. However, the text could benefit from a deeper exploration of the political ideologies behind the push for economic integration. The book opens with a stark and simple sentence that reads: "The lived experience of disability in Canada during the late twentieth century revolved around work" (p. 3). This statement seems to leave little space for dialogue – for instance, *why* is work portrayed as the premier avenue to full citizenship? What political and social systems produce the idea that employment is necessary for inclusion? While Galer makes brief allusions to the socio-political conditions of the

state, he misses an important opportunity to speak to the parallel emergence of neoliberalism that was concurrently developing in the 1970s (Harvey, 2007). In an era of privatization and fiscal austerity, neoliberal directives of total independence and capital-based productivity became important tools in justifying the alleviation of state responsibility through the production of self-sustaining citizens and, consequently, cutbacks to governmental welfare provisioning (Abramovitz, 2010; Harvey, 2007; Rudman, 2006). These cultural imperatives are evident in the narratives of participants and their expressed sense of responsibility for attaining employment as core to their constructed identities. However, absent is the connection of these personal experiences to the overarching cultural and political discursive landscape that would add an additional dimension to Galer's argument.

Expanding on discussions of neoliberalism within the text, Galer falls into the trap of assuming a unitary understanding of independence that is somewhat reflective of neoliberal individualism. Independence within the study is equated to self-reliance when navigating social and employment spheres. These conceptualizations of independence are very limited and often centre on one's ability to conduct activities of daily living without major assistance (Baars, 2000; Sherwin & Winsby, 2011). While Galer does not actively promote this understanding of independence, he also does not question this restrictive definition or explore alternative understandings of autonomy that embrace the interdependency of the human condition (Boyle, 2008; Sherwin & Winsby, 2011). Offering a clear definition of independence - and integrating participant voices in the development of that definition - would assist the reader in thinking beyond traditional ideas of independence to adopt a definition of autonomy that is more reflective of the realities of individuals with disabilities.

The missing voices of individuals with intellectual disabilities: Critiquing Galer's analysis of sheltered workshops

One segment of the book I found troubling was chapter five which described the inception and progression of the now abolished sheltered workshop system. While Galer successfully integrates the experiences of individuals with sensory and physical disabilities within this chapter, explicitly absent are the voices of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Despite Galer (2018) himself stating that by the late 1970s "approximately 75 percent of workshops included or were exclusively devoted to serving people with intellectual disabilities", the chapter contains no quotes from participants with intellectual disabilities and offers little insight into their perspectives on the former sheltered workshop model (p. 115). Galer relied almost exclusively on historical documentation and external quotes in this portion of the book – accentuating the weakness of this chapter when compared to Galer's more expansive integration of participant quotes and narratives in other chapters of the book. It is clear that the study was limited by the study's sample profile which included only four individuals with learning disabilities (out of thirty participants). This is a significant misstep in the wake of the disproportional impact sheltered workshops had on persons with intellectual disabilities specifically.

Within the same chapter, Galer (2018) addresses the conflicting views of different disability advocates with respect to the sheltered workshop model. He speaks to the fear of the community's lack of existing resources in responding to the needs of individuals with disabilities and facilitating their social inclusion, while also outlining the "warehousing" nature of the sheltered workshop system and its representation of "oppressive regimes of segregation" (p. 117). Furthermore, Galer directly

condemns the poverty wages and stipends previously paid by now-closed sheltered workshops and calls for egalitarian employment that more meaningfully reflects the vigorous capacities of individuals with disabilities. While I appreciate and agree with much of Galer's analysis within this chapter, I feel that he fails to acknowledge that many workers with disabilities derived meaning and a sense of purpose from the sheltered workshop environment. As a former support staff who worked in sheltered work environments and supported employment within the developmental service sector for over ten years, I witnessed first-hand how clients viewed their role as a paramount aspect of their identity – they took pride in their work and looked to their peers at the workshop for social support and engagement, fostering a familial sense of community that combated the segregation of institutionalization. While the closure of sheltered workshops was seen as a victory in light of Galer's concern for more equitable employment, it was a considerable loss for some former employees. As discussed by Galer in the first chapter of this book, employment was deemed to be an important aspect of identity formation. The absence of this viewpoint within the context of the discussion of the sheltered workshop was, as mentioned, likely a consequence of the small cohort of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the study's sample.

Conclusion

Working towards Equity is a triumph for disability studies and labour history in Canada, providing a scholarly yet accessible account of the complex evolution of disability rights in relation to employment. Galer's respect for the fluid and complex nature of the disability rights movement reveals his sophisticated understanding of disability. His inclusion of a number of images, in addition to concrete data sources, produces a pragmatic piece of literature that can be enjoyed by both academics and activists alike. A more thorough investigation into the role of neoliberalism in this time period, and an exploration of independence as a neoliberal cultural imperative, would assist the reader in achieving greater insight into labour and market-based ideas of citizenship and their impact on the conceptualizations of self. Galer's book offers a personal, political and historical analysis of the tremendous struggles for workplace inclusion and highlights the victories of individuals with disabilities in attaining meaningful work in Ontario. *Working towards Equity* is a useful resource for policymakers, scholars, and activists who are eager to learn from the past and work towards a more just and equitable future for the disability community.

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