

Peter Normann Waage:

On wheels in Oslo

Did you know that almost 20 percent of the Norwegian population is systematically discriminated?

There are women everywhere. Ethnic minorities are also quite visible in the streets. Discrimination against those groups is openly disussed. They are visible. That is not in the same degree the case with the disabled, in spite of the fact that they make up more than ten percent of the population in Oslo. The reason is shamefully simple: The public space is almost closed to them. Yes, there are busses, which are accessible, but nobody knows when one of them will turn up. Neither do you know on which stops you can get off. The same is true for the metro. The authorities have not bothered to put up signs on the proper stations, or make maps with this information. When the Norwegian Handicap Organisation last autumn made a survey of 450 restaurants, cafés and bars, they found that only a little more than 30 were accessible. The same organisation told me that 75 percent of all the shops have steps leading to their entrances. How many legs do you need to be considered a human being?

I didn't think too much of this kind of discrimination either, until I translated Ruben Gallego's book *White on Black*, and later had the pleasure of being one of his hosts when the handicapped author visited Oslo last week. Due to the fact that the discrimination has a rude economical aspect, his stay in Oslo could not have been arranged without support from 'The Foundation Free Speech'. But it was impossible for him to give his lecture on their premises. They are not accessible — so far. The chairman has, however, told me that this situation will not last very long. The absurdly tall kerbstone outside the entrance of the SAS Hotel, where he stayed during his visit, will be removed too, the direction said. But I was promised the same two months before the visit. On Gallego's arrival I mentioned that the kerbstone was still there, and excuses and presents were produced. That was nice, but it is not nice that even hotel rooms adapted to people in wheel chairs are filled with details that make a proper use of the rooms impossible. What use can you have of a bath tube, unless you want to commit suicide?

When your eyes are opened to this part of the reality, you soon discover that most of the practical discrimination and isolation burns down to details: the lowering of sinks and switches, knobs to push, not switch knobs and so on. It is so easy to make everything right: let a person in a wheel chair assist the architect while planning the rooms. Sadly, it seems a lot harder to correct the city's public space. «It might be difficult to combine esthetical considerations with accessibility» was the answer given by the man responsible for transport and environment in the city, when he was confronted with The Handicap Organisation's criticism of the recent renovation of Oslo's main street. The pavement outside the old university is tilted on two places. But on the other side of the street the kerbstones are virginally tall all the way. And of course, it is obviously an esthetic value in seeing a man or a woman in wheel chair caught in the street — should he or she believe that the tilts are for them. They are not. They are for cars — which have far more rights than a handicapped has.

The discrimination is, however, after all not a question of tilts, lifts and adapted toilets. It is the gaze that defines and discriminates, as the researcher Lars Grue points out in his book *Disability is only a Word* (2004). The «ables» turn the disabled into an object, into a thing, receiver of pity and help. He quotes a handicapped, who writes about the real hinderance to moving freely around among people: the knowledge that your step into the public space «will cause gazes, glaring, condescension, compassion and hostility.»

This kind of objectification has a rude expression visible for everyone. There are three kinds of toilets, one for men, one for women and one for handicapped. In this way the handicapped are deprived of their sex. It is probably not done deliberately, it is just so very easy to think that «they» are «something else». But what is good for the handicapped is just as good for the rest of the people. Everybody might use a handicap toilet. And who says that the kerbstones have to be so tall? Why not make tilts everywhere?

During Gallego's visit to Oslo we once had to force a little step. Two men lifted the wheel chair, which weights abot 100 kilo. Gallego himself, who weighs about 40 kilo, looked at me and pronounced a sentence you should read very carefully: «Peter, would you kindly lift my body and carry me down.»

We all notice the useless body. The handicapped himself is most often the only one who sees the very «useful» human being. Only when we all see it, the discrimination will become past tense.

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