The myth of transition: contractualizing disability in the sheltered workshop

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This paper investigates notions of transition and independence, as well as the current circumstances that detain countless disabled people in employment endeavors that not only pay meager wages but also cement a lifelong servitude to the workshop. Sheltered workshops exist on the basis and replication of a structure that incarcerates disabled people within vocational-like settings. This paper begins a discussion of the social contract that occurs between the disabled person in the workshop. The workshop is no longer a place of societal liberation that affords the individual the opportunity to learn vocational skills, but rather it has become an institution that creates its own army of workers that will forever be subjected to a life in the workshop because of their disability status.

In the end, I was placed in a sheltered workshop. That thing drove me nuts. All we did all day was put nails in plastic cups. I didn’t understand why I was there, it wasn’t my choice. After one week, I ran away. (From Maroger, 2002)

In the above quote taken from Director Diane Maroger’s 2002 French documentary, Forbidden motherhood (Maternité interdite), there is a scene in which one of the main characters, Bertrand, goes to visit his place of employment when he was in high school. His reaction to revisiting the workshop brings about the quote above – a realization that the ‘work’ he was required to complete was not only useless but also not of his own choosing. He was positioned in the workshop against his will, leaving him with only one choice – flight from the institution that required simulated work activities. Bertrand’s reaction to the workshop was not my initial reaction. What took him a week to comprehend, took me years.

Coming to realize the system was flawed: my time in the workshop

In my senior year of high school as part of a community service class I took a placement at a local sheltered workshop. My initial reaction was one of amazement that there could be a place that would offer people of differing abilities the opportunity to

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hold a job. On any given day the tasks of the workshop could include anything from making candles and puzzles to completing contracted jobs from a local distributor who sold physical therapy equipment. In my freshman year of college I was hired as a staff member and continued working there for the following six years. Although my years working at the workshop were enjoyable because of all the people I interacted with on a daily basis, I soon learned the injustices of the workshop; the same ones Bertrand alluded to in the film. While I was paid a decent wage to supervise, all the disabled persons who completed the contract work were paid wages often little more than 30 USD for a month of work.

The local company who contracted with the workshop paid a few cents for each item produced. A portion of this was passed on to the person who completed the task while the rest of the money – as well as the thousands that came from the local county – were given to the non-disabled support staff. In this particular workshop impairment and diagnoses equated to lower wages and an even lower status.

During my time of employment at the workshop not one employee transitioned out into an independent, higher-paying job. Instead more ‘clients’ were brought in while the organization received more and more money from the county. The discourse of transition and job training was a myth in this workshop, perpetuated only to appeal to socially conscious donors at fundraisers over wine and cheese. Once a person was identified and labeled as worthy of workshop services, their fate was sealed; 30 hours a week producing products for wages that could never buy independence, let alone a night on the town of dinner and drinks.

Within this paper I will examine the ideological formulation of the sheltered workshop through modern representations in order to expose flaws and patterns of isolation. This project comes not only out of a knowledge that workshops are fundamentally corrupt institutions for vocational training, but also out of six years of daily contact at a workshop as my place of employment. Hopefully this endeavor will create a complex but convincing thesis on the basis and replication of the workshop as a location which houses disabled people in vocational-like settings.

The question might arise, why undertake this type of project? Although perhaps the complex motivations might still need to be unearthed from deep within my own subconscious, quite literally I wonder why I have yet to revisit the workshop that I once worked at for so long, but since my leaving almost five years ago I have no desire to return. What in the formulation of that particular workshop, and perhaps others more generally, does not invite participants to revisit once they have left? Generically, why can people placed within the workshop find it difficult to leave, but perhaps once transition occurs, any desire to revisit or reemerge within the same isolationist setting dissipates. My project is an attempt to theorize and hopefully begin to understand why sheltered workshops function in the ways that they do.

Creation of confinement: state-sponsored work

In *Madness and civilization*, Foucault (1998) explores an ideological basis for the foundation of state-sponsored work programs. He documents the establishment of
programs in France for those labeled as ‘mad’. These programs were aimed at providing those excluded from society an opportunity to produce material goods. These newly created work programs were dependant upon the workers involved; a contract between the two parties was created:

[T]he unemployed person was no longer driven away or punished; he was taken charge, at the expense of the nation but at the cost of his individual liberty. Between him and society, an implicit system of obligation was established: he had the right to be fed, but he must accept the physical and moral constraints of confinement. (Foucault, 1998, p. 48)

Foucault contends that these working institutions were created largely with the appreciation that they would be places of isolation and the charges of the institution were subject to the rules and conventions within. Using this analysis of state-sponsored work programs as a starting point to understand the contemporary sheltered workshop can perhaps provide the ability to theorize disabled people’s role as exploited laborers.

Employment options currently for people labeled with developmental disabilities are similar to the sentiment in Foucault’s depiction of confinement. All too often persons in the social service system are given ‘occupational’ choices that either consist of simulated work in a sheltered workshop, an enclave program, or they are assigned a job developer and job coach that calls in favors to restaurants and grocery stores for yet another placement of a person with ‘special needs’. Professionals in the employment arena for those with cognitive impairments are often not as concerned with the work and choice of the individual, but rather with lessening their caseloads. The sheltered workshop foundation emerges out of an ideal of work for all, regardless of meaning and purpose. However, the social service system all too often is filled with too many ‘clients’ and not enough skilled, educated and compensated ‘professionals’. Instead of affording people the opportunity to search out the employment sphere for a vocation of meaning and desire, people are placed at the whim of another who is considered an expert.

I remember my first chance to job develop for an individual in the workshop. The local ‘expert’ handed me a list of contacts to call to see if they had any positions available. When I asked if I should check to see if the individual whom I was finding the job for was interested in the list of positions, I was told that was ‘not our job’. Supposedly we were there not to allow preference or choice for the individual but rather place them in whatever position was available.

**Contractualizing disability: loss of freedom and choice**

Unfortunately disabled people with the label of a developmental disability are not given control over their vocational options. Based on perceived impairment and subsequent labeling, the new charges of the workshop are offered places of employment for an exchange of any sort of participation in determining their vocational futures. The individual is no longer allowed the opportunity to roam the streets and in turn is placed into a setting that is isolated. I contend that this exchange of freedom
(roaming the streets) for seclusion (placement) is not in the best interest of the individual, but rather the sole benefit is for the other members of the society in which the workshop is placed. As the charge of the workshop moves out of the community into the institution, the village is removed of the presence of the person and their disability status. In attempt to isolate all those deemed as ‘mad’, the movement to work programs and institutions not only isolates the mad in one location but also clears the rest of dominant society of madness itself. Within the sheltered workshop, developmentally disabled workers are housed in one location away from everyone else. Disability status has now been subject to a social contract. Its presence and any sort of visible signs are deemed difficult to integrate into society and in turn those labeled as disabled are forced to leave.

The formulation of the modern workshop then involves what I refer to as contractualizing disability. Essentially this refers to the social pact that is created with the disabled individual and the rest of the members of the community, once the place of isolation to house displaced persons is created. In exchange for shelter and ‘vocational/therapeutic’ training, offered and financed by the ruling body of the community, the individuals labeled as disabled are (un)voluntary taken as employees in the workshop and its institutional settings. Moreover, the exclusion of these people is not into some sort of hostile environment but rather a building on the outskirts of town where the inhabitants will receive meals and shelter in exchange for remaining there as a charge of the institution. The move that occurs when people are positioned into settings based on impairment status by a dominant society that deems that impairment is an undesirable aspect of the civilization results in this contractualizing disability.

As a side note, I recently spent a few days in Ireland at a Camphill Community, an international organization molded around the principals of Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Movement. The formulation of Camphill is a farm-like setting in which ‘students’ (young persons with some sort of impairment) live side by side with ‘co-workers’ (most often international volunteers who do not have an impairment and come to the community for a yearly volunteer commitment). The goal is create a living situation where the community can become almost entirely independent, by producing their own food, means of economic support and social life. Although space does not allow for a complete theorization of this type of setting in relation to sheltered workshops and contractualizing disability, international settings like this and L’Arche can often be highly controversial locations of scholarly debate within the disability studies community. In-depth scholarship and theorization can be developed to engage the structure and formulation of these sheltered residential options – most often for people labeled as having intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Briefly I also want to mention why I chose ‘disability’ as opposed to ‘impairment’ when linking it up with contractualizing. I use disability because the society and not the individual make the movement of contractualization. Simply the disabled person is acted upon; they receive the enforced placement in the workshop. The social model formulation theorizes that it is society that creates disability based on assumptions of value and worth of the person with a certain impairment. Within the workshop is such
a case. The move from individual impairment to societal rendering of unfitness results in the formulation of disability status. This new contract was not with madness or cerebral palsy but rather with the person who was given an impairment categorization. This contract is the crucial element surrounding the formulation and upkeep of the institution.

The sheltered workshops on one level are based upon a belief that all people can work. Along with this belief is another premise; those without work are often the same ones outcast by society – the poor, impaired and criminal. Workshops are created with the hope that they would not only provide gainful employment for those largely receiving public assistance but that output or products of the workshop would provide a measurable benefit to the society around the workshop. The workshop is a tangible sign of the social contract that was created: a vocation in exchange for an attempt to become self-sufficient contributors of society.

**Characteristics and trends of the workshop**

In 1848, Samuel Howe, of Laura Bridgman fame, petitioned the Massachusetts Legislature to provide him funding that would enable the opportunity to establish an institution for idiocy. An essential part of this institution would be the formulation of workshops that would provide the participants with vocational training as a part of their rehabilitation. Combined in Howe’s report on the proliferation of idiocy in the United States is a clear initiative to not only confine, but also provide teaching and training to those in the establishment. These work programs, according to Howe, will play an essential role in demonstrating ‘... that no idiot need to be confined or restrained by force; that the young can be trained to industry, order and self-respect; that they can be redeemed from odious and filthy habits, and that there is not one of any age, who may not be made more of a man, and less of a brute, by patience and kindness, directed by energy and skill’ (Howe, 1848, p. 54). This promise of education and re-emergence into society is akin to Itard’s quest with Peter in France; training can fix any perceived human deficiency. The job of the professional is to create structure systems that will allow the deviant an opportunity to return to society as one who is educated and a valuable supplement to the populace.

When Howe calls for the creation of these institutions that would provide vocational training to the inmates, he is illustrating what I contend to be a foundational belief central to many sheltered workshops in existence today; the essential role of the workshop is to provide vocational training that not only allows the person the opportunity to acquire job skills but also positions themselves in an opportunity to replicate these skills into a more integrated job setting in society. The role of the sheltered workshop is to train the individual for employment in the future, however the structure of the workshop becomes dependant on skilled workers. The entire system is faulty.

Steven Taylor, director on the Center of Human Policy at Syracuse University, outlines this conflicting mission of the workshop in his article, ‘Disabled workers deserve real choices, real jobs’. Taylor cites facts from previous studies done on the
workshops in the United States settings as places of low wages. However, the real crucial step in the formulation of the workshop is the idea that these locations serve as places of transition, despite only 3.5% of employees each year transitioning into community-based jobs within US settings (Taylor, 2003). Workshops have incentives to keep the highest functioning and most dependable employees. Taylor writes: ‘Workshops have a built-in incentive to retain the most productive and dependable clients. These are precisely the persons most likely to succeed in the competitive labor market, with fewest supports’. This inherent flaw in the workshop structure is the reason people never leave. As more and more companies contract out tasks to these workshops, the workshop becomes dependant on the higher functioning clients in order to fulfill the requests of the outside businesses that have contracted production work with the administration of the workshop. People that do their job well often do not leave. Often these outside businesses have no idea of their role in prohibiting transition. Greg Jones of the Southeast Kansas Independent Living Resource Center illustrates this unawareness, as ‘... local businesses do not know that they are actually contributing to this exploitation. They actually think that they are doing a good thing. It sounds to me like a sheltered workshop is nothing more that a sweatshop’ (Johnson, 2003). This type of exploitation is evidenced all over the country.

Caution must be exercised here though in reference to the sheltered workshop and sweatshops. Most often, sweatshops are at the center of media uproar and exploited laborers – as corporations such as the GAP, H&M and Wal-Mart seek cheaper labor pools, all too often exploited labor forces are utilized to produce goods for consumers. The situation that creates the sweatshop and forces employees into unsafe and under-paying labor situations is the real problem, not the employees of the sweatshop. The last thing the disability rights community ought to do is continue to victimize our brothers and sisters trapped in sweatshops. In fact, disabled communities and labor rights organizations, including unions, would be of benefit to utilize each other’s resources in engaging with corrupt labor practices across the globe.

One such example of a potential collaboration between disability rights movements and labor organizations was evidenced in October 2003, when a group of students in a special education in class in Washington State were being required to serve as janitors for what the school district referred to as ‘work experience’. Phil Jordan, of the Washington Protection and Advocacy Service, the organization that explored these allegations, writes:

That these students are told to perform menial tasks speaks volumes about how school district officials perceive special education students. The school district apparently believes that special education students can be forced to do undesirable tasks because they have disabilities, and that this is the type of ‘education’ that should be provided for them. To describe this sort of activity as a work experience program is shameful. However, in this case, they have opted to deny these students an appropriate vocational program and have chosen instead to use these students as unpaid janitorial workers. (Jordan, 2003; emphasis added)

This type of work done in the name of vocational training for disabled people is paramount to contractualizing disability. The students were required to provide a
service to the school community in exchange for their place in the school as segregated members labeled as ‘special’. Not only were they not allowed inclusion into the community but also they were forced into a role of subordinate, based on their status as disabled people. The label of disability is an exchange for a place of isolation and exclusion. This formulation is the crux of the workshop as a location of unique barriers that are unable to be overcome. Societal rules about fair wages, equal treatment and supportive employment arenas do not apply to the workshops. Instead, due to the composition of the clientele that is housed in the workshop, these rules are not enforced. Disability status takes the place of equal rights. The societal contract with those in the workshop is enforced; society will fund jobs for disabled persons in exchange for these jobs being located in isolation. The individual takes the ‘job’ in exchange for lower wages and isolation while the community pays higher taxes while excluding persons with labels of disability from their presence. The workshop is a location of isolation and forced docility.

This forced docility is based upon contractualizing disability in the workshop. People are allowed in because of their disability status and in turn this status guarantees that there will be limited chance of transitory movements out of the workshop. People are grouped together based on labeling done by others. Goffman’s *Stigma* offers an insight into this world of grouping that occurs in the institution. Reporting on an experience of a blind person entering the Lighthouse workshop, this expectation of docility because of grouping becomes apparent:

I was expected to join this world. To give up my profession and to earn a living making mops. The Lighthouse would be happy to teach me how to make mops. I was to spend the rest of my life making mops with the other blind people, eating with the other blind people, dancing with the other people. I became nauseated with fear, as the picture grew in my mind. Never had I come upon such destructive segregation. (Goffman, 1963, p. 37)

This housing of disability inside the workshop reinforces the ideological foundation of the work programs; a workshop should simultaneously be a place of exclusion while allowing the inhabitants the opportunity to work their bodies in production of craft materials. Once the person has been assigned into the confines of the workshop, they are taught not to question anything but instead maintain an even temperament that allows for the smooth flow in the daily operations of the workshop.

**Documentary analysis of the exploitation in the workshop**

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, in a recent composition, ‘The visual Foucauldian: institutional coercion and surveillance’ in Fredrick Wiseman’s *Multi-handicapped* documentary series, trace out the development of docile bodies in the institution, as proved apparent by the documentaries of Fredrick Wiseman. Mitchell and Snyder contend that:

All of the administrators and teachers of the Alabama institution [the site of Wiseman’s documentary] participate in the production of rhetoric about returning its residents to the community; yet, they pursue practices that prepare the residents for little more than a
future within the sheltered society of their institution. As one administrator explains to a
group of nondisabled workers: we seek to train our residents ‘to function in an open OR
sheltered society.’ The positioning of the connective ‘OR’ in this comment demonstrates
the conflict that undergirds all institutional objectives. Even in the rhetoric of ‘return to
society,’ custodial institutions struggle to hold onto their residents as a function of their
own livelihood. The training of docile subjects within institutions takes a great deal of time
and an extraordinary amount of energy. This investment of resources makes the creation
of good (read: ‘docile’) institutional subjects the primary unacknowledged aim of institu-
tion staff. (Snyder & Mitchell, 2003, pp. 301–302; emphasis added by authors)

Advantages to the sheltered workshop include making all the residents compliant so
that the daily events of the institution can be completed without any interruption. If
there is to be any disruption in the events of the day, the opportunity for increased
dissension amongst the inhabitants increases. In a scene in Wiseman’s’ document-
tary Adjustment and work (1986), the camera records a meeting of the managers of
the workshop. The supervisor of this workshop, which employees 75% Blind
people, the remaining population being made up of other impairment groups, is
discussing the apparent problem of the employees calling into work sick. The super-
visor makes the claim that, ‘blind people are sick’ and that he seems to not have any
reliable employees in his workshop. He desires a workforce that shows up to work
daily to produce the products and then returns to their dorm rooms. Equating the
increase of sick days to impairment type as opposed to workforce conditions is
typical to the larger ideological framework of the workshop. Inside, people are not
seen as individuals but rather as markers of a specific impairment. The workers in
Wiseman’s documentary are not afforded uniqueness but rather are simply grouped
together based on labels, here as ‘the Blind’. As the supervisor equates sickness to
blindness, he fails to see the larger problem of the workshop. Workshops are not
places that give benefits, competitive wages or are created as inviting places. In fact
the viewer of the documentary must spend the first moments of the film traveling
with the camera to the institution. As the camera moves from the center of
commerce, to the residential neighborhoods, past the poorer sections of town
littered with broken cars and rotting houses, the viewer sees the path to the work-
shop on the outskirts of town. It is not in some central location where people can
visit or even accidentally wander to; the path to the workshop must be taken deliber-
ately and requires traversing a space that gradually progresses from wealth and
vitality to an utter destitute existence. This seems fitting considering the employees
of the workshop are constantly given wages forcing a life of poverty. Also, by placing
the sheltered workshop outside of the city, all temptation for integration is removed.
Instead the supervisors must talk of the problem of sick days as an institutional
epidemic risking uproar from their proletariat of docile bodies.

As the camera moves through the workshop it becomes interesting as to the type of
products that are created by the employees. We learn from the documentary that
there are two distinct types of products that are produced at this workshop; materials
for the military and custodial staffs. Inside the workshop is a class of people forced
into poverty by low wages, producing products to be used by other low-paid and
subordinate populations. The sheltered workshop does not often produce unique
products that find some sort of niche in the commercial market, but rather items like mops and first aid pouches that are sold to companies for mere pennies, allowing the recipient of the goods to use them for their own low-paid labor force. The workshop plays a crucial stage in the development of the working poor. As the employees are paid low wages to produce products that are often being formed by machines in other places, they are cementing their place at the bottom of the labor pool. Mitchell and Snyder argue:

> The point of institutional objectives is never to cultivate an intimacy and interdependency among the residents that might make institutional life habitable for those who are most in need of the comfort that comes from communal interdependence … In scenes of profound alienation, the workers are cut off from each other until the shift ends and the buzzer sounds. In each scenario, the production floor is filled with the sounds of machinery that has entirely displaced the conversation of workers … Each worker becomes a cog in the industrial wheel of institution, and education becomes a foundational step toward fulfilling one’s future place in the labor assembly line. (Snyder & Mitchell, 2003, pp. 305–306)

Educational systems help to prepare a future generation of employees. The isolation of employees in the workshop and the connection to this isolation is based upon a subordinate educational system that prepares the student for future placement in the workshop; the parallel to special education and the sheltered workshop does not seem like a difficult one to make. As referenced previously, the students in Washington State and their garbage detail provide a perfect example of this parallel between educational systems and the creation and subsistence of the workshop. Instead of being taught vocational skills that could provide some sort of advancement into a career or the option to enter into college, those in the special educational system are funneled into a workshop existence that creates isolation and docility and in which the overall social utility of the workshop is often questioned.

One final scene of Wiseman’s is important to visit before moving on in the discussion of sheltered workshops at large. A part of this particular workshop involved educational classes in which certain ‘lifestyle’ skills were involved. Notice the use of quotes around the term lifestyle, because often the skills taught are not essential to any sort of independence but rather a continued existence in the institution. It seems illogical to require people to learn how to seam-rip and sew as well as how to navigate the set up of a kitchen and how to properly set a table, when none of these skills are essential to a variety of jobs in the community. However, these skills are essential to the daily upkeep of the workshop and institution in which this film is created. Instead of transition into a higher-paying job, the employees learn to do tasks that will continue their fate in the workshop as insignificant contributors to the community but essential components of the workshop. This *contractualizing disability* is dependant upon the status of the workers as unable to leave the workshop. The scene of interest in the film to this concept is the math class that a group of workers attends. The particular subject of this class involves learning how to count money. In a very detailed account the camera focuses on a particular individual being instructed to count quarters. She is given eight quarters and asked a series of questions involving their worth, component in relation to other types of money and what sort of items this
currency could buy. Two dollars’ worth of quarters becomes the instructional tool used to teach this particular worker about money. Interesting considering that she most likely does not receive much money for her work in the shop, but rather must budget her paycheck in terms of quarters. This scene of counting quarters speaks volumes to the options available to the employee placed in the workshop, an existence when budgeting of quarters means more than purchasing time for a washer or playing a video game, but rather the quarter becomes a crucial piece of currency which represents the literal limitations to freedom and other options that are present to those in the sheltered workshop.

**Drawing to a conclusion: continuing the patterns of isolation**

Returning to the words of Samuel Howe in early nineteenth century America shows how little the workshops have evolved over the last 150 years. A few years before Howe petitioned for the creation of an institution of idiocy, a similar call was placed in front of the Massachusetts Government for the establishment of an institutional workshop for the blind of the state. Howe envisioned this place to give the inhabitants a purposeful existence, ‘There can be no more delightful spectacle than is presented by these establishments, where you may see a hundred young blind persons, changed from listless, inactive, helpless beings, – into intelligent, active, and happy ones; they run about, and pursue their different kinds of work with eager industry and surprising success …’ (Brooks *et al*., 1833, para 17). There is no talk of providing vocational training to offer a method of transition but rather creating an environment that looks good to outside viewers. This ‘delightful spectacle’ promised by Howe is representative of other workshops, including the one filmed by Wiseman. Often places of sanitary fixtures and bright appearances, the workshops attempt to hide the ideological framework that it is established upon with a pageantry of progress in the display of new buildings, tools and technology. However, these trappings are merely signifiers of the larger problem, a problem that allows the management of the workshop to invest in new equipment and facilities while paying their employees wages that will ensure a lifetime of poverty and lack of transition out of the workshop.

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**Notes**

1. The average employee earns 37 USD a week, however in my experience we often had employees make 37 USD a month, equating to some 30 cents an hour for paid labor. This is all because sheltered workshops are able to pay employees piece rate. This means that each item that is produced is worth a certain amount, based on a mathematical equation in which a
non-disabled employee works for an hour and the products created in the hour are divided by
the minimum wage to create a per piece rate, often times resulting in one item being
produced for a fraction of a penny in labor costs to the workshop.

2. Wiseman often spends long amounts of time capturing the life of the workshop without any sort
of fancy editing that would create a flashy plot. The effect is an intrusional eye into the work-
shop that theoretically provides a value neutral account of the events there.

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