

Current Research

The New Disability Historiography: Introduction

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The three essays that follow reflect the variety of emerging scholarship in disability history. They also suggest new directions for future work.

Thus far, notes Douglas Baynton in "Disability: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," "historians of disability have concentrated on writing histories of disabled people and the institutions and laws associated with disability." "It is time," he urges, "to posit disability as a fundamental element in cultural signification...not just a description of a group but the primary term in a fundamental binary opposition - 'normal' versus 'disabled',...a signifier for relations of power." As such, argues Baynton, "disability" is "indispensable for historians who want to make sense of the past" and therefore "must be resituated from the margins to the very center of humanities scholarship."

Because public policy has long been central to defining not only disability, but the social roles available to people with disabilities, policy history is central to disability history. Mark Priestley's "The Origins of a Legislative Disability Category in England: A Speculative History" seeks to revise our understanding of the historical roots of modern policy definitions. He responds to "disability theorists who have frequently employed historical arguments in an attempt to explain the administrative segregation of people with impairments in Western industrial societies." In particular, he writes, "social model theorists...have evoked a broadly materialist notion of British economic history in order to assert that the transition to an industrial mode of capitalist production was the key causal factor in excluding disabled people from participation in the labour force." Instead, Priestley finds the origins of "the process of administrative segregation...in much earlier [Tudor] attempts to control labour supply during periods of economic and political crisis."

In the final essay, "Political Movements of People with Disabilities: The League of the Physically Handicapped, 1935-1938," David Goldberger and I recount the brief history of an activist group in Depression-era America. We use that case study to call for comparative historical investigations of disability-based political organizations.

These articles and the book reviews that follow all indicate the fertile variety of scholarship in disability history and suggest new lines for further inquiry. They also point toward the need to begin to synthesize this emerging literature into a general historical interpretation.

Disability: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis

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In her seminal 1986 essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Joan Scott wrote that despite a substantial number of works on women's history, the topic remained