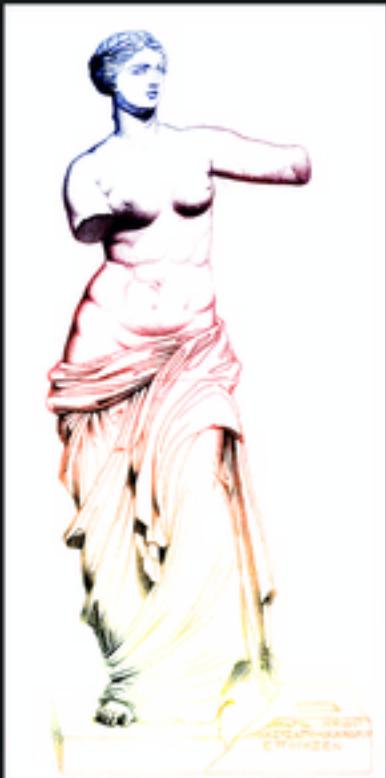


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# The Imperfect Historian

## Disability Histories in Europe



# The need for imperfection: Disability histories in Europe

*Sebastian Barsch, Anne Klein & Pieter Verstraete*

In June 2010 the *Disability History Group* hosted one of the first conferences entirely devoted to the history of disability.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the slogan ‘Looking forward to a better past’, a number of scholars interested in the history of disability came together in the city of Preston, UK. One of the aims of the meeting was to present and discuss particular case studies as well as to raise methodological questions. Although all attendees shared a common interest in the history of disability it very soon became clear that their methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives were quite heterogeneous.

Given the number of scholarly articles, monographs, academic courses, and (inter)national conferences devoted to the history of disability in recent years, this heterogeneity of methodologies and theoretical frameworks will probably not come as a surprise. But when one takes a closer look at what constitutes this heterogeneity, it starts to look a little strange in two particular ways. First, it is not evident that any articles or discussions exist that explicitly address these differences. What can be found instead, one could say, is a kind of reluctance towards methodological and meta-historical reflection; a kind of unease with dealing too explicitly with the presuppositions that affect the basis upon which a firm collection of historical data is to be built.

This is not to say that empirical data should become less important. Without this no theory can be constructed or meta-historical reflections made. However, when these data remain isolated and are not guided by a reflection on the process that led to their discovery, something essential is lost. The chapters included in this volume seek precisely to break with this empirical isolation. They aim to open a door to the possibility of doing disability history in a way that fruitful-

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1 “The Disability History Group (DHG) is an international association that promotes research into the history of disability. Its goal is to broaden the scope of disability history and deliver fresh and dynamic perspectives on the way disability has been used to legitimate and understand norms, social relations, inequality, and oppression. This includes historical research into individuals, groups and institutions, as well as representations/constructions and perspectives on disability. We wish to build on this exciting field of study through research, teaching and theorizing the history of disability”. Taken from the mission statement of the disability history group: <http://www.disabilityhistory.co.uk/>

ly combines the longing for historical data with the need for theoretical reflection.

Besides the aforementioned reluctance to engage in methodological and meta-historical reflection, the second aspect of the strangeness of this heterogeneity is the predominant tendency towards the use of the social model in writing histories of disability. Indeed, to a large extent, disability historians have tried, and continue to try, to found the social model on firm historical grounds and – as a consequence – to contribute to the ongoing emancipation of persons with disabilities. Moreover, some authors have argued that this founding of the social model is more evident in Anglo-Saxon research traditions than in the European context.<sup>2</sup> The disability historian's toolbox, however, does not have to be interpreted on the basis of the social model alone. This is the second argument around which this volume is constructed. Historians can make use of the rich diversity of theoretical frameworks coming from philosophy through literature to the social sciences – not to mention the newly developed theoretical models about disability itself.

Intimately bound up with the predominant tendency to approach the history of disability from a social-constructivist perspective is the fact that disability historians have tended to legitimate their historical inquiry by referring to the political consequences it has for persons with disabilities. Schematically one could say that disability history currently can be divided into at least two opposing interpretations. On the one hand one can find scholars whose aim it is to examine the past in order to promote and distribute contemporary ideas on good practice. These authors write histories of disabilities in order to make valuable contributions to ongoing emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive practices. On the other hand, however, one can find historians who precisely tend to disconnect historical research from specific political and educational aims. This latter group is in a way also reluctant. Their reluctance, however, has more to do with an unwillingness to insert their historical data into a well-delineated world-view. They are not afraid of change, nor do they plead for a continuity of the present. One could say that the change they have in mind is not pre-conceived but is precisely opened up by history.

The aforementioned ways of writing disability history refer to a particular tension at the heart of contemporary disability history: a tension between those who directly jump from one truth to another truth, and those who go from truth

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2 E. Simonsen, Disability history in Scandinavia: part of an international research field. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 7 (2005), pp. 137-154

to the opening up of truth.<sup>3</sup> Informed by poststructuralist and postmodern theories, several scholars, mainly from a continental European philosophical background, indeed tend to distrust approaches that focus too much on the construction of a promising worldview. Their theories instead contain no directives on how to *make and realise* future policies. What they try to do instead is to open up a space where people can start to think anew; a space where they can think and speak for themselves. This poststructuralist attitude informs the critical voices raised towards what can be called a ‘new disability history’.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, within each approach – the one that strives towards and from a clear-cut world-view and the one that precisely tries to distance itself from such a well-delineated world-view – there are numerous differences and nuances. The dichotomy evoked here, therefore, should be considered rather as an instrument to make people sensitive to certain characteristics of the state of the art within disability history. Regardless of the hypothetical nature of our dichotomy, however, it poses the challenge of looking for a kind of unity between the divergent approaches contained under the banner of poststructuralist theory. Would it be an exaggeration to state that it is precisely the notion of disability that can be found? Not ‘disability’ itself but what it refers to in terms of bodily states, mental conditions, its definition by medical diagnoses, laws, social relations, work practices, and concrete daily life experiences, namely ‘imperfection’. This is to say that what diverse applications of poststructuralist theory have in common is the sense of imperfection. The valuing of imperfection in poststructuralist theory refers not only to the conviction that ‘not being perfect’ can be considered a positive thing for human beings, but also to the fact that the narratives produced by historians can gain something if they tend to be ‘imperfect’.

Besides the focus on imperfection, this book also presents itself as focusing on the European context. At first glance, this might be a bit misleading and counterproductive: by subtitling this volume ‘Disability Histories in Europe’ do we not reinforce a well-delineated identity for disability historians? Although the following chapters do focus on geographical areas other than Europe, they all have connections with Europe. But the intention of the book is not to construct a ‘European’ way of doing disability history. On the contrary, we emphasise the word *histories* to stress one of the characteristics of disability research done within a European context: it is a plurality not only in terms of the divergent backgrounds of the scholars involved but also, and perhaps even more im-

3 See for instance H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 184-205.

4 P. Verstraete (2012) *In the shadow of disability: Reconnecting history, identity and politics*. (Opladen: Barbara Budrich 2012).

portantly, in terms of the particular but complex relationship between knowledge and imperfection.

The link between knowledge and imperfection referred to here can be illustrated by referring to one of the statements made in an interview by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. While residing in the United States and being once again reproached for not being a real historian, Foucault replied: 'I'm not a historian, but then again, nobody is perfect'.<sup>5</sup> Foucault's characteristically ironic answer points towards what we describe as an 'imperfect historian'. S/he is a historian who is convinced of the insight that what s/he writes or re-constructs is never and can never be completely true. S/he is a historian who knows that the knowledge s/he produces and the insights s/he builds up will always in a way be imperfect and open to unending interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault's explorations of power, the body, and the self have already undoubtedly contributed enormously to the study of the history of disability. His seemingly trivial utterance on imperfection might lead us again towards new, un(der)explored terrains of disability history.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, it can be said that the aim of this volume is to stimulate and to promote self-reflexive, poststructuralist research approaches that are able to show the diverse interconnections of history and disability. All of the chapters collected in this book tend to reveal the aforementioned 'imperfection' of history. This means not only that the authors have refrained from formulating clear-cut statements about the direction we should follow in order to create a better world, but also that the uncommon paths chosen to explore the history of disability are not considered problematic in themselves.

The volume is divided into four parts.<sup>8</sup> In Part I, 'Challenging methodologies', three chapters are brought together that deal with what we consider to be 'marginalised' topics and approaches in disability history. Two of the three chapters focus on the Middle Ages, itself already a neglected area within the current research, in a challenging and innovative way. In their chapter, Bianca Frohne and Klaus-Peter Horn illustrate one possible approach to the history of

5 G. Gutting, Foucault's philosophy of experience. *Boundary 2* 29 (29) (2002), pp. 69-85.

6 M. Depaepe, Demythologizing the educational past: An endless task in the history of education. *Historical Studies of Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 9 (2) (1992), pp. 208-223.

7 A. Waldschmidt, Macht – Wissen – Körper: Anschlüsse an Michel Foucault in den Disability Studies, A. Waldschmidt & W. Schneider (Eds). *Disability Studies, Kultursoziologie und Soziologie der Behinderung: Erkundungen in einem neuen Forschungsfeld*. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag 2007), pp. 55-77.

8 Most of the chapters were presented at the conference 'Disability histories in Europe', which took place in Cologne from 21st to 22nd August 2012.

disability in medieval and early modern societies. On the basis of new and previously unexplored historical source material – such as medieval miracle accounts and revealing case studies of 15<sup>th</sup> century urban elite families – they present ‘disability’ as a fluid category and are critical of the accepted viewpoint that ‘poverty’ provides the best framework to examine medieval disability history. Like Frohne and Horn, Patrick Schmidt makes use of exciting and new sources. His time period, however, is the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in which he highlights how newspapers, magazines, and journals played a crucial role in the construction of disability. By basing his analysis on British, French, and German periodicals he traces the image of disabled people and their social integration from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the French Revolution. By not limiting his analysis to history alone he comes up with a useful presentation of narratives as historical instruments. The first part, then, is completed by Paul van Trigt who presents his refreshing theory about sensory history and its value for disability history in general. Although disability history seems to deal with the senses throughout its work, until now the senses have not fully been included in methodological considerations. What van Trigt wants to show us is that if we approach the history of disability from the perspective of the senses a new picture of our past appears. His theoretical ideas are illustrated by a case study on Sonneheerdt – a Dutch residential institution for people with visual disabilities.

The three chapters collected in Part II ‘Power and Identity’ are all inspired by the theoretical work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In her contribution, Annemiek van Drenth presents the forgotten case study of a Dutch autistic boy in the 1930s. By a meticulous reconstruction of the nurse Ida Fryeeije’s interest in the boy’s behaviour and life, van Drenth recounts and reconstructs the interplay of science, gender, personal ambition, and humanitarian intentions. Her story in particular leads us to reconsider the role of care within the history of disability. Focusing on a different concept from the Foucauldian toolbox, David Leenen then examines the German system of ‘cripple welfare’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His respectful use of the Foucauldian vocabulary shows how German ‘cripples’ became the focus of simultaneously individualising and totalising techniques, thus forming the point where identity and politics intersect. In line with Leenen’s interest in identity, Hilary Malatino turns to the work of Michel Foucault in order to study the problem of hermaphroditism in history. More than any other contribution ever written in the field of disability history, Malatino succeeds in showing how the work of Foucault and its application to history does not have to lead to a negatively interpreted nihilism but can warm our hearts and boost our activity.

After having focussed so far on the Middle Ages and the value of Foucault’s work for disability historians, Part III focuses on what we have called ‘Travelling knowledge’. Inspired by trends in general/educational historio-

graphy, the emphasis of these chapters is placed on the travelling of concepts and ideas. Change doesn't take place out of the blue and when one takes a closer look one almost always finds that local practices have been influenced by international contexts. All of the chapters included in Part III, therefore, find themselves crossing the boundaries that separate nations/geographies. First, Gildas Bregain vividly illustrates how transnational developments have influenced the protests of disabled people in the South American context. In his analysis he reconstructs the roots and the radicalisation of the disability rights movements in Argentina, Brazil, and Spain. To do so he adopts what is called an entangled perspective on disability history. Like Annemieke van Drenth, the subject researched by Sebastian Barsch is related to autism. This time, however, it is the famous case of Birger Sellin that is scrutinised. Sellin was an autistic man who became very well-known after some of the poetry he wrote was published in the 1990s. Barsch's contribution focuses in particular on the role of facilitated communication. He outlines a shift in the understanding of autism from being a symptom of intellectual disability to a spectrum disorder. Then, in her thoughtful contribution on the rise of the percentage system, Gaby Admon-Rick illustrates how Western thought has thoroughly influenced the development of the social care system in Israel and in British Mandate Palestine. She reconstructs the historical transformations of these 'disability percentages' in different political frameworks from 1930 until 1956 and analyses their influence on the construction of disability itself. Although geographically Israel is not in Europe, this chapter is a perfect example of how nation-building processes and their impact on the lives of disabled people are shaped by knowledge coming from and invented in a European context. Finally, José Perez & Mercédez Del Cura's chapter deals with the idea of 'scientific management' and its crucial role in increasing industrial productivity in Spain after World War I. Their chapter can be read as a wonderful example of how European ways of dealing with disability in the first half of the nineteenth century cannot be seen apart from transatlantic influences.

The final part of this volume is entitled simply 'Emerging topics'. Jitka Sinecka, for example, 'peeps over the wall' and ventures on a journey to the Cold War. Based on the analysis of several interviews with mothers of autistic children in the Czech Republic, she describes the way people with autism were treated there before and after communism. Anna Piotrowska has immersed herself in the field of musicology in order to find out whether the concept of disability could be of any help to a scholar interested in the history of music. Writing at the crossroads of disability and disease, Pieter Verstraete links the history of AIDS/HIV to disability history and queer studies on the basis of the case study of the Flemish philosopher Pascal de Duve (1964-1993), who died as a result of

AIDS. This particular case study is presented in such a way that it becomes clear what a disability history written from the perspective of a cultural model might look like. Finally, Anne Klein probes the use of the Foucauldian concept of culture for historical research on biopolitics. In tracing some of the parallels between the decolonisation and the anti-psychiatry discourses, she observes the emergence of a postmodern disability ethics.

In addition to these four main parts we also include a text written by Henri-Jacques Stiker, in which he retraces the pathway that made him engage in the examination of disability history. Based on his timeless and pioneering book *A history of disability*, Stiker again emphasises the role of anthropology in doing and writing disability histories für the Trenty First Century.

