

The Imperfect Historian - Disability Histories in Europe. Cologne: Historisches Institut, Universität zu Köln / History Department, University of Cologne, 21.08.2012-22.08.2012.

Reviewed by Sebastian Barsch

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From 21st to 22nd of August University of Cologne's department of history hosted the international Conference "The Imperfect Historian - Disability Histories in Europe". The conference – mainly funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) – focused on some methodological innovations related to the activity of doing and writing disability history in a European context. Scholars from eleven countries presented the results, theoretical backgrounds and methodological challenges of their current research.

Up till now the research undertaken by disability historians mainly has been inspired by an Anglo-Saxon social-constructivist tradition. Given the recent critiques that were formulated with regard to some of the presuppositions taken for granted by the social model and taking into account some of the theoretical developments coming from the discipline of history, philosophy and educational sciences, all of the scheduled presentations tried to lay bare some innovative and refreshing approaches to the history of disability. The leading thread of the conference "The imperfect Historian – Disability Histories in Europe" therefore sought out how disability historians can keep pace with the critical reinterpretation of the relationship between history and (disability) theory.

The introduction given by the three organisers SEBASTIAN BARSCH (Cologne), ANNE KLEIN (Cologne) and PIETER VERSTRAETE (Leuven)

brought up some issues with regard to the question, if there really are different lines of traditions of writing disability history between continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world. While Sebastian Barsch pointed out that metahistorical and narrativist traditions in Europe might differ from those in the USA and the UK, Pieter Verstraete showed common lines and methodological approaches. Anne Klein argued that one common interest might be the benefit of writing disability history for the emancipation process of disabled people.

Panel 1 titled "Uncommon spaces, time-periods and sources" assembled three presentations dealing with topics which until now have been taken only rarely into account by disability history. PATRICK SCHMIDT (Rostock) showed how the image of disabled people in the 18th century and their social integration could be reconstructed by analysing contemporary British, French and German periodicals between the last decades of the seventeenth century and the French Revolution.

BIANCA FROHNE and KLAUS-PETER HORN (both Bremen) showed refreshing ways how to research disability in medieval and early modern societies. After shaping some basic ideas on medieval 'disability', they exemplified disability as a fluid category by analysing early medieval miracle accounts and case studies of urban elite families in 15th and 16th century in Nuremberg.

Finally YANN CANTIN (Paris) asked “Who are the deafs of the Belle Epoque?”. Based on the fact that sign language in French schools was banned after the congress of Milano in 1882, he showed the impact of this policy on the social and cultural life of the deaf community in the 19th century.

The second panel was titled “Re-applying power”. The two presentations of the panel were all in one way or another influenced by poststructuralist theories of Michel Foucault, showing how ‘power’ took effect in situations of education and care. Firstly, ANNEMIEKE VAN DRENTH (Leiden) presented the case study of an autistic boy in the 1930s Netherlands. She highlighted the role of ‘care’ as a central but much underrated, ignored and contested factor within practices and reflections on individuals with a ‘mental disability’ in the past.

MARIA ROMEIRAS (Lisbon) tried to explore how Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon influenced architecture of schools for blind children in the 19th century. In this context she also referred to pedagogical theories.

The last panel of the first day of the conference was called “Disability, work & compensations”. MYRIAM WINANCE (PARIS) dealt with disability and reparation in 20th century France. In this context she showed how the shift from multiple terms like infirm, crippled, maladjusted children, etc. to the single term of ‘disability’ influenced the way people with disabilities has been seen: less biologically out of norm and more socially disadvantaged.

DANIEL BLACKIE (Helsinki) highlighted a non-European context. He explored the position of disabled men - to be more precisely disabled veterans - in the American household economy of care from c. 1783 to 1830. He argued that ‘dependency at this time was a highly gendered and racialized concept’, but that white disabled men disposed considerable power over the people in their household.

The 2nd day of the conference started with a panel on “International perspectives”. GABY ADMON-RICK (Ramat Gan) illustrated the deployment of a system for determining grades of disabilities in percentages for issues of social welfare. She focused on British Mandate Palestine and Israel from 1930 to 1956. She showed historical transformation of these disability percentages and their factors of influence.

JOSE MARTINEZ-PEREZ and MERCEDES DEL CURA GONZALES (Albacete) presented their research on the ‘scientific management’ programme in Spain after World War I. The aim of this programme was ‘to develop the provision of various factors of production that would result in optimum productivity’. They showed how the programme influenced medical doctors’ proposals how to deal with children with intellectual disabilities and disabled workmen. NAUSICA ZABALLOS (Paris) explained vividly how the ‘Camarillo Mental Hospital’, which was opened in 1936, faced social changes and those of psychological positions and theories. Furthermore she showed how medical practices and their aims that were used on the patients changed over time.

GILDAS BRÉGAIN (Paris) opened the next panel called “Uncommon spaces, time-periods and sources - part II”. In his transnational analysis he reconstructed the radicalisation of the disability rights movement in Argentina, Brazil and Spain.

JITKA SINECKA (Syracuse) ‘peeped’ over the wall. She explored the shift of how people with autism were treated in Czech Republic before and after communism was abandoned. Therefore she has conducted interviews with mothers of autistic children.

PAUL VAN TRIGT (Amsterdam) presented some refreshing theories about sensory history and its value for disability history in general. He specified these theories by oral histories of blind people about the narratives of inclusion in 20th century Netherlands.

The final panel assembled two presentations. EMMANUEL NATHAN (Leuven) explained how a cultural theory of disabilities could be applied on biblical studies. After a theoretical foundation he exemplified his approach on parts of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians.

Finally ANNA PIOTROWSKA (Kraków) showed the value of linking musicology to disability history. She claimed that 'this issue was overlooked in musicology and the disabled musician has never been paid attention to as if the discipline tacitly presupposed the assumption that making/composing music requires good and perfect health condition.'

All presentations were followed by fruitful and lively debates. It became clear that the still burgeoning field of disability history didn't lose any of its power. A collection of papers from the conference will be published in the beginning of 2013 by Peter Lang under the title "The Imperfect Historian. Disability Histories in Europe".

Conference Overview:

Welcome: Franz Peter Mittag (Cologne, Germany)

Introduction: Sebastian Barsch (Cologne), Anne Klein (Cologne), Pieter Verstraete (Leuven, Belgium)

Panel 1: Uncommon spaces, time-periods and sources (I)

Patrick Schmidt (Rostock), A narrative approach on disability history: Disabled persons and their social integration in eighteenth-century periodicals

Bianca Frohne/ Klaus Horn (Bremen), Poverty and beyond?! New and fluid perspectives on researching disability in Medieval and Early modern societies

Yann Cantin (Paris), Who are the deafs of the Belle Epoque? A presentation of a deaf community

Panel 2: Re-applying power

Annemieke van Drenth (Leiden), Care and curiosity: Ida Frye and the discovery of autism in the 1930s in the Netherlands

Maria Romeiras (Lisbon) –Panoptical discourses and self-surveillance on blind school projects

Panel 3: Disability, work & compensations

Myriam Winance (Paris), Disability and reparation

Daniel Blackie (Helsinki), Disability, dependency, and the household economy of care in the early United States

Panel 4: International perspectives

Gaby Admon Rick (Ramat Gan), Persons as numbers: Deciphering disabled bodies in British Mandate Palestine and Israel, 1930-1956

Jose Martinez-Perez & Mercedes Del Cura Gonzales (Albacete), Work injuries, scientific management and the production of disabled bodies in Spain, 1920-1936

Nausica Zaballos (Paris), Constructing Disability at Camarillo Mental Hospital (1948-1996)

Panel 5: Uncommon spaces, time-periods and sources (II)

Gildas Brégain (Paris), The radicalization of the Disability Rights Movements (1968-1981). An entangled history (Argentina, Brazil, Spain)

Jitka Sinecka (Syracuse), Peeping over the wall: Communism, Goffman and the deinstitutionalization of people with autism in the Czech Republic

Paul van Trigt (Amsterdam), The imperfection of narrative: Sensory history and the inclusion of blind people in Dutch society in the twentieth Century

Panel 6: Interdisciplinary approaches

Emmanuel Nathan (Leuven), Cultural Theory of Disability

Anna Piotrowska (Kraków), Disability history and musicology

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