

H-Net Reviews

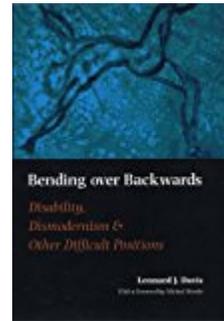
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lennard J. Davis. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. 224 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1950-3; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1949-7.

Reviewed by Susan Burch (Department of History and Government, Gallaudet University)

Published on H-Disability (November, 2003)



Lenny Davis's admirers will welcome his most recent work, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. This compilation of nine separate essays offers a panoramic view of the author-activist's evolving ideas about disability, disability studies, and literary historical criticism. It covers a breadth of topics—the human genome project, ADA court cases, concepts of citizenship, the history of the novel, homosexuality, postmodernist theory, the rise of Disability Studies, etc. A recent addition to the NYU series Cultural Fronts, which seeks to promote works of cultural criticism with policy implications, this is not intended primarily for an audience of historians. Still, Davis's work offers creative and challenging examples that may be useful to our discipline and particularly to Disability historians.

Davis argues that disability, as a category of identity, has the potential to transform the postmodern notion of identity. In previous works, which include *Enforcing Normalcy* and *The Disability Studies Reader*, Davis outlined the social, scientific, and linguistic processes that inform the meaning of "disability." In an edited collection of his parents' correspondence, *Shall I Say a Kiss*, and in his own memoir, *My Sense of Silence*, Davis revealed in poignant and personal images the complexities of living as/with Deaf people. Inspired by Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, Davis melds the theoretical with the personal.

His most recent work is primarily a collection of pieces previously published and the result of dialogues Davis had with himself and others since their publication. Consequently, some chapters overlap in content and argument. Still, taken together, they reveal a steep evolution of understanding. In writing this book, Davis strives to remind scholars of the pervasive presence of disability, and its manifest possibilities for clarifying and reconceptualizing academic and practical definitions of identity and status.

Several chapters in *Bending over Backwards* summarize arguments previously made by Davis in his other books; most widely known is his contention that the nineteenth century witnessed a watershed change in conceptions of humans from ideals to norms, exemplified by the rise of eugenics. Included in this argument, Davis elucidates the extent to which the idea of normalcy has been tied to, created by, and developed with the idea of abnormal bodies. Several chapters from this newest installment go further, linking disability in new ways to the legal system, American politics, the environment, technology, and the economy. Moreover, *Bending over Backwards* sharpens the application of disability to cultural studies and postmodernist theory, challenging the theoretical basis of identity politics and social constructionism, and promoting instead what he calls "dismodernism." Rather than tack on disability to the traditional interpretive troika of race, class, and gender, Davis provocatively suggests that disability embod-

ies, supplants, and transcends these postmodernist classifiers. According to Davis, it is in part disability's instability as a category that will allow Disability Studies the chance to "provide a critique of and a politics to discuss how all groups, based on physical traits or markings, are selected for disablement by a larger system of regulation and signification. So it is paradoxically the most marginalized group—people with disabilities—who can provide the broadest way of understanding contemporary systems of oppression" (p. 29).

His introduction, entitled "People with Disability: They Are You," goes further than most disability theory scholarship. Augmenting the position that disability directly and indirectly influences everyone, Davis advocates a broader civil rights mandate by linking disability much more closely with legal, cultural, governmental, and social matters. His solution is called dismodernism, which incorporates the value that protections offered to any class be offered to all classes (p. 30). With this theory, Davis conveys the potential of dismodernism succinctly, asserting, that "[i]mpairment is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy. Dependence is the reality, and independence grandiose thinking. Barrier-free access is the goal, and the right to pursue happiness the false consciousness that obscures it. Universal design becomes the template for social and political designs" (p. 31).

Several chapters may be of particular interest to historians of Disability. Chapter 1, "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism," offers a coherent description of the parallels between historical expressions of minority identities, particularly framed by literary criticisms of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. Critiquing genetic interpretations of disability and normalcy, Davis relocates the discussion of essentialism. He makes perhaps his strongest case for the instability of identity and the value of dismodernism here. Using the example of transgender politics and intersexed people, Davis reveals the "dissolving boundaries" of traditional identity categories (p. 17). The human genome project—a common target for disability scholars—also plays a prominent role in this essay. Yet Davis raises fresh and cogent questions about the meaning of "correct" or "real" genomes—what is the ideal, and how is that being defined? For instance, he questions what it means to eradicate certain conditions that may ultimately prevent those individuals from experiencing other disabling conditions.

The chapter "Bending over Backwards" is particularly strong and illuminating. In it, Davis outlines the Ameri-

cans with Disabilities Act and specific current cases testing the ADA. This close reading of legal texts emphasizes the ways cultural norms frame such documents and judicial decisions. The references to common historical and contemporary popular images of disability broaden the implications of the case studies, demonstrating in vivid ways the construction of disability. "Go to the Margins of the Class," which focuses primarily on the brutal murder of James Byrd Jr., is one of the finest pieces Davis has created. In 1999 Byrd, a citizen of Jasper, Texas, was dragged behind a truck for two miles, before he ultimately was dismembered and killed. Viewing this hate crime with equal and intensified attention to the issue of disability produced superb, shocking results. This reviewer, like many, had heard nothing of Byrd's impairments—seizures and debilitating arthritis—when national media covered the case. Davis potently challenges the premise that certain identities are more important than others in hate crimes, and in society generally. The writing is crisp and focused; his explanation of evidence and his analysis will appeal to the historically trained.

Although it was not his primary aim to do so, Davis's increased attention to the economic factors that compound physical and mental impairment was greatly appreciated by this reader. A multitude of his examples depict the intimate and inextricable tie between class circumstances and experiences of disability. Genetic testing, for example, occurs mainly in affluent societies and for its members (p. 21), and the majority of people with disabilities are poor, under or unemployed, and undereducated (p. 28). Especially in his study of employment law and disability, he illuminates the "dissolving boundaries" of identity and brings disability into closer proximity to the mainstream world. It is hoped that Davis will continue to probe this issue in future works.

This book was not intended, nor does it qualify, as a "history collection." Its interdisciplinary nature and strong theoretical and literary criticism framework necessitate a different standard of argument than historians apply. Thus this review cannot fairly critique the sources using traditional historical measures. It should be noted, however, that Davis's primary evidence reflects the diverse nature of his pieces. He cites many classic texts in Disability Studies, including *Freakery*, *Claiming Disability*, *The Black Stork*, and *Nothing about Us without Us*. He frequently references his own previous works, as well as critical literary studies, British novels, current American legal briefs, and recent *New York Times* articles. Several of the pieces in this collection, while historical in nature, might have benefited from greater attention to

past evidence of activism. “The Crip Strikes Back,” for instance, shares many similarities with Paul Longmore’s work on the League of the Physically Handicapped; Bob Buchanan’s work on deaf laborers and activists resonate with and contradict Davis’s position that before the 1970s different populations of people with disabilities did not previously see commonality with others (p. 11).[1]

One regret this reviewer had with the work was the relative absence of direct evaluation and theoretical study of Deafness with/versus disability. As a leading theoretician of disability and the son of deaf parents, Davis is uniquely poised to review both. His provocative ideas about the instability of identity and the powerful advantages of embracing disability might well challenge or at least complicate the tense relationship between the Deaf world and people who identify as disabled. The collection would have benefited significantly from more thorough copyediting, too; the endnotes are inconsistent and often inaccessible. Davis should be commended for his provocative discussion of the human genome project and his previous work on the impact of eugenics. He could go still further with his analysis of the role of science and popular culture; his next work—on what he calls “bioculture”—promises to address this topic more fully.

Like Paul Longmore’s recent memoir-collection *Why I Burned My Book*, Davis’s compilation ultimately allows readers to see the ebb, flow, and evolution of positions as well as the complex and difficult personal relationship between scholar, activist, and member of the disability community. In *Bending over Backwards*, the author acknowledges at the outset that the pieces do not fit neatly together. Since many chapters repeat similar themes and assume some grounding in Disability Studies and Davis’s previous works, it may be less useful to students or general readers. Some of the repetition may prove useful in

the end, however. Many selections, for example, address issues of control and marginalization, lending themselves naturally as complementary pieces to works like *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, *Illusions of Equality*, or sections from *The New Disability History*. Davis’s theoretical components, especially his critiques of Foucault, could counterbalance the lack of such study in virtually all Disability social histories.

Bending over Backwards may not be not an easy read for traditional historians; the essays are highly theoretical, often reading as a keen stream of consciousness. Something Davis does particularly well is juggle theory and activism deftly, employing language that makes their overlap plain to academics who claim they are not activists, and activists who stake no claim on theory. The writing is quirky at times, sarcastic at others, and the high spiritedness of the book may challenge those who prefer more straightforward, tangible explanations. Still, this kind of cutting edge historicization-meets-literary criticism may delight many, opening new ground for interdisciplinary dialogue.

Thus even with its limitations, *Bending over Backwards* remains an important and useful work for historians as a template for examining the myriad ways disability and Deafness infiltrate vital aspects of our identity, including laws, cultural icons, literature, and citizenship.

Notes

[1]. Paul Longmore, “League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History,” *Journal of American History* 87:3 (2000): pp. 888-921; and Robert Buchanan, *Illusions of Equality: Deaf Americans in School and Factory, 1850-1950* (Washington: Gallaudet University Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Susan Burch. Review of Davis, Lennard J., *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. November, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8410>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.