

Dustin Galer. *Working towards Equity: Disability Rights Activism and Employment in Late Twentieth-Century Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 328 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0131-0.

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Dustin Galer's book, *Working Towards Equity*, is not about disabled workers. It is not about *the* disability rights movement. Instead, Galer argues that, in the late twentieth century, Canadians with disabilities, more often than not, defined themselves through their working identities. To the extent that *the* disability rights movement existed, it consisted of many different organizations that tried to improve disabled people's opportunities to find meaningful work. This is what Galer's book is about: how paid work shaped the identities of Canadians with disabilities in this period and, to a slightly lesser extent, how paid work for disabled Canadians, as it evolved, in turn reshaped the definitions of disability, work, and rights and equity in Canada. He completes his task in eight chapters, plus an introduction, conclusion, and appendix, and uses thirty interviews and a wealth of documentary sources.

It has taken some time, but Canadian scholarship in the new disability history has come of age. Galer's book is one of the most recent and best examples of a work in Canadian history that, as the new disability history exhorts historians to do, uses disability as a category of analysis to explore different topics. However, Galer also claims "the framework of critical disability studies" (p. 5). Yet he mercifully avoids the over-theorizing that

sometimes comes into disability history from other fields in the social sciences and humanities. He does not use high theory to establish the concepts of work, identity, disability, and activism that he employs across his analysis. Instead, he introduces these themes in a short first chapter, "Disability Activism, Work, and Identity," which draws directly on his interviews "with actual people with disabilities" (p. 22). Work was central to disabled people's identities is Galer's theory. Or, as William, one of the interviewees Galer quotes in chapter 1 to introduce this theory, put it, "I had the sense that I had to work as everybody else did, as my parents did" (p. 25).

Neither William nor especially Galer—and this is crucial—wishes to make some moral point that disabled people *should* work. Rather, Galer's point throughout this book is simply that, if you ask them, people with disabilities in the late twentieth century defined themselves frequently by reference to work. This occurred whether they were working or not—or choosing to work, choosing not to work, or prevented from working. Galer, for example, explains that Michael, another interviewee quoted in chapter 1, "did not find his personal values were compromised by acceptance of welfare benefits. Instead, he preferred to view such benefit as the means by which he could se-

lectively engage the labour market in work that was both rewarding and accommodating for his needs and abilities” (p. 29). Michael: “I said that I had difficulty with finding work. Her [someone assisting Michael] suggestion was, ‘You weren’t able to work.’ I said, ‘No I had difficulty working’” (p. 29). Disability rights activism typically took place at sites where people like William or Michael encountered challenges to their working identities. Interviewee Danielle (also quoted in chapter 1) made a formal human rights complaint when she was wrongfully dismissed from her job because she was disabled.

A definite upside of Galer’s grounded approach to theory is the freedom this gives him to historicize disability, work, rights and activism, and equity as fluid and changing over time. He is not burdened by heavy theoretical baggage that needs unpacking and assembling each time he wants to address these concepts. In chapter 2, he demonstrates how mainly middle-class parents of people with disabilities in the 1960s and 1970s were the first to challenge the prevailing ideology that disabled people did not work, so that disabled people were being seen to be demanding work, and by extension, the right to work. In chapter 3, he discusses the rehabilitation professionals and community organizations for people with disabilities, who joined the struggle begun by parents, by trying to rehabilitate disabled people for work, by creating jobs for them, or by reshaping public opinion and lobbying employers to hire them for jobs that already existed.

Chapter 4, however, introduces the most dramatic change in work for disabled people in Canada during this period. The chapter is the pivot for Galer’s narrative. Disability activists, spanning all sorts of disabled identities, were not content with how parents, rehabilitators, or community organizations (in other words, other people) fought for work and rights *for* them. Their members wanted and needed to define themselves as workers and as people with disabilities. The founding of the

Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH) in 1976 was a watershed for disabled people in Canada that enabled them to break away from their benefactors and to “forge a rights movement based on identity politics” (p. 82).[1]

Once they were in control and command of activism for meaningful work, people with disabilities tried to change the prevailing approaches to work for the disabled up to the 1970s or 1980s. In chapters 5 to 8, Galer takes up different aspects of this effort. In chapter 5, he examines how people with disabilities overturned the sheltered workshops model. Sheltered workshops went through several transitions because they were also placed under pressure from the psychiatric de-institutionalization policies of the 1970s; however, people with disabilities successfully eventually steered the workshops away from “shelter” (that led nowhere) to “support” (that more often led to meaningful, often “mainstream” work) (p. 124). Galer devotes chapter 6 to work regulation and place changes in the 1980s that promised to incorporate people with disabilities into the same job pools as non-disabled employees, such as voluntary employment equity programs for private employers, disability-aware public-sector hiring, and new technologies. The outcomes, however, he notes were less than people with disabilities had hoped for, with the possible exception of public-sector hiring where some gains were evident.

Chapter 7 continues this line of inquiry into disabled activism, examining how Canadians with disabilities forced the hand of government to structure an “activist Canadian state” (the chapter’s title) that used public policy, such as employment equity legislation, to guarantee employment rights for people with disabilities. For a brief moment in the 1980s and early 1990s, major victories were won. Thanks to disability activists, disability was included as a protected category in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms when Canada patriated its constitution from Great Britain in 1982.

This further shored up the right to work. Yet, by the mid-1990s, federal and provincial cost cutting and backlash against government intervention in the economy through such measures as employment equity legislation diminished gains that had been achieved from these victories.

Chapter 8 takes up how labor unions were involved in the process of addressing disabled people's struggles for the right to work. Unions often put their traditional concerns first. This pitted things like seniority provisions against employment equity programs that had the potential to bring in new workers who had disabilities. The progressive stance in the public sector that Galer describes in chapter 6 also comes to bear in chapter 8; public sector unions grew in influence in the 1980s and 1990s and this meant that opportunities for workers with disabilities expanded. Social unionism and feminism were important in public-sector unions, further supporting disability rights.

The book claims to be about Canada but is really about Ontario, and even more specifically, Toronto. (All of the interviewees were in Toronto.) Some Canadian historians inevitably will complain about books like this because they do not represent the whole country. Instead of being a deficit in this book, this regional focus should be considered an opportunity and invitation for others to expand the historiography. Work and rights are vastly different in Canada's different provinces. Galer has given historians the first theoretical and empirical overview of how they might intersect with disability in any given provincial context. Other historians can now test this in their own studies of work, disability, or regionalism across Canada.

A periodic distraction is the use of the exact same interviewee quotation on more than occasion. This seems to arise because of the way Galer has organized rich data sources. His interviews reveal so much that they can speak to multiple topics, thus causing these unfortunate duplica-

tions. However, this is an ambitious and largely successful book. It deserves a wide readership because of its potential to expand the historiography about work, rights and rights movements, and policy (federal and provincial)—in the style of the new disability history—by bringing a disability analysis to bear on these topics.

Note

[1]. COPOH is now called the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

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