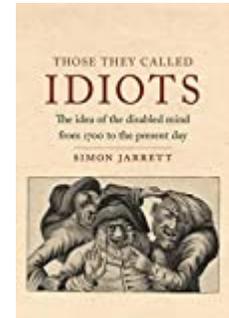


Simon Jarrett. *Those They Called Idiots: The Idea of the Disabled Mind from 1700 to the Present Day.* London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 304 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78914-301-0.



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Simon Jarrett's new book will strike many potential readers as offensive given that the title, and text throughout, contains a word that is universally detested as an insult by people with mental disabilities upon whom it has been imposed. Readers will find other similarly detestable words that have a history of cruelly isolating people with intellectual disabilities. There is no doubt, however, that Jarrett's emphasis is to understand the meaning behind this word (and similar terms), how it evolved, and how it impacted people over a three-hundred-year period. In doing so, his work is deeply humane, not least because of his clarity in denouncing the emotional and physical cruelties inflicted upon people labeled "idiots" as well as the vicious cruelties of a society that eventually imprisoned those deemed mentally different, for simply being different. Thus, his book is not a "balanced" treatment with meandering qualifications that leaves the reader wondering, "what does the author think about his topic?" It is instead a rigorous exposition of how grotesquely prejudiced beliefs about mental disability have had such a dev-

astating impact for those who had to live with the consequences.

In his introduction, Jarrett underlines that a key point of his book is that people with intellectual disabilities are "simply humans, without having to jump through a series of meritocratic hoops before society is prepared to accept them as such" (p. 12). In doing so, he points out how people with intellectual disabilities have been marginalized within the historiography that this study helps to redress. The author examines intellectual disability as a fickle "*idea*, one which changes over time" while the lives of people directly impacted by this evolving concept are the book's prime concern (p. 16). Jarrett explains his use of the term "idiot" and similar terms that are universally regarded as insulting: "To avoid ahistoricism, and to capture important truths about periods in history, the terminology in use at the various time periods described is used; this includes idiocy, imbecility, mental deficiency, moron, mental handicap and so on. None of these of course is acceptable terminology outside their historical context in public dis-

course today, all having become terms of abuse or anachronistic” (p. 18).

The book’s first section, comprising three chapters, focuses on the period from 1700 to 1812, for which Jarrett describes the wide range of popular and legal concepts around idiocy and imbecility. He notes that during late medieval periods in English history—where his book is primarily, though not exclusively, geographically situated—the ruling class viewed illiterate masses as “idiotic” given their low social status. Gradually, legal thinkers and the wider public, but not medical doctors, began to narrow down to whom this term was, or was not, applied. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a person labeled as an “idiot” was deemed below those defined as an “imbecile” in terms of mental capacity. As Jarrett notes, “the legal profession simply confirmed what the public already discerned”; that is, it was just “common sense” to determine who was an “idiot” (p. 40). The author effectively uses legal records to show that people labeled “idiots” were viewed as part of the community from which they came and were seldom sent to prison for criminal offenses during the 1700s. Instead, local people who knew and liked the accused, whether in a domestic setting or workplace, would vouch for them in court, helping to secure acquittals for crimes deemed less serious. This was at a time when the legal system was merciless toward the poor and disenfranchised. The author is quick to point out, however, that people accused of violent or serial crimes, no matter what their mental capacity, were seldom shown leniency. Though he does not romanticize their place in eighteenth-century English society, noting harassment and cruelties inflicted on them, Jarrett argues convincingly that people deemed “idiots” “remained at the heart of communities: challenged, vulnerable, perceived as different and lacking capacity, but with sufficient personal capital in the eyes of others to be worth defending” (p. 53).

Jarrett researched a wide array of primary sources, including the already mentioned court records, but even more importantly for public attitudes of the time, books that recorded popular slang, jokes, and folk tales, all of which reveal how the term “idiot” came to be defined, not only as a category denoting diminished mental ability, but also as a way of dismissing someone regarded as irresponsible or infuriating in some way. It was also during the eighteenth century that the physical representation of “idiots” was popularized with caricatures of people with a vacant expression, drooling, open-mouthed, as shown in some illustrations in the book. This was at a time when people caricatured in this way often toiled primarily as unskilled workers and servants, with a minority in skilled jobs, though abuse from nondisabled people was all too evident. Jarrett argues that while being laughed at was “cruel and uncomfortable”, there were plenty of others besides those called “idiots” who were subjected to such taunts and that “a person was noticed, accepted as part of the social fabric” while being mocked (p. 81). This claim seems hard to sustain, however, since while Jarrett shows that plenty of nondisabled people were ridiculed, some were in a far better position to deflect insults or fight back than were others, such as those with mental disabilities. Jarrett also notes elsewhere in the book that first-person accounts of intellectually disabled people are not available from those derided in this way during most of this history, so we have no way of knowing their torments compared to those of their social superiors during the eighteenth century.

Jarrett concludes the first section of his book with a chapter on “racial ideas of idiocy” in which European travelers during the 1700s, convinced of their own superiority as white Christians, looked with scorn on indigenous people wherever they were encountered across the globe. The insouciance with which various indigenous people regarded foreign interlopers upset European egos that expected deference and wanted to be looked

upon with awe. White travelers who wrote about their experiences began to compare indigenous peoples' indifference to their presence as evidence of "idiocy" similar to that with which they regarded those who had been so categorized back home. As this travel writing was influential back in Europe among elite thinkers who were developing concepts around race and difference, and as European empires continued to expand, "domestic ideas of idiocy and racial encounters abroad became ever more entangled" (p. 104). Related to this, just as concepts of guardianship had evolved in places like England during the eighteenth century to protect people deemed "idiots" from exploiters (e.g., inheritance-related greed by predatory marriage partners), so too the concept of guardianship was extended by the racist thinking of imperialists who rationalized overseeing non-Europeans for their own supposed benefit. This was further subdivided based on three types of presumed racial and mental development by European-based writers: people derided as "savage" were defined as "a child and an idiot"; people derided as "barbarian" were defined as "a youth and an imbecile"; the exalted "civilized person," who was invariably a white European, was cast as an "adult with perfect faculty of mind" (pp. 114-115). As Jarrett poignantly states: "Idiocy was no longer a joke. Skin colour and racial designation had started to become determinants of mental faculty for the people of the world" (p. 119). All of this was at a time when medical doctors had shown no serious interest in people labeled "idiots" given the belief in their static mental state, and who were therefore viewed as being devoid of medical remedy. This idea was about to change.

As the term "idiot" became globalized by Europeans, so too did the direct consequences of this label become even more intensely punitive than ever before. In the second and longest section of the book, comprising four chapters, Jarrett focuses on the 1812-70 period, during which people called "idiots" were taken seriously by medical professionals who came to view their pre-

viously commonly accepted status in the community as instead a danger warranting scientific scrutiny, social exclusion, and incarceration. Jarrett notes that as medical officials in France and later England, began to come up with classification systems as a sign of their supposed scientific prowess in understanding "idiocy," they nevertheless continued to perpetuate earlier ideas, with one significant exception: the idea that an "idiot" could be dangerous and degenerate, warranting state intervention under the direction of medical officials. This eventually led to the nebulous term "moral imbecile" to categorize a supposedly innocuous-looking person who was without moral scruples or conscience. "Idiocy" began to be subdivided into various categories under which the all-knowing medical professional could discern who was what kind of "idiot," that is, harmless or dangerous. In time, all categories came to be seen as ripe for incarceration. Jarrett is careful to point out that medical ideas around idiocy were challenged and ridiculed by other English professionals including some doctors who were themselves split on the issue of what they meant by "imbecile." This intra-professional conflict significantly undermined medical claims of scientific certitude in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Yet the author also shows how, beginning in 1789 and increasingly in the early nineteenth century, doctors began to be called upon as "experts" in trials of people deemed "idiots." This was crucial as it led to far greater and more consistent severity in judgments for the accused than before. A gradual coarsening of attitudes toward people deemed "idiots" was reflected as well among Romantic writers who, inspired as they were by the ideals of the French Revolution, did not extend their humanitarian impulse to those whom they saw as devoid of valiant characteristics that they deemed as essential to furthering a progressive polity.

These developments occurred when, from the 1830s, cultural ideas of idiocy were transformed into a general contempt for people deemed as such. People labeled "idiots" were increasingly

viewed not as real people who were part of the wider community, as in the past, but instead as worthy only of condescending pity at best, or detestation and confinement. Charles Dickens's scorn for people deemed "idiots" was evident in his writings, including his belief that they would be better off dead—a far cry from eighteenth-century popular culture, which Jarrett describes earlier. People deemed "idiots" were thus no longer considered a part of local communities by more people than ever before. Jarrett also makes clear that people deemed "idiots" were linked with subject peoples in the wider empire by asylum operators and colonizers who borrowed upon each other's prejudices about those they governed to further classify and regiment both groups. This included the eventually discarded idea that moral treatment would "achieve discipline and control over troubled, and troubling, populations who would then live orderly, regulated and unthreatening lives" (p. 194). Mid-nineteenth-century proponents of scientific racism, such as Robert Knox and Arthur de Gobineau, equated notions about idiocy with the mental development of racialized people, a classification system that reached its most notorious expression with John Langdon Down in the 1860s when he coined the designation "Mongolian imbecile," or "Mongolism." This term was part of medical diagnostics for a century until it was dropped in 1965, by which time geneticists showed race had nothing to do with having trisomy 21. Jarrett argues convincingly that officials who ran nineteenth-century asylums and empires were linked through medical and racist imperialism in their respective and intertwined spheres of influence as well as in their exchange of ideas around "idiocy."

The increasing marginalization of people labeled "idiots" by the mid-1800s through public and medical beliefs and practices led to their eventual large-scale confinement in prison-like institutions. Jarrett traces how concepts of citizenship espoused since the late 1700s by European and American writers left out those believed to be incapable of exercising their own rights. Neither

the Left, which promoted the earning of civil rights through mental articulation of such a concept, nor the Right, where contempt was expressed for the illiterate masses who needed to know their place, had any desire to include people labeled "idiots" into their ideas for the wider community. This increasing exclusion of people labeled "idiots" from any place in society by activists of all political persuasions contributed to what Jarrett describes as "the drift to the asylum" (p. 235). Legislative changes, such as the 1834 Poor Law in England and Wales, led to a greater emphasis on institutional rather than community supervision for the poorest and most disabled members, leading to many being confined in regimented workhouses. The 1845 County Asylums Act led to mentally disabled people being viewed as a state obligation so that over the next several decades into the 1870s private and then public asylums for "idiots" were established all over England and Wales and were replicated in other jurisdictions. "Medicine had gained ascendancy over them and the power to identify, control and treat them. Society had turned its back on them" (p. 241), Jarrett writes. Thus, by the late 1800s, a conglomeration of medical, cultural, and legislative changes had led to people labeled "idiots" being systematically shunned, denounced, and imprisoned, a process that had wide support from across the political spectrum.

Having established the multitude of factors that led to incarceration in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, Jarrett's third and final section of the book, comprising two chapters, quickly covers a sweeping 150-year period from 1870 until the first two decades of the 2000s. He begins this section with a discussion of the impact of eugenics policies on people labeled "idiots." This includes discussion of Darwinian evolutionary concepts that linked animals with mentally disabled people, claiming to show the way in which certain people had reverted to earlier, primitive stages of evolution. Along with the labels of "idiot" and "imbecile" as supposed descriptors

of mental status that have come to be universally despised as insults, a new term was coined: “mor-on.” This term designated a person who was rated as having a capacity above the preceding labels, but was similar to “moral imbecile” in regard to their supposed dangerousness and amorality. People with these labels attached to them were targeted for institutionalization, though some family members were able to care for their loved ones at home despite pressure to lock up their relative by medico-state officials. Britain’s 1913 mental deficiency acts solidified these prejudices as supposed scientific fact in a catastrophic way, as Jarrett makes plain: “The drive to incarcerate the deficient was relentless” (p. 269). Exploitation of inmate labor; filthy, wretched, crowded, abusive conditions in asylums; guardianship that reduced confined people to perennial infantile status—all took place under the guise of eugenic philosophies that were both punitive and moralistic, casting people labeled as “idiots” as a burden on society.

The most horrific impact of such thinking was, of course, under Nazi rule in Germany beginning in 1933, and in parts of Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II, which Jarrett briefly summarizes. He notes that while eugenics appeared to be discredited after 1945, this did not help people with intellectual disabilities in the immediate postwar decades, as they continued to languish in filthy institutions. The advent of Britain’s National Health Service only saw further marginalization as resources were diverted to prioritize able-bodied people, not the masses of disabled people in institutions. Jarrett makes clear what these post-World War II decades were like for intellectually disabled people locked up at this time: “The pervasive regulation and the ferocity of the punishments and treatment reflected not only the suffocating institutional moral corruption, and the dehumanization of the deficient patients, but a form of rage against a group who had come to be seen as inadequate humans and who needed to be somehow kept for their whole lives in a form of netherworld, leading useless, purposeless existences” (p.

284). With rising awareness of the rights of disenfranchised people, parents and disabled people organized against this oppressive system, including opposition to what advocates described as “the exploitation of patients in paid work” (p. 287). This gradual shift in tone supporting rights over repression was not uncontested, as eugenics ideas continued to be promoted among medical officials, even if not so clearly publicly expressed as in the pre-World War II period.

With continuing reports of abuse in state-run institutions, incarceration of intellectually disabled people began to be slowly rolled back in Britain, such as with a 1970 law that guaranteed education for all children in local areas, and a 1981 government report which advocated closing institutions in favor of community supports. Unfortunately, the austerity measures of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government (1979-90) and subsequent Tory and Labor successors, latched on to abuse reports as a way of promoting the removal of significant amounts of state funding from disabled people in large institutions without reallocating money in sufficient quantities to local communities. This process of de- or transinstitutionalization still saw people transferred to smaller institutions at the neighborhood level. As a result, many people who were discharged from discredited massive asylums to the community still ended up in institutions. While terminology changed, prejudices and inadequate resources continued in the daily lives of people with mental disabilities. Nevertheless, Jarrett concludes that the “great return” to the community of intellectually disabled people in the late 1900s had been “surprisingly successful” (p. 304). He also warns, however, that reinstitutionalization in the early 2000s may forebode ill for the future: “Is the murderous beast of the institution on the march again?” (p. 305).

At the beginning of this book, Jarrett notes that, in comparison to mad people, first-person accounts by people with intellectual disabilities are largely absent due to their widespread illiteracy

for much of the three hundred years described in this study. Yet, at the end of the book, where he does note the importance of self-advocacy groups by people with intellectual disabilities in recent decades, he could have included more readily available first-person accounts from people who are the primary focus of this study. The lack of attention paid to activist efforts by disabled people themselves, while briefly mentioned, could have been expanded upon with more detail, and voices from those who, as Jarrett so rightly notes, have been historically excluded from discussions about themselves, might have been heard. This caveat aside, Jarrett's book is an impressive, accessible, and richly illustrated study about a maligned group of people in disability history. He bluntly shows how the evolution of cultural, legal, and medical thinking transformed a general descriptor into a specific label to oppress an entire group of people who continue to live under the shadow of dubious ideas about "the disabled mind" that are still evident today.

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