

Gildas Brégain. *Pour une histoire du handicap au XXe siècle: Approches transnationales (Europe et Amériques) (French Edition).* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018. 340 pp. EUR 36.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-7535-6503-6.



Reviewed by Holly Caldwell (Chestnut Hill College)

Published on H-Disability (March, 2022)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Following the First World War, Europeans were confronted with the issue of disability in ways they had never experienced in previous decades. As stigma developed around disability and the language regarding the definition of disability began to shift at the turn of the century, individuals with disabilities came to be regarded as “un-productive citizens.” Before this shift, individuals with different types of disabilities were regarded as central to the social fabric and contributors to the wage-labor economy and the home front. In *Pour une histoire du handicap au XX^e siècle: Approches transnationales (Europe et Amériques)*, Gildas Brégain, a scholar of modern history and disability studies, explores the development of disability public policies over the course of six decades from a transnational perspective. According to Brégain, norms linked to the treatment of disabled individuals that were constructed in the postwar period were largely influenced by political maneuvers at both local and international levels.

Impressive in its scope and depth of analysis, *Pour une histoire du handicap au XX^e siècle* explores the histories of public policy development from a transnational perspective, using three countries, Argentina, Brazil, and Spain, as case studies to delve into how modern international policies influenced powers at the local level. This complicated narrative is achieved by dividing the book into two parts, each of which consists of two chapters. The first part is chronological in nature. It traces the evolution of how disabilities were perceived, categorized, and treated in the wake of the First World War (chapter 1), then discusses the emergence and influence of international agencies designed to address concerns (chapter 2). In the second part of the book, chapters 3 and 4, Brégain examines how, under dictatorial regimes such as Argentina, Brazil, and Spain, public assistance represented only a fraction of the care offered to those in need, and as the need increased, those with disabilities often received assistance from family, religious, and other private groups while government support waned. As rights for the dis-

abled increased on the international scale, they often weakened in these three nations. A concise yet detailed introduction and conclusion frame the work by providing readers with the historical context that briefly describes how, in the twentieth century, multiple rehabilitative policies concerning disabilities were initially formed in Europe and later became a global model imposed on other nations.

Drawing on a wealth of archival and institutional records from various countries and international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization, as well as a comprehensive list of individual associations providing services for those with disabilities, Brégain offers an overarching analysis of rehabilitative policies that evolved under the influence of the United Nations and other specialized agencies. From 1918 through the end of the Second World War, there was an expansion of state intervention in the private lives of disabled individuals, particularly returning soldiers who became disabled as a direct result of their experience during war. Individuals coping with various disabilities, such as deafness or blindness, as well as those who suffered from war-related mutilation, fell under the umbrella of nations that attempted at first to establish compulsory employment acts before moving toward the rehabilitative model. Such policies were inspired by the long-standing view that the disabled lacked self-sufficiency and were shaped in large part by the Elizabethan poor laws of the seventeenth century, which categorized the poor into two distinct groups—the deserving and the undeserving. In short, the deserving poor were individuals who wanted to work but were physically incapable of doing so, whereas the undeserving poor were individuals who were able to work but refused to do so. Although individuals with disabilities (individuals who were defined as mentally deficient, maimed, blind, or deaf, among others) fell into the category of the deserving poor, Brégain notes how this classification often contributed to their neglect by state officials under dictat-

orial regimes such as Argentina, Brazil, and Spain. This occurred because individuals with disabilities were often treated as having conditions that required rehabilitative services to overcome their condition so they could conform to the construct of an able-bodied society (referred to as the medical model or medicalization), as opposed to society providing an inclusive environment and services that met their individual needs.

According to Brégain, between the years 1945 and 1983 many western European states adopted comprehensive protective measures as part of a new rehabilitative model. In tracing the development of specialized agencies concerning disability in the first section of the book, he highlights how these agencies were attempting to address concerns such as blindness, deafness, and mental deficiencies while also operating in conjunction with broader international forces of the period. It was during the 1950s that the North American model, due in part to the intervention of the United States, began to play an increased role in enforcing the rehabilitative model on a global scale. Though it had gained momentum due to support by organizations such as the World Health Organization, United Nations, UNESCO, and UNICEF, it was nonetheless rejected in many eastern European countries and other underdeveloped nations for its impracticality and difficulty to implement.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, policymakers in Argentina, Brazil, and Spain often neglected to pass legislation in support of those with disabilities, actions that would leave these populations in crisis and without adequate state-sponsored funding. This occurred despite the fact that, as Brégain highlights, these dictatorships were at various moments in their rise and fall from power. Franco's regime in Spain came to an end with his death in 1975, whereas dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina were established in 1964 and 1976, respectively. Until the 1960s, Argentina, Brazil, and Spain developed distinct disability

policies to address different concerns, such as deafness and blindness, special education services, and those who had recently become disabled either through war-related injuries, work-related accidents, or as a result of illness. Throughout the 1970s, the unification of public policy concerning disabilities reform and a push for equal rights at the international level led to a partial integration of policies in these three nations. However, what is clear is that corruption contributed to disability becoming a politicized topic in these nations—one had to obtain political favor from those in power to see progress on a certain agenda.

Pour une histoire du handicap au XX^e siècle analyzes how international public policies and dif-

ferent political agendas impacted the lives of the disabled during the twentieth century. Although the successes and failures of policies enacted under the three dictatorial regimes discussed in the book depended on geopolitical context, there was one common thread among them. Disabled individuals were subject to ever-increasing repression and were unable to secure equal footing with their able-bodied counterparts. This book will interest scholars who specialize in the fields of public policy and social welfare, in addition to historians of disability and Latin America and Spain. It will also appeal to readers who are interested in how historically rooted, politically motivated policies influenced public policy reform, which continues to affect the everyday realities of individuals with disabilities today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Holly Caldwell. Review of Brégain, Gildas. *Pour une histoire du handicap au XX^e siècle: Approches transnationales (Europe et Amériques) (French Edition)*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. March, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57576>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.