

BOOK REVIEW

Cultural Locations of Disability

SHARON L. SNYDER & DAVID T. MITCHELL

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Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell are US scholars working at the University of Illinois at Chicago. They have previously published important books, such as *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies on Discourse*.

In their book *Cultural Locations of Disability* they trace how disabled people came to be looked upon as biologically deviant. Using the eugenic period as a starting point they examine cultural spaces that have been developed exclusively on behalf of disabled people. Included in their understanding of cultural spaces are locations like the 19th century charity systems, institutions for the feeble-minded (during the eugenics period), sheltered workshops for the “multi-handicapped”, documentary film representations of disability and current academic trends in research on disability.

Snyder and Mitchell argue that the social production of human variance as deviance (from an empirical norm) places disabled people in significant jeopardy. The modern obsession with order and tidiness and our desire to attain perfect bodies constantly produces images of disabled people as living examples of what is imperfect. They continue to illustrate how disability discourses and practises are important as examples of how our society has infused different modes of social obedience – a transition from a historical period (eugenic period) where instrumental techniques were applied to a period (the present) where self-policing and regulation of the self prevails.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part the authors address eugenics, the making of a US disability minority and what they call the Eugenic Atlantic – disability and the making of an international science. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Henry Friedlander (1997) and Robert Lifton (2000) the authors illustrate how the cultural (dis)location of disabled people was closely linked to an idea of social prophylactic against members of society who were imagined to endanger the racial “stock” from the inside. This was an ideology directly responsible for the sterilisation and then the medical killings of hundreds of thousands of disabled people in Europe during the period of 1938–1945.

In part two Snyder and Mitchell examine the echoes of eugenics – primarily by looking into (US) contemporary institutions. One main issue

is to examine the parallels between Michel Foucault's research into disciplinary regimes in the 19th century and the regimes used in institutional practices of today. As their starting point they focus on these practices as recorded in a recent series of documentary films by Frederick Wiseman filmed on location at the Helen Keller Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Alabama.

In his works Foucault identified sites such as the asylum, the courts, the prison and the clinic that adopted shared techniques of discipline. Foucault's analyses of the cultural locations illustrates how these became sites where professions such as medicine, psychiatry and rehabilitation transformed the "human monster" into "abnormals", as a naturalization of difference that placed the abnormal on a continuum of human capacities. Like Foucault's historical research, Wiseman's films identify some of the cultural locations typically occupied by disabled people today: prisons, hospitals and sheltered workshops. One important message that comes across in Wiseman's films is that instead of violence against bodies, modern institutions (in the US), regiment time into minute segments of trivial occupation. In line with Foucault's arguments this oversight of space and time distributes and compartmentalises bodies into spaces that allow for optimum oversight and regulations. In institutions residents pursue self-care and vocational training in order to achieve independence. Ironically, engaging in these practices of self-care the result is extreme compartmentalisation and distance from one's fellow inmates. The authors illustrate how it is possible to discern the echoes from eugenic practices in the temporary US society and they hold a view contrary to many scholars of eugenics who claim that the movement collapsed in reaction to the Nazi atrocities during the Second World War.

In part three the authors examine the institutionalisation of disability studies and make the claim that institutionalisation resists reflexive inquiries about whether or not more research is inherently better. They proceed to point out that what they refer to as "the modern disability research industry" is not enacting an appropriate level of restraint with respect to the value of disabled people's pursuit of their own objectives. They make the claim that researchers are running the risk of reproducing an oppressive structure that disability studies was expected to correct, or at least avoid.

The three parts of the book are exactly that – three parts – and each part is in itself a more or less completed and interesting story. However, read as a whole the book provides an analysis of how dominant culture works. Snyder and Mitchell bring together different strands of knowledge in order to advance a deeper understanding of the complex attitudes surrounding disability and disabled people. The authors examine how different cultural locations of disability can be looked upon as different kinds of social oppression not only by the exclusion policies of eugenics but also by a pervasive policy of inclusion. On this point they echo the reflections made by the French historian Stiker (1999) when he states that the problem of our time is not a failure to integrate but of integrating too well, integrating in such a way that identicalness reigns.

Even if it is framed within a US setting, this is an important book also for a European audience. Hopefully the book will be read by a number of scholars and students within the field of disability studies. It should be added that the complexity of the issues addressed in the book calls for theoretical reflections and empirical data not included in the text, but on the other hand, some of these supplementary texts are available elsewhere.

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