

BOOK REVIEW

The ugly laws: disability in public, by Susan M. Schweik, New York, New York University Press, 2009, 431 pp., US\$24.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8147-4057-6

Susan M. Schweik, professor of English and the co-director of the Disability Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley, says that the idea for *The ugly laws: disability in public* arose after she failed to give an answer to her colleague's question. Her colleague asked if she knew whether the 'ugly law', early twentieth century American ordinance she had come to know as prohibiting 'diseased, maimed, and deformed persons' from appearing in public, were actually ever actively enforced anywhere. Although the ugly law had for decades been the bread-and-butter of disability activists' and theorists' depiction of the discrimination and oppression that disabled people had faced in the American society, Schweik realized that she did not know the answer to the question and decided to find out what these laws were all about.

The ugly laws is a story of the municipal ordinances that made up the figure of the 'unsightly beggar' at the turn of the twentieth century America. The book is divided into three parts and has 11 chapters. Schweik examines ordinances' textual variants across a relatively broad time span (1876–1920) and in different cities across the United States. By being critical of the disability activists' view of the ugly law as a blanket solution designed specifically for excluding disabled people from the public sphere by denying them the access to the city streets, she touches on an important and sometimes problematic question in the relationship between disability activists' history politics and the study of history. According to Schweik, the conventional view of the ugly law, although well suited for the activists' political purposes, is oversimplified, ahistorical and fails to present the laws in their right context as begging ordinances. Thus, her main objective is to show that there was not only one type of ugly law, but many, and to situate the ugly laws into a historical context, to understand what factors contributed to the enactment of these statutes, and what was their purpose. In addition, Schweik also aims to contribute to the body of disability studies by utilizing the story of the ugly laws in rethinking aspects of disability theory, and in turn to use disability theory as an instrument in reconsidering aspects of both the past and the present-day American culture.

In the first part of the book, Schweik traces the structural and cultural factors, ideologies and actors contributing to the emergence of the ugly laws, or unsightly begging ordinances, which according to her is their historically more accurate name. The relevant legislation is tracked across the country by utilizing extensive source material ranging from contemporary city records, police reports and court cases to newspaper articles and popular fiction. Schweik begins by presenting three examples of the ugly laws' emergence, in San Francisco, Chicago and New Orleans. From the outset, it is made clear that ugly laws were not independent ordinances in the city

code books but a part of a broader set of begging statutes that were intended to root out a variety of unwanted phenomena perceived as mendicancy and other disturbances in the urban environment.

The first chapters of the book present an intricate depiction of American society at the turn of the twentieth century, consisting of the structural and cultural factors intersecting the emergence of the ugly laws. The role of a driving force behind the ordinances' enactment is accorded to Charity Organization Society (COS), an upper class movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century. COS set out to eliminate pauperism by 'scientific' organized charity that was meant to put a stop to begging by detecting fraudulent cases and channelling the benevolent but often misguided acts of charity to cases considered as worthy and deserving.

According to Schweik, COS also promoted ugly laws in the context of the late nineteenth century 'tramp scare' as an attempt to prevent the gathering of the 'ugly crowds', growing public resistance to the arrests of beggars and public alliance with them. Thus, she reads the act of begging to be more than a mere means of subsistence. Begging, and the crowds gathering to prevent the police from interfering with it, are understood as 'infrapolitics', acts of everyday resistance and a political statement. In Schweik's reading, COS's call for the ugly ordinances was a part of the growing worry of the working class organization in the American society: an important motivation for the ordinances' enactment was the perceived need to suppress the forming class struggle in the streets around unsightly beggars.

Although important, the ugly crowds alone are not sufficient to explain the emergence of the ugly laws. Therefore, Schweik proceeds to discuss a variety of contextual factors explaining the creation of the unsightly beggar. These are closely linked with the modernization of the American society, and include monitoring the population, the system of monetary compensation for industrial accidents and the rise of institutions and rhetorics of care. Schweik's analysis portrays the unsightly beggar as a product of the material conditions of the capitalist industrial society and of the growing interest and intervention in the citizens' everyday lives by the authorities and experts. Here Schweik draws on Foucauldian notion of assessing and ranking biopower that underlies the modern order and that, instead of punishment, prescribes care for those falling out from the scope of normality. According to Schweik, ugly laws ordering unsightly beggars off the streets and to almshouses was '*—just what the doctor ordered for the one who needs to be well cared for*' (64, emphasis added). Moreover, the evolving compensatory systems for industrial accidents and pension schemes for the war veterans made almsgiving to beggars seem more and more unnecessary, and thus justified the prohibitions. The ugly laws also seem a perfect fit for the reformists' objectives in the Progressive era by functioning as a tool for planning and managing city spaces, encouraging proper behaviour in citizens and discouraging indecency.

Part two traces unsightly beggars' identities by mapping the immediate textual surroundings of the ugly laws in the city codebooks and by examining the various societal questions in terms of gender, sex, immigration and race that ugly laws were expected to solve. According to Schweik, understanding these intersections is important because focusing too much on the definition of 'diseased, maimed, and the deformed' in the ordinances and failing to see disability as entangled with other minority group histories distorts the analysis and hides the individuals at these intersections. For example, the blind Italian organ-grinder at the streets of Chicago who was doubly marked: both disabled and foreign. This analysis cracks the

traditional views of beggars and disabled people as homogenous groups and reveals the context in which the ugly laws emerged.

The ugly laws' greatest merit is its depiction of the many identities of the ordinances' subjects, the unsightly beggars. One of Schweik's main findings is that ugly laws break up disability as a homogenous category and reveal its entanglements with class, gender, sexuality, national identity, race and religion. Moreover, ugly laws are studied from the viewpoint of the unsightly beggar, thus a more active role is given to them than has been customary in the literature. Instead of treating beggars merely as passive objects of middle- and upper class reformers' control efforts, begging is discussed as an act and a survival tactic in city streets' severe circumstances. Moreover, although the political memory of the ugly laws reads 'disabled people' as their target, Schweik's analysis shows that these laws were designed at least as much on curbing the begging of those *pretending* to be disabled. Part one ends with an absorbing discussion on the role of fakers or 'sham cripples' and their status compared with the 'really afflicted' beggars. Here ugly laws are understood as an attempt, not so much to deny certain individuals a permission to *appear* in public as such, but to prohibit *the act* of 'getting ugly' as a means of livelihood from both of these groups.

The final section of the book moves on to look for signs of the contemporary resistance to the ugly laws. The last chapters present an intriguing discussion of literary pieces written by mendicants, the unsightly beggars, themselves. They are treated as exponents of the 'diseased, maimed, and deformed', who by writing resisted ugly ordinances and fought for their right to appear and earn their livelihood in the city streets. This analysis further highlights the individuals in the unsightly beggar category by presenting them as actors and by shedding light on their survival tactics.

The ugly laws is an ambitious book. With close ties to disability studies it is not only a historical study on the ugly laws, but also a bidirectional re-evaluation of both American culture and the concept of disability. Such a wide-reaching discussion, however, can become somewhat cluttered at times. In many respects, this is due to the research subject, since the ugly laws were a miscellaneous collection of ordinances varying in textual, temporal, and geographical context. Also, the very wide scope of Schweik's analysis on the contextual factors based on the extensive archival material and secondary literature takes away some of the depth from her analysis. Many times the reader is left with a feeling that the text raises many extremely interesting questions, but would have produced better answers if the questions would have not been quite so numerous. For example, a systematic discussion on the significance of begging as a mode of income would have helped the reader to better understand the scope of the question and to further situate the research subject into a context.

Furthermore, a more detailed discussion on the concept of ugly ordinance and on the selection of the ordinances discussed in the book would have been useful. According to Schweik, most American cities probably enacted ugly laws in the turn of the twentieth century (3). Thus, it would have been useful to know why exactly these ordinances were selected. Moreover, Schweik states that, '*But within each city there were many ugly laws, not one. Definitions of and penalties for unsightliness could take different forms for women and men, Italians than African Americans, and so on*' (18, emphasis added). The reader would have benefited from knowing more about the grounds by which an ordinance is categorized as 'ugly', notably when the textual position and formulation of these ordinances in the codebooks varied considerably.

According to Schweik, some scholars have argued that the ugly laws were characteristic of American culture. The context, however, in which Schweik shows the ugly laws emerged, was not confined to the American society. Modernization with its intricate threads was a transnational phenomenon and took its full effect also in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century where governments were fighting pauperism and vagrancy by seeking for more 'rational' and 'scientific' solutions to need. Hence, *The ugly laws*, by exposing the complex ties between begging and disability raises important viewpoints to the body of studies discussing the dynamics of begging and of the developing social policies also in the European context.

Recent concerns over the increasing number of Romany beggars in European cities and outcries for uprooting street begging show that *The ugly laws'* dynamics are specific neither to a certain culture nor to a certain era. For example, a bill demanding prohibition of begging was introduced in the Finnish parliament in spring 2010 on the grounds of improving the pleasantness and safety of the city environment. According to polls on the Finnish sentiments towards aid, the attitudes towards beggars are often harsher than towards many other needy groups because beggars are not considered as equally 'deserving' as, for example, the elderly or sick children (Pessi 2009). Hence, it seems that beggars who will not consent to stay hidden still act as society's bad conscience and as an active reminder of the existing poverty which many people would rather live without.

Reference

- Pessi, A.B. 2009. Suomalaisten suhtautuminen kerjäämiseen ja apuun heille [Finnish attitudes towards begging]. In *Kerjääminen eilen ja tänään* [Begging in the past and present], ed. Virpi Mäkinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi. Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino.

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