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On the Merits of Labour Histories of Disability

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Packing Disability into the Historian's Toolbox: On the Merits of Labour Histories of Disability

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DISABILITY AND LABOUR HISTORIANS have a lot in common. Both fields work from an interdisciplinary framework, have scholarly roots in social movement activism, are politically left-leaning, are critical of the economic and political status quo, focus on socially-constructed barriers, and foreground working and marginalized figures in a more inclusive academic discourse. Born of different generations, labour historians and disability studies scholars broke away from a stifling parent academic discourse – one as part of the New Left movement, another from the corners of medical history. Vigorous criticism of contemporary and historical structures that control and oppress marginalized populations is perhaps the strongest link connecting these disciplines.

In 2012, disability historian Geoffrey Reaume observed, “Disability history in Canada, incorporating the perspectives of disabled people using a critical theoretical approach based on rights and inclusion, not charity and pity, is new in this country as elsewhere.”¹ Reaume concluded, “Whatever form our past takes in the future, we can only interpret it if we make a deliberate effort to maintain and continue to collect our documentary heritage that is all too easily forgotten and discarded – like so many disabled people were in the

1. Geoffrey Reaume, “Disability History in Canada: Present Work in the Field and Future Prospects,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, 1 (2012): 36.

past and still are today.”² Disability history is a subfield of “critical disability studies,” which distinguishes itself from the vast array of literature *about* disability, primarily in the fields of medicine and rehabilitation, by centring analysis on the subjective experience and agency *of* people with disabilities within a socially constructed environment rather than the “objective” projections of others, which are usually nondisabled professionals writing from their respective fields. An example of this contrast includes the difference between a study based on interviews with former patients on their experience of living in an institution grounded in their own words versus an institutional history of a particular institution surveying changes in the application of various medical and therapeutic interventions.

By the 1990s, some scholars – often connected with the disability rights movement – began to challenge the absence of disabled peoples’ voices in mainstream academic discourse and historiography in particular. One of the earliest Canadian scholars to do this was a non-historian, Mary Tremblay, whose work analyzed the experiences of people with spinal cord injuries within rehabilitation programs and subsequent struggle with reintegration.³ Tremblay’s studies observed that most people with disabilities, regardless of the origin of their impairment, relied heavily on family support and individual resilience. Studies such as Tremblay’s demonstrated the possibilities for investigating social, economic, and cultural context surrounding disability that had been overlooked in existing historiography. Fast forward to the launch of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* in 2012 and we see a vibrant academic community of researchers interested in researching and publishing contemporary and historical work from a critical disability studies lens. Reaume’s essay in the inaugural issue points to precipitous growth in the field of disability history in Canada and elsewhere since the 1990s, as well as major gaps and opportunities that remain in the historiography.

Two recent anthologies in disability history reveal this enormous potential for including disability as an effective analytical lens in labour history. *Disability Histories* (2014) edited by Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, and *Civil Disabilities* (2015) edited by Nancy Hirschmann and Beth Linker contain some of the most recent works in Canadian and American disability history that incorporate critical perspectives of disability and labour. Disability can provide labour history new insights about such varied topics as class, gender, race, and ethnicity, social movement activism, citizenship and civic engagement, unions, constructions of work, institutionalization, and precarious

2. Reaume, “Disability History in Canada,” 64.

3. Mary Tremblay, “Going back to Civvy Street: A Historical Account of the Impact of the Everest and Jennings Wheelchair for Canadian World War II Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury,” *Disability & Society* 11, 2 (1996): 149–170; and Mary Tremblay, Audrey Campbell, and Geoffrey L. Hudson, “When Elevators Were for Pianos: An Oral History Account of the Civilian Experience of Using Wheelchairs in Canadian Society. The First Twenty-Five Years: 1945–1970,” *Disability & Society* 20, 2 (2005): 103–116.

employment. A survey of pieces that touch upon or focus on aspects of labour history serve to provide a glimpse at some of the work being done in this field, indicating opportunities to revisit well-studied topics with fresh eyes in addition to forging ahead in completely new areas.

Intersectionality, particularly the ways in which gender and disability interact, have received much attention in the historiography of disability. In *Disability Histories*, Daniel Blackie considers the experiences of disabled male ex-servicemen in early America who were often unemployed and compelled to apply for pensions since this was a time before veterans and their families were automatically guaranteed continuing support beyond the tenure of their service. Blackie analyzed veterans' applications, extrapolating patterns of cohabitation with non-relatives which he took as an indication that families of disabled ex-servicemen frequently took in boarders in order to supplement the loss of income.⁴ He concludes that families were expected to support disabled people during this period. If the male head of the household was disabled, the pressure to find alternative means of support was even greater in order to "subsist comfortably."⁵ Where the early American family banded around the disabled male head of the household, Herbert Muyinda's study of landmine survivors in late 20th-century Uganda revealed a strikingly different picture for disabled women. Muyinda discovered that female landmine survivors lost status and were seen as an embarrassment to their husbands because of their inability to perform expected domestic tasks.⁶

Audra Jennings' study of gender and activism in postwar America considers the relationship between American disability activists and union leaders. Jennings found activists and unionists worked together to counter popular cultural beliefs about disabled men as "emasculated," recasting injured veterans and workers as "protectors" of nation and industry.⁷ This new narrative rejected the discourse of victimization, drawing close associations between injured workers and wounded soldiers.⁸ Jennings' investigation found disabled girls and women were considered inappropriate for most traditional roles assigned to women in workforce and domestic life, though many people began to resist this marginalization as early as the 1940s. Disabled women

4. Daniel Blackie, "Disability, Dependency, and the Family in the Early United States," in Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2014), 20.

5. Blackie, "Disability, Dependency and the Family," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 21.

6. Herbert Muyinda, "Negotiating Disability: Mobilization and Organization among Landmine Survivors in Late Twentieth Century Northern Uganda," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 103.

7. Audra Jennings, "Engendering and Regendering Disability: Gender and Disability Activism in Postwar America," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 353.

8. Jennings, "Engendering and Regendering Disability," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 354.

who sought more out of life struggled against popular cultural stigma and rehabilitation practices.⁹

Recent contributions to the historiography of the body include Paul Lawrie's examination of the proletarianization of African American workers during the onset of industrialization which further our understanding of the body as a category of analysis during this period.¹⁰ Lawrie considers the ways in which the vocational rehabilitation system in the United States worked to oppress disabled Black Americans through strategic assignment of work and evidence of racial bias in denial of benefits.¹¹ Cultural ideals surrounding physical and moral capabilities were heightened by the introduction of industrial capitalism as workers were forced to compete with each other for wages in the labour market. This economic arrangement tended to marginalize people with disabilities who rated unfavourably against other "able-bodied" workers with the result that other social and legal systems were introduced to deal with the social and economic problem of disabled people.¹² The "logic of capitalism" thus asserted itself in the classification and oppression of people with disabilities whose bodies are thought to exclude them from the principal means of survival in a wage labour economy.

Jagdish Chander takes the well-studied topic of colonialism and examines its influence within the context of blind worker activism in India. Chander determined residential schools for the blind in India introduced the charity and burden narrative of disability which clashed against traditional beliefs and practices that involved blind people in the community.¹³ Informal systems of work and support of blind and disabled people that had existed for centuries in India were challenged by colonial-run residential schools and organizations that transplanted disabling cultural beliefs about disability. By the 1970s, blind graduates of residential schools were among the first in India to challenge these colonial institutions and underlying prejudices that perpetuated them.

9. Jennings, "Engendering and Regendering Disability," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 348–349.

10. Paul Lawrie, "'To Make the Negro Anew': The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination, 1896–1928," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2011. See also: Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (London: Routledge, 2013).

11. Paul R.D. Lawrie, "'Salvaging the Negro': Race, Rehabilitation, and the Body Politic in World War I America, 1917–1924," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 330.

12. Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, "Disability, Work, and Welfare: Challenging the Social Exclusion of Disabled People," *Work, Employment & Society* 19, 3 (2005): 520; Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *American Historical Review*, 108, 3 (June 2003): 766.

13. Jagdish Chander, "Self-Advocacy and Blind Activists: The Origins of the Disability Rights Movement in Twentieth-Century India," in Burch and Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories*, 364–366.

In *Civil Disabilities*, two essays in particular speak to the labour history of disability. Beth Linker and Emily Abel consider the contested history of tuberculosis including ways in which medicine, social welfare, and public health intersect. Linker and Abel argue such intersections reveal cultural constructions of who is considered a burden and who is a resource to society. In particular, they argue "citizenship is bound up with the problem of the unequal distribution of resources in society," including who is considered a burden and who is a resource. The authors find that disability "forces one to contend with difficult and rather dehumanizing questions," confirming the tenuous, biological basis of citizenship.¹⁴

Douglas Baynton extends these questions to a transnational perspective of disability and citizenship in his analysis of American immigration history. Baynton points out that for most of the 20th century, a purely economic view of immigration prevailed. Disabled applicants were routinely refused entry to the United States on the presumption they would be unable to work and thus become a public burden upon their arrival. Immigration officials often did not investigate disabled applicants to determine whether or not they were actually able to work, rather it was "a cultural assumption that disability meant inability to live independently."¹⁵ Similarly, women were typically presumed to be nonworking dependents despite the widespread existence of working women and families dependent on them. A growing rehabilitation movement immediately preceding World War I and its aftermath motivated changes in this approach, including increased awareness of the capabilities of disabled workers. As early as 1914, for example, Henry Ford hired thousands of disabled workers and introduced an antidiscrimination policy. Baynton found some industrial efficiency designers advocated modified work schemes to enable workers with different abilities to function. Baynton argues historians should consider immigration restrictions in their proper context; that is, as one manifestation of systemic barriers confining disabled people, including buildings, streets, transportation, and workplaces that were designed "for certain ways of functioning and not for others."

Ultimately, Baynton circles back to Reaume's calls for a more rigorous and robust labour historiography of disability. Baynton argues for an international labour history that identifies "the reasons for unemployment among people with particular disabilities at particular moments in history" which he argues are "questions to be argued and demonstrated, not simply assumed."¹⁶

14. Beth Linker and Emily K. Abel, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Disease History: Tuberculosis and its Past," in Nancy J. Hirschmann and Beth Linker, eds., *Civil Disabilities: Citizenship, Membership, and Belonging* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 85.

15. Douglas C. Baynton, "Defect: A Selective Reinterpretation of American Immigration History," in Hirschmann and Linker, eds., *Civil Disabilities*, 53.

16. Baynton, "Defect," in Hirschmann and Linker, eds., *Civil Disabilities*, 54.

As these works demonstrate, a greater focus on disability by labour historians provides opportunities to present a more complete picture of historical and contemporary policy questions such as that pertaining to work disability policy and precarious employment. It also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the shared heritage and outlook of disability and labour movements, including past successes in working together to achieve change. Fortunately, the interdisciplinary nature of both disability and labour history as well as the increased attention to the work and employment of disabled people means there is ample space for historians to pack disability in their toolbox of analytical devices.