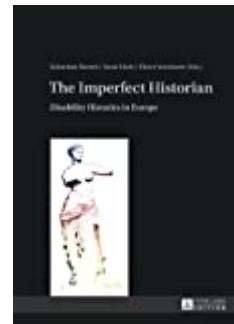


**Sebastian Barsch, Anne Klein, Pieter Verstraete, eds.** *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013. 280 pp. \$60.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-631-63659-6.



**Reviewed by** Rebecca Scales (Rochester Institute of Technology)

**Published on** H-Disability (January, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

*The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe*, edited by Sebastian Barsch, Anne Klein, and Pieter Verstraete, features fourteen essays that explore the history of disability in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present day from a range of disciplinary perspectives: sociology, history, literary studies, philosophy, and musicology. The aims of the volume, the editors suggest, are to counter the “reluctance to engage in methodological and meta-historical reflection” which they see in the “social model” deployed by much recent disability history (p. 8). Instead, they seek to “stimulate and promote self-reflexive poststructuralist research approaches” that broaden our knowledge of what disability “refers to in terms of bodily states, mental conditions, and concrete daily experiences, namely “imperfection” (pp. 8-9). Critical of “disability historians [who] have tended to legitimate their historical inquiry by referring to the political consequences it has for people with disabilities,” the editors suggest that “imperfect” historical narratives refrain from “formulating clear-cut statements about the direction we should follow in order to create a better world” (p. 10).

The first of the book’s four sections, titled “Challenging Methodologies,” features three essays that tackle “marginalized” topics and approaches within disability

history (p. 10). In one of the strongest contributions to the collection, Klaus-Peter Horn and Bianca Frohne challenge the assumption that disability, as a “historically and culturally variable set of assumptions concerning corporeal “difference,” is a uniquely modern phenomenon (p. 17). Where scholars have long asserted that premodern societies marginalized people viewed as physically or intellectually different, the authors suggest that poverty is not the best framework for understanding “disability” before the Enlightenment. Drawing on medieval accounts of miracle cures and sixteenth-century case studies of elite families, Horn and Frohne uncover the complex kin and family networks that provided physical and material support to “disabled” individuals, in turn revealing the “esteem in which [they] were held” (pp. 26-27). Patrick Schmidt draws on literary theories of narrativity to analyze representations of disability in eighteenth-century French and German periodicals. “Story-like texts,” he concludes, rather than being straightforward journalist accounts, were “particularly suited to expressing ideas that went against the grain of prevailing opinion” about disability (p. 57). Finally, Paul von Trigt seeks to develop a “new interpretive framework” for understanding disability that blends “sensory history” with the anthropological theory of “aesthetic

formation to understand the embodied experience of blind people at the Sonneheerdt Institute for the Visually Impaired in the Netherlands (p. 59).

The essays in section 2 of the book, "Power and Identity," draw heavily on the work of Michel Foucault. In her study of Siem, the "first body with autism in the Netherlands," Annemieke van Drenth complicates our understanding of "care" as an expression of power by examining the "dialogic relationships" that emerged between Siem, his parents, and medical professionals at the Dutch Paedagogical Institute during the 1930s-50s, which were both "enabling and disabling at the same time" (p. 94). David Leenen explores "Cripple Welfare," the first state-run scheme to provide for people with disabilities in Germany, as a "technique of government designed to shape the behavior of cripples toward themselves and others" through medical rehabilitation practices designed to reform their bodies and minds (p. 95). As post-WWI veterans' rehabilitation programs expanded to include civilians, so too did their disciplinary mechanisms, by which the cripple would "realize he had to de-cripple himself for his own sake and society's sake. Exercise, self-discipline, and the iron will would allow a normalization of both the physically restored body and the endangered soul" (p. 110). Finally, Hilary Malantino revisits the case of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite whose "diaries" were first introduced to the scholarly world by Foucault in the 1970s, by uncovering the "resistant alternatives modes of being that are worked out in the text" beneath discourses of normalization that Foucault wanted readers to see (p. 123).

"Traveling Knowledge," the third section of the book, illustrates how the movement of ideas across national and cultural boundaries has shaped ideas about bodily difference as well as disability activism. Where disability rights movements have largely been studied in the Anglo-Saxon context, Gilda Bragança uncovers disability activist movements in Argentina, Brazil, and Spain in the 1970s, analyzing the role of Catholic organizations and transitions from dictatorship to democracy in the emergence of protests demanding civil rights for people with physical disabilities. Sebastian Barsch uses the case of Facilitated Communication (FC), a nonverbal method of communication, to examine the circulation of "expert knowledge" and its varied applications. Charting FC's move from Australia in the 1980s to the United States and then to Germany in the early 1990s, Barsch shows how FC allowed parents to construct more positive perceptions of their autistic children, even as it contributed to the further stigmatization of others with intellectual dis-

abilities. The final two essays examine how vocational injuries came to be seen as "disabilities" meriting medical intervention and rehabilitation in two different national contexts. Gaby Admon-Rick explores the history of the disability percentages welfare system in Mandate Palestine and Israel, illustrating how work injury was transformed from a "local, labor, and workplace issue to be negotiated between worker and employer into a state-run issue defining injured workers as invalids or disabled," with their bodies to be "calculated, assessed, assisted, and compensated by the government" (p. 173). Jos Martinez-Prez and Mercedes Del Cura trace the introduction of scientific management and physical rehabilitation techniques in Spain between the two world wars. Rehabilitation promised to reduce disabled workers' "perceived differences with those considered 'normal,'" but was also harnessed to demonstrate that "there was no excuse for those that were lucky enough not to be impaired to shirk responsibility in contributing to production," thus reinforcing the larger task of "disciplining the Spanish people in order to achieve the aims of rationalizing and modernizing the nation" (p. 209).

The final section features four intriguing, if disparate, essays on "emerging topics" in disability history. Drawing on interviews with the mothers of autistic children, Jikta Nelb Sineck surveys the services (or lack thereof) provided to people with intellectual disabilities in Czechoslovakia. Under communism, physicians and educators pressured families to send children who would not become "economically productive" to institutions, even if it meant confinement in horrific conditions. Despite post-1989 moves toward deinstitutionalization through the creation of smaller, individualized residential homes, Sineck argues that they still "constrain the agency of their clients and leave much room for improvement" (p. 233). Anna Piotrowska surveys musicological literature to investigate its treatment of disability, demonstrating how both historical and contemporary accounts reference musicians' impairment only when it can be used to highlight their "genius" or heroic ability to overcome odds. Pieter Verstraete makes a case for studying HIV/AIDS as a strategy for advancing a "cultural model" of disability through a brief examination of the life of the Flemish philosopher Pascal de Duve. Finally, Anne Klein considers the parallels between anti-psychiatry movements and critiques of colonialism to uncover the emergence of a new "ethics of disability" rooted in a "heightened awareness of spatial (institutional and geopolitical) arrangements," a "deconstructionist attitude towards scientific power/knowledge or-

ders, and the emergence of a new language of respect (p. 269). The book concludes with a short reflection on the relationship between disability history and anthropology by Henri-Jacques Stiker, whose 1982 book *Corps infirmes et sociétés* (translated into English in 2000 as *A History of Disability*) sparked a renewed interest in disability studies.

This collection, which grew out of a 2010 conference of the United Kingdom-based Disability History Group, highlights the diversity of methodological perspectives and theoretical approaches currently employed by European scholars of disability, while showcasing emerging work on understudied topics, from the status of individuals with disabilities in the former communist East to the complex relationship between disability and music. Readers interested in the history of vocational disabilities, state-run rehabilitation and welfare programs, or the

emergence of organized disability rights movements will find useful insights in this volume applicable to different methodological approaches. Yet despite the editors' claims to present a "new disability history" (p. 9), their critique of the "social model" of disability, I think, underestimates the important impact of the "cultural turn" of the 1990s for disability studies. Several of the essays in this collection also demanded a more sustained engagement with primary sources to fully demonstrate the utility of the authors' theoretical interventions, or even more importantly, to grapple with the possibilities and limitations offered by different types of historical data. In the end, these essays remind us that the best historical scholarship combines methodological rigor with the creative interpretation of primary sources. Readers will undoubtedly await more expansive studies by the collection's authors in future articles or monographs.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

**Citation:** Rebecca Scales. Review of Barsch, Sebastian; Klein, Anne; Verstraete, Pieter, eds., *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45986>



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