

Disability history: Victim of its own success or more militant than ever?



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15th anniversary of *New Disability History*

- Paul Longmore & Lauri Umansky (2001). ***New Disability History: American perspectives***. New York: New York University Press
- Douglas **Baynton's** mantra: “Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write” (p. 52)
- Google/scholar: 254.000 hits/5.050 hits
- Longmore & Umansky's and Cathy Kudlick's 2003 plea for **putting 'disability' on a par with 'gender', 'race' & 'class'** seems to have been taken up

Option #1

- **“Keep doing what you’re doing”**
- David Gerber’s recent article in DSQ: *Disability scholars as world disrupters and worldmakers*
- Undoubtedly remains important!
- Persons with disabilities still face discriminatory attitudes, often cannot participate to society/education and are still subject to dehumanizing care practices
 - Dutch KU Leuven blog contribution on silence & deafness
 - Immediate reaction by deaf colleague: “I completely do agree. I am completely deaf and it gives me great pleasure to read such a story and I have good reason for this ... The more one writes about deaf people the better ... for we still face ignorance, intolerance and impatience”

“My point is not that everything is bad, but that **everything is dangerous**, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism”.

Michel Foucault. “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress.”
Afterword, in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond
Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Massachusetts Press.
(1983)

Why Option #2?

- In contemporary academia:
 - Lip service is being paid to the emancipatory agenda of disability history
 - Strategic use of the word ‘disability’ in order to attract competitive grants
 - Cf. also ‘gender’ – research teams indeed increasingly have women among their members, but the rationale behind it is not always very sincere ...
 - The two origins that were bound together by the New Disability History (Academia & Activism) seem to separate again.

Why option #2?

- Sometimes the underlying identity politics are problematic
 - In the shadow of disability (2012)
 - Critique is conceptualized as the promotion of an alternative identity (centred around notions as independence, autonomy, voice, etc.)
 - Cf. position of Michel Foucault towards emancipation of homosexuals in 1970's
 - Need to go beyond dichotomic and binary thinking – a lot already is being done, but the conclusions are paradoxical!

Option #2 – How?

- Unsure
- Importance of source material
- Renewal of theoretical frameworks
- Interdisciplinary research
- Bridges between academia and activism

→ “The art of belonging”



Wishing you an
inspiring conference!

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