

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pieter Verstraete. *In the shadow of disability: Reconnecting History, Identity and Politics*. Opladen: Barbara Budrich-Esser, 2012. 133 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8474-0023-3.

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Nowadays, it is almost a cliché to state that the field of disability history is booming. What else can we say when we see how disability keeps popping up in the historiography of the last decade? The recent volume edited by Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, *Disability Histories* (2014), for example, shows the size and diversity of the field. At the same time, it remains difficult to find contributions to the field of disability history that deal explicitly with theoretical and methodological issues. Cornerstones in this respect are still the volume *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (2001), and the related article, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” by Cathy Kudlick (2003). These historians advocate a “cultural turn” in disability history, inspired by the shift from woman to gender studies. These new disability histories should, of course, remain key texts in the field, but the ideas that they present also call for discussion. During the last decade, new insights in the broader field of disability studies and historiography, such as attention to the body and posthumanism, have seemed worthwhile subjects for reflection. A book that explicitly tries to take a step beyond the new disability historians is Pieter Verstraete’s *In the shadow of disability: Reconnecting History, Identity and Politics*.

Verstraete works at the Center for the History of Education at the University of Leuven in Belgium. *In the shadow of disability* is a progression of his doctoral dissertation, in which he developed a Foucauldian perspective on disability history. The author was influenced by many scholars, but it was in particular Foucault who motivated him to develop a new perspective on disability history. In the introduction and the chapters that follow it becomes clear that Verstraete recognizes his debt to and affiliation with the new disability historians. Nevertheless, Foucault inspired him to challenge their assumption that “disability, just as gender, sexual preferences or skin colour could be regarded as the basis for a particular and positively experienced identity” (p. 33). Thinking in

terms of identity enables one to discern a marginalized group of people with disabilities past and present, who need—according to the modern model of emancipation—to move from the shadows of the margins into the light of the mainstream. But, Verstraete asks, will the new position of people with disabilities in the light not bring with it new margins and shadows? Does “any political movement based on the notion of identity” not run “the risk of replicating the dichotomous pattern they wanted to fight in the first place” (p. 31)?

What is the alternative? According to Verstraete, it is to stay in the shadows and try to “imagine new ways of behaving, other forms of life and different ways of speaking”: throughout the different chapters he illustrates this stance. Like Foucault he does not think it is possible to find or realize places “where people could become themselves and act completely free.” Rather it is the task of the historian to make shadows visible or, rephrased, show how power always plays a role. With his metaphor of the shadows Verstraete suggests “that ‘us’ and ‘them’ both are covered up and caught in the power-knowledge strategies that have continuously been invented” (p. 120). Investigating power relations as Foucault did leads to a radical historicization of reality. In the case of disability this means, according to Verstraete, that “the very fact that we consider disability as a problem ... thus can be demythologized by turning to its history and showing how exactly disability came to be seen as a problem for human thought” (p. 72). He shows the contingency of disability by analyzing two cases.

First he discusses the publication *Institution des sourds et muets* by the French Abbé de l’Épée (1776), in which de l’Épée asked himself why a well-defined group of people became known as “disabled” and argued that these people were in need of special education. Verstraete convincingly shows how the problematization (a Foucaultian category) of disability was part of a broader development around 1800, namely the problematization

of solitude. Solitude and disability became a problem because of the rise of “an educational complex which sought to produce free, mobile and active citizens” (p. 97).

The second case discussed is the emergence of the visiting of the poor, an approach to the education of deaf and blind people in the nineteenth century. This case is not only an important addition to disability histories dominated by institutions, but also questions oversimplified distinctions between “the activity of the subject and the wielding of power” (p. 103). Both cases underline Verstraete’s critique of the use of the concept of identity: the dichotomy of us and them does not help to understand the past; disability is always part of broader and complex relations of power in society.

With these cases Verstraete shows first of all how theory enables new interpretations of the sources in relation

to the existing historiography. That is by itself a very relevant contribution to the field of disability history, but what more does this book contribute? At the end of the book Verstraete asks himself and the reader: “Do we then have to conclude from all of this that critical thinking and political reforms have become impossible?” “Not at all” is his answer. Like Foucault he states that not everything is bad, but everything is dangerous and “one of the dangerous places that I have been focussing on in this book is education” (p. 121). Using disability to unmask education and its history is what, in the second place, makes this book relevant. It is what the new disability historians have argued for, namely making disability part of the (critical) toolbox of historians. Whether, in the third place, his book is relevant for stimulating disability politics is a question that will, hopefully, be picked up by disability activists.

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