
EXPLORING HUMAN DIVERSITY: A DOSSIER DEVOTED TO DISABILITY HISTORY /
EXPLORANDO LA DIVERSIDAD HUMANA: UN DOSSIER DEDICADO A LA HISTORIA DE LA DISCAPACIDAD

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING DISABILITY IN THE PAST: ON PERSPECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND THEMES IN DISABILITY HISTORY

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INTRODUCCIÓN: EXPLORANDO LA DISCAPACIDAD EN EL PASADO: SOBRE PERSPECTIVAS, METODOLOGÍA Y TEMAS EN HISTORIA DE LA DISCAPACIDAD

Disability, particularly in recent decades, has become a matter of great political and social concern. In Spain, the enactment of the *Law 39/2006, of the 14th of December, on Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Care for people in a situation of dependence* (known as the *Dependence Law*) is an expression of the need to respond during this century to a phenomenon that has increased in visibility since the middle of the last century. It should not be surprising therefore, that the interest in human and social sciences in studying the way in which disability is configured, the reactions it provokes or the way in which it influences the lives of the people has been growing in a sustained manner since then.

This trend has not passed historians by. If the bibliographic review of the works on the history of disability published in English and French that Gary Woodill undertook in 1987 and 1988 is taken as a reference, it could be said that even before the end of the 20th century the topic was not exactly *terra incognita*.¹ For this reason, the statement made by Douglas C. Baynton in 2001 could be taken as slightly unreasonable, when he showed his surprise regarding the fact that a phenomenon such as disability, which "is everywhere in history", was, however "conspicuously absent in the histories we write" (Baynton, 2001, pp. 52). This sentence must be interpreted however within the framework of a "new" history of disability in which this author was involved, and that was trying to flourish particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom spurred on by different contributions. In the first place, by those who had been shaping a new theoretical approach to disability since the

decade of the sixties. The works by Szasz (1960, 1961), Goffman (1961, 1963), Becker (1963), Veil (1968) or by Safilios-Rotchild (1970) contributed to bringing to light and developing ideas such as deviation or stigma and social labelling processes. Additionally, the work by Michel Foucault (1961) provided theoretical and analytical keys for the study of the mechanisms for exercising power and social control over individuals considered as “abnormal”.

These contributions stimulated the appearance of an interest in exploring the rational explanations based on the identity that was used to justify inequality amongst human beings. In this way, fields of knowledge flourished regarding the study of gender, race or ethnicity which, incorporating post-modern approaches and a linguistic twist, had to provide theoretical and analytical tools that could be applied to address disability within a historic perspective. For example Kudlick stated (Kudlick, 2003, p. 763), how Joan Wallach Scott “heralded a new age with her ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’” (1986).

Disability, another of the most commonly used ways of legitimating the inequality, was a phenomenon whose study was shaken by these pioneering works prepared in the nineteen sixties. At the end of this decade and over the following one, sociology became interested in disability producing works —Scott (1969), Albrecht (1976) Blaxter (1976), Townsend (1979)— which paid attention to the economic and social consequences of being affiliated to a specific disabled identity. It was revealed that these contributions did not mean a serious attempt at questioning the ideological basis on which they were supported —the so-called “medical” or “individual” model of disability—². From the perspective of these works, the causes of the social and economic problems of disabled people were internal to the individual and their impairment (Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002, p. 4).

Objections to the “medical model” of disability were going to arrive in a much more outstanding way through political activism, led by disabled people who started to protest in the decades of the sixties and the seventies to demand an improvement in their rights and possibilities of social inclusion. Under this impulse, in Great Britain a new approach to disability was generated that became known as “the social model of disability”. Without rejecting the meaning of the impairments in the lives of the disabled people, the work by a series of activists —Hunt (1966), Finkelstein (1980), Oliver (1983, 1990)—, contributed to laying down the guidelines for a model that tried to

reveal the role of the economic, political and social barriers that were built around impairments (Barnes, Oliver y Barton, 2002, pp. 4-5).

This “social model”, that was opposed and intended to overcome the “medical” or “individual model” of disability, formed one of the *leitmotifs* on which a new academic field of “disability studies” emerged which included in its work area “the intricate interaction among cultural values, social arrangements, public policy, and professional practice regarding ‘disability’” (Longmore and Umansky, 2001, p. 12). From a multi-disciplinary approach that is centred to a large extent on the study of the social construction of disability, initially the field of disability studies concentrated on the production of political science and sociological works aimed at providing arguments to reform public policies and professional practices aimed at disabled people. This fact meant that the field was contemplated as an area in which the participation of disabled people must be fundamental. As Verstraete recorded, the expression “Nothing about us without us” referred to the strong conviction amongst activists for the disability movement that something could be lost when those who were talking about them were non disabled people.³ In fact, some of them have defended the idea that disability history cannot be written by an able-bodied person; an opinion that has not been shared by others who, however, have proposed the idea that non disabled people must take great care when tackling this matter to avoid worsening the problems of disabled people (Verstraete, 2012, p. 24-27).

From 1990 onwards, the social model of disability had already attracted a large number of disabled and non disabled scholars who, very quickly, developed humanistic disability studies as “a vibrant area of inquiry” (Longmore and Umansky, 2001, pp. 12-13). However, as Gleeson emphasised in 1997, disability studies continued being “largely an ahistorical field of enquiry” (Gleeson, 1997, p. 185). This author drew attention to how the field “remains dominated by discussions of policy matters” and it was suffering from “the legacy of theoretical deprivation” (pp. 180-181). Gleeson identified four areas of theoretical weakness: the detachment from major social theory; idealism; the fixation with normality; and historical unconsciousness. He championed too the idea of incorporating a “historical materialist approach view of disability” which would help to overcome the theoretical weakness of the field and to cultivate what he considered to be one of its strengths: report “of the concrete experience of the oppression of disablement” (p. 192).

Gleeson warned that this viewpoint, which already had many significant contributions about the genesis and reproduction of disablement in Western societies —Abberley (1987), Finkelstein (1980) and Oliver (1986, 1990)— showed a different conception of disability: the distinction between *impairment* —which refers to the absence of part of all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body— and *disability* —which is the socially imposed state of exclusion or constraint that physically impaired individuals may be forced to endure (p. 192).

From this perspective, the social construction of impaired people and the social oppression that disability represented arose in the first instance “from the specific ways in which society organises its basic material activities (work, transport, leisure, domestic activities)”. Gleeson acknowledged that the attitudes, discourses and symbolic representations were essential in the reproduction of disablement, but he considered that they were the result of social practices that societies carried out in order to meet their basic material needs (Gleeson, 1997, pp. 193-194).

The need to overcome the deficit of historiography regarding disability stimulated the reflection on the need to broaden the perspectives approaching history. The predominant institutional history was contemplated as depersonalised and, in addition to the historical materialistic focus, it was proposed the adoption of approaches that allowed “accounts of the lived experience of disabled people” (Bredberg, 1999, p. 192) to be incorporated. On this point, Bredberg defended the advisability of incorporating two perspectives to the history of disability: the “vernacular” and the “experiential”. The former was what was represented by the non-institutionalised responses to disabled people within a society, which in certain cases could be dealt with in a more personalised manner. The latter attempted to approach the personal accounts of disabled people (pp. 194-195).

To a large extent, this position was in line with the new approaches that were arising in the work about disability. As Anne Borsay indicated, the materialist interpretation defended by Gleeson, which “used a historical, economic and political framework akin to the social model”, exaggerated the impact of industrialisation (Borsay, 2012, p. 330). The British author spotlights the fact that the social model, in addition to offering a historically flawed analysis of disability, was being accused of omitting the cultural dimension and of losing sight of the experiences of disabled people (Borsay, 2002, p. 104). The work of the social scientists

and of the disabled people themselves was revealing that the social model “omits the structural factors that interact with impairment: social class, gender, age and ethnicity”. These contributions also condemned “the neglect of personal pain, fatigue, depression and the internalised oppression that arises from the psychology of exclusion”, and accused the social model “of being too deterministic, of selling short the ability of disabled people to undermine institutional constraints, and of denying them the agency to give their lives meaning” (Borsay, 2012, p. 330). The response to these criticisms was, as has been indicated by Borsay, a cultural turn in the social approach to disability that reflected the penetration of postmodernist ideas (Borsay, 2012, p. 330).

The growing positive valuation of the role of historical research to understand disability and the boom in humanistic disability studies was used as a stimulus to make the interest amongst historians grow to aim their work towards this field. A multitude of works progressively appeared dedicated to analysing the patterns of abuse, discrimination, and oppression present in the past of disabled people. Subsequently, the objective was aimed at the cultures, values and activism of these people, posing how they had shown resistance to the healing approaches aimed at them. All the historians also directed their interest at making readings about disability from the perspective of gender, class, race, sexuality, age, and region, and to analyse the way in which disability can function as a primary construct, an underlying structure in all of history. Finally, the analysis of the differences between the disabilities and the medicalisation of all of them has also contributed to structuring the field of the approach by historians to disability (Longmore and Umansky, 2001, pp. 16-21). This would allow, at the beginning of this century, the emergence of a “new disability history” to be affirmed, the goal of which was “to join the social constructionist insights and interdisciplinarity of cultural studies with solid empirical research as we analyze disability’s past” (Longmore and Umansky, 2001, p. 15).

In fact, Catherine J. Kudlick found objective data in 2003 to affirm that the conditions were appearing to be able to say that the field of disability history “is now established enough” (Kudlick, 2003, p. 764 note 4). As she set forth, the already significant contributions made by those, who either explicitly or in a less aware manner, had studied disability in a historical perspective would be shaping it at the beginning of this century “in form of a fresh area of inquiry that

could well reshape our scholarly landscape” (Kudlick, 2003, p. 764). For the North American author the field would be helping to generate questions and answers to essential questions for the mission of the cultivators of the humanistic disciplines: What does it mean to be human? How can we respond ethically to difference? What is the value of a human life? Who decides these questions, and what do the answers reveal? She suggested too that, at the same time, the scholars could use disability as an analytical tool to explore power itself and to understand how Western cultures determine hierarchies and maintain social order and they define progress (Kudlick, 2003, p. 764-765). According to Kudlick, the field offered work possibilities from different areas of study:

For political and policy historians, disability is a significant factor in the development of the modern state, by raising questions of who deserves the government’s assistance and protection, what constitutes a capable citizen, and who merits the full rights of citizenship. For labour historians, it suggests ways of exploring assumptions about work, strength, productivity, and tensions between solidarity and individuality. Anyone interested in subjects as diverse as war, the body, the senses, aging, medicine, beauty, aesthetics, or technology will find ways of making the familiar refreshingly unfamiliar again. Just as gender and race have had an impact well beyond women and people of colour, disability is so vast in its economic, social, political, cultural, religious, legal, philosophical, artistic, moral, and medical import that it can force historians to reconsider virtually every concept, every event, every ‘given’ we have taken for granted (Kudlick, 2003, p. 766-767).

Not all historians shared Kudlick’s enthusiasm regarding the possibilities of disability as an analytical tool. As Baynton stated, it was judged from an area like an enterprise that “smacks of academic opportunism” and that represented “creating for ourselves a new Other” destined to overcome the exhaustion that had been reached by the “possibilities for race, class, and gender” (Baynton, 2008). However, the truth is that the field monopolised a highly relevant degree of attention and some historical journals —*Radical History Review* (94, Winter 2006) and *European Review of History* (14 (4), December 2007)— published specially edited volumes that focus on disability with the aim of making contributions to “the burgeoning field of disability history” (Meade, Serlin, 2006, p.2).

The interest in the field was also expressed in the more specific field of disability studies with the issue that *Disability Studies Quarterly* devoted to “Disability

and History” in the summer of 2008. In its introduction to the monographic issue, Audra Jennings drew attention to how the amount of historians working in the field had experienced an important increase in the United States. Comparing the number of contributions made at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 2002, where “disability barely registered on most historians’ radar”, the 2008 annual meeting hosted: nine sessions, five papers, and one poster on disability or disability-related topics; an open forum on disability; and a well-attended party sponsored by Disability History Association (DHA). (Jennings, 2008).

At the end of the first decade of this century, Julie Anderson considered that although disability history had not yet found “its niche within mainstream historical research, it [had] certainly established itself as a burgeoning sub-discipline” (Anderson, 2009, p. 108). She was confident that the development of the “new” disability history, and its approach about representation, agency and culture could manage to broaden out within mainstream historical discourse (pp. 109-110). On this point, she recommended placing “less emphasis on marginalization and politicization” (p. 108), and overcoming the “old-fashioned” style of approach to institutional history to bring the institutions closer with the aim of exploring their “intersection (...) with individuals, their families, professionals, and the meanings of different social constructs” (p. 110).

The history of disability had stopped being a neglected field and had become a fertile and fascinating area of historiographic production that was extending beyond the United States and the United Kingdom. Disability history, as pointed out by Borsay, was managing to integrate “economic, social and political causation with cultural construction”. The British author set forth the idea that the “challenge now is to ensure that the experiences of disabled people —accessible through a critical reading of traditional documentary sources as well as through the direct personal testimony of autobiographies, diaries and oral history— are central not only to disability history but also to the discipline as a whole” (Borsay, 2012, p. 333).

As has been brought to light, heterogeneity could be found in the methodology and in the theoretical base of the work by those who shared their interest in the history of disability (Barsch, Klein, Verstraete, 2013, p. 6). From our point of view, this feature, when stimulating debate and thought, must be interpreted as a sign of the vitality and the potentiality of the field.

At a recent international symposium held in July 2015 in Swansea (United Kingdom), organised by the members of the project “Disability and Industrial Society: A comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields 1780-1948”, this heterogeneity was expressed with an audience of researchers representing a broad range of interests in disability history, history of medicine, labour history, comparative history and literary studies. In his intervention that closed the symposium, David Turner referred to what he considered the “themes emerging” from the meeting. Amongst others, he stated the opportunity to:

1.- Investigate the relations between work and disability, from a long term and comparative perspective that considered different countries and impairments, the different work varieties (paid and unpaid) or of care giving, and the relations between disability, work and the life course; 2.- Analyse “im(mobility) in historical perspective”, which includes considering questions such as why and when is walking important? How have societies invested in the mobility of their citizens? What role has medicine, rehabilitation, religion or educators played in this? What has the impact of the technological change about the construction of the environment been? Or how does immobility affect the lives of people? 3.- Explore interpersonal relations and disability, paying attention to the relations of disabled people with family members and carers, their emotional impact and the cultures of “(inter)dependence”; and 4.- Investigate the relations with the community, which would include the study of the appearance of communities of disabled people, the role of activism, of the trade unions and of the well-being policies, of the problems related to confrontations between real disability and faked disability or of inclusion as opposed to exclusion and of the problems related to isolation and loneliness (Turner, 2015).

The topics laid down by Turner represent a sample of the relevant questions that the analysis of disability in historical perspective can contribute to clarifying. On this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the sensitivity and the interest by the editorial board of *Asclepio* for offering the pages of the magazine for the publication of a monographic issue dedicated to the topic. This decision to incorporate disability to a medical history magazine spotlights the wish for dialogue between historians of medicine with those who acknowledge themselves as disability historians. Along the same lines, the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* proposed a debate about the relations between both fields. In her contribution, Beth Linker alluded to how disability had been present in the

work by historians of medicine and to the way in which they could have benefitted from the use of disability as an analytical tool. Aware of the wary looks with which many disability historians, whose work has had to do with the declared enterprise of contributing to spotlight the undesirable consequences of the “medical model”, contemplate the work by historians of medicine, Linker advocates for stimulating and recommending that “historians with interest in both fields” focus “on our overlapping similarities rather than carving out differences” (Linker, 2013, p. 535).

This dossier was proposed with this idea in mind. It has brought together a set of works whose authors, with a varied education and who teach in academic centres of different disciplines (education, humanities or medicine), have shown for some time an interest in investigating the past of disability. Convinced of the potential of this task for their intellectual, academic and educational interests, their work has been materialized here in a set of contributions that highlight: the varied way of approaching disability that can occur in historical research; the different areas and questions to which historians can address their concerns; and the varied topics that emerge from this.

Resorting to the case study method, in the article that opens the dossier David M. Turner sets forth the way in which the field of disability history can interact positively with that of the history of emotions in order to illuminate our knowledge on the past of disability. His contribution means the inclusion in the analysis of the experiences and feelings of disabled people from a perspective and using some methodological tools that had rarely been applied previously. Armed with them, Turner explores in his approach to Britain in the eighteenth century how emotions formed part of the set of ingredients that were used to represent the causes and consequences of disability in the past. His work shows not only how the philosophical and medical context resorted to the concept of “passion” to explain the appearance and disappearance of impairments in a human being, but also the way in which the physical difference was regularly represented as capable of producing the appearance of powerful emotional states in people. Turner, when considering how sympathy was negotiated in the context he analysed, underlines that the feelings caused in those who contemplated deformity differed in the way in which they were interpreted with respect to the current ones, lacking, as happened with the feelings of pity, of the negative implications that they would acquire subsequently.

In the article, the idea of how the consideration of disability as a “sorrowful” or “miserable” state was shown to be highly dependent on the way in which the impairment disrupted a person’s expectation of happy life course, therefore showing the value of the way of interpreting the impairment in the generation of the responses to the disability. In this way, by showing the changing interpretation of the emotions of disabled people and those around them, Turner makes a significant contribution to the task of reflecting on the contingent nature of cultural stereotypes that are held about people who have impairments.

The interest held by Pieter Verstraete and Frederik Herman in discovering spaces where the boundaries between disabled and non-disabled people were broken down makes them take us to a Europe shaken by the First World War. Their concern for finding “commonalities”, moments “where the boundaries of otherness and sameness, of individual and collective identity are redrawn”, leads them to oppose the rehabilitating discourse of the French industrial ergonomist and fatigue expert Jules Mardochee Amar (1879-1935) with the experiences in an institution used for convalescence of war veterans where his recommendations were followed. Verstraete and Herman show how Amar’s discourse was generally aimed at improving the efficiency of a “crippled” society. In this way, the division between disabled and abled people was diluted alongside others —capable of learning vs. incapable of learning, or valuable trained workers vs. unskilled workers— turning Amar’s discourse into a source of new distinctions. However, as the authors highlight, using testimonies given by disabled veterans, these barriers towards the creation of a shared feeling of community were overcome when faced by certain events that struck the lives of the people who shared their existence in the institution, and therefore contributing to suppress all the subjectivities.

Sebastian Barsch takes post-Second World War Germany as a reference to show how the political ideology that dominates a State behaves in relation to the social construction of disability. Comparatively scrutinising the way in which the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) took on the task of providing care for people with intellectual disabilities, Barsch shows how, although initially the differences were not very significant. However, the consolidation of socialism in the former and of capitalism in the latter had an impact on this group of people. His work persuasively shows how differences occurred that affected: the degree

of affiliation of medicine to rehabilitating actions; to the way in which the social factors were considered related to disability; to the way in which the educational systems considered the separation at school of children with intellectual disabilities with respect to those who were considered not to have any intellectual impairments; and to the efforts that were made for people with severe intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual disability is also the subject of the article written by Mercedes Del Cura and José Martínez-Pérez. By studying the association movement related to intellectual disability started in Spain during Franco’s dictatorship, the authors explore the way in which disabled people and their families relate to the community. The article highlights how, in spite of the difficulties that Franco’s Dictatorship established to the development of associations, the members of these self-organised groups found the way to ask and get improvements for the people with intellectual disabilities. By analysing as main sources bulletins and reports published by these disability organisations, the article studies the way in which these associations built their identities and performed their intended functions, and how in doing that emerged discussions about the best way to carry out their proposals and claims.

In the work that closes the dossier, Anne Klein expresses her concern about the way in which the current working conditions have a negative effect on the workers. Her work attempts to stimulate thought in the context of what she calls “the anthropology of the working subject”. Inspired by the “cultural turn” in social and historical research, the German author sets forth the way in which historical products, such as scenes from films or legal definitions can be connected to the results of current studies about health at work. She attempts to understand the way in which human beings are conceptualised and she sustains the thesis that the work induced through the action on it by the microphysics of power during the twentieth century produced new plans/views of subjectivity and subjectivation. Her proposal shows how the “cultural turn” can result in a good source for research and teaching in the context of disability history.

This issue of *Asclepio* dedicated to the study of the past of disability brings together a set of works that we hope will respond to the expectations with which it was prepared. On the one hand, offering a collection of articles that allow the potential of disability as an analytical tool in historian’s work to be appreciated. On the other hand, contributing to highlighting how the history of disability can be shown as a formidable route towards

generating questions about the methods for conceiving corporal and mental diversity and to questioning many of the ways in which we react to it. Finally, if this dossier succeeds in attracting researchers to work on disability history, this will be a good enough reason to feel even more accomplished with the results.

NOTES

- 1 Gary Woodhill, *History of Disabilities and Social Problems*. Available at: <http://codi.tamucc.edu/archives/bibliography/woodhill/woodhill.html>. Accessed 23 May 2016.
- 2 The main feature of this model is that it focuses on the corporal 'abnormality', and on the way in which this is responsible for some degree of functional limitation or disability. This functional 'inability' in the model is used as the basis for a wider classification of the individuals as 'invalids'. This model therefore is the basis of a view of disability in which the individual is seen as a victim, and as someone that needs care and attention, and therefore, dependent on others. That is say, the view that has been the core of social welfare policies

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- designed to help people cope with their 'disabilities' (Barnes, Mercer, Shakespeare, 2002, pp. 21-27).
- 3 This expression appeared in the title of the book by James Charlton (1998), *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*, Berkeley, University of California Press. Charlton stated that he "first heard the expression in South Africa in 1993" being talked about by "two leaders of Disabled People South Africa" –Michael Masutha and William Rowland- who "separately invoked the slogan, which they had heard used by someone from Eastern Europe at an international disability rights conference" (Charlton, 1998, p. 3).
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