

Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics. By Douglas C. Baynton. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Pp. 192. Cloth, \$35.00.

“Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”¹

Douglas Baynton’s observation about disability’s simultaneous ubiquity and scarcity in American history poignantly summarizes the value of disability history. Although historians have considered the ways that gender, racial, and ethnic classifications have justified inequalities, rarely has disability been considered an equally salient category. Thankfully, several historians have begun to remedy this oversight in the past decade by publishing works that specifically place disability at the center of historical analysis.² Baynton’s recently published volume, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*, palpably demonstrates the virtues of this approach. By shining a spotlight on how disability profoundly shaped American immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book underscores the benefits of reassessing standard historical interpretations through the lens of disability.

Baynton directly challenges the centrality of race and ethnicity as the principle interpretive factor in contemporary immigration history.³ Contrary to most accounts focused on racial or ethnic assumptions, Baynton’s narrative focuses on the eugenic debates about protecting the nation from defective gene pools that animated the discourse surrounding immigration reforms.⁴ Although racial and ethnic animus certainly imbued anti-immigrant rhetoric throughout the Progressive era, consternation over visible or suspected disabilities was far more salient to widespread concerns about public dependency. Fears about the corrosive economic, social, and political effects of incoming “defectives” were the “primary preoccupation for those who wanted to reduce immigration from Europe.”⁵ Just as the rhetoric of disability was employed to justify legal coverture, miscegenation laws, and Jim Crow practices throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the same medicalized rhetoric surrounding ability/

¹ Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 52.

² Recent scholarly monographs and collections include David Gerber, ed., *Disabled Veterans in History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Allison Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Kim E. Nielson, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); James W. Trent Jr., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University, 2016); and Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840-1930s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

³ For a relatively recent historiographical treatment of this literature, see Mae Ngai, “Immigration and Ethnic History” *American History Now*, edited for the American Historical Association by Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

⁴ “The menacing image of the defective was the principle catalyst for the rapid expansion of immigration law and the machinery of its enforcement.” Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2016), 1.

⁵ Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 10.

disability also permeated many of the arguments justifying the exclusion of those deemed unfit for admission to America.

Baynton divides the book into four key conceptual taxonomies: “defective,” “handicapped,” “dependent,” and “ugly.” Each provides a distinctly different framework for understanding the pervasive nature of disability in Progressive era immigration debates. Each chapter connects rhetoric about individual impairments to broader concerns about national security and domestic stability.

For example, the notion of “defect” was regularly characterized by physical, mental, and moral terms. Visible defects were assumed to correlate with mental and moral deficiencies, often treated as signals of more insidious and unseen psychological and moral dangers. Baynton highlights how leading eugenicists considered hereditary “fitness,” rather than race, to be the most important index in measuring threat to the body politic.⁶ He persuasively argues that ineffective and inefficient mass inspections prompted support among eugenicists for a quota policy as a “last resort” to keep out undesirables.⁷ Although race and ethnicity still mattered to many anti-immigration advocates, undesirable traits were nevertheless believed to distribute unevenly among different national, ethnic and racial populations.⁸ Thus, selective restriction of the most “high risk” populations was justified to reduce the chance of “defects” slipping through the cracks of a perpetually overwhelmed immigration inspection regime.

In the chapter “Handicapped,” Baynton examines how changing conceptions of time produced by the transition to an urban industrial wage economy dramatically altered the meanings of terms like “handicapped,” “retarded,” “normal,” and “degenerate” to the detriment of disabled persons. Traditionally understood as part of an unchanging, purposeful, Godly design, commonplace afflictions and infirmities were increasingly attributed to impersonal forces and viewed as evidence of evolutionary backwardness and economic inefficiency. As a rapidly accelerating market economy fueled a culture valuing individualism, competitiveness, and achievement, fears about the ever-present possibility of individual failure paralleled collective anxiety over the prospect of national decline. As “handicapped” became associated with an inability to compete in a fast paced labor market, growing assumptions about genetic contagion from “unfit” foreigners sparked fears of “race suicide” and hereditary degeneracy. The prevailing assumption that degenerative traits caused individual and collective immorality and criminality became fused with worries that disabled individuals would impede the economic and moral progress of the nation. At stake in debates over immigration was nothing less than the domestic health of the American polity and its international standing in the global race for power and prestige.

Language about the disabled falling behind in an accelerating and increasingly competitive economy augmented concerns about individuals’ capacity for self-sufficiency. Just as longstanding and unproven assumptions about female incapacity justified women’s economic, political, and legal dependence on men, unproven assumptions about immigrants with disabilities unfairly marred their chances of admission. Judgments made on appearances alone

⁶ Consider, for example, that the subject of Goddard’s infamous study of “feeble-minded” lineage, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, featured a family of “white Anglo-Saxon Protestants whose ancestors dated back to at least the American Revolution.” *ibid.*, 26-29.

⁷ Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 40-41.

⁸ “By the 1910s race was practically defined by defect in discussions of restricting Europeans. Defect itself was not defined by race, however. A defective person of any race was unwelcome.” Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 42.

without additional empirical evidence frequently determined the fates of arrivals. Immigration officials routinely turned away blind, deaf, and others with visible impairments assumed “likely to become public charges.”⁹ Indicators of social class also played a role in the likelihood of admission, with those of lesser means and modest attire given greater scrutiny than better-dressed arrivals.

Indeed, a full understanding of the public rhetoric and political justifications around immigration restriction is nearly impossible without the benefits of a disability framework. As Baynton’s deeply nuanced and richly textured book suggests, bringing the language of disability to the surface of historical analysis fundamentally reorients our understanding of Progressive Era immigration reforms. Although the salience of a disability framework to this particular topic is evident, other historical periods and subtopics are equally fertile areas for expansion. Hopefully Baynton’s welcome volume will help to reverse disability’s conspicuous absence and encourage other efforts in this field.

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⁹ Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 96.