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The Ugly Laws (The History Of Disability)



Synopsis

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, municipal laws targeting "unsightly beggars" sprang up in cities across America. Seeming to criminalize disability and thus offering a visceral example of discrimination, these "ugly laws" have become a sort of shorthand for oppression in disability studies, law, and the arts. In this watershed study of the ugly laws, Susan M. Schweik uncovers the murky history behind the laws, situating the varied legislation in its historical context and exploring in detail what the laws meant. Illustrating how the laws join the history of the disabled and the poor, Schweik not only gives the reader a deeper understanding of the ugly laws and the cities where they were generated, she locates the laws at a crucial intersection of evolving and unstable concepts of race, nation, sex, class, and gender. Moreover, she explores the history of resistance to the ordinances, using the often harrowing life stories of those most affected by their passage. Moving to the laws's more recent history, Schweik analyzes the shifting cultural memory of the ugly laws, examining how they have been used and misused by academics, activists, artists, lawyers, and legislators. Drawing from a huge range of cultural materials, from police reports and court dockets to popular fiction and reformist exposés, Schweik rewrites an urban legend about disability into a meticulously researched and powerfully reasoned argument about law, politics, and cultural aesthetics. Building a case in ever expanding circles until she is in a position to rethink large swaths of United States culture through the lens of the ugly laws, Schweik casts a bright light on the conditions of disability at the turn of the century in order to better understand disability in the present.

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Legal History

Customer Reviews

I found this book absolutely fascinating. It gives engaging, nuanced, and insightful analysis of the complex interests surrounding these laws and the intersections of disability, class, race, ethnicity, immigration, gender and sexuality they implicate. While these particular laws may have fallen out of favor, the issues remain highly relevant today. I rarely find an "academic" book so readable and compelling.

The Ugly Laws is a very thorough and interesting historical account of how the disabled were treated and mistreated in America's past. It does have its shortcomings, however. For one thing, it is very verbose and repetitive. It also delves too deeply into side issues such as language semantics and characters in fiction literature. It would have been much better if it had more stories of real people affected by the ugly laws, such as Arthur Franklin Fuller. Still, in spite of its problems, The Ugly Laws captured my attention and kept it for the duration of my reading of it.

I respect the research Susan Schweik has done in "The Ugly Laws" but found its arcane language and theorizing off-putting. As others have noted, what insight is presented here is buried in highly academic, theoretical language that probably only a few eggheads will fully understand. All the post-modernist buzz words and jargon about heteronormativity, cultural bodies, apparatuses of disruption, Foucault, etc. wore me down and made me lose interest in the jumble of theories. I've read other books about disability and have a graduate degree, so I'm no slacker. It would be nice if academics made some effort to be a little more accessible. I recently read Kim Nielsen's concise A Disability History of the United States (ReVisioning American History) so it can be done. That's probably an unfair comparison, as Schweik's book is a detailed analysis of the ugly laws while Nielsen's is a survey of disability history over several centuries, but I learned and retained a lot more from Nielsen's clearly written, engaging book (including the essence of what one needs to know about the ugly laws). "The Ugly Laws" may indeed be a valuable contribution but it's hard to wade

through and I don't recommend it for general readers.

This is utterly appalling that people were treated so inhumanely due to have disabilities! I'm amazed at how humanity can be towards others that are different from themselves and then to pass laws against innocent persons is unbelievable. My rating does not reflect the author. It's like watching the news and being turned off by all the crime being reported. I would suggest this book to others. I'm keeping it in my library.

This book has two faces. On the one hand, it reflects an enormous amount of original research, locating obscure local ordinances from around the country and relying on important archival sources. Kudos to the author for not merely resting on the research of others. I am keeping this book on my shelf as a reference. But the book is almost impossible to read cover to cover. Instead of just starting with a theoretical framework and using that theory (or theories) to describe the results of the research, the theory overwhelms almost every chapter. And the author seems to continually shift perspectives -- trying in the same page (and sometimes the same paragraph) to describe the enactment and enforcement of the laws as a historical events, critically examine the motives of the actor under various perspectives, and also explain how the incidents were used and understood in the modern disability-rights movement. While each point is important, mushing them together makes it hard to understand anything.

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