

Editorial

Thinking About Immigration and Disability

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The state and the body are always connected. In times of crisis (political and economic), there is often increasing concern with borders, both of the nation and of the body. It becomes “urgent” to protect the state from contagions and threats, real or imagined. With increasing urgency, leaders often attempt to unify their base by clearly articulating what it means to be a “normal citizen,” identifying which bodies are included and which are not. We can see this connection between body and state both in the present and in the past.

History is replete with examples, and the lessons are not subtle. As the Third Reich consolidated power in 1933, among their first actions was to identify people with disabilities as enemies of the state. Just six months after assuming power, they passed the Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases. On one hand, the physically strong and independent *Übermensch* (superman) served as powerful symbol of a strong independent German state. On the other hand, there was perhaps no more inconvenient sign than people with disabilities: inconvenient truths of the vulnerability of bodies, of their needs and undeniable interdependence. Eliminating these inconvenient bodies became an important early step in nation-building, and the muted national response to their elimination became a tragic rehearsal for much larger atrocities. (See Liz Crow’s short film *Resistance* (2009) and David Mitchell and Susan Snyder’s upcoming *Disposable Humanity*.)

Our present moment reflects a great deal of border anxiety. There’s rhetoric of literal wall building to protect and reify imaginary and geographic borders and a troubling rise of isolationist/anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States and Europe. The rising chorus of voices saying which bodies should be citizens and which should not marks a shift that has taken many in the world by surprise: there was near global shock to the assumption of power by the current POTUS in the US and to the passage of Brexit in Great Britain, as well as to the recent near-miss in closely watched elections in France.

At least in the United States, this rise in border anxiety appears to coincide with increasing government disdain (or at least apparent disinterest) in the needs of those with disabilities. The current POTUS, who as a candidate famously mocked a reporter with disabilities, has a pattern of choosing appointees with apparent disinterest in the needs of people with disabilities. It was widely reported that now Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos appeared confused about basic legal protections afforded to all students with disabilities. As recently as May 24th, Ms. Devos refused to say she would refuse federal funds to schools that discriminated against students with special needs. The confirmation hearing of Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch, revealed a seemingly similar lack of concern: a case showed him unnecessarily ruling against a student with autism, a questionable ruling the Supreme Court

subsequently rebuked (during his actual confirmation hearings). Some rhetoric in current efforts at immigration reform has also evoked the danger posed by immigrants drawing on public services in ways that could easily target those with disabilities for exclusion.

While this particularly anxious moment has taken many by surprise, immigration and disability have long been tied in the history of the United States. Two centuries ago, with the Immigration Act of 1882, the country identified people with disabilities as potential “threat to the nation” and has since had a long history of using disability as criteria for immigration exclusion (See Daniel J. Wilson’s “‘No Defectives Need Apply’: Disability and Immigration.” *OAH Magazine of History* 23 [July 2009]: 35-40.) Today, the ‘ideal’ citizen has been more explicitly tied to religion and ethnicity than to issues of ability, with Islamic people the immediate subject of particularly intense suspicion. At the same time, history suggests it’s wise for us to keep mindful of possible slippages of otherness, slippages that frequently allow these fears to bleed to the body and to disability. With a view shared by many, embattled former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn famously described Islam in biological terms, as a “cancer” threatening national security and as a “sick” ideology that, per his tweet, “needs to B [sic] healed.” The US administration’s recent attempt at a Muslim ban attempted to “cure” this “sickness.”

As the effects of early exclusion policies still echo and debates rage over who belongs, who does not belong, who is worthy of entrance, who is not, a great deal of attention is rightly paid to the ethnic and religious dimensions of the debate. Perhaps we should give more attention to also considering the ways in which disability may intertwine with these. In a time when nations are actually increasingly interdependent, with a variety of bodies—with a variety of needs—often living in flow between nations, perhaps the greatest threat is pretending this isn’t so. And in this chain of bodies that need one another and have the power to speak out for one another, now more than ever, as Martin Niemöller reminded us, it doesn’t matter who they come for first.