

CALL FOR PAPERS

From disability to human variation. Old narratives, new narratives

European and American societies 19th-21st centuries

Since its emergence in the 1980s as a consequence of the disability rights movement in the United States and Great Britain (1960s-1970s), the field of disability studies has contributed to a considerable evolution in the approach to disability. It has been accompanied by a true epistemological revolution, which has consisted in changing the paradigm. Since the 19th century, the 'medical model' has driven an interpretation of disability that centres on a lack or loss in relation to the 'norm' – a non-disabled body and intelligence described as 'neurotypical'¹. Countering this approach, disability studies has highlighted the fundamentally political and social dimensions of disability: 'disability refers to a collective situation of oppression affecting those who cannot play according to the rules of non-disabled individual performance'². Generated by a certain type of social organisation and environments that are

¹ This term was coined by the autistic community and is now used by neurodiversity activists and the scientific community to refer to any person with neurological functioning that is considered to be the norm and who does not have a specific neurological condition.

² Pierre Dufour, 'Être public, être privé: l'expérience d'hommes en fauteuil roulant', Anastasia Meidani *et al.*, *La santé: du public à l'intime*, Presses de l'EHESP, 'Recherche, santé, social', 2015, p. 55-67, p. 57. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from French sources have been translated into English.

not fully accessible, the ‘medical model’ results in the exclusion of a whole section of the population considered to be ‘atypical’. In this sense, while disability studies involves a radical critique of the medical approach to disability and the hegemonic nature of its discourse to define and categorise non-normative subjects, it also implies specific positionings. The so-called anti-ableist struggle, for example, ‘is characterised by belonging to a group struggling for autonomy’³.

For a long time, the question of disability was confined to specialist editorial fields. As recently as 2016, Stiker⁴ commented that only a small number of French generalist journals (he was thinking of *Le Débat*, *Commentaire*, *Les Temps modernes*) had devoted a special issue or even just a few one-off articles to the subject. With this new issue, *Amnis* seeks to contribute to the debate on disability. Because it demands an approach that is both relational and interdisciplinary, the subject fits well with *Amnis*’s primary purpose of encouraging dialogue between different disciplines. Indeed, in addition to the fact that the question extends across all the social sciences, its primary characteristic is its situation at the intersection⁵ of various problematics. It lies at the interface of the individual and the social (disability is certainly a social construct, an ideological framework, but it is also an individual experience), of different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, law, history, philosophy, aesthetics, literary and film studies), of plural identities defined in an intersectional way based on notions such as gender, social class, race and sexual orientation, of contemporary problematics (including civil rights, feminism, speciesism, ableism) and of research and activism (remember the slogan ‘Nothing about us without us’). Confronted with such a research object, it is essential to decompartmentalise the disciplines and to try to reduce the fragmentation of approaches. This is at least what *Amnis* aims to do in this new issue while remaining faithful to the journal’s traditional research fields, namely European and American societies from the 19th to the 21st centuries.

In 2001, the historian Baynton wrote: ‘Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write’⁶. To reverse this trend, this issue of *Amnis* encourages a subversion of the traditional historiographical approach by relocating what was for a long time situated on the margins, in a state of liminality, to a central position. By adopting a disabled perspective that is rich in ‘situated knowledge’⁷, we will be able, on the one hand, to develop a different viewpoint on our environment and, on the other, to increase our collective knowledge on the question of disability.

The title of this issue, ‘From disability to human variation’, reflects the concern of disability studies to move away from thinking of disability as a stigma and to consider it within a vast field that embraces all forms of bodily, sensory and cognitive diversity within

³ Zig Blanquer and Pierre Dufour, ‘Sexualités et handicaps: les terres promises d’un bonheur conforme’, *Empan*, vol. 2, no 86, p. 55-61, p. 58.

⁴ Henri-Jacques Stiker, ‘Pour une recherche renouvelée sur le handicap’, *La nouvelle revue de l’adaptation et de la scolarisation*, vol. 3, no 75, 2016, p. 11-17.

⁵ We have taken this idea from Stiker, *ibid*.

⁶ Douglas C. Baynton, ‘Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History’, Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (ed.), *The New Disability History*, 2001, p. 52; document available online: <https://courses.washington.edu/intro2ds/Readings/Baynton.pdf>, accessed 28 March 2022.

⁷ This expression was first used by North American feminist researchers who conceptualised the feminist theory of ‘situatedness’, which challenges the dogma of scientific neutrality and considers the ‘epistemic privilege’ of female experience as a source of knowledge (see Nancy Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism’, Sandra Harding [ed.], *Feminism and Methodology*, Social Science Issues, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press & Open University Press, 1987).

the human community. The subtitle, 'Old narratives, new narratives', seeks to clarify the perspective adopted. The word 'narrative' is to be understood here in the broad sense. To elucidate this, we refer to Harris's article 'The Aesthetics of Disability'⁸, which shows how 'integration' has become the watchword orienting all disability policies in the United States. This notion of integration is driven by a narrative generated by the work of social scientists, who consider what they call 'intergroup contact' to be an effective solution from a cognitive point of view to the problem of segregation. It holds that negative stereotyping and ignorance can be counteracted within a dominant group through association with members of a minority group. This narrative on the cognitive nature of prejudice was originally mobilised to shape civil rights legislation on the race issue but subsequently migrated to the question of disability. However, as some researchers argue, it is more hypothetical than theoretical and is far from being systematically true. In fact, recent studies have shown that the 'integration' situation is more complicated with regard to disability than the classical narrative claims: 'Similar to racial integration, the physical integration of students with disabilities in neighborhood schools largely resulted in shared physical place rather than inclusion'⁹.

Through the notions of 'old narratives' and 'new narratives', the aim is therefore to highlight the ideological preconceptions that have historically driven and shaped the different discourses on disability.

In order to address the question from a broad spectrum, papers should focus on the following areas:

- Disabilities, struggles and social movements (from exclusion to 'nothing about us without us')
- Disability policies (national and/or transnational historical approaches)
- Disabled bodies and ideological constructs
- Disability and identity, a category to be understood in an intersectional way
- The representation of disability. Disability and empowerment. Consider, for example, autobiographies and fictions that adopt a disabled perspective (*The Way He Looks* [2014] by Brazilian Daniel Ribeiro, the Argentinean mini-series *4 Feet High* by Rosario Perazolo and Belén Poncio).
- The crip¹⁰ culture and its manifestations

⁸ Jasmine E. Harris, 'The Aesthetics of Disability', *Columbia Law Review*, May 2019, vol. 119, no 4, p. 895-972, p. 906; available online: <https://columbialawreview.org/content/the-aesthetics-of-disability/>, accessed 23 March 2022.

⁹ Jasmine E. Harris, 'The Aesthetics of Disability', op. cit., p. 913.

¹⁰ For activists reclaiming this appellative, the term 'crip' (short for 'cripple') reverses the stigma. The crip identity 'comprises three requirements: a valorisation of the often overlooked capacities of the crip community in all its diversity; an in-depth critique of the sexist, heteronormative, racist and classist world; and an explicit position of solidarity with other marginalised groups (women, queers, people who are racially discriminated and poor people in general), while acknowledging the particularity of the crip identity'. (Roberto Domingo Toledo, 'Aux États-Unis, les plus marginaux mettent le centre aux marges', Charles Gardou, *Le Handicap et ses empreintes culturelles*, Paris: Érès, 'Connaissances de la diversité', 2016, p. 99-116, p. 111).

Proposals for articles (30 lines) can be written in French, English or Spanish. They should be submitted (with a Curriculum Vitae) before **15 December 2022** to the following address: **amnis@revues.org**. Accepted articles must be received by **15 June 2023** at the latest. Following submission to the journal's scientific committee and two external reviewers, the articles will be published on the journal's website (**<http://amnis.revues.org>**) in 2023.

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