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Ugly laws book summary

The murky history behind municipal laws criminalizing disabilityIn 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’ 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. Because everyone is pressed for time, the need to look up the summary of this book or that one is sometimes a priority. Therefore, a wide variety of sites are available containing them. Follow these guidelines to learn where to find book summaries online.Websites and BlogsMany websites and blogs offer summaries of chapters in books for free to their readers. Some present notes, reflections, and reviews that their readers can comment on, discuss, or reflect on. The purpose of these websites and blogs is to present an informal setting for people to enjoy books without feeling the pressure of making a purchase. 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These book summary sites contain information about the author, release date, characters, plot, and then move on to the summaries, like a short summary of Othello, for example. MORE FROM QUESTIONSANSWERED.NET In June 2009 Riam Dean, a British student, took Abercrombie and Fitch to court for unfair dismissal and disability discrimination. Ms. Dean, who has a prosthetic arm, was deemed not to conform to the company's 'look policy', and was informed that she could not work on the shop floor until the winter uniform arrived and she could wear a concealing cardigan. In May 1881 Chicago city council passed an ordinance ruling that ‘any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object [...] shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine' (1-2). This was the first of the infamous ‘unsightly beggar ordinances’, or ‘ugly laws’, within the USA. A febrile concept frequently drawn upon in disability criticism — from Robert Burgdorf Jr., original author of the ADA, to contemporary disability studies scholar Stuart Murray — there has been little sustained investigation into the origins and effects of the ugly laws. That Susan Schweik’s monograph on the ugly laws of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was published in the same year that a young woman was subject to dismissal on the grounds that a prosthetic limb disabled her from ‘looking great while exhibiting individuality’ (A&F ‘look policy’) indicates that this book is not only important in terms of historical research but speaks into the contemporary aesthetics of popular culture and disability. In the preface to The Ugly Laws Schweik professes that she is not a historian, and that her intent in the text is to examine the discourse — legal, journalistic, autobiographical — that surrounds the ugly laws. In the process, she delves deep into the legal debates at the turn of the twentieth century regarding the position and rights of disabled beggars and street vendors in America, presenting court case minutiae and political tracts and cross-examining the language and rhetoric therein. Prefacing her work, Schweik quotes a contemporary New York lawyer, commenting after winning his clients the right to panhandle in the subways: ‘it’s hard to get real excited about winning the right to beg’ (viii). At times, the sheer mass of material Schweik covers in The Ugly Laws may threaten to overwhelm the thread of her argument (and the reader) — but there is never any danger of indifference. Schweik’s study is divided into three sections. The first deals with the historical backdrop to the emergence of the ugly laws: its precursors in vagrancy and begging legislation, both in America and the UK; the rhetoric and language used by charitable organisations to justify the proposals; the contribution of a growing middle-class in the efforts to enforce the legislation. Part II, ‘At the Unsightly Intersection’, discusses the points at which the ugly laws (and disability more generally) overlapped with other minority identities: bringing gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity into the melting pot, along with class. Schweik describes how popular accounts of the ugly laws have ‘tended to frame the subject of the ordinances as purely and abstractly disabled: ungendered (that is, male), unracial (that is, white), without nationality (that is, American), and unsexualized (that is, heterosexual, but only in default)’ (18). She goes on to detail how not only did the penalties for breaching the ugly laws vary from city to city, but also differed between men and women, American citizens and recent immigrants, etc. The final section of the text discusses resistance to the ordinances: resistance that was largely ineffectual, and — at least until the dissolution (astonishingly late) of the laws in the 1970s — openly scorned by the establishment. It is at this point that it would have been interesting to see Schweik make a clearer comparison to contemporary politics and aesthetics: she mentions Plymouth city council’s 2004 begging policy (‘any unsightly beggars are quickly removed from the city centre’), drawing attention to the retention of the phrase ‘unsightly beggar’, and to the case of Robichard vs. RPH Management (the owners of MacDonald’s), where an employee was told that she would ‘never be in management’ because of a birthmark on her face (284), but leaves further questions unasked. Where were the beggars removed to, in Plymouth? What constitutes ‘unsightly’ in today’s society? Are we to presume that customers of MacDonald’s are of a hardier nature than its management, or those who frequent Abercrombie and Fitch? What prompts the need for a ‘look policy’? These questions aside, The Ugly Laws remains a substantial piece of scholarship, providing in-depth and meticulously researched insight into one of the most infamous examples of disability discrimination — and is a useful resource for anyone working within disability studies. Return to Top of Page In 1881, the Chicago City Council ratified a law that aimed “to abolish all street obstructions” by prohibiting “Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object” from appearing in public. Known as the ugly laws, Chicago’s ordinance and numerous others passed in cities across the nation, have understandably become a sort of shorthand for the oppression of disabled people and the criminalization of disability. But despite this prominence in the field of disability studies, the laws have been subject to little sustained study. This month’s Berkeley Books selection, The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public remedies this lacuna by telling the story of the “unsightly beggar” who emerged across multiple forms of discourse and knowledge in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the Preface, Schweik, Professor of English, Associate Dean of the Arts and Humanities, Co-Director of the Disability Studies Program, and Co-Director of the recently-announced Disability Research Initiative, explains that book developed from an informal question posed to her by a colleague in disability studies and professor of city and regional planning, who asked: “Do you know, was that law ever actively enforced?” Schweik writes: “I didn’t know, and it suddenly struck me as a problem that I didn’t. So I went to find out. This project emerged from the moment of that whispered question—an exchange between a city planner and a literary critic that in itself exemplifies some of the interdisciplinary range of disability studies.” (vii) The book is divided into three parts, the first of which traces the emergence of the ugly laws, examining early examples and related municipal rulings. This first part moves from a discussion of the urban unease and class conflict surrounding conspicuous begging that gave rise to laws to an exploration of a wider range of factors that created a niche for them: the rise of eugenics and state institutions; the development of urban planning and an understanding of the urban public sphere as a pedagogical space; temperance and prohibition movements; and a rhetorics of disgust. The final chapter of the first part, “Dissimulations,” studies the figure of the faker, a constant preoccupation of ugly law advocates, who seemed to assume the majority of disabled beggars to be “sham cripples.” The second part, “At the Unsightly Intersection,” considers the other identity categories enmeshed with the “diseased, maimed, and deformed” to show how the ordinances have worked to reinforce unstable and evolving norms of nation, race, sex, and gender. The last part, “The End of the Ugly Laws,” traces resistance to the ordinances both at the moment they emerged and after. In her review of The Ugly Laws in the American Historical Review, Barbara Young Welke writes: “This is a powerful book, essential reading for scholars of disability, race, gender, sexuality, immigration, urban, legal, social movement, and twentieth-century history more generally—indeed, for anyone concerned about law and its power and the limits of that power to define borders of belonging.” In this week’s Biblio-file Schweik recommends nine titles that influenced her thinking while working The Ugly Laws, and helped to shape the field of disability studies. Her selections include The Sunny Side of the Street, a memoir by a famous vaudeville performer often described as a ‘hunchback dwarf,’ Deborah Rhodes’ 2010 best-seller The Beauty Bias, and a collection of contemporary plays by disabled playwrights.

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