

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: On the government of disability

Author: Shelley Tremain

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: Contrary to the social model of disability, “impairment” is not a timeless, ahistorical descriptor of bodies, but is an historical and strategic product of “the regime of ‘bio-power’.” Disability activists should be wary of using it to ground their political movements because it will feed back into the power structures and relations that produced it.

Key Definitions:

Impairment – according to the social model of disability, “the lack of a limb or part thereof or a defect of limb, organ or mechanism of the body” (620).

Social model of disability – that disability is “a form of disadvantage which is imposed on top of one’s impairment, that is, the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization that takes little or no account of people with physical impairments” (620). Contrary to a medical model, which locates disability as a problem with the body itself. On this view, impairments are about the body, and disability is about the lack of fit between that body and the social and material world. People with impairments need not be disabled.

Biopower – “the endeavor to rationalize the problems that the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings, when constituted as a population, pose to governmental practice: problems of health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, and race” (618). Since the late 18th century, governments have taken up the management of these problems as a central aim. They often use disciplinary strategies to do so (see below for more on disciplinary power).

Brief Summary:

The social model of disability relies on an understanding of power that Tremain rejects

- “power is a fundamentally repressive thing possessed, and exercised over others, by an external authority such as a particular social group, a class, an institution, or the state” (620)
- Disability is something that the state or society *does* to people with impairments

Tremain’s understanding of power is Foucauldian: government, “any mode of action, more or less considered and calculated, that is bound to structure the field of possible action of others” – with disciplinary techniques, which aim at creating docile bodies, bodies “that can be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (622)

- It’s productive because it creates possibilities, paths, goals, etc. It also conceals itself, naturalizes the aims and possibilities it puts forward; it makes it appear given, obvious
- “the production of seeming acts of choice (*limits* of possible conduct) on the everyday level of the subject makes possible hegemonic power structures” (622)

Her thesis is that impairment is an effect of power, analogous to the way sex is constructed but taken as a bodily, ahistorical given

Sex is produced by biopower:

- The sex-gender distinction plays on a nature-culture distinction that takes nature to be a given, “prediscursive” or prior to culture, with settled boundaries; it is improper to ask political or strategic questions about natural stuff (ex. who benefits from counting this as natural? Who doesn’t?)
- But “the category of sex (as well as the categories of biology, race, body, and nature) must be considered in the specific historical and cultural contexts in which it has emerged as salient” (626)
- Foucault points out how the category of sex, and its “naturalness” is essential and central to biopower—“the notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning” (626-627). So it’s used to explain/ground heterosexism.

Obj: but there are sexual parts, differences, etc.

- “My argument does not entail the denial of material differences between bodies...my argument is that these differences are always already signified and formed by discursive and institutional practices...what counts as ‘sex’ is actually formed through a series of contestations over the criteria used to distinguish between two natural sexes, which are alleged to be mutually exclusive” (627)
- “the practices of gender performance (construed as the cultural expression of a ‘natural sex’) seem to be dictated by individual choice, therefore, conceals the fact that complicated networks of power have already limited the possible interpretations of that performance. For only those genders that conform to highly regulated norms of cultural intelligibility may be lived without risk of reprisal” (630)

Impairment is produced by biopower:

- The identity of a person as having an impairment is produced by the political situation which the social model purports to respond to and resist
- “Disciplinary practices into which the subject is inducted and divided from others produce the illusion that they have a prediscursive, or natural, antecedent (impairment), one that in turn provides the justification for the multiplication and expansion of the regulatory effects of these practices. The testimonials, acts, and enactments of the disabled subject are *performative* insofar as the allegedly ‘natural’ impairment that they are purported to disclose, or manifest, has no existence prior to or apart from those very constitutive performances. That the discursive object called *impairment* is claimed to be the embodiment of natural deficit or lack, furthermore, obscures the fact that the constitutive power relations that define and circumscribe ‘impairment’ have already put in place board outlines of the forms in which that discursive object will be materialized” (632)
- “the category of impairment emerged and in part persists in order to legitimate the disciplinary practices that generated it in the first place” (632)
- Analysis of a UK disability living allowance policy by Shildrick and Price.
 - o “through a performance of textual confession (“the more you can tell us, the easier it is for us to get a clear picture of what you need”), the potential recipient is made a subject of impairment (in addition to being made a subject of the state), and is rendered ‘docile,’ that is, one to be used, enabled, subjugated, and improved” (633)

Is resistance possible? Yes, disabled people’s movement is an example. But by grounding resistance in impairment, possibilities here are limited (634). Tremaine thinks we need to move away from identity politics and just demand things “for us” and to interrogate the construction of disabled/impaired identity.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Possible Applications:

- Continental philosophy classes
- Philosophy of disability classes
- Bioethics
- (For a unit on) philosophy of/and the body
- Capabilities approach
- Philosophy of science classes

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Excerpts from Tremain's *Foucault and the Government of Disability*
- Defenders/representatives of the social model of disability [Rebecca Kukla has a good MOOC video explaining this: <https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/phil105/human-body-and-the-concept-of-natural/disability/index.html>]
- Judith Butler on the sex/gender distinction
- Excerpts from Foucault on power/biopower
- Anne Fausto-Sterling on sex/gender distinction
- Sara Ahmed on the privilege of seamlessly being able to utilize a space (in a way that individuals with disabilities may well not be able to)
- Elizabeth Anderson and Martha Nussbaum if you were to pair this with Capabilities Approach stuff
- Excerpts from Ian Hacking
- Defenders/representatives of the medical model of disability
- Sandra Bartky on disciplinary power
- Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability"

Possible Class Activities:

- Bring in governmental disability documentation/forms that have to be brought in
- Look at actual legislation on disability
- Videos on sex-gender distinction
- Spending time on explaining the idea of power-as-productive; combatting the culture vs. nature dualism; other key, but difficult concepts that students are likely to find counter-intuitive.