RECIPIENT OF THE 2005 IRVING K. ZOLA AWARD FOR EMERGING SCHOLARS IN DISABILITY STUDIES: 'It Is For The Mother': Feminists' Rhetorics of Disability During the American Eugenics Period

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Abstract

Since the inception of the current U.S. disability rights movement, there has been tension between mainstream American feminists and disability rights activists over disabled women's right to control our bodies. While many nondisabled women now take such freedom for granted, disabled women continue to have decisions about our bodies determined by others who are part of the dominant culture. Why have mainstream feminists, who base their ideology upon the fallacy of a social construct of “inferiority,” been unable to generalize their analysis to include disabled women?

This essay contributes to women's and disability studies scholarship, exploring eugenic-period feminists’ ideologies about disabled people to better understand the roots of the friction between these two movements. I compare the lives and work of two of the period's influential feminists: Charlotte Perkins-Gilman and Margaret Sanger, examining their use of eugenic language and ideology through close readings of papers, diaries and autobiographies in order to understand the formation of a movement to liberate non-disabled women at the expense of disabled people.

Keywords

Disability; Eugenics; Feminists; Charlotte Perkins-Gilman; Margaret Sanger

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1 Adriana Scardino, Improvements in life expectancy and sustainability of social security schemes, report for the International Conference of Social Security Actuaries and Statisticians, Ottawa, Canada, 16-18 September 2009. 2 The study covers Argentina, Chile, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States and Uruguay. 3 Dang T., Antolin P., Oxley H., Fiscal implications of ageing: projections of age-related spending, OECD Economics Department Working Paper, OECD, 2001. Tags: social security, ageing population. 'It Is For The Mother': Feminists' Rhetorics of Disability During the American Eugenics Period. Sharon Lamp University of Illinois-Chicago E-mail: slamp1@uic.edu. Abstract. This essay contributes to women's and disability studies scholarship, exploring eugenic-period feminists' ideologies about disabled people to better understand the roots of the friction between these two movements. The assertion has been made "it is for the mother, by the use of appropriate means to produce a poet, a thinker, an artist, an inventor, a philanthropist, or any other type of manhood or womanhood, desirable or undesirable, as she will," wrote Dr. Mary Melendy, in Modern Eugenics for Men and Women (Melendy and Frank: 1922: 118). Of course, a significant jump in disability numbers has accompanied the increase in longevity. Because countries age at different paces, it is possible for the elements of production - labour and capital - to flow across national boundaries and mitigate the impact of population aging. Studies predict that, in the near term, surplus capital will flow from Europe and North America to emerging markets in Asia and Latin America, where the population is younger and cheaper and supplies of capital relatively low. In another 20 years, when the baby boom generation in the West has mostly retired, capi