



The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public

Susan Schweik

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In 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.

The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public Details

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From Reader Review The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public for online ebook

Marilyn McEntyre says

Even for those who have paid attention to discrimination against the disabled, Susan Schweik's thoughtful history of "ugly laws" delivers disturbing surprises. Her title comes from a 1975 work of legal scholarship and refers to ordinances that make punishable offenses of "exposure" of "unsightly" bodies or embarrassing public behaviors associated with mental illness. The legal history of such ordinances in the U.S. dates back to 1867. A San Francisco ordinance passed that year criminalized the "display" of certain "offensively" visible disabilities for purposes of begging. Such laws conflated disability, socioeconomic status, and race, so that persons who were visibly "different" were regarded as threats to the health and well-being of others. An important feature of Schweik's argument is how ugly laws emerged as a direct function of capitalism. Unsightliness was, she points out, "illegal only for people without means" (16). One paradox created an embarrassing dilemma for the enforcers of ugly laws: wounded soldiers returning from the Civil War, and other sites of combat had to be handled with particular diplomacy. One need only recall more recent controversies over funding mental health care for vets to recognize how strong is the inclination to avoid recognizing the systemic issues that underlie some of the human misery we may find "distasteful." This book provides useful background for understanding current efforts to encode and enforce protections for the disabled and disadvantaged. Though the book's moral appeal is mostly implicit, it is unmistakable. It might well lead us to pray as the poet Richard Wilbur did in his poem, "The Eye," that we be led to see "in all bodies the beat of spirit," and that "this eye not be folly's loophole /But giver of due regard."

Sherry Lee says

Academics, we sometimes write too much. This book is an example of where less would be more. It is a good book on an important topic.

Danine Spencer says

It took me two years to read this book. The information is fascinating but the writing is atrocious. I often found myself bored after a page or two and put the book away for months. I only forced myself to finish it because I wanted to move it off my "currently reading" list. The sad thing is, with better prose, "The Ugly Laws" could have been another "The Warmth of Other Suns".

Audacia Ray says

I'd like to give this book 5 stars for interesting ideas, and 1 star for the droll and somewhat confusing academic writing. So 3 stars it is.

The analysis of the relationship between "ugly laws" that criminalize poor people and people with disabilities

for being in public and the rise of charities was nothing short of stunning intellectually. It was really intriguing/disturbing to see how these things all connect up. The author also hits hard on the distinction between "meaning well" and doing actual measurable good.

I used to read exclusively non-fiction, often with heavy academic leanings. But since starting to read a lot more fiction and memoir, I really want better (or any!) narratives in my non-fiction writing. This book is sorely lacking in that area.

Mills College Library says

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Lindsay says

I had to read this for a sociology class and I loved it. The Ugly Laws should be mandatory reading. It's an eye opener!

Ellen says

An important topic, but very dry. This took me far longer to read than I thought it would.

Margaret Sankey says

In the late 19th century, new urban governments passed ordinances to prevent the display of ugliness in public space--driven by new understandings of disease vectors, Victorian offense at "'fake"' crippled beggars and visions of "'new cities"' . Quickly, these became a useful catch-all to round up beggars, cross-dressers, peddlers, unruly women (wearing trousers!), insufficiently humble non-white people and anything generating "'foreign"' noises or smells. Of course, it became complicated when those targeted were veterans, when diseases like polio hit decent middle-class society, when it was obvious that ugly was not contagious, in the face of the surprisingly powerful pro-circus lobby, or when disallowing begging meant government had to pay for social services or institutions. Since those prosecuted were the least likely to get lawyers willing to follow these cases to overturning the laws, it was only in the 1930s that they began to fade away rather than be repealed, although the last prosecution was in Ohio in 1974, and subjective cases framed in the same way remain a contentious category of ADA lawsuits now.
