



REVIEW: *Constructing Disability after the Great War: Blind Veterans in the Progressive Era*, by Evan P. Sullivan. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024

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BOOK REVIEW

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Evan Sullivan's *Constructing Disability After the Great War* provides a compelling examination of how Progressive Era cultural constructions of ability and disability shaped the lived experiences of blind veterans after World War I. Sullivan argues that media representations of blind veterans played a dual role—both exacerbating the economic, physical, and psychological struggles of disabled veterans and reinforcing state-driven norms of productivity and self-reliance. By situating his work within the historiographies of disabled veterans, nation-state formation, and disability studies, Sullivan challenges prevailing interpretations that emphasize federal indifference, instead highlighting how the media functioned as an apparatus of state control.

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KEYWORDS:

World War I; disability; culture;
citizenship; capitalism; veteran

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Clark, V. (2025). REVIEW: *Constructing Disability after the Great War: Blind Veterans in the Progressive Era*, by Evan P. Sullivan. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 11(1), pp. 47–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v11i1.657>

Evan Sullivan's new book offers a concise and thoughtful examination of how Progressive Era cultural conceptions of ability and disability shaped the lived experiences of blind veterans at the end of World War I. Sullivan's central thesis is that media representations of blind veterans played a critical role in exacerbating disabled veterans' postwar physical, mental, and economic struggles, while reinforcing state-driven norms of productivity and self-reliance. This book exists at the intersection of several broader historiographies. First, Sullivan firmly situates his work in the historiography of disabled veterans. The author's work both reaffirms and challenges ideas put forth by authors such as John Kinder (*Paying with Their Bodies*). For example, while Sullivan and Kinder's studies illustrate the mental, physical, and economic hardships experienced by disabled World War I veterans, Sullivan expands on Kinder's work by emphasizing the role that media representations of disabled veterans played in the Progressive Era. Sullivan argues that these media portrayals served a dual function. These images simultaneously diminished the hardships of disabled veterans while providing the state with a tool to discipline broader American society, compelling adherence to industrial capitalist standards of productivity. This emphasis on cultural critique challenges existing historiographical patterns, which tend to overemphasize federal indifference, downplaying the active role the broader state apparatuses, such as American media, played in shaping public perception and the body politic.

By invoking the idea of social construction in the title of this book, the author also engages in ongoing conversations about disability as a socially constructed category, aligning his work with scholars like Lennard Davis (*Enforcing Normalcy*) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomas (*Extraordinary Bodies*). This book augments Davis' theoretical exploration of normalcy by grounding the theory in a historical case study, demonstrating how the state used the media to establish and reinforce the idea of normalcy. Moreover, while Garland-Thomas and Sullivan both exemplify how writers perpetuate the false binary of disabled and nondisabled in their works, Sullivan aims to demonstrate how the news media also served as a tool for state control. Whereas Garland-Thomas engages in literary analysis to challenge the very legitimacy of the disabled-nondisabled binary. Collectively, these works provide a clearer picture of how American society reifies the idea of disability through the media as a means of social control.

In addition to analyzing media representations, Sullivan engages with the broader historiography of nation-state and citizen subject formation among scholars like Douglas Baynton and Natalia Molina. While Sullivan agrees with Baynton's assessment of the American government's preoccupation with limiting disabled subjects' impact

on shaping the national body politic each author offers a different methodology for exploring the topic. While Baynton takes a transnational political approach, Sullivan provides a domestic cultural analysis of nation-state formation. Sullivan's method demonstrates how the domestic state media apparatus aided in the nation-state formation process described by Baynton. Likewise, while Molina and Sullivan offer a domestic analysis of body politic formation, Molina presents a more specific regional institutional analysis of public health in Los Angeles. On the other hand, Sullivan's work is conceptually broader, demonstrating the reach of the state beyond California. Collectively, these authors support the pervasive argument in this historiography that a significant concern of the emerging U.S. nation-state, in the modern period, was shaping the body politic to promote old-stock American expectations for the nation's physical, economic, and cultural health.

Sullivan's analysis uniquely illustrates how the cultural construction of disability, through media representation and political discourse, informed the meaning that the American public ascribed to wartime disability. Sullivan argues that "the process of culturally constructing blindness was bound to all the emotions and contingencies of mobilizing, fighting, and healing from war's traumas" (p. 10). Through the media's portrayal of blind veterans as "downcast wrecks of their former selves" or as "morally superior," the American public came to understand not only the physical and emotional toll of War but also what a deserving disabled veteran citizen subject looked and acted like. As the author points out, inspirational news stories about blind veterans simultaneously highlighted the tenacity of the nation's veterans while chastising nondisabled citizens who failed to meet cultural expectations for ideal Americans. The author emphasizes that through media representations of "inspirational... soldiers overcoming their disabilities [the media] argued that though blind soldiers had an almost insurmountable disability, they conquered their disabilities through sheer individual will" (p. 69). The focus on individual will within these stories is key to understanding the construction of disability as a tool of the state for determining merit for the privileges of citizenship in the modern period. Deserving disabled veterans were those who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and through sheer force of individual will turn themselves into productive capitalists.

Aligning with the traditional preoccupations within the historiography of disabled veterans, Sullivan highlights the fraught relationship between disability and laissez-faire capitalist expectations of productivity. As the author shows, examining the cultural construction of disability reveals how news outlets used stories showcasing blind

veterans' willingness and capacity to work as examples of disabled citizens who were fit for citizenship. The American public viewed veterans with disabilities who could not work as "potential liabilities and dangers to public health and the social body politic" (p. 6). To counteract this threat to the nation's economic health, news outlets like the *Cincinnati Enquirer* propagated hyperbolized stories about inspirational figures like blind World War I veteran Carl Bronner. The American media used Bronner's story of success to both model the ideal disabled veteran citizen subject and to "shame unproductive nondisabled people, both veteran and nonveteran alike, who "still cravenly shrink" from their social responsibilities such as work and family" (p. 6). In other words, through stories like Bronner's, the image and idea of productive blind veterans became a weapon. The state used this weaponized image of the productive blind veteran to shame unproductive citizens, who were unwilling or unable to keep up with the vocational demands of an increasingly industrialized America. The state manipulated citizens, hoping the humiliation would compel adherence to the standards of capitalist productivity. Ultimately, these inspirational stories diminished the public's capacity for empathy toward those citizens with disabilities unable to meet industrial demands. That diminished capacity for empathy led to widespread neglect of some of society's most vulnerable citizens.

Evan Sullivan has written a thought-provoking study of the cultural construction of disability after World War I. He demonstrates how the representation of disability in the

media served as a tool for the emerging U.S. nation-state to accomplish two primary goals of modern development in American life. First, the cultural construction of the inspirational blind veteran served as a litmus test for an individual's fitness for citizenship. Second, the author shows that for those deemed currently unfit, the image of the persevering blind veteran shamed unproductive citizens, disabled and nondisabled alike, compelling them to meet the unreasonable expectations of the industrial American labor market. This book provides a clearer vision of the lived experiences of veterans with disabilities, a group too often overlooked by the historiography of modern America.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Mary Ellen, the greatest mom a fella could ever ask for.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted: 16 December 2024

Accepted: 16 January 2025

Published: 25 February 2025

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