

Michael D'Antonio
The State Boys Rebellion.

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. 308 pp.

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Michael D'Antonio's, *The State Boys Rebellion*, is a well-written and dramatic account of disability, children's experiences of institutionalization, eugenics and reform in the mid-twentieth century United States. D'Antonio examines the experiences of a group of boys, particularly one boy, Fred Boyce, from their admission to Massachusetts' Fernald School for the Feeble-minded in the 1940s and 1950s, to the present. D'Antonio's main argument is that officials misdiagnosed these "utterly normal" (5) boys (and some girls, housed separately, but whose experiences D'Antonio explores only briefly) as 'feeble-minded.'

D'Antonio begins his narrative at Boyce's admittance to Fernald in 1949 at the age of eight. At Fernald, Boyce and his peers faced violent attendants; the abuse of younger and more disabled boys by older, more 'normal' ones; hours spent in idleness instead of in school; sexual assaults by male and female staff; and the constant disciplinary threat of banishment to Fernald's forensic unit ("Ward 22") or its totally degraded back wards. Despite these obstacles, Boyce exercised agency by learning to survive in the institution and even by actively questioning the accuracy of his own diagnosis.

In addition to following Boyce and the other boys, the book provides background on American eugenics, particularly the institutionalization and sterilization of tens of thousands of Americans, whom various authorities deemed 'feeble-minded,' as well as the Fernald School's role in Massachusetts' post-war welfare state. Fernald, a public institution, served as a human laboratory for resident psychiatrist and neuropathologist, Dr. Clemens Benda, who explored the once-suspected connection between 'feeble-mindedness' and glandular dysfunction. D'Antonio also looks at reforms, beginning in the mid-1950s, to Massachusetts' institutions for children and adults with mental illnesses and disabilities. Reform was connected to the nascent Civil Rights movements of the 1950s. D'Antonio argues that an awareness of Civil Rights, specifically the movement's capacity to raise the group consciousness of various groups experiencing dis-

crimination, including people with disabilities, may have inspired the boys to rebel against the institution in 1957. Their organized rebellion quickly fizzled and D'Antonio's brief treatment of it proves anti-climatic in light of the book's title.

In the second part of the book, D'Antonio examines Boyce's parole from Fernald in 1960 and his subsequent efforts to integrate into the outside world. Boyce adapted remarkably well to the immense change he experienced going from institutional life to total independence, finding success as a midway operator on the very competitive carnival circuit. D'Antonio reminds us that, unfortunately, many of Boyce's friends from Fernald were not as successful.

In the book's final section, D'Antonio examines a State of Massachusetts inquiry into the Fernald School in the early 1990s. The inquiry was only indirectly related to the boy's wrongful incarceration and experiences of abuse. It mainly investigated allegations that Benda experimented on the boys; feeding them radioactive oatmeal without their knowledge. The inquiry paralleled an initiative by President Bill Clinton to investigate claims that American doctors conducted a number of illicit atomic experiments on human subjects during the Cold War. Boyce appeared before both the Massachusetts inquiry and the Clinton inquiry and attempted valiantly, with mixed results, to get officials to recognize that the greatest tragedy at Fernald was not Benda's experiments, but the institution's appalling conditions and the misdiagnosis and admission of 'normal' boys.

In his analysis, D'Antonio is primarily interested in the misdiagnosis of 'normal' boys as 'feble-minded.' He first deconstructs the category of 'moron,' a diagnosis the 'normal' boys often received. Henry Goddard, the American eugenicist and author of *The Kallikak Family* (in which he claimed to show 'feble-mindedness' was hereditary), invented this category to describe individuals whose IQ approached, but did not quite meet, the 'normal' standard. D'Antonio then picks apart the rationale officials used to admit and keep 'normal' boys in an institution for the 'feble-minded.' He shows that IQ tests were fundamentally flawed and virtually useless in assessing intelligence, then that the supposed science behind 'feble-mindedness' – eugenics, which contributed greatly to Goddard's 'moron' category – was really a pseudoscience, and, finally, that Fernald officials allowed their own prejudices about class and race to affect diagnostic practices.

D'Antonio overlooks what should be the next logical step in his misdiagnosis argument: state officials – whom he thoroughly discredits – did not just fail in diagnosing 'normal' boys as 'feble-minded,' they failed at accurately diagnosing *anyone* as 'feble-minded.' Officials diagnosed other children at Fernald – D'Antonio calls them "the ones who were really retarded" (3), using the same flawed IQ tests and eugenic assumptions that trapped Boyce. In fact, D'Antonio has no basis to assume diagnoses were any more accurate when applied to the "really retarded" children. Moreover, new scholarship in disability history argues that all disabilities are socially constructed, arising from the way doctors, psychologists and others categorize human difference in accordance with the social, cultural and political factors of a given time and place.¹ Instead of distinguishing between misdiagnosed 'normal' and 'really retarded,' it is more interesting

to ask: what was happening in 1950s America that caused contemporaries to create a category of 'retardation' that included Boyce and the other boys? How has this category changed since that time, so that today we would categorize these boys as 'normal'? Similarly, we must also historicize eugenics. Eugenicists made many highly dubious claims, nevertheless, eugenics was not pseudoscientific in this period, as D'Antonio claims. Dubious claims and all, eugenics fit easily within mainstream science – something historian Diane B. Paul and others note.

Undergraduate classes in education history or children's history, in particular, would benefit from reading this book. D'Antonio's prose is accessible and he tells a good story. The book will generate classroom discussion on the role of science in education policy, disability and education, and children's agency and resistance.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent overview of the literature in the field see Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June, 2003): 763-793.