

## Colonizing Cognitive Disability: Progress, Development, and Confinement

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In *Folie et déraison*, Michel Foucault famously argued that a “Great Confinement” took place in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. This period Foucault wrote, was marked by the unprecedented sequestration of the cognitively ill and disabled in lunatic asylums and mental hospitals across Europe from the late 1600s onwards. Following Roy Porter’s reappraisal of Foucault’s thesis, however, historians generally agree that a “great confinement” did not occur in England until the nineteenth century, when the cognitively disabled were systematically confined in asylums and labor colonies. Before this “institutional turn” in the history of disability, the mentally disabled were, as Peter Rushton argues, largely “left in virtual independence . . . with no hint of custody or care by others.”

In this paper I argue that a discernible shift in attitudes toward cognitive disability occurred in England and the United States throughout the nineteenth century. Whereas seventeenth and eighteenth-century social contract theorists, from Hobbes to Kant, conceived of disability as a congenital, natural, and untreatable form of subpersonhood, nineteenth-century social reformers saw it as an illness that incurred cure. This shift, I argue, is a product of what Barbara Arneil has recently called “internal colonialism.” That is, a strain of nineteenth-century liberal colonialism directed at “curing” and “improving” certain “inferior” European citizens through a similar process of colonization deployed overseas, emphasizing progress and civility through industry and rational development.

Édouard Séguin’s physiological model for cognitive development became one of the most widespread nineteenth-century “cures” for cognitive disability in the mid 1800s. Séguin’s treatment subjected disabled patients to a series of repetitive physical exercises geared at re-educating their bodies and consequently ushering them into mental maturation, rationality, and civility. It was no accident, I argue, that Séguin’s model, which emphasized rational development through industry and segregation, became one of the most popular remedies for curing the “feeble-minded” during the apogee of European liberal colonialism.