The course explores disability as experience, as identity and as difference in spaces as varied as modern Botswana to ancient Greece and early modern France. In the course of the semester, students will come to an appreciation of the immense import and potential of disability as a category of historical and social analysis. Employing literature from history, anthropology and disability studies, we explore diverse theoretical perspectives on disability from scholars including Foucault, Canguilhem, Garland-Thomson, Stiker and Erevelles. Important themes that transect with disability in the course include labour, war, religion and eugenics.

We also will engage with the criticisms made of disability studies as being a neologism, a framework that emerged in the Anglophone world drawn on largely ‘western’ Judeo-Christian social and cultural norms of corporeal difference. The course will therefore also attempt to decolonise disability by considering the cultural fluidity of such an experience. This course uses documentaries and films to push students towards a more critical understanding of the complex narrative of the histories of the ‘abnormal’ body against the discourse of colonialism, biomedicine, gender, religion, poverty, race and class in the majority world. We trace how various cultures have developed criteria, practices and rituals that identify and regulate the non-normative body. In particular we explore the intersection between disability and poverty and how disability has been subsumed into the discourse of development, and the implications of this.

The questions that this course explores includes the following:

- How do and how have we experienced and responded to corporeal difference and debility in our midst?
- How have the definitions of disability changed across time; who has been excluded and who included?
- What is disability’s impact on mainstream histories?
- How did and does disability intersect with others categories of difference including gender, class, caste, race and sexuality?
- How is disability socially constructed, produced and reproduced?
- What was and is the relationship between science, biomedicine and the disabled or non-normative body?
- How did societies begin to conceptualise the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’ through science and the scientific method; and how did those ideas reinforce power and penalise and stigmatise deviance?
- What kinds of scientific understandings, social responses, political constructions, economic valuations and cultural articulations shaped the experience of disability in locations as diverse as the Ottoman Arab world, to modern Botswana or twentieth century Japan?