

The Ugly Law, A Dark Page in Chicago's History



Chicago has long been a pioneering city in progressive civil rights legislation. However, there was a time when this same city had a rather controversial, discriminatory and inhumane law: the "**Ugly Law**."

Adopted in 1881, this municipal ordinance prohibited people who were "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object" from appearing in public, begging, or exhibiting their "disgusting and obscene deformities" under penalty of fine or imprisonment. Legislation that openly targeted disabled people, war veterans or anyone with a physical appearance deemed repulsive by the elite of that era.

In the late 19th century, hygienist and aesthetic ideas were gaining ground in rapidly industrializing American cities. For the wealthy classes, the presence of disabled or disfigured beggars on the streets was seen as a nuisance to be eradicated in the name of public order and decency.

Chicago, then in the midst of reconstruction after the Great Fire of 1871, was no exception. Municipal authorities gave in to pressure from business circles and passed this abhorrent "Ugly Law" which remained in force for nearly 50 years, until 1974.

Numerous accounts tell of aggressive arrests and arbitrary incarcerations of people solely because of their physical appearance during this long period. A revolting episode of institutionalized discrimination that long tarnished the city's progressive image.

Today, Chicago has turned this page and strives to promote inclusion for all without distinction. But the history of this abhorrent "Ugly Law" must remain as a reminder of the abuses that intolerance and prejudice can lead to when enshrined in the legislation of a country that claims to be a land of welcome and opportunity for all.

Sources

- hitek.fr

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