

## Book Review

**Title:** *Disability History: Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte. Eine Einführung.* ["Disability History: An Introduction to Historical Constructions of Disability"]

**Editors:** Elsbeth Bösl, Anne Klein, Anne Waldschmidt

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**Reviewer:** Katharina Heyer, Ph.D.

The field of disability studies has taken Germany by storm. With the publication of *Disability History*, we now have a collection of essays written by the who-is-who of German disability studies. Published in a new book series entitled "Disability Studies: Bodies – Power – Difference" [Körper – Macht – Differenz] by the German *transcript* publishers, this book offers a comprehensive overview of central themes in the German approach to disability studies.

So, what's "German" about disability studies? Judged by the first section of the book, which offers methods and theoretical foundations, the German approach to disability studies takes many of its starting points from the cultural turn in Anglo-based, disability studies. All of the authors refuse to translate the English term "Disability Studies" and weave it seamlessly into their (German) text. The bibliography is riddled with English-language disability classics – gesturing towards the globalization of that understanding – and especially the first section extensively cites American and British classics establishing the foundations of the why and how of disability studies (such as the work of Lennard Davis, Paul Longmore, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mark Priestly and others). The volume's first section also makes the case for a "cultural" model of disability. This model, explains Anne Waldschmidt in the first chapter ("Why do we need Disability Studies and Disability History?"), expands the limitations of the social model's orientation towards policy ("how should society treat people with disabilities") (p. 20) by asking more fundamental – and interdisciplinary – questions regarding the construction of disability, difference and marginalization. In that sense, a cultural model, inspired by the Cultural Studies movement, can use disability as an analytical category pointing to "modernity's dark side and unexamined spaces." (p. 23)

Sections Two and Three examine scientific, institutional, and political constructions of disability. Thus, we have studies tracing the construction of "feble-mindedness" in two distinct periods in German history (1900s and 1970s) as well as one that examines the use of controversial cell-therapies for the "treatment" of children with Down syndrome. German postwar history is well represented by studies of institutions and the deinstitutionalization movement, the public work of charities, and a very general overview of Swiss welfare policy. Petra Fuchs offers a fascinating reading of euthanasia medical charts dating from the 1920 through the 1940s, using Roy Porter's call for a "medical history from below." (Porter 1985) She uses medical charts as biographical sources, offering a rare glimpse into the lives of institutionalized patients who became the victims of mass murder during the Nazi regime.

The final section covers arts and culture, such as the relationship between sports and disability during National Socialism and the representation of little people in the fine arts. Many of the chapters in this book are conceptualized as both introductory and comprehensive, meaning that they typically begin with the Middle Ages, walk us through the Renaissance, and end with the modern period. This means we get a sense of general themes that leave us wanting for more. For example, the final chapter on humor walks us through the ages and then jumps to contemporary disability humor, which suggests a move from derogatory jokes to humor that is politically empowering and casts a critical glance on our continuous discomfort with physical difference. Theoretically, the chapter relies heavily on the Anglo discussion on disability humor that was published in a special edition of *Body & Society* in 1999. Surely there must be German theoretical considerations on disability humor? For example, cartoonist Phil Hubbe is the German equivalent of John Callahan, poking irreverent fun at both disability and our reactions to it. And yet Hubbe is barely mentioned in the chapter's footnotes. Readers with German language skills are invited to browse his website displaying his cartoons as well as his transformation from political to disability cartoonist ([www.hubbe-cartoons.de](http://www.hubbe-cartoons.de)). *Disability History* in its entirety offers important glimpses into German-language disability studies that should prompt readers to investigate this growing field more deeply.

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