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*Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*  
by Carol Poore

# **Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture**

*Carol Poore*

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## Abbreviations

ABM	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Behinderte in den Medien (Project Group on Disabled People in the Media)
ABiD	Allgemeiner Behindertenverband in Deutschland (General Association of the Disabled in Germany)
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
BDM	Bund deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls)
BSV	Blinden- und Sehschwachenverband (Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired)
CDU	Christlich-Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
CeBeeF	Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Clubs Behinderter und ihrer Freunde (National Coalition of Clubs of the Handicapped and Their Friends)
DKOV	<i>Deutsche Kriegsoferversorgung</i>
DKP	Deutsche Kommunistische Partei (German Communist Party)
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
GSV	Gehörlosen- und Schwerhörigenverband (Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing)
HJ	Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth)
ISL	Interessenvertretung Selbstbestimmt Leben in Deutschland (Independent Living Movement in Germany)
KLV	Kinderlandverschickung (Nazi program for evacuating children during World War II)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers Party/Nazi Party)
NSKOV	Nationalsozialistische Kriegsoferversorgung (National Socialist War Victims Association)

NSV	Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist People's Welfare Office)
ORP	Rassenpolitisches Amt (Office of Racial Politics)
PDS	Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus (Party of Democratic Socialism)
POW	Prisoner of war
RBK	Reichsbund der Körperbehinderten (Reich League of the Physically Handicapped)
RBV	Reichsdeutscher Blindenverband (German Association of the Blind)
REGEDE	Reichsverband der Gehörlosen Deutschlands (Reich Union of the Deaf of Germany)
RWU	Reichsanstalt für Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht (Reich Institute for Films and Images in Science and Education)
SA	Sturmabteilung (Nazi brown-shirt storm troopers)
SBK	Selbsthilfebund der Körperbehinderten (Self-Help League of the Physically Handicapped)
SBZ	Sowjetische Besatzungszone (Soviet Occupation Zone)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SMAD	Soviet Military Administration in Germany
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SS	Schutzstaffel (Nazi black-shirt storm troopers)
UCLA	University of California at Los Angeles
UN	United Nations
VdK	Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegshinterbliebenen, und Sozialrentner (Association of War-Disabled, War Survivors, and Social Pensioners)

## Preface

The goal of this book is to write disability into a central place in the German cultural history of the twentieth century. It is actually surprising that this has not been done before. After all, many leading artists, writers, filmmakers, and others have taken disability as one of their most significant themes. Intense debates have occurred in many sociopolitical contexts over how to interpret and evaluate particular kinds of variations in human bodies. In these controversies, disability has often been a focal point for clashes between more inclusive, democratic visions of citizenship and intolerant, authoritarian standpoints. And fundamental ethical questions about the value and quality of human life have frequently revolved around issues related to disability.

Even a cursory survey can easily show that both cultural representations of disability and debates about the proper places for disabled people in German society have often been central to major controversies about aesthetics, normality, individuality, citizenship, and morality. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, disability has remained outside the focus of most cultural historians in German studies.<sup>1</sup> This is so for a number of reasons. First, until recently most scholars have considered disability mainly from a medical rather than a minority perspective. That is, they have viewed disability primarily as a problem of individual impairment and thus as a subject for experts in medicine, rehabilitation, or education rather than as a cultural, political, and social phenomenon having to do with the meanings given to particular kinds of bodies. Second, when historians have dealt with disability, they have usually defined their research according to its cause. For example, there are historical studies about disabled veterans, the social welfare system for disabled workers, and the development of eugenics. Monographs recount the history of treating and educating various groups such as people who are mentally ill, blind, or deaf. And there are even a few analyses of how members of some of these groups have been represented in the cultural sphere. The main drawback of such partial approaches, however, is that they do not tie these phenomena together as comprising general dis-

courses about disability and disabled people. Third, it is still a relatively new idea to most cultural historians that ubiquitous one-sided representations of disability have real consequences for people who are disabled—in contrast to more generally accepted views about the harmfulness of, say, anti-Semitic, racial, or gender stereotypes. It is all the more surprising that German cultural historians have neglected to focus on disability because struggles over definitions of *normality*—which has often been held up as the antithesis of *disability*—had such grave consequences in twentieth-century Germany.

Scholars who are themselves members of previously excluded groups—such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and sometimes even working-class people—have generally taken the lead in challenging and transforming outmoded interpretive paradigms rooted in paternalism or prejudice. Linked to the disability rights movement that began in the United States in the late 1960s, disabled scholars have been hired as American university faculty in somewhat more significant numbers in recent decades. Some of these colleagues, along with nondisabled researchers who share their perspectives, have been engaged in developing disability studies in the humanities, though more so in areas such as English and American cultural studies and history than in German studies. Scholars in this rapidly growing interdisciplinary field consider disability not in terms of medical issues but with regard to far-reaching questions about how bodies are represented in culture. Viewed like this, disability becomes a category of human variation to be studied in the complex ways accorded to race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexual orientation. Informed by this perspective, my book has two main trajectories. In political terms, I focus on the struggles among advocates of charity, rehabilitation experts, and proponents of segregation or elimination, on the one hand, and the increasingly successful efforts of disabled people and their allies to create more democratic models of inclusion on the other. In cultural terms, I trace a development from the traditional use of disability as a negative metaphor to more realistic depictions of disabled people as ordinary human beings and to the growing participation of disabled people in creating cultural texts. My book shows how disabled people in Germany have moved from being relatively passive objects to more active subjects and from being represented mainly by others to telling their own stories.

I have found it easier to bring disability into focus as a cultural phenomenon by keeping in mind two problems of definition. First, and more specifically, it is often useful for purposes of interpretation to distinguish among disabled veterans, people with disabilities considered to be hereditary who were the main targets of eugenics, and other civilians

whose disabilities resulted from illnesses or accidents. It is just as important, however, to be attuned to the links among these three groups such as representations that blur the borders between them or fears of falling from a relatively unproblematic status to a more stigmatized position. Second, I have attempted to employ the most expansive definition of *disability* possible. At first, I planned to focus on cultural representations of physical disability, but I soon found this to be an untenable limitation. For one thing, I learned that the dividing lines between physical and mental disabilities were often not all that clear. For another, since people with mental disabilities have always been the most stigmatized group and they were the main disabled victims of Nazism, I soon saw that the subject of mental disability was essential to my project. Consequently, the range of embodied characteristics that I associate with disability includes physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental impairments along with all those familiar cultural figures such as freaks, invalids, monsters, cripples, idiots, and the insane. I am well aware that this approach leads to impreciseness at points. I hope, however, that it also illuminates unexpected connections and opens up thought-provoking problems that other scholars will refine in the future. Here a note about the language used in this book is necessary. I do not place quotation marks around pejoratives such as *cripple* or *idiot* when it is obvious that they are other people's words used in the context of earlier times. I do set them off whenever it seems necessary to indicate clearly that the terms are not my own.

Intensively studying disability in German culture opened up rich perspectives and a host of fascinating questions that I had not imagined before. This means that the main organizational problem in writing this book was not contending with a dearth of material but having to select from an enormous amount of potential sources. Some readers may take issue with the topics I chose to emphasize. I hope they will go on to research other areas in this field. Rich projects await colleagues interested in writing about the cultural history of disability in Germany before World War I. Topics that immediately come to mind include representations of disability understood as broadly as possible in art, literature, and the public sphere; the cultural history of monstrosities and freaks; the meanings of ugliness and beauty in classical aesthetics; automatons and prostheses in romanticism; cultural discourses about degeneracy and heredity in the late nineteenth century; gendered portrayals of disability and illness; and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

My book can be described as an extended exercise in seeing disability where its broader significance as an important cultural phenomenon has previously been overlooked. To accomplish this, I follow two strate-

gies. First, awareness of disability as an important sociocultural category makes it possible to reinterpret many well-known art and literary works, films, and media depictions as texts that are also about disability, although scholars have generally not emphasized this before. Second, I also focus on points where intense debates erupted over the proper places for disabled people in the public sphere. These controversies were often flash points of struggles over such things as the meaning of “Germanness,” the makeup of the nation, the emancipatory possibilities of socialism, or the inclusiveness of democracy. Where appropriate, I also include comparisons with the United States in order to critique assumptions about normality more effectively. Throughout, I have been concerned with trying to recover the lost or suppressed voices of disabled Germans themselves.

Against the background of the two main prewar discourses about disability—the integrative approach of rehabilitation and the antidemocratic perspectives of eugenics—chapter 1 analyzes the flood of images of disability after World War I found in visual art (especially that of Grosz, Dix, Beckmann, and Hoerle), literature (Leonhard Frank, Toller, and Remarque), and other kinds of texts such as autobiographies, films, political statements, and rehabilitation manuals. Diverging perspectives on disability were integral to debates over the meaning of democracy in the Weimar Republic. Many progressive artists and writers depicted disabled veterans using disability as a metaphor through which to critique social injustice. Others, influenced by dadaism and constructivism, explored the new connections between human bodies and prosthetic technologies, linking the figures of the disabled veteran and the factory worker. Advocates of eugenics used negative images of disability both to attack modern art as degenerate and to argue that people with hereditary disabilities should be eliminated. And in a democratic spirit some disabled Germans rebutted stereotypical views of disability and founded their first self-advocacy organizations.

Chapter 2 explores how central disability was to Nazi culture and politics by drawing together material about disabled veterans, people considered to have hereditary diseases, and other disabled civilians. Since national socialists always stressed the effectiveness of “pictures” for indoctrinating the population, this chapter highlights how important visual images of disability were during the Third Reich with respect to both propaganda and the appearance of disabled people in public. First, I discuss how national socialists claimed to honor disabled veterans as the “leading citizens of the nation” and orchestrated gatherings of these men on official occasions. Next I review the laws and practices that excluded people viewed as having hereditary diseases from the national

community as background for a detailed overview of Nazi propaganda directed against this group of disabled people. In the following section, about the disabled victims of sterilization and “euthanasia,” I try to retrieve the voices of these individuals as much as possible. Then I examine how the official Nazi organizations for disabled civilians presented images of disability to the public and attempted to negotiate between collaboration and self-advocacy. The most difficult aspect of writing about disability during the Third Reich is to try to imagine how disabled people themselves experienced Nazi propaganda about them and Nazi policies whose purposes ran the gamut from rehabilitation to elimination. In many ways this is an impossible task, for indifference, neglect, censorship, or murder silenced their voices. Creative use of sources, however, enables the historian to uncover indications of how some disabled people reacted to Nazi propaganda and policies and even some noteworthy stirrings of resistance to stigmatization and exclusion.

From 1933 to 1945, it was only in exile that Germans could publicly continue to profess a commitment to universal human equality and advocate adequate support for poor, disabled, and ill people. Chapter 3 investigates several texts written in exile by opponents of Nazism. The philosopher Ernst Bloch critiqued rigid eugenic norms of health and insisted instead on remedying social injustices that were rooted in class inequalities. And in literary works published in exile a few authors (Bertolt Brecht, Maria Leitner, and Arnold Zweig) depicted disabled characters in ways that challenged exclusionary norms. These writers created utopian visions that conceived of disabled people as ordinary human beings, portrayed their social exclusion as caused by oppressive environments rather than inherent individual flaws, and even imagined them as positive heroes.

During the Third Reich, images of disability and illness constantly circulated as the Nazis attempted to define whom they considered to be inferior outsiders. Therefore, studying images of disability in postwar culture, as well as how disabled people appeared in the public sphere, is a crucial part of debates about continuities and transformations of Nazi ideology. The first part of chapter 4 analyzes disability in the art, literature, and films of the immediate postwar period. I compare representations of disability in several works of postwar literature and then contrast the first postwar German film, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are among Us, 1946), with the American film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), using this as a case study for representations of disabled veterans in both countries. I then reinterpret the most scandalous postwar film, *Die Sünderin* (The Sinner, 1951) as a film about disability and a remake of the Nazi “euthanasia” film *Ich klage an* (I Accuse, 1941).

The second part of the chapter focuses on public controversies over cultural representations of disability, including sections on disabled veterans as victims or activists, rehabilitation rhetoric and early self-help efforts of physically disabled civilians, and the growing efforts to treat and represent people with mental impairments as individuals with human dignity rather than as “lives unworthy of life.”

Chapter 5 presents three transitional representations of physical disability in (West) German film, literature, and media since the late 1960s. These illustrate how old representations of disability as nothing but negative metaphors began to break down and be replaced by more complex depictions. The film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder set out to break taboos but ended up re-creating stereotypes of disability in his film *Chinese Roulette* (1976). The dramatist Franz Xaver Kroetz rejected metaphors of disability in favor of depicting disabled characters who are simply ordinary human beings searching for happiness. Finally, in the debates over whether Wolfgang Schäuble could be chancellor while using a wheelchair and whether Franklin D. Roosevelt should be shown as disabled, the old view of disability as standing for shameful incompetence and weakness clashed with a newer perception that visibly disabled people could also be competent and powerful in a positive sense.

The relationship of socialist theory and practice to the body, and specifically to the disabled body, is a long, complex story. Chapter 6 investigates disability and socialist images of the human being in the culture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from two angles. Against the background of the difficult postwar years, early hopes for constructing a better Germany, and growing disillusionment with really existing socialism, I first show how many authors began to represent disability and illness in order to challenge the claim within socialist realism that collective and individual interests are identical. Using sources such as laws, official policy statements, and biographies and autobiographies of disabled GDR citizens, I then focus on locations assigned to disability in the socialist state in light of the importance attached to performance and the development of the “socialist personality.” The socialist state provided many benefits to disabled people. Nevertheless, their experience of marginalization made many of them ready to participate in the popular movements of 1989, which demanded more democratic rights. Consequently, a specific, unresolved problem of disability within socialism was that of reconciling equality (based in economics) with freedom (based in human variation).

In chapter 7, I survey the emergence of disability rights, disability culture, and disability studies since the early 1970s in West Germany and reunified Germany. I highlight the efforts of disabled West Germans

to claim their civil rights, and I assess the state of disability rights in Germany up to the passage of the General Law on Equal Treatment in 2006. I give an overview of the multitude of disability culture projects in Germany, such as autobiographies, women's groups, theater and dance organizations, films, art, exhibitions, and so forth, which are all concerned with developing new forms of self-expression for embodied experience. Finally, I consider the similarities and differences between disability studies in Germany and the United States today. Just as disabled Germans have been increasingly successful in gaining civil rights, disabled scholars there are beginning to have a greater impact on setting the terms of debates about disability.

Chapter 8 shows how concepts of the "German" and the "American" appear as national subtexts in major biocultural and bioethical debates related to disability today. First, I discuss briefly how these debates in the United States refer to Germany almost solely through the negative example of the Nazi past. To illustrate the different ways in which knowledge about this past shapes these discussions, I then contrast the reactions in each country to the controversial philosopher and bioethicist Peter Singer. In German debates about bioethics, the United States frequently appears as a source of technological and scientific innovation, which some view as desirable and others criticize for neglecting ethical issues in favor of economic profits. I show how these conflicting views emerged in the so-called Philosophers' Debate of 1999–2000 over Peter Sloterdijk's speech "Rules for the Human Zoo," which considered the ethical limits of gene technology. Finally, in contrast to these mostly negative or ambivalent views of the United States, I discuss the current efforts in Germany to pass an antidiscrimination law as a biocultural debate that draws on a positive conception of the United States as a model for civil rights. In conclusion, I reflect on some of the lessons that Germans and Americans might learn from each other's histories in these areas.

Narratives about disability have the potential to illuminate the strength of norms within particular societies, for if told in the right way they must always reflect on both the individual and the societal responses to someone who disrupts assumptions about how the human body should function and thus about what it means to be a human being. Keeping this framework in mind, the brief memoir that serves as the concluding chapter has two main emphases. The first part recounts how I experienced West Germany during my first stay there in 1970–71 as a visibly disabled young American woman. I know of no other autobiographical text by a disabled American traveler to Germany. In the second part, I reflect on what it has been like for me as a disabled person to

become a university professor of German studies in the United States, to return to Germany over the years, and to develop a professional interest in disability studies. This approach hopefully connects my personal story with larger developments. One of these is the enormous transformation in Germany since 1945 from the Nazi view of many disabled people as “lives unworthy of life” to the current efforts to pass an anti-discrimination law. Another is the ongoing debate over the meanings of *access* and *diversity* in the United States. I finished this chapter some time ago, before writing the greater part of this book, and laid it aside. Upon rereading it, I found that it complements many of the issues addressed in the preceding chapters, and so I decided to take it out of the drawer and put it in the book. I hope the reader will view my story as a small building block in the much larger comparative cultural history of Germany and the United States.