

## Book Review

**Title:** *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*

**Author:** Carol Poore

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

“Why has disability remained outside of the focus of most cultural historians in German studies?” asks Brown University German studies Professor Carol Poore in her comprehensive and nuanced new book, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*. While cultural representations of disability have been central to specific topics in German history – most notably the development of eugenics and the social welfare system for disabled workers – there has been no comprehensive study weaving together the different discourses of disability in German society until Poore’s important contribution. Informed by critical disability studies, Poore uses an impressive range of texts and resources to match the cultural representations of disability with the way that Germans with disabilities themselves responded to and resisted that representation. The result is an intensely readable, richly illustrated, and thought-provoking read for students of disability studies, German culture, and contemporary bioethics.

A large part of the book’s attention goes to the development of the Nazi eugenic ideology. This is perhaps an inevitable focus of a book on disability in Germany, even though much has been written about the subject already. Poore provides the important cultural background to understanding National Socialism’s contempt for “useless eaters” and “lives unworthy of life” by tracing metaphors of the disabled body back to the Weimar Republic, where images of the disabled veteran in both art and politics symbolized both Germany’s humiliating defeat in World War I as well as Germany’s fascination with modernism. It is no coincidence that this period provided the foundation for Germany’s unrivalled leadership in physical and vocational rehabilitation. The compelling image here is that of a quadruple amputee war veteran wearing state of the art prostheses on both arms and legs while working as a skilled craftsman (p. 11).

Continuing chronologically, Poore’s analysis moves to the postwar Allied occupation and the founding years of the two German states, both grappling in different ways with yet another generation of disabled war veterans. In contrast to the Weimar model of rehabilitation and generous pensions, the Allied occupation of Germany discouraged the privileging of war veterans in their attempts to “impress upon the public that a military career bears neither honor, profit, nor security” (p. 171). Just a year after the end of the occupation, however, the young West German state re-instituted employment quotas for disabled workers and social welfare benefits that became emblematic of Germany’s postwar economic miracle (Heyer, 2005).

When it came to accountability for bringing the perpetrators of disability-based euthanasia and forced sterilization to justice, however, the German state fell miserably short. Similarly, the East Germany state’s ideal of social justice and a classless society failed to include

disabled citizens in meaningful ways. Thus, Germany's eugenic legacy continued to haunt the country's thinking about disability for decades to come. Attitudes began shifting in the late 1970s, spearheaded first by the student's movement and then by disability activist protests against the UN Disability Decade, challenging the medical model that continued to inform Germany's extensive but still segregationist rehabilitation system. The U.S. civil rights approach to disability became a powerful model for German activists eager to embrace notions of inclusion and equal opportunity while at the same time critical of the American social welfare system (Heyer, 2006).

Poore's analysis covers an ambitious range of topics and historical periods. It is thus understandable, but ultimately frustrating, that her chapters can read like a list of events without conclusion or deep analysis. Readers may be left feeling deprived of a larger theoretical argument, or deeper case studies into the lives of activists and artists she introduces. Poore's book is most successful when it is explicitly comparative, as for example her insightful comparison between FDR's "splendid deception" (Gallagher 1999) and German contemporary politician Wolfgang Schäuble's inability to escape disability assumptions about the meaning of his disability for public office. She also offers powerful comparisons of the way Germany's eugenic past informs contemporary debates about gene technology in both countries. Not to be missed is her last chapter's personal observations: an "American Professor" with a visible disability navigating two worlds.

#### References

- Gallagher, Hugh Gregory (1999). *FDR's splendid deception: The moving story of Roosevelt's massive disability and the intense efforts to conceal it from the public*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Vandamere.
- Heyer, K. (2005). "Rights or quotas? The ADA as a model for disability rights" In L. B. Nielson and R. Nelson. Eds. *Handbook of research on employment discrimination: Rights and realities*, p. 237. New York: Springer.
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