

Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*,  
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007

Reviewed by Justin J.W. Powell, Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), Germany

In *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, Carol Poore offers numerous insights into the social, political, economic, and scientific processes that produce the tremendous range of disability definitions—and treatments—of disabled people. Germany in the twentieth century presents a bountiful case for studying the consequences of different cultural representations and social understandings of human variations in embodiment. Yet this book not only spans Germany's at times terrifying, at times liberating, twentieth century but also reaches beyond its title to creatively compare disability representations, scholarship, and social forces in the German-speaking countries and the United States. Building on decades of transatlantic scholarship and personal experiences, Poore is uniquely placed to guide us on a journey from the boundaries drawn around disability in the arts and state policies of the Weimar Republic to the eugenic nadir of Nazi Germany and to ongoing struggles—and increasing victories—of people with disabilities for civil rights, self-determination, and social inclusion in both the United States and Germany.

Comprehensively researched, abundantly illustrated and written in accessible and engaging prose, this book represents a major contribution to German cultural history and to the historical and comparative analysis of disability. At the nexus of German Studies and Disability Studies, the cultural, literary, and visual analyses employed here unmask taken-for-granted notions of disability, powerfully exemplifying the contextuality of disablement. With great skill, Poore weaves diverse types of evidence, including historical sources, art, literature, journalism, film, philosophy, and personal narratives into a tapestry which illuminates the cultural, political, and economic processes responsible for the marginalization, stigmatization, even elimination, of disabled people—as well as their recent emancipation.

While it would be unjust to attempt to synthesize the myriad insights in this kaleidoscopic study, a few themes may be emphasized here. Beginning with a focus on discourses and images, Poore shows how key disability was to adjudicate the boundaries of citizenship and nationhood in both Weimar Germany in the throes of economic crises and in the Nazi regime, which paradoxically murdered disabled people as part of its eugenic policies while simultaneously creating vastly more disabled veterans than in any previous era. Remarkable shifts in the distinctions made between groups of disabled people are carefully reconstructed here. For example, if in Weimar, disabled veterans were heroes eligible for rehabilitation and their pensions benefits a major component of the nascent German welfare state, just a few years later during Hitler's dictatorship, others were targeted in extensive propaganda programs, deemed "life unworthy of life," compulsorily sterilized or eliminated. To delve deeply into twentieth century German history, as into the history of disability, requires a strong constitution, for the criminality and oppression as well as complexities and ambivalence such mining brings to the surface are often difficult to bear, yet vital in bolstering contemporary attempts to solidify human rights advances that aim to ensure such atrocities never recur.

The post-WWII period provided an even greater diversity of disability representations in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the socialist German Democratic Republic. Despite providing new benefits, neither country succeeded in giving disabled people equal rights from the beginning; in fact, in a disconcerting continuity, these citizens remained largely disenfranchised in favor of paternalistic attitudes and professional diagnoses. Laudably, Poore often triangulates social class, gender, and disability in her analyses, examining the equivalences and disparities in these characteristics that have so often led to differential social status and life chances. Moving then to the past four decades, her history of the growth of disability rights, disability culture, and Disability Studies in Germany, with reference to American developments, fills a lacuna as it shows how crucial the disability movement's political actions have been in securing anti-discrimination legislation. As Poore recounts, disabled people's transnational networks provide inspiration and learning opportunities on how to sustain activist organizations, to direct academic attention, to foster solidarity and to advance civil rights.

The eras in disability history contrasted here raise awareness about the unimaginable costs to humanity of war as well as potentials for abuse of power by politicians and professionals that not only facilitated the eugenic and euthanasia programs but also are implicated in contemporary debates about bioethics. In collecting aesthetic and literary achievements that characterize the ubiquitous, everyday phenomenon of disablement and that showcase the advancing self-determination and political mobilization of disabled people, Poore's greatest contribution to Disability Studies is to give voice to disabled people so long silenced in these cultures. In her moving "autoethnography" that concludes the book, Poore brings her own life course, spanning various regions of the United States and Germany, to bear on the analysis of continuity and change in perspectives on disability and reactions to people with visible disabilities. Having encountered ableism throughout her life, she recounts her awakening to disability as a universal experience eminently worthy of study, and she traces the decline of attitudinal and environmental barriers in both countries that she has witnessed, showing also how much these countries have learned and can profit from each other.

For all the above reasons, this important book deserves a wide readership in Disability Studies and German studies. For anyone interested in how "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" (xv), this book is mandatory reading. Notably, Poore generously shares with readers not only her considerable knowledge but also the contours of future scholarship, identifying promising avenues for further exploration and inviting us to join her on what will surely be productive pathways (another reason this book's chapters make excellent seminar readings). As she convincingly writes disability into the heart of German cultural history, Poore charts the despair and disillusionment caused by wars that generated massive disablement and by oppression and segregation that, only partially ameliorated, continue to the present day, despite well-intentioned educational and social policies. Her careful, even-handed analyses balance negative with positive trends, ending appropriately with guarded optimism as to the state of access, equality, and social justice.