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## Disability Studies in Austria, Germany and Switzerland: Introduction

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Austria, Germany and Switzerland, as the three German-speaking countries, have a lot in common while, at the same time, being different. This holds true especially in the case of disability discourse and the state of disability studies. Recently, disabled people in each country have succeeded in getting their respective constitutions amended with anti-discrimination provisions. In regard to federal equalization legislation, some achievements have been made as well, but there is still a long way to go before international standards will be fulfilled. With respect to disability studies, one can observe similarities but also differences among the three countries. Whereas in Germany an astonishingly dynamic process of occupying the field of disability studies by various persons, disciplines and institutions is presently taking place, neither Austria nor Switzerland can report comparable efforts. One has to bear these starting points in mind when reading the contributions of this international theme section. It is evident in the fact that, of the seven articles that comprise the section, we include no paper from Switzerland, none having been submitted from there in response to our call for papers; and only one that was written by an Austrian scholar.

Unlike other non-English speaking countries in Europe, Germany has witnessed a very active, creative and successful disability rights movement since the late '70s. In Austria and Switzerland, grassroots activities of people with disabilities exist as well. It is astonishing, however, that in the German-speaking countries disability studies as a research field is only now being introduced to a broader public. Despite a great number of articles, documents, studies and books having been published by activists and advocates of the German Disability Rights Movement within the last two decades (cf. for an overview Waldschmidt, 2005, p. 11-13), Disability Studies as a label for emancipatory research by and on behalf of disabled people was not known in this part of the world until the beginning of the current century. Only in 2001 was Disability Studies introduced to the German speaking public. This happened, when in the context of the outstanding exhibition "Der (im-) perfekte Mensch" (The [Im]-Perfect Human Being) — a worldwide unique attempt to give a comprehensive overview of disability history organized by Aktion Mensch, Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden and Humboldt University of Berlin — Disability Studies scholars from the USA introduced the field at an international conference in Dresden, followed by another one in Berlin the following year (cf. Lutz, Macho, Staube and Zirten, 2003).

Since then, Disability Studies has been blossoming especially in Germany. In 2002, the working group "Disability Studies in Germany — We do research ourselves," was founded by professors Anne Waldschmidt and Theresia Degener. They were joined by disabled scholars and activists who were interested in the development of critical disability studies. Another recent highlight was the two-week summer institute titled "Disability Studies in Deutschland — Behinderung neu denken" (Disability Studies in Germany — Re-thinking Disability) which took place at the University of Bremen in 2003 and was funded within the framework of the European Year of People with Disabilities. This big event attracted nearly 500 participants from Austria, Germany and Switzerland and provided an impressive platform for discussing a broad variety of Disability Studies issues (cf. Hermes and Köbsell, 2003; Waldschmidt, 2003). At the end of 2004, an International Disability Studies Research Unit was established at the University of Cologne.<sup>[1]</sup> At the moment one can find various research and teaching activities at many universities — e.g. in Berlin, Bochum, Bremen, Cologne, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Giessen, Kassel, Marburg (all in Germany), Innsbruck (Austria) and Zurich (Switzerland).

Despite being late in developing its own branch of Disability Studies, the German Disability Rights Movement has shared a lot of ideas with international disability studies right from the beginning. Like the movements in other countries, German Disability Studies is opposed to the predominant medical model of disability with its negative attributions and its preoccupation with disorders, deficits and defects, albeit a different terminology is used in German-speaking contexts. Segregation is the pivotal term for German people with disabilities fighting for the abolition of all isolating institutions, and in their identification of oppressive societal mechanisms and their consequences. In Germany, disability rights activists regard the conception of "Behinderung" (disability) as a political issue, as the provocative use of the term "cripple" instead of "disabled" during the first years of the movement demonstrates. The two first-hour activists, Franz Christoph (Mürner, 2005) and Horst Frehe, conceived the "Krüppel-Standpunkt" (cripples' position) on disability in the late '70s, thus drafting a concept that comes very close to the British and American social models of disability. Since then, German disability rights activists have considered disability as an oppressive relationship between non-disabled and disabled people and have demanded the right to full inclusion and participation in society. At a relatively early stage one could already witness the critique of disciplines such as medicine, psychology and remedial pedagogy, which were accused of contributing to the oppression of disabled people. In 1980, members of the then-leading "Bremen cripples' group" stated: "Partial science from and in the interest of disabled people, i.e. a science of cripples ('crippology') does not exist." (Mitglieder der Bremer Krüppelgruppe, 1980, 6)<sup>[2]</sup> And Horst Frehe, the founder of this group, stressed in the same year, "any science of disability, which does not aim to control or govern disability should be subordinated under the goal of the political emancipation of disabled people." (Frehe, 1980, 44)

Although the German disability rights movement never explicitly developed a social model of disability, it is nevertheless ubiquitous in the implicit critical disability discourse. And even though there was never a general acknowledged definition of disability, verbalizations of a "German social model of disability" (Köbsell and Waldschmidt 1989, 103-104) and methodological reflections on "peer research" (Waldschmidt, 1997) can be found all the same. However, despite some recognizable efforts to initiate a scientific critique of hegemonic disability concepts and rehabilitation practices, an identifiable research field which could be called disability studies at least in retrospect, never really got off the ground. More than a decade ago, Theresia Degener (1995, 40) stated an "academic shortfall." She also observed that the German Disability Movement did not have a self-developed theory of disability and therefore lagged behind the US and Great Britain (ibid.). However, this appeal did not cause any activity — obviously the time was not yet ripe, and many years were still needed before Disability Studies in German-speaking countries finally emerged (cf. Hermes and Köbsell, 2003; Waldschmidt, 2003; Weisser and Renggli, 2004; Bruner and Dannenbeck, 2005; Hermes and Rohrmann, 2006).

The question remains, Why did German-speaking Disability Studies need impulses from the outside before starting up? As no empirical findings exist, we can only speculate and point to some factors which may have contributed to this delay. First, in all those years there were only a few activists, and their time, energy and resources were absorbed by their fights for basic needs and rights; secondly, the German education system, still very much dominated by the segregationist approach, does not really, to say it politely, promote academic careers of disabled people; and thirdly, a fear of intellectualization, which was present in parts of the movement, may have played a role as well. The latter was pointed out by Franz Christoph already in 1980: He foresaw a "class conflict" between academic and non-academic members of the movement (Christoph, 1980, 25f). Others feared a lessening of solidarity within the movement and the development of new hierarchies (Ehlers, 1998, 10).

Thus, as Waldschmidt (2005, 14) has explained elsewhere, in our country we are still confronted with a large backlog concerning the development of critical disability theories and methodologies. The German-speaking discourse is still oriented either towards concrete problem solving, which does not have a thorough theoretical underpinning, or abstract reflections on theory that are lacking any reference to reality. Waldschmidt (2005) therefore pleads for a comprehensive approach of social science and cultural studies, i.e., a linkage of the social model with a "cultural model of disability" assuming "that social welfare benefits and civil rights alone do not suffice to achieve acknowledgment and social participation and that rather cultural representation is additionally needed. Individual and social acceptance will only become possible when disabled people are not understood merely as a minority group who has to be integrated, but as an integral part of society." (ibid., 27)

In this international section we begin with a short history of the German Disability Rights Movement by Swantje Köbsell. She explores the background from which the German Disability Movement emerged and how it subsequently developed. From the very beginning, the fundamental goals of the movement have been the de-medicalization of disability, the demands of self-determination, anti-discrimination and equalization, the fight for disabled people's right to live, integration into the community, and control over services for disabled people. Two of these issues are dealt with in more detail in the next two papers.

Rebecca Maskos and Birger Siebert present a reflection on self-determination as the key concept of the German disability movement. In using labor and the constraints of the job market as a means to highlight the general significance of autonomy in society, their article explores this critical maxim, its merits and shortcomings. Anne Waldschmidt's paper on normalcy, bio-politics and disability examines the critique of new genetics developed by the German disability movement. She argues that the disability rights discourse has considered power mainly as a disciplining, repressive force, but still needs to view normalcy and eugenics as modern apparatuses of power/knowledge.

The next section deals with juridical and political issues. Theresia Degener looks at the problem of defining disability in the context of anti-discrimination law. In her review of definitions in German and international disability laws, she focuses on whether the respective juridical concepts perpetuate the medical/individual model, or support the social model/human rights model of disability. Ursula Naue provides a case study of the Austrian Act on the Equalization of Disabled Persons, exemplifying the struggle of persons with disabilities against ableist attitudes in the socio-political discourse. Her article demonstrates how disability politics in Austria has changed in recent years and how different political actors have participated in shaping the field of disability politics.

In the final section, two examples demonstrate historical and empirical research findings within Disability Studies in German-speaking countries. Ruth von Bernuth's paper on imaginations of "natural folly" deals with the fools who were kept at European courts in medieval and Renaissance times. Her article concentrates on the so-called natural fools who are treated by mainstream historical science as being both mentally and physically ill and/or disabled. In contrast, Bernuth shows that in medieval times natural fools used to be regarded as "wonder (wo)men" and only later became objects of medicine and education. In the last article of this section, Sonja Dudek, Karin Jeschke and Ulrike Lehmkuhl present qualitative empirical data from a research project on the handling of homosexual behavior in German residential facilities for people with cognitive disabilities. They argue that there are still deficits in the theoretical and practical knowledge on homosexuality and cognitive disability in Germany. After a critical review of special education theory the authors apply ideas and concepts of queer theory to their subject.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The research unit is directed by Professor Anne Waldschmidt.

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<sup>ii</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the authors.  
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