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## Disability Movements

### National Policies and Transnational Perspectives – Introductory Remarks

The special issue *Disability Movements: National Policies and Transnational Perspectives* examines different Disability Movements and their transnational entanglements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The articles in this issue enquire into the adaptations and transfers between different national movements and into the establishment of networks across borders between like-minded people, who shared similar aims. Furthermore, they ask about processes of how knowledge and strategies were transferred, exchanged and adapted. Therefore, the issue combines three different research strands: First, disability; second, new social movement research; and third, transnational approaches. The adoption of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 highlights the need of considering disability rights activism on national as well as international levels.

Disability is an emerging issue in historical and socio-scientific research. This special issue on Disability Movements is an expression of the spreading work on disability. A paradigm shift in the understanding of what disability means initialised the recent interest in disability. From an older medical perspective, disability was understood as an individual deficit, which could be cured or medicated by experts. Prosthetic, therapeutic and rehabilitative measures should provide the achievement of the highest degree of normalcy possible. For this reason, a medical model of disability centres on the individual and the physical, mental and psychiatric deficiencies, and deviations from what is considered normal. In fact, medical professionals, experts of the welfare state and rehabilitation specialists dominated research on disability. Pushed by a social understanding of disability, a purely medical view on disability was increasingly rejected throughout the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> It ceased to be the individual who was considered to be a medical problem. In contrast, the social environment, for instance with respect to accessibility, and society itself, for instance in terms of discrimination, were identified

1 See for example Colin Barnes: *Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past, Present and Future*, in: Nick Watson et al. (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, New York 2012, pp. 12–29; Tom Shakespeare: *The Social Model of Disability*, in: Lennard J. Davis (ed.): *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., New York/Abingdon 2013, pp. 214–221.

as disabling circumstances. Furthermore, a perception which emphasised the social relativity of disability was complemented and challenged by a cultural understanding of disability.<sup>2</sup> In particular, this perspective accented the processes of the cultural construction of normalcy and deviation.

Disability Studies and especially Disability History are fields of research that are closely connected to these paradigm shifts in the perception of disability. Due to the dissociation from a medical perspective and the supposition of disabling social and cultural circumstances,<sup>3</sup> Disability History aims at the historicisation of disability. Furthermore, an influential change of perspectives is linked to this field: studies in these fields are not about people with disability, their deviances and medical, prosthetic treatments and rehabilitation, but about people with disability as subjects and self-conscious actors.

The Disability Movements were prominent expressions of people with disabilities acting as self-conscious subjects. Mostly parallel to other new social movements, Disability Movements emerged since the late 1960s. Although the historical research on new social movements expanded and added further organisational forms and issues to the list of new social movements, Disability Movements have been up to now largely ignored in the research on new social movements.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, Disability is often disregarded due to a lack of mass representation in comparison to the other movements. Compared to other new social movements, as the peace movement for example, Disability activism never had a broad basis. On the other hand, Disability is still not broadly acknowledged as a category of analysis.<sup>5</sup> Sociologists and political scientists have recently, however, broached the issue of Disability Movements in contemporary contexts.<sup>6</sup> Yet in historical dimensions, Disability Movements, especially

- 2 See Anne Waldschmidt: Soziales Problem oder kulturelle Differenz? Zur Geschichte von "Behinderung" aus der Sicht der "Disability Studies", in: *Traverse* 2006, pp. 31–46.
- 3 See Elsbeth Bösl: Was ist Disability History? Zur Geschichte und Historiografie von Behinderung, in: *Ibid./Anne Klein/Anne Waldschmidt (eds.): Disability History. Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte ; eine Einführung*, Bielefeld 2010, pp. 29–43.
- 4 However, in the research area of Disability History some studies on Disability Movements exist. For the US-American Disability Movements see for example Sharon Barnartt/Richard K. Scott: *Disability Protests. Contentious Politics 1970–1999*, Washington 2001; see also Duane F. Stroman: *The Disability Rights Movement. From Deinstitutionalization to Self-Determination*, Lanham/New York/Oxford 2003. For the German Disability Movement see for example Swantje Köbsell: *Towards Self-Determination and Equalization. A Short History of the German Disability Rights Movement*, in: *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26:2 (2006), at: <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/692/869> (accessed on 28 May 2015).
- 5 Catherine J. Kudlick: Disability History. Why we need another "Other", in: *American Historical Review* 108 (2003), pp. 763–793; Susan Burch/Ian Sutherland: Who's Not Yet Here? American Disability History, in: *Radical History Review* 94 (2006), pp. 127–147.
- 6 Angharad E. Beckett: Understanding Social Movements: Theorising the Disability Movement in Conditions of Late Modernity, in: *The Sociological Review* 54:4 (2006),

in Europe, seem to be forgotten. Meanwhile there exists a bunch of theoretical and methodological approaches to new social movement research.<sup>7</sup> Recently, Jürgen Mittag and Helke Stadtland have criticised the absence of a historical foundation for this research field. In particular, the theoretical implications are often not realisable in the historical research due to a lack of reliable data.<sup>8</sup>

Recent studies stressed the transnational aspects of the upheavals following “1968” and the new social movements.<sup>9</sup> The transfers, connections, diffusions and entanglements between different national movements were interpreted, for instance, as an expression of a “transnational cycle of contention”.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that a transnational orientation of new social movements challenged the nation-state and repealed its significance.<sup>11</sup> Especially for Disability Movements, the nation-state retained a central reference. Disability was tied closely to the traditions, definitions, sanctions and entitlements of the national social policy and the welfare state. Therefore, one

- pp. 734–752; Kyra R. Greene: Disability Rights Movement (United States), in: David A. Snow et al. (eds.): *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Volume I: A-E, Malden, MA/Oxford 2013, pp. 360–364; Anne Waldschmidt: *Advocacy Movements: Germany*, in: Gary Albrecht (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Disability*. Vol. 1, Thousand Oaks 2006, S. 57f.
- 7 See for example Donatella Della Porta (ed.): *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, Oxford 2014; Doug McAdam et al. (eds.): *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements. Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge 1996; Kai-Uwe Hellmann/Ruud Koopmans (eds.): *Paradigmen der Bewegungsforschung. Entstehung und Entwicklung von neuen sozialen Bewegungen und Rechtsextremismus*, Opladen et al. 1998.
  - 8 See the Introduction to a volume that connects the sociological and historical approaches in new social movement research: Jürgen Mittag/Helke Stadtland: *Soziale Bewegungsforschung im Spannungsfeld von Theorie und Empirie. Einleitende Anmerkungen zu Potenzialen disziplinärer Brückenschläge zwischen Geschichts- und Sozialwissenschaft*, in: *ibid.* (eds.): *Theoretische Ansätze und Konzepte der Forschung über soziale Bewegungen in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Essen 2014, pp. 13–60, p. 15f.
  - 9 See for example Martin Klimke: *The other Alliance. Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties*, Princeton, NJ 2010; Angelika Ebbinghaus: *Gab es ein globales “1968”?* In: Peter Birke/Bernd Hüttner/Gottfried Oy (eds.): *Alte Linke – Neue Linke? Die sozialen Kämpfe der 1968er Jahre in der Diskussion*, Berlin 2009, pp. 17–28; Hanno Balz/Jan-Henrik Friedrichs (eds.): *“All we ever wanted...”. Eine Kulturgeschichte europäischer Protestbewegungen der 1980er Jahre*, Berlin 2012; Holger Nehring: *Transnationale soziale Bewegungen*, in: Jost Dülffer/Wilfried Loth (eds.): *Dimensionen internationaler Geschichte*, München 2012, pp. 129–149; Carole Fink/Philipp Gassert/Detlef Junker (eds.): *1968: The World Transformed*, Cambridge/New York 1998.
  - 10 Marcel van der Linden: *Transnational Labour History. Explorations*, Aldershot 2003, p. 117.
  - 11 See for example Michael Mann: *Globalization, Macro-Regions and Nation-States*, in: Gunilla Budde/Sebastian Conrad/Oliver Janz (eds.): *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Göttingen 2006, pp. 21–31.

might assume that transnational aspects are of no specific importance to the Disability Movements: The transnational entanglements were limited by the social welfare state due to its legal definitions of disability. Nonetheless, transnational perspectives and entanglements provided the exchange of concepts, strategies, explanatory models, forms of organisation and protest as well as the affiliation to a struggle for acceptance and anti-discrimination. In this regard, disability gives insights into the interplay between transnational challenges of the nation-state and, in consequence, its modifications and responses through the transnationalisation from below.<sup>12</sup>

The contributions to this volume pick up these three central concepts: disability, new social movements and transnational perspectives. The questions to ask are those concerning the entanglements between the different movements across borders and issues. Which learning processes referring to strategies or forms of protest can be identified? Which concepts were transferred from or to other national movements? The potency of this volume lies in the variance of its essays and articles. The contributions refer to different transnational entanglements of national disability movements as well as to transnational non-governmental organisations and the transnational advocacy networks of disability activists.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it becomes obvious that disability activism comprises different groups of people with disability and different interests.

Anne Klein focuses on a transnational history of knowledge, when she observes the circulation and adaption of therapeutic concepts in psychiatry and the emergence of an anti-psychiatric activism in the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany. Monika Baár concentrates on national disability organisations in Hungary and their transnational networks promoting disability rights activism during the Kádár regime in the early 1980s. She emphasises the significance of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, announced by the United Nations that provided a basis for exchange and networking under state socialism. Jan Stoll traces the transnational entanglements of the West German Disability Movement as an activism of belonging to an alternative milieu in the middle of the 1980s. Paul van Trigt examines the issue of human rights in the Dutch Disability Movement. On the one hand, he considers the human rights issue as a result of the discussions following the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, and on the other hand, as a delayed issue when compared to the anti-discrimination laws in the United States. Anne Waldschmidt, Anemari Karačić, Andreas Sturm and Timo Dins add a sociological perspective on the transnational networks of contemporary disability organisations in nine European countries. In this

12 See Nehring: *Transnationale soziale Bewegungen*, in: Dülffer/Loth (eds.): *Dimensionen internationaler Geschichte*, p. 145f.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 130. See also an earlier attempt on transnational organisations by Diane Driedger: *The last Civil Rights Movement. Disabled Peoples' International*, London 1989.

perspective, disability rights activism becomes a form of political participation. Finally, Sebastian Weinert kindly contributed a collective review on recent releases in the field of Disability History.

The conditions and aims of the different activists and movements are multifaceted. The struggle against discrimination, the campaigning for anti-discriminatory laws and the implementation of disability in the agenda of human rights politics as well as the improvement of living conditions in a more practical sense were central to the politics of Disability Movements. Moreover, the creation of a kind of collective identity became an important concern of Disability Movements: Self-conscious and self-determined perceptions replaced representations of the pitiful and needy people with disability.

However, several further questions arise from this. Especially the role and significance of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, which was initiated by the United Nations, needs more attention. The parallels in the significance of the International Year for the transnational connections of the Hungarian, West German and Dutch activists are striking. The importance of this internationally celebrated event and its prominence among politicians, rehabilitation-experts and institutional organisations offered an occasion of protest and commitment. This applies to the Western European activists as well as to the Hungarian example. Across the Iron Curtain activists criticised the insufficient social and rehabilitation policies as well as the neglect of the integration promises. Obviously, the protests of 1981 also provided a transnational broadening of the perspectives of the particular movements and activists. They initiated new transnational connections and intensified existing entanglements. To this effect, questions regarding the significance of the protests of 1981 arise, which take the transnational spread of a social perspective of disability into account. Particularly, the legal struggle since the 1980s for the implementation of disability as an issue of human rights poses the question, to what extent can the struggle for acceptance and appreciation be integrated into the context of civil society?<sup>14</sup>

Studies should furthermore take into account the effects of disability activism at different levels. The reactions to the events of 1981 by national social policies as well as by institutional organisations, which carried care and education for people with disability, demand greater attention. Likewise, the societal perceptions of disability and the adjustments of definitions of disability itself, should be studied in more detail. How did movement, national politics and transnational human rights discourse affect the definitions of disability?

14 See for example Mittag/Stadtland: Soziale Bewegungsforschung, in: *ibid.* (eds.): *Theoretische Ansätze und Konzepte*, p. 53f; Jürgen Kocka: *Zivilgesellschaft in historischer Perspektive*, in: *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 16 (2003), pp. 29–37.

This issue on Disability Movements also raises questions concerning the definition of new social movements. “Movement” is still a surprisingly fluid and vague term: there is a multitude of definitions, forms of organisations and activisms, affecting, for instance, people with physical disabilities, persons with mental illness or parents of children with mental and intellectual disabilities. However, the circumstances, demands and different forms of discrimination caused by different disabilities are not considered sufficiently. Furthermore, different degrees of social and political change were traced by the activists. As some cross-movement-entanglements show, a contextualisation within other new social movements and their political attitudes help to understand their habitual style and terminology. Adaptions from other new social movements, their strategies and forms of action are often observable, and show similar expressions.

Over all, this issue offers initial insights into the questions of national Disability Movements and transnational perspectives. In addition, it aims at motivating further research linking disability, new social movements and its transnational entanglements.