

Editors' Introduction

The cover of this issue of the *Radical History Review* features a photograph taken by Deborah Hoffmann of CeCe Weeks, a disability rights activist who was involved in a protest action at a movie theater in Berkeley, California, screening Hal Ashby's 1978 film *Coming Home*. Despite critical and popular acclaim (and Oscars for Jane Fonda and Jon Voigt) for the film's poignant portraits of disabled veterans from the Vietnam War—including a provocative sex scene between a disabled man and an able-bodied woman that was unprecedented in mainstream American cinema—many Berkeley residents were outraged to find that the theater was completely inaccessible for those who used wheelchairs. Many, like Weeks, took civil disobedience measures, such as chaining themselves to their wheelchairs and to the theater, in order to raise public awareness and make the theater comply with federal regulations for accommodating the needs of disabled patrons.

To a large degree, Weeks's protest might be perceived as deeply ironic. In the 1970s, Berkeley was one of the world's recognized centers of disability rights activism. This was due in large part to individuals like Ed Roberts, a disabled undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley during the early 1960s, who along with Weeks founded the city's Center for Independent Living in 1972, which became a model for independent living centers throughout the United States and around the world. In this sense, Hoffmann's photograph crystallizes around a particular historical truism that is painfully familiar to anyone involved in political struggles for human rights: change happens slowly. Although grassroots activists and their supporters saw dramatic changes in both federal policy and social responses to people with disabilities—from the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and its important section 504, which added to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by prohibiting discrimination against disabled people—by the late 1970s it was clear that much work still needed to be done in order to bring

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buildings into compliance and to raise public consciousness, efforts that, one could argue, culminated a dozen years later with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.

Hoffman's photograph, however, is also powerful for the ways in which it crystallizes around a particular set of popular assumptions about people with disabilities and as a result tells a visually compelling story. Weeks's gaze directly into the camera intensifies her act of civil disobedience by challenging the viewer to confront his or her own biases about the putative frailty and vulnerability of the disabled and, in particular, disabled women. As a visual document, the photograph offers insight into the visual culture of disability and, like other material artifacts, requires a set of analytical and cognitive tools other than textual exegesis.

Weeks was not alone challenging public perceptions of the disabled: in 1977, just one year before Hoffmann took this photograph, disability rights activists in cities across the United States staged demonstrations and occupied the offices of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in Washington, DC, in order to urge the Carter administration to enforce section 504. Across the bay from Berkeley, Weeks and other disabled activists in San Francisco crawled up the steps of City Hall and occupied the building for nearly a month, fed and encouraged by members of Oakland's Black Panthers. Weeks was also part of an extended network of disabled women activists whose political subjectivities converged in the disability and feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. For disabled women, issues of independence, autonomy, and control over one's body had a specific set of immediate political meanings that were related to, but also distinct from, activists' calls for the demedicalization of the disabled body and for federal protections for employment, housing, and health care. Thus Hoffmann's photograph is both a document of the disability rights movement and stands as a challenge to the conventional expectations of disability's public face in the late 1970s. Over the next two decades, Weeks fought for disability rights as well as for women's rights, prisoners' rights, lesbian and gay rights, and other struggles for social justice until her death in 2002.

This issue of *RHR* is intended as a contribution to the burgeoning field of disability history by bringing distinct yet complementary elements of scholarship on disability and history together without reducing disability—configured materially as a set of physical or cognitive impairments, or ideologically as a political movement—to a linear narrative with a singular trajectory. There are multiple and conflicting histories of disability just as there are multiple and conflicting interpretations of the photograph of CeCe Weeks. The articles in this issue pose a historical framework that sees disability rights as part of the trajectory of movements for civil rights and social justice that has emerged in modern industrial societies beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Many of them also challenge what it means to historicize disability in the first place.

Disability, along with race, class, gender, and sexuality, should always be understood as a contingent term. Definitions and meanings attached to disability are always historically and culturally specific and never ideologically neutral. Yet this does not mean that disability is merely an artifact of poststructuralist dematerializations of the individual body or subjective experience. Physical and cognitive impairments do indeed exist across a wide spectrum of human experiences. But *disability*—like *gay* or *black* or *woman*—is a socially produced category with vast implications for the writing and rewriting of history. As with the histories of other marginalized groups, histories of disability and of disabled persons demonstrate how disability is socially constructed according to the political and economic imperatives of a given era or moment. What, then, does it mean to write about disability within the context of a journal devoted to radical history? Do radical historians treat disability differently than scholars in other fields, or is doing disability history an inherently radical enterprise?

For years, disability was considered solely within the domain of the medical and social sciences. Traditionally, disability has been understood epistemologically as a physiological or psychological condition defined within a medical model that codes the “normal” body according to a fixed and narrow standard of economic and social productivity. Medical models of disability, focused on bodily impairment, created the disabled person and his or her disabled body as something distinct from the able-bodied person. As Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler have written, “The ‘person’ at the center of the traditional liberal theory is not simply an individual locus of subjectivity (however psychologically fragmented, incoherent, or troubled). He is an *able-bodied* locus of subjectivity, one whose unskilled labor may be substituted freely for the labor of other such individuals, who can imagine himself largely self-sufficient because almost everything conspires to help him take his enabling body for granted (even when he is scrambling for the means of subsistence).”¹

In the medical model, disabled people are seen as social embodiments of their physical disability: they are dysfunctional or quasi-functional or nonfunctional bodies to be repaired or, if not, then managed with bureaucratic and economic efficiency. Historically, those who were not fixed, or managed, or cared for simply fell to the margins of an unforgiving society, forced to make do in a state of neglect yet visible in most cities of the world. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, categories of disability could include those with physical impairments through diseases of childhood, congenital deformity, or accident, as well as the blind, deaf, insane, and so-called feeble-minded, and everything from left-handedness to hormonal imbalances that were characterized as endocrinopathies. In the Progressive Era, bodily disabilities were conflated with social disabilities as legal, economic, and medical discourses began to redefine immigration and rural poverty within the logic of eugenics. This logic reached its apotheosis in the social hygiene programs of

the Third Reich, although the United States made its own contributions to this logic through landmark legal cases such as *Buck v. Bell* (1927), in which the Supreme Court supported the sterilization of women thought unfit to reproduce.

For the radical historian who has not approached the topic of disability explicitly, the medical model—which focuses on the perceived failings of the individual body rather than acknowledging the social, legal, political, and environmental forces that naturalize bodily difference and thus define social difference—will look like familiar territory. It is the story of Taylorist managerial science and religious and psychological discourses of self-sufficiency and productivity as applied to and against workers in industrial and postindustrial economies. It is the story of urban planning and the Manichaeic manipulations of the built environment by real estate moguls, environmental polluters, sweatshop owners, and the fickle migrations of transnational capital. It is the story of ethnic cleansing, religious persecutions, state-sanctioned torture, and the political and educational structures that deliberately erase them from public memory or disavow their existence. One can and must draw powerful connections between critiques of structural economics that keep the working poor disenfranchised and critiques of medical authority that keep the disabled disempowered.

Many historians of disability have been deeply influenced by the interdisciplinary field of disability studies that has emerged since the 1970s from the disability rights movement. Disability studies, like ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, and gender and queer studies, questions the constant, arguably compulsive, need to define human experience according to normative categories that calculate the value of human life with the accounting techniques of cost-benefit analysis. As a scholarly field and political position, disability studies responds to the moral humanism attributed to the therapeutic model within medical discourse that pathologizes rather than liberates the individual. It shifts analysis away from the disabled body to the conditions that produce disability: the vast web of social, political, economic, medical, and legal forces that create material and virtual barriers for individuals with physical or cognitive impairments. Scholars in disability studies have passionately argued that disability is not an individual issue, but a structural one. What constitutes so-called normalcy, and which bodies are inside or outside the circle of the privileged normative, is determined socially, not individually. Critical studies of disability, then, share in the same activist projects that interrogate the legal and social boundaries and limitations imposed by the reifications of norms in definitions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class status, and citizenship. Scholars in postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and queer studies, in common with disability studies, confront the allegedly objective models of understanding the body in favor of thinking through subjective experience and self-fashioning as the key to understanding individual bodies and identities, as well as communities and nations.

In this issue, we have tried to present a broad array of texts that engage with

disability from within both a disability rights movement paradigm of history as well as a disability studies paradigm. These paradigms are neither mutually exclusive nor hostile to each other, but they do represent points on a continuum along which disability scholarship operates. The “Features” section of this issue offers five original contributions to the ongoing project of reclaiming historical movements for political inclusion, social justice, and human rights for people with disabilities, while also exploring disability as an analytical category.

Máirtín Ó Catháin makes an important intervention into Irish disability history, where the bulk of scholarship has revolved around deaf communities, and to European disability history more broadly. By looking in close detail at a protest for fair and equal wages by blind shopworkers in Derry, Northern Ireland, during the late 1930s, Ó Catháin highlights the volatile relationship between traditional paternalism for the blind and labor radicalism. The author unmasks the social and political landscape in which local, regional, and national constructions of disability take shape by paying attention to the class tensions and municipal rivalries of the second-largest city in Northern Ireland less than two decades after British annexation. In much the same way that Ó Catháin uses the tools of labor history to discuss disability, Natalia Molina examines the politics of disability among Mexican immigrants to California and Texas in the early decades of the twentieth century through the lenses of labor history and immigration history. Both nativist reformers and labor organizers held Mexican immigrants to competing standards of fitness—a eugenic gauge of social worth in the Progressive Era—in order to measure the immigrants’ propensity for inclusion in the workforce. As Molina argues, disability was clearly a floating, unmoored signifier for employers and government and municipal officials, so that immigrants were often “disabled” by their immigration status far more than by any perceived physical impairments.

Carol Poore’s essay revisits the social and political history of Weimar Germany and recovers the advocacy work done by disabled political activists and writers. Like sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who made human rights claims for homosexuals and the gender and sexual non-normative in the years prior to Hitler’s rise to power, disability rights advocates in Weimar Germany were active until the Third Reich silenced their work by the adoption and adaptation of eugenic policies imported from the United States and Great Britain. In making available key German texts, most translated into English for the first time, Poore turns both the history of the stigma attributed to the disabled and the movement against it on its head. Poore’s article complicates our understanding of interwar Germany and challenges the assumption that the evolution of disability rights activism was an exclusively mid-twentieth century (and, more ethnocentrically, American) phenomenon. Similarly, Paul K. Longmore and Paul Steven Miller revisit the writings of the well-known U.S. radical Randolph Bourne and recover Bourne’s experience of physical disability as the basis for his radical political and intellectual legacy. Through a

close reading of Bourne's sole statement on disability, "A Philosophy of Handicap," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911, and a careful reconstruction of both the radical and reactionary elements of the Progressive milieu in which Bourne's political subjectivity fermented, Longmore and Miller take a disability studies position by persuasively historicizing how "'disability' was central to the project of modernity becoming a major category of social organization, policy formulation, and cultural signification."

Finally, Victoria Lewis, a historian of theater, looks at the conditions that enabled the tradition of the people's theater, which emerged with the revolutionary activism of antibourgeois thespians in late-eighteenth-century France and culminated in the creation of a disabled women's feminist theater practice. For Lewis, who founded Other Voices, a workshop for disabled women, in Los Angeles in 1982, disability activists like CeCe Weeks were part of a performance trajectory by disabled women that began in the United States with proletarian theater in the 1930s and gained momentum in the radical theater pedagogy of the 1960s and 1970s. As a full-fledged liberation movement in the 1980s, it combined disability rights activism with feminist consciousness-raising and the ethos of the independent living movement. As with Ó Catháin and Poore, the process of recuperating the marginalized histories of disabled activists and their supporters is, for Lewis, an expansive redefinition of what comprises disability history.

In our "Reflections" section, Julie Livingston's essay on Botswana invites historians and anthropologists to interrogate notions of physical impairment and disabled identity outside of, but always linked to, Western definitions of disability. Livingston demonstrates the way that European imperialism in Botswana not only created the conditions for numerous acquired disabilities through industrial work (such as in mining) but also recalibrated traditional notions of dependence and mutual responsibility within local social networks to include the stigma of the Western medical model. Susan Burch and Ian Sutherland attend to the dynamic range of scholarly trends and themes that make up the growing field of American disability history, providing a useful framework for the evolution of a canon of American disability scholarship. Burch and Sutherland demonstrate how disability, as a critical lens and methodological tool, constitutes a distinct area of intellectual and political inquiry intimately linked to trends within American social and cultural history. Finally, Robert McRuer examines the overlapping and individuated tenets of political theory espoused by queer, feminist, and disabled scholars and activists in thinking through global labor practices and neoliberal economics. While encouraged by the attention given to critical disability studies, McRuer nonetheless shares his reservations about the limits of disability studies for radical political transformation and questions postmodern endorsements of disability as the supposed last frontier of identity politics.

In this issue's "Public History" section, David Serlin interviews Katherine

Ott, a curator and historian at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC. Ott's exhibitions—on the disability rights movement in the United States and on the social and cultural meanings of polio throughout the world on the fiftieth anniversary of Jonas Salk's polio vaccine—are important contributions not only to public understandings of disability and the politics of public memory but also to the ways in which visual texts and material objects can enrich narratives of disability and disabled people. Similarly, in their history of the institutional development of disability studies at the University of Toledo in Ohio, Diane F. Britton, Barbara Floyd, and Patricia A. Murphy describe the crucial role that archivists have played in preserving and disseminating public histories of disability. A partnership between the University of Toledo and the Ability Center of Greater Toledo, an important local resource for independent living, provides the means to build the scholarly and pedagogical resources necessary for promoting academic scholarship and political activism and serves as a model of public collaboration in the service of collecting and preserving the history of Toledo's disabled community. The "Public History" section ends with "Licking Disability," a set of meditations by Geoffrey Swan, Teresa Meade, J. Douglass Klein, and David Serlin on a selection of postage stamps produced by the United States, Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia during the past five decades. By looking at complex systems of postal iconography and the national contexts in which those systems are created and sustained, stamps offer numerous alternative histories of disability, an encouraging prospect for those interested in the politics of philately.

The "Teaching Radical History" section features an impressive assortment of syllabi and reflections on teaching and pedagogy by historians engaged with disability history, as well as on the critical and political influence of disability studies. Kimberley Hewitt and Geoffrey Reaume offer distinct though complementary perspectives on teaching, respectively, histories of mental illness and madness, inspired in large part by Hewitt's scholarship on psychopharmacology and Reaume's activist work in the psychiatric survivors' movement in Toronto, Canada. R. A. R. Edwards's teaching of deaf history and culture has a particular pedagogical and political urgency as part of the National Technical Institute of the Deaf in Rochester, New York. Katherine Sherwood, a professor of art history, has created a syllabus focused on the intersections of art and medicine within a disability studies framework. Sherwood uses historical and contemporary examples of painting, sculpture, photography, film, and performance art by disabled artists to encourage students to think through the assumptions that they bring to understanding disability as well as to the interpretation of aesthetic texts.

A final selection of reviews by Seth Koven, Sarah E. Chinn, and Everett Zhang—a historian, a literary scholar, and a medical anthropologist, respectively—examines recent scholarship on the political and cultural economy of invalidism in Great Britain among nineteenth-century middle-class women and disabled veterans of World

War I, the gendered and sexualized dimensions (and the titillating lack thereof) of disability biography in a study of Helen Keller, and the role of modernization and global capitalism in redefining disability among male workers in an anthropological study of contemporary China. An exhibition review by David Gissen, a professor of architecture, on the Jim Rouse Visionary Center in Baltimore, Maryland, suggests the multiple ways in which histories of disability can be exploited for any number of political and economic opportunities: as a triumphant narrative of personal success for the disabled developer Jim Rouse; as a specious claim about creative practice and cultural authenticity among “outsider” artists; and as a tool of gentrification and urban redevelopment for real estate speculators and construction companies seeking to “rehabilitate” the inner city.

As editors, we willingly acknowledge that this issue on disability and history focuses almost exclusively on historical interpretations of disability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We also acknowledge the paucity of non-Western and cross-cultural perspectives in this issue. Critical examinations and representations of disability in premodern historical periods and non-Western geographies are only now emerging in the humanities, just as in many parts of the world histories of disability are emerging where they did not exist before or, perhaps more accurately, where they followed a medical model and lacked the theoretical insight to regard disability as socially constructed and discursively produced. The reasons for this are complex and need to be studied. We have wondered if this is because academic scholarship on disability rests largely on articulations of individualism and bodily sovereignty that have been shaped by constitutional democracies in North America and Europe since the late eighteenth century. Americans in particular place (or purport to place) a very high value on independence, which they see as supporting the normal views of society and justifying its differences. Of course, there is much to critique in the contradictory and opportunistic valuing of independence and autonomy, which has become no more than an excuse for privatizing individual experience and debasing citizens’ rights. Appeals to autonomy, or even the ludicrously stated concept of consumers’ rights, are among the central tenets of contemporary neoliberalist thinking and continue to serve as powerful rhetorical tools for fiscal and social conservatives. In truth, they are no more than a cover for denying collective and individual rights that run counter to their right-wing agenda.

Much remains to be written. We offer this issue of *RHR* in the hope of stimulating further intersections between radical historiography and disability studies.

—Teresa Meade and David Serlin

Note

1. Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler, “The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability’s Criticism,” *Public Culture* 13 (2001): 350; emphasis in original.