

Disability Studies Under Threat: Protect and Strengthen Critical-Emancipatory Scholarship! – An Urgent Appeal from Research, Teaching and Practice

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To the Senator of the Ministry for Science, Research and Equality (BWFG) of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Maryam Blumenthal,
to the Minister for Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Ina Brandes,
as well as to the members of the Hamburg State University Conference, the members of the State Rectors' Conference of the Universities in North Rhine-Westphalia, the Rectorate of the University of Cologne, and the Rectorate of the Protestant University of Applied Sciences for Social Work & Diakonie Hamburg¹

Disability Studies constitutes a transdisciplinary, internationally oriented and highly innovative field of research that challenges traditional perspectives on disability and stimulates new ways of thinking: the focus is on the analysis of disability as a social phenomenon. Its approach is thus oriented towards social critique and fundamental theory - disability is not understood as an individual deficit, but rather societal barriers are examined alongside the processes of standardisation and normalisation of social inequality. Since the early 2000s, Disability Studies, which emerged from international disability movements, has also been represented at various colleges and universities in the German-speaking world; 'Centre for Disability Studies and Participation Research' (ZeDiSplus) in Hamburg, the 'International Research Centre for Disability Studies' (iDiS) in Cologne, or the 'Bochum Centre for Disability Studies' (BODYS). There is a wide range of research activities and numerous courses on offer, but as yet no independent degree programmes. Disability Studies sees itself as an interdisciplinary field; it develops new knowledge, theories and methods that go far beyond traditional disability discourse and put the principle "Nothing about us without us." into practice. The equal participation of people with disabilities is central to this.

In light of the current social and political backlash, both Gender & Queer Studies and Disability Studies are under pressure. This manifests in systematic attacks on sexual and gender diversity as well as inclusive pedagogy and continues in the rejection of socially critical research and teaching. The attacks follow a familiar pattern: They begin with the delegitimisation of individual emancipatory disciplines in order to gradually undermine the entire spectrum of socially critical teaching and research. Particularly intersectional and human rights-oriented research approaches are therefore not a matter of course. Permanent institutional foundations for Disability Studies must urgently be created in the German-speaking world – also to counter the dismantling of critical-emancipatory sciences. Currently, however, precisely the opposite is happening in this country: instead of

¹ cc: Presidium of the German Rectors' Conference, Chair of the German Science Council, Chair of the Bundestag Committee for Education, Research and Technology Assessment, Spokespersons of the parliamentary groups for higher education policy, Representatives of the Federal Working Group for Science Policy of the political parties, Associations for disability and inclusion work as well as Gender, Queer and Disability Studies networks.

strengthening existing institutions of Disability Studies, they are either to be closed or are threatened by radical cuts:

The **Centre for Disability Studies and Participation Research (ZeDiSplus)** at the **Protestant University of Applied Sciences for Social Work & Diaconia, Foundation Das Rauhe Haus Hamburg** and the associated nationwide unique Interdisciplinary Professorship for Disability Studies and Participation Research are to end in September and December of this year respectively. ZeDiSplus has been one of the first institutions to represent Disability Studies institutionally in Germany since 2005. Its impending disappearance would not only affect a crucial research institution in Northern Germany, but would also silence one of the few voices that consistently advocate for inclusion, participation and human rights-oriented research and teaching. ZeDiSplus has gained international recognition through its public and largely accessible lecture series. Numerous publications have emerged from these events. The professorship for Disability Studies has developed, among other things, concrete criticism of current state policies regarding the inclusion and participation of people affected by disability through the Shadow Report Hamburg. Through the development of inter-university certificate programmes, ZeDiSplus performs pioneering work and makes an urgently required contribution to inclusive and transdisciplinary higher education.

The **International Research Centre for Disability Studies (iDiS)** at the **University of Cologne**, founded in 2004, as well as the first full professorship for Sociology and Politics of Rehabilitation and Disability Studies at a German-speaking university – represented until 2024 with national and international visibility by Prof. Dr. Anne Waldschmidt – are currently threatened in their existence by austerity plans of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The research centre produces central, profile-building contributions to German-language Disability Studies, including textbooks, an interdisciplinary handbook on Disability Studies, fundamental collected works as well as introductory and programmatic texts. Relevant third-party funded projects have also been supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and research programmes of the European Union. The Cologne approach innovatively connects social and cultural sciences. Particularly noteworthy is the fundamental theoretical orientation of the professorship, which in connection with Disability Studies has established a unique profile within the German higher education landscape. The pioneering teaching and research area at the University of Cologne requires a secure future!

Consequences

- Universities and higher education institutions are central actors in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the promotion of an inclusive, accessible society. The dismantling of Disability Studies contradicts this public mandate.
- Without permanent structures, German-speaking universities and higher education institutions lose connection to international developments in Disability Studies as have long been established in the US, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia – with negative consequences for international visibility, cooperations and third-party funding access.
- The impending dismantling of Disability Studies at multiple higher education locations endangers the critical engagement with social inequality and societal change in the context of inclusion, participation and social justice.
- The severely reduced institutionalisation of Disability Studies weakens the diversity of disciplinary perspectives and undermines universities and higher education institutions in their role as places of critical and pluralistic reflection.

- Students require more, not fewer, interdisciplinary and critical perspectives that are crucial for understanding disability, diversity, inclusion and participation in the sense of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Demands

Our appeal is directed to all those who bear responsibility at universities, higher education institutions and in science policy:

- Preservation of the Centre for Disability Studies and Participation Research (ZeDiSplus) in Hamburg, the International Research Centre for Disability Studies (iDiS) in Cologne, and the associated professorships for Disability Studies.
- The financing of existing teaching and research structures in disability studies must be secured on a permanent and reliable basis.
- In view of the current reactionary backlash against fundamental democratic values such as human dignity, equality, diversity, tolerance, solidarity and justice, it is imperative that we expand rather than dismantle the forward-looking and innovative field of disability studies.
- The range of courses on disability studies must be systematically expanded in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
- It is necessary to structurally integrate proven expertise, in particular from scientists with disabilities in leading positions, in accordance with the international Guidelines for Disability Studies Programs of the Society for Disability Studies (2004).
- In order for Disability Studies to effectively develop its critical and emancipatory perspective, it must be ensured that it is institutionally independent of the established structures and disciplines of traditional “disability assistance”.

Science thrives because it is controversial and needs diversity. Those who silence its critical voices are undermining the foundation of our liberal democracy. Defending critical and emancipatory approaches to science is therefore not a luxury project, but protects against growing tendencies towards intolerance and hatred – and sends a clear signal for the idea of an open, diverse and non-discriminatory college and university.

Sent with Pride – for an academia that excludes no one.