Behinderung, Arbeit und Technologie in der Disability History: Assistive Objekte in Selbstzeugnissen und Memorialbüchern des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts

Disability, Work, and Technology: Assis8ve Objects in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Ego-Documents and Memorial Books

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Work and the (in)ability to work have long been central analytical categories in Disability Studies. One influential argument traces the very emergence of the concept of "disability" to the restructuring of workplaces during the Industrial Revolution, framing disability as a product of modern economic practices. Another view equates premodern "disability" with poverty and destitution, based on the assumption that an inability to work was the primary marker of being considered "disabled." Neither perspective captures the complexity and diversity of lived experience of disability in premodern societies.

In this paper, I approach "(in)ability to work" from a different point of view by focussing on assistive technologies: Following Katherine Ott, I am interested in how aids and technical adaptations supported bodily functions ("activity objects") and also acted as markers of social belonging and esteem ("worth objects"). Considering technology as an analytical category opens up new insights into the aesthetic and performative dimensions of premodern work and (in)ability to work. My aim is to explore the cultural and social meanings of different assistive objects, drawing on ego-documents and memorial books from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

One of my key sources are the memorial books of the Nuremberg Twelve Brothers Foundations (Mendel and Landauer Foundations), charitable institutions for elderly craftsmen and day laborers who were no longer able to work. The portraits and short biographies in these books refer to former occupations, but also mention physical impairments or show assistive objects. A cutler, for instance, is depicted wearing a special shoe, presumably to stabilize an impaired foot. A shoemaker is shown with crutches compensating for a foot deformity. Spectacles also appear, sometimes simply resting on a workbench, with no textual reference in the accompanying texts. While the written entries often place impairments after the end of gainful employment, the images merge assistive objects and depictions of work-related activities, pointing to the social significance of these devices.

The "writing bed" of Matthäus Schwarz of Augsburg, an employee of the Fugger family, also shows how spaces and material arrangements could be adapted during periods of illness to make professional activity and social status visible to others. Riding equipment, too, could serve as a "worth object": the elderly Zürich resident Josua Maler the Elder, suffering from a severe hernia, rode out of the city on a woman's saddle to visit his son in another town. Publicly appearing on horseback seems to have been regarded as an important form of social participation.

These and other examples suggest that in the premodern world, aids were at once practical tools and powerful symbols. Their functions and meanings overlapped and shifted with social, spatial, and biographical context. Viewing assistive objects as points of intersection between body, work, status, and social expectations will allow us to trace their cultural significance in a systematic way.