

Bethel in Our Dreams: The Asylum between Utopia and Nightmare

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After the Nazi seizure of power, advocates for the disabled clung to the idea of the asylum as refuge, a utopian space that allowed “sick” and “healthy” to live side-by-side and enabled social outcasts to achieve lives of dignity. This was the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reflections on Bethel, in his letter to his grandmother of August 1933. That Bonhoeffer –the son of a leading psychiatrist with a profound awareness of injustice –embraced Bethel as a model Christian charity demonstrates the extent to which the logic of segregation and confinement in 20thcentury Germany was hegemonic. This paper delves into the foundations of this hegemony. What social and cultural forces allowed the asylum model, in spite of its manifest failures, to grow in importance in the 1920’s and 30s? How did Bethel in particular, arguably Europe’s most famous welfare asylum, normalize the idea of legal guardianship and “enclosed care” for ever-expanding categories of the disabled? Using case files and correspondence from Bethel and other institutions, I will show how the persistence of an idealized view of asylum practice undercut attempts to defend the rights of persons with disabilities and even facilitated the efforts of Nazi policy-makers to demonize “useless eaters” as a threat to the national economy and racial health