

BOOK REVIEW

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Understanding State Socialism Through the Lens of Disability¹



Abstract: *This book review examines Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism: Visions, Promises, Frustrations (edited by Kateřina Kolářová and Martina Winkler), a volume exploring the history of disability across communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Moving beyond narratives of invisibility or total institutionalization, the book addresses multiple perspectives on disability under state socialism, ranging from expert discourses such as defectology to labour-centred care policies and cultural representations of disability. The volume also highlights intersections with other categories, including ethnicity and family. The contributions span diverse contexts, from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia, Poland, the GDR, and Bulgaria, offering a nuanced and comparative picture of socialist disability histories. Importantly, the book focuses not only on the*

visions and plans of communist dictatorships but also on the limits, paradoxes, and contradictions inherent in socialist disability policies. These tensions reveal both the

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utopian aspirations and the structural challenges faced by socialist welfare regimes. Furthermore, the contributions situate approaches toward people with disabilities within a broader framework of welfare state transformation, tracing shifts from the Stalinist period to the era of late socialism. It positions disability as a lens through which broader themes of modernization, identity formation, and social norms can be examined.

Keywords: *Disability history; state socialism; Central and Eastern Europe; care and control; welfare state.*

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This edited volume examines the position of disabled people within the communist utopia. More specifically, it explores how state socialist regimes, which promised a “healthy, abled, happy and resilient” population (p. 7) and placed labour at the core of their social organization, approached individuals with mental illnesses and disabilities. Rather than reproducing the common narrative of disability under socialism as merely a “dark age” of institutionalization or invisibility, the book aims to offer a more nuanced history. It highlights the tensions between the visions, utopias, and plans of communist dictatorships and the limits, paradoxes, and internal conflicts into which these often culminated. The authors draw attention to a fundamental paradox of disability in state socialism: while disabled people were included in the vision of a new socialist society, grounded in the belief that human nature was plastic and shaped by the environment and material conditions, the persistence of disability in socialist societies posed a continual challenge to, and critique of, this vision (pp. 9–10).

Methodologically, the volume approaches disability as “a useful category” (p. 13), one that not only articulated the utopias and ideals of state socialism but also exposed the underlying “able norm” embedded within these societies. The publication is structured around several thematic clusters that interweave throughout the contributions: the emergence of a new epistemology of disability, the role of labor in socialist care politics, and cultural representations of disability. The first theme examines expert knowledge about disability – in fields such as pedagogy and psychology – shaped by the discipline of so-called defecto-

logy. On the one hand, the defectological model constituted a new epistemological field that redefined understandings of disability; on the other hand, it simultaneously produced new mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion. Another recurring theme is the role of labour as a tool of care and inclusion in socialist societies. Here, too, a paradox emerges: socialist regimes sought to integrate into a labour-cantered society those members who, by virtue of disability, were unable to work. The emphasis on labour as an integrative factor was not unique to state socialism; however, while exclusion in the West meant the inability to sell one's labour on the market, under state socialism it meant the inability to participate in the collective project of building a new society. A third key theme explored in the book is the analysis of cultural representations of disability and the broader socialist disability imaginaries.

The edited volume brings together nine studies that explore the disability history of the communist dictatorships of Central and Eastern Europe, with particular emphasis on Czechoslovakia (four chapters), as well as the GDR, Bulgaria, and Poland; one contribution also focuses on the Soviet Union. In the chapter, titled "*Just Like It Is at Home!*" *Soviet Deafness and Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War*, Claire Shaw examines the formation of Soviet deafness as a specific identity shaped by the Soviet model and its subsequent dissemination to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (p. 30). She analyzes not only symposia, journals, and deaf organizations, but also international visits and exchanges, exploring how deaf identity was constructed. At the same time, Shaw demonstrates that "socialist deafness" was far from a monolithic concept: significant tensions and alternative understandings existed within the socialist bloc, going beyond what Soviet activists envisioned, or perhaps even desired (p. 46). One particularly valuable contribution of this chapter is its attention to the lived experiences and emotions of participants and activists involved in these transnational exchanges, the so-called "socialist deaf tourists", and their feelings (p. 50). The following chapter, *Work as a Form of Emancipation: The Emergence of Czechoslovak Defectology* by Marek Fapšo and Jan Randák, focuses on the emergence of Czechoslovak defectology and the figure of Miloš Sovák, the founder of this discipline in the post-war period. The authors argue that defectology in Czechoslovakia should not be understood merely as a Soviet export; they stress the need to examine the transfer of defectological concepts within local professional practices rather than as a "pre-programmed" transmission (p. 72).

They also highlight that defectology's position after the communist takeover was far from secure: during the 1950s, its leading proponents had to actively work to legitimize it in the eyes of party officials, even though it drew heavily on Marxist positions and the teachings of I. P. Pavlov. Precisely this link to Pavlovian doctrine, the conceptual and language framework it provided for talking about disability, helped defectology achieve a more stable footing. In the third chapter, *Disability Assessment under State Socialism*, Teodor Mladenov examines disability policy in the Soviet Union and its influence on socialist Bulgaria. He explores how the "Soviet disability blueprint" was translated and reshaped in this context. Furthermore, he analyzes disability policy under state socialism through the lens of "medical-productivism," aimed at creating "hyper-able" and "motivated" laborers (p. 95). Mladenov situates these attempts within a broader discussion of the transformation from industrial to post-industrial societies and considers the role of control and discipline in both neoliberal and state socialist regimes.

Frank Henschel's study, *The Formation of "Disability": Expert Discourses on Children's Sexuality, "Behavioural Defectivity", and "Bad Families" in Socialist Czechoslovakia (1950s–1970s)*, examines expert discourses on "defective children" in socialist Czechoslovakia from the 1950s to the 1970s. He focuses in particular on pedagogical and psychological knowledge concerning the "sexually deviant child." Henschel identifies an important shift in expert discourse: an increasing emphasis on the idea that "deviant" children were primarily the result of a "bad family environment." This reasoning stemmed from the observation that, despite the establishment of a new socialist society, social problems persisted; consequently, blame for "defective individuals" was attributed either to remnants of the "old society" or to an individual's failure to adapt to the new social order. Within the discourse on defective children, this argument broadened to encompass the entire family. Thus, the focus shifted from a structural to an individual level (pp. 135–136). Maria-Lena Faßig in her chapter, *Discourses of Prevention, Risk and Responsibility in the Women's Magazine Vlasta (1950s–1980s)*, makes a similar observation in her study of the popular women's magazine *Vlasta*, as she examines what was considered a threat to children's health. She traces a shift in prevention discourse: whereas in the 1950s the emphasis lay on combating infectious diseases and promoting vaccination, later discourse placed increasing stress on parental responsibility for children's health (p. 161). In addition, the later decades witnessed a renewed interest in genetics.

Kateřina Kolářová and Filip Herza, in their study *Engineering Socialist Integration in the Age of Normalisation: Roma and People with Disabilities as Objects of Care in Socialist Czechoslovakia*, examine the intersection of disability and ethnicity. By analyzing state policies toward the Roma population, they show that integration efforts were primarily framed in paternalistic terms. They also highlight a key contradiction in this approach: initiatives to involve Roma more fully in social life simultaneously served as strategies to silence or slow down the political emancipation of emerging Roma elites (p. 190). Moreover, the conceptualization of race and disability shifted over time; by the 1980s, it had taken on more conservative and determinist overtones. Pia Schmüser's contribution, "*We as parents must be helped.*" *State-Parent Interactions on Care Facilities for Children with "Mental Disabilities" in the GDR*, focuses on interactions between the state and parents regarding the placement of disabled children in care facilities in the GDR, particularly in extra-familial settings such as day-care centers and residential homes. Her analysis combines two perspectives: a top-down view, based on official state actors, infrastructures, and policies concerning people with disabilities; and a bottom-up approach, grounded in parental correspondence and written complaints, which examines how parents negotiated with state authorities. Schmüser draws on the concept of *Eigensinn* to trace how the dynamics of the state–parent relationship evolved in the GDR, especially during the Honecker era, when parental voices gained greater prominence. In line with Mary Fulbrook's thesis of the "participatory dictatorship," Schmüser argues that parents appropriated the rhetoric of late socialism in East Germany to make greater demands on the state concerning care for disabled children.

The final two contributions, by Martina Winkler and Natalia Pamula, explore shifting representations of disability under state socialism. Winkler, in her chapter *Disability and Childhood in Socialist Czechoslovakia*, focuses on children's literature and media, analyzing how narratives of childhood and disability were framed. This perspective allows her to address broader questions concerning constructions of normality and attitudes toward diversity in socialist societies. Similarly, Natalia Pamula's closing chapter, *Out of Place, Out of Time: Intellectual Disability in Late Socialist Polish Young Adult Literature*, examines representations of disability in young adult literature in late socialist Poland, with particular attention to portrayals of mentally disa-

bled children. The four novels Pamula analyzes are set in rural environments, which play a central role in shaping depictions of these children. The protagonists are depicted as living in poverty, rendered helpless and voiceless, while the rural setting itself emerges as a space of violence and deprivation (p. 297). The disabled characters are read as instances of “bare life”, lives marginalized by economic injustice, state neglect of rural areas, and social prejudices. The village itself mirrors this marginalization, positioned at the fringes of socialist modernity.

Overall, this edited volume addresses an important and understudied topic: the history of disability under state socialism, approached from a variety of perspectives. It examines the emergence of expert knowledge about people with disabilities, the formation and implementation of state policies, and the ways disability was represented in the media. A significant number of the contributions highlight a broader shift in how disability was conceptualized between the 1950s and the era of late socialism. While in the immediate post-war period disability was framed primarily through the emerging discipline of defectology, with a strong emphasis on labour as the main vehicle for social integration, the later socialist period increasingly foregrounded the role of the family environment alongside this productivist trope. Although disability might at first glance appear marginal to the broader history of socialism, this volume demonstrates, and this seems to me one of its key contributions, that disability provides an illuminating lens for examining major questions of modernization, identity formation, and the construction of norms in post-war societies, as well as the intertwined histories of care, control, and repression. Importantly, the individual chapters explore not only the utopian projects, plans, and visions of socialist disability policy, but also the limits, paradoxes, and internal contradictions inherent in these approaches. As the volume demonstrates, these tensions in turn provide a productive starting point for further historical research. Two possible avenues for further development come to mind. First, a stronger comparative engagement with Western Europe could help situate the socialist experience more fully within transnational histories of disability. Second, in addition to expert discourses or representations, closer attention to sources connected with the infrastructure of care, its administration, organization, and everyday functioning, could deepen our understanding of how socialist disability policies operated in practice.