

Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism: Visions, Promises, Frustrations. Edited by Kateřina Kolářová and Martina Winkler. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2021. 319 pp.

Compared to race, gender, sexuality, and class, disability remains a rather undiscovered area of research in social sciences and humanities. However, a growing number of historians have convincingly argued that disability provides a novel angle for a more nuanced understanding of social and political systems of the past. *Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism. Visions, Promises, Frustrations* seeks to contribute to this knowledge building by putting the focus on the former Eastern Bloc, suggesting that the complexities posed by understandings of dis/abilities of bodies and minds accentuate the many challenges faced by the Soviet socialist project, particularly these complexities overlapped with various categories of “otherness.”

The purpose of the multi-author volume, which consists of an in-depth introduction and nine chapters, is precisely to argue for the close analysis of these very challenges and to complicate the picture of state socialist attitudes towards disability. Therefore, one of the key points of the book is to show how state socialist regimes attempted to strike a balance between theory (socialist utopia) and practice (social engineering).

The egalitarian principles of socialist ideology and the exclusionary nature of state-defined normalcy concepts present an apparent paradox, which is addressed in several chapters of the volume. For instance, the notion of defectology, defined as an influential epistemological framework which spread across East Central Europe from the USSR, was initially meant to be a state-controlled emancipatory process. In practice, however, it led to the creation of hierarchies of “defects” based on the limits of these supposed defects to “correctability.” Explained at length in the chapter *Work as a Form of Emancipation: The Emergence of Czechoslovak Defectology*, by Marek Fapšo and Jan Randák, defectology became a powerful domestic discipline in Stalinist Czechoslovakia under the scientific supervision of Miloš Sovák. Later, it acquired new meanings in accordance with socialist economic interests and state-defined standards of productivity. The chapter *Engineering Socialist Integration in the Age of Normalisation: Roma and People with Disabilities as Objects of Care in Socialist Czechoslovakia*, coauthored by Kateřina Kolářová and Filip Herza, examines how disability, race, and ethnicity were viewed in the framework of this discipline, also concluding that the overly normative nature of defectology led to the failed integration of those with

purportedly unchangeable defects, who were persistently labeled as “useless” members of socialist societies.

Work indeed played a quintessential role in the collective effort to build socialism. Since disabled bodies and minds were perceived less productive than abled ones, individual bodily or mental difference was, again, a major source of tension under socialist regimes. In the chapter *Disability Assessment under State Socialism*, Theodor Mladenov discusses socialist disability assessment, a classification mechanism based on medically determined work capacity. Mladenov draws attention to the ways in which disability assessment was used by the Bulgarian Communist Party as part of a broader state socialist biopolitical project which aimed to construct a constantly improving socialist ideal and, within that, the new Bulgarian Soviet personality type. Underpinned by allegedly scientific foundations, this “medical-productivist” (p.92, 112) model of disability assessment therefore served as the ultimate control over disabled citizens, regulating their access both to work and support and expertly advising (or rather imposing) ways of personal improvement aligned closely with notions of socialist morality.

The distinctive soviet disabled identity is also a salient point in the chapter by Claire Shaw, titled “*Just Like It Is at Home!*” *Soviet Deafness and Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War*. In this study, Shaw analyzes transnational socialist relationships through the first International Symposium of Societies and Unions of the Deaf Socialist Countries, which was held in Moscow in 1968. This event was dedicated to the creation of the ideal socialist deaf person, who in principle would have a sense of shared identity and belonging with other deaf people (and other ideal socialist types of actors) across the Eastern Bloc. This chapter also illustrates how deafness seemed to be a “correctible” and a widely acceptable condition under state socialism. This ties into the argument presented by Fapšo and Randák, who point out how strongly Sovák believed in the emancipation of deaf and mute children through defectology (p.70).

Childhood, which was also a concept coopted and manipulated by socialist ideology, is another recurring theme in the volume. Both Martina Winkler, author of the chapter *Disability and Childhood in Socialist Czechoslovakia*, and Natalia Pamula, whose chapter is titled *Out of Place, Out of Time: Intellectual Disability in Late Socialist Polish Young Adult Literature*, use children’s stories and media as well as young adult literature to explore how childhood and disability were (symbolically) connected for pedagogical purposes. Winkler argues that the study of overlapping discourses on childhood and disability sheds light on

certain transformations within the Czechoslovak political propaganda, which was initially centered around the concept of overcoming and correction in the 1950s and then shifted towards “the construction of a strongly normative social consensus with inclusive features” (p.287) through the Czechoslovak new wave movies in the 1960s. On the other hand, *The Formation of “Disability”: Expert Discourses on Children’s Sexuality, “Behavioural Defectivity”* by Frank Henschel, and *“Bad Families” in Socialist Czechoslovakia (1950s–1970s)*, and *Discourses of Prevention, Risk and Responsibility in the Women’s Magazine Vlasta (1950s–1980s)* by Maria-Lena Faßig † demonstrate that state narratives routinely placed the blame on families, claiming that the responsibility for “defective” children lay with destructive parental influence, neglect, or certain stigmatized health-related issues, such as substance abuse or addiction. With this in mind, Faßig presented the gendered aspects of this mechanism by analyzing Czechoslovak propagandistic content directed to mothers, who faced intense pressure to raise useful children for the state. In contrast, the chapter *“We as parents must be helped.” State–Parent Interactions on Care Facilities for Children with “Mental Disabilities” in the GDR* by Pia Schmäuser unveils the complicated “state-citizen interactions” (p.250) between parents and the authorities in the GDR. Schmäuser calls attention to the inherent tension between the “individual” and the “collective” by showing parent-state negotiations concerning whose responsibility it was to raise disabled children.

While the volume presents a multitude of theoretical frameworks, discourse analysis is the key methodology used by most of the authors. Although named and defined only by Faßig (p.150), the cultural model of disability also seems to be a collectively accepted approach among the contributors, considering that all chapters intend to reflect on shifts in understandings of and approaches to disability under different regimes, in different cultural contexts, and at different points of historical time. However, the sources used by the authors vary. For instance, Mladenov studies official documents of the Soviet and Bulgarian authorities (p.94). Henschel (p.120), Kolářová and Herza (p.168), and Fapšo and Randák (p.64) analyze expert narratives and state socialist discourses of science regarding defectology. As mentioned above, Winkler (p.260) and Pamula (p.295) use Czechoslovak and Polish children’s and young adult literature and films. Faßig (p.149) relied on a propagandistic Czechoslovak women’s magazine, Shaw (p.30) and Schmäuser (p.239) both investigate archival materials of state narratives, combined with personal accounts, such as letters and petitions.

To locate the volume in the context of broader methodological debates, it is worth mentioning the categorization of sources in disability history set up

by Elizabeth Bredberg, which is cited as an important reference point in the journal article “State of the Field: Disability History” by Daniel Blackie and Alexia Moncrieff, published in *History* in 2022. For Bredberg, there are three main types of sources: institutional (official documents, such as state, medical, and various other expert records); vernacular (lay representations of disability in the media, literature, or art); and experimental (egodocuments and interviews). This categorization is highly important, as it calls attention to the relevance of experimental sources in historical disability research and underscores that institutional and vernacular sources mainly originate from nondisabled actors. Without explicitly discussing this categorization, this book seems to challenge it. Given that most of the vernacular sources used by the authors, such as films, literature, and newspapers were under state control (a women’s magazine, children’s literature, and movies were in fact analyzed to highlight their propagandistic and/or pedagogical values in communicating socialist values), the question arises whether there is a need to reevaluate existing methodological concepts of disability history that have been formulated primarily from Western perspectives in order to discover how expert and lay narratives of disability under socialist regimes actually differed, as well as how alternative ideas were regulated or even banned from public discussion.

As for the closer analysis of the types of sources used in the volume, two issues seem to deserve further discussion. First, the number of sources documenting lived experiences of disability under state socialism (such as interviews, letters, personal accounts, diaries, or memoirs) is strikingly limited, especially in contrast with the thorough study of sources offering examples of expert and state rhetoric presented in the volume. As pointed out earlier, political and medical records alone prove inadequate if we seek to understand how the grand narratives trickled down into everyday life, as is indeed problematized by some of the authors of the book (e.g., Mladenov, p.94), if, however, left unresolved. Second, the lack of references to the material and design culture of state socialism (which would be most relevant for chapters focusing on work or socialist modernization) leaves many questions unanswered. As historians Katherine Ott and Bess Williamson argue in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (edited by Rembis, M., Kudlick, C., and Nielsen, K. E.), disability history, viewed through the lens of non-textual sources, urges us to understand the imposed normativity of objects and spaces that remain woefully exclusionary to many. While the reviewed book touches (rightfully) on the connection between the visions of disability emancipation and socialist technological utopia (e.g.,

Kolářová & Herza, pp.182–83), it does not observe material culture, architecture, or design, and this leaves room for further material investigations that could complement the text-based and visual sources presented.

To conclude, the editors and contributors of *Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism. Visions, Promises, Frustrations* intend to address gaps in Eastern European disability history. The book puts forward the proposition that state socialist attitudes towards dis/abilities of bodies and minds had many facets, so the authors call for a new focus that points towards the varied ways in which the political regimes in postwar East Central Europe envisioned, constructed, and dealt with notions of “disability” and “normality.” Although Czechoslovakian *visions, promises, and frustrations* are undeniably overrepresented in the volume (with the remaining chapters studying the USSR, Poland, Bulgaria, and the GDR), the authors succeeded in equipping readers with a more comprehensive view on this difficult topic, adding vitally important scholarship to both disability history and area studies. Thus, *Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism. Visions, Promises, Frustrations* will be well-suited for researchers from different academic levels and backgrounds who are looking to carry out comparative case studies in disability history. The volume will also certainly influence further methodological considerations in the field.

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