

Teodor Mladenov. *Disability and Postsocialism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. 122 pp. \$149.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-138-23446-8.

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Published on H-Disability (January, 2019)

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Disability studies arose from the specific social, political, economic, and academic environments of the United States and United Kingdom. The disability movement began outside academia, making its way to the universities arm in arm with activists marching on the streets, riding their wheelchairs, and crawling up the steps of the Capitol to advocate for provision of full accessibility. The academic field of disability studies was legitimized by the grassroots activism of people with disabilities but also provided activists with historical perspective and theoretical background to their claim for equal rights. In the 1990s, when the communist states fell one by one and turned to neoliberal capitalism, Western disability studies was a well-developed paradigm—and already criticized, in its second wave, having become more aware of its dead ends. At the same time, in postcommunist states, the so-called medical model of disability was the dominant, and indeed the only, model.

Communist states were political, social, and ideological environments where activism and any form of resistance to the dominant perspective, not only by disabled citizens, were extremely difficult. Due to the Iron Curtain, ideas (just as people and goods) did not travel easily. All this gives a specific context to the present state of both the disability movement and disability studies in

postsocialist states. In *Disability and Postsocialism*, Teodor Mladenov investigates the nuances and paradoxes of the current situation of disability as a concept, and people with disabilities, in postsocialist states. Mladenov is not only a researcher and author (*Critical Theory and Disability: A Phenomenological Approach* [2015]) but also an activist involved in disability advocacy in Bulgaria. He explains the current marginalization and difficulties in self-organization against the dominant state and medical discourses by shedding light on the persistence of practices and structures inherited from socialist states and harsh realities associated with the transformation to, and adoption of, neoliberal ways. When explaining the main aim of the book, the author recalls the failed promises of socialism, which declared safety and stability, and neoliberalism, which assured freedom and independence. For people with disabilities in countries like Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary, both of these systems turned out to be surprisingly similar in their exclusion and humiliation of people with disabilities.

Mladenov begins by defining the key terms he uses in the book: “disability,” “state socialism,” “neoliberalism,” “postsocialism,” and “social justice.” While the first four are quite obvious in setting the core themes of the book, “social justice”

sets out the principles that guide the author to the model of disability that directs his work. Indeed, he declares in the very first sentence of the preface: “This book is personal as much as it is political” (p. viii). *Disability and Postsocialism* is the effect of the author’s expanding awareness of economic conditioning; he criticizes his earlier writings for not recognizing the impact of social and economic elements, and of reinforcing postsocialist neoliberalism. What he highlights about his previous works, and of disability studies in general, is the concentration on cultural recognition and negligence toward economic factors, a perspective that he robustly refers to as “culturalist reductionism” (p. ix).

Mladenov draws a line between two political systems that are based on the (moral) value of work and consequently on the position of citizens who cannot participate in the community of workers. People with disabilities who are unable to work become culturally devalued and materially marginalized. Both systems are responsible for developing a “medical-productivist complex,” which means that medicine is entangled with production in diagnosing, and justifying, the inability to work. The author lists core elements of socialist welfare directed at citizens with disabilities that constituted the common social structure for all socialist states in Europe: sheltered workshops, dominance of residential institutions for social care, inability to work, heavy medicalization, and elimination of disability organizations or their reduction to being extensions of the state. After the fall of communism in the late 1980s, the new political order not only did not improve the everyday lives of people with disabilities but also reaffirmed their “economic deprivation, cultural devaluation and political disempowerment” (p. 1). Along with the sociopolitical neoliberalization that was introduced as a shock doctrine came reduction in state support, which was stigmatized as signifying welfare dependency. Ideals of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility accompanied decentralization of service provision, and civic

disabled organizations were structured as providers of services that permitted only tokenist participation of disabled people in the public sphere.

It is not surprising that Mladenov—with his emphasis on economic and labor equality—uses “social justice” as one of the key words to frame his book. He adopts Nancy Fraser’s concept that social justice requires parity of participation in economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and representative justice.[1] Fraser and Mladenov point out the critical importance of political participation: voting as well as decision-making. People who do not perform these political activities are reduced to being a subject of charity and benevolence and become non-persons.

Mladenov points out three main areas in which disability is marginalized or mistreated in a systematic, large-scale way: distribution, recognition, and representation. The subsequent parts of the book are therefore devoted to disability and maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation. Each part is divided into two sections, the first concentrating on state socialist legacy and the second on the postsocialist, neoliberal one.

In the first chapter, devoted to disability and maldistribution, Mladenov focuses on the economic realm. He analyzes the residential institutions and sheltered workshops that were characteristic of disability management in socialist states. He points out the exploitation of employees through extremely low wages that held disabled workers in constant poverty, isolation from the regular employment market and from able-bodied workers, and perception that work for disabled people was not regarded as bona fide employment but programs of rehabilitation. The postsocialist, neoliberal order withdrew from participation in a welfare state, transferring public support to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which in turn resulted in disabled people being reluctant to question the new order and

their position within it. At the same time, the workfare paradigm was dominant, which meant personal responsibility for one's well-being, wealth, and career path.

In the second chapter, on disability and misrecognition, Mladenov shifts to cultural recognition, which he defines, in a quite specific way, as "respect for difference and provision of equal opportunities to achieve social esteem" (p. 57). The cultural perspective also has a social, work-related plan. The author considers various definitions of disability in the Soviet bloc countries and their evolution. The main point of this chapter is the "denial of the very existence of disabled people" in socialist states, which was amplified by neoliberal disdain for social support and the myth of self-sufficiency (p. 73).

The third and final chapter is devoted, unsurprisingly given Mladenov's focus on the social justice concept, to political representation of people with disabilities. Here he continues his analyses of the "twin factors of state socialist legacy and postsocialist neoliberalisation" (p. 73). Mladenov points out the deep structural impact socialism left on communities by prohibiting them from pursuing civic, grassroots initiatives, these being treated by regimes as a potential threat. The result was lack of civil societies' strategies and tactics in Central and Eastern European countries. New orders only strengthened this by "depoliticisation of disabled people's organizations by reducing their role to service provision and by incorporating them into structures of tokenistic (quasi-corporatist) policy-making" (p. 95).

The landscape Mladenov describes and analyzes in *Disability and Postsocialism* is a pessimistic one, concentrating on a large-scale, hard-to-change network of factors that for decades, and across political systems, has excluded people with disabilities from full participation. However, Mladenov finishes his book with a solution that is based on his own experience. This is advocacy for the right to work and for user-led personal assis-

tance—both leading to independence, which is a prerequisite for full participation in the public sphere.

Mladenov uses his book to map the current situation of people with disabilities in Eastern and Central Europe. He highlights the areas that cause pain and distress to the disabled, and analyzes these to pinpoint how the old and the new political and economic orders both carry responsibility. Mladenov's central argument is that, in this part of the world, the prevailing difficult and unequal position of people with disabilities reflects that neoliberalism has more in common with socialism than is widely recognized.

Note

[1]. Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-socialist' Age," in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willet (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 19-49; and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

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Citation: Magdalena Zdrodowska. Review of Mladenov, Teodor. *Disability and Postsocialism*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. January, 2019.

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