Understanding the Institutionalized Nexus of Disability and Labor

The central task of disability history is to explore and reconstruct as far as possible the diverse and complex, but also hidden or forgotten, histories of disability (Paul Longmore, Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability [2003]). Conceptually, disability history is particularly linked to the schools of thought that have emerged from emancipation-oriented disability studies. These have opened up new perspectives on both disability and normality, which are understood not as natural but as socioculturally constructed. Thus, inequalities related to bodies considered deviant can be analyzed as consequences of sociocultural marginalization (Jacques Stiker, A History of Disability [2019]). Consequently, the history of disability is fundamentally concerned with dis/ableist ideas and structures and their genesis, as well as with personal experiences of disability in different spheres of life, eras, and cultures. As disability and people with disabilities have been neglected in contemporary historical research, it is commendable that this collection addresses the historical link between disability, employment, and rehabilitation policies. However, strictly speaking, this volume primarily counts as an instance of classical social history, focusing on employment and the working class. It is only concerned with disability policy and politics against this backdrop.

Nevertheless, this interesting anthology explores the nexus between disability and labor from a historical and comparative perspective and offers a respectable collection of eleven essays of historical research on the situation in the second half of the twentieth century in different countries. In doing so, the edition "analyses the multiple meanings of labour in different political and economic systems through the lens of disability" (p. 1). In the introduction, the editors explain the idea behind the volume. It emerged from a lively exchange between established and young researchers from ten countries with different disciplines at a symposium hosted by Jönköping University and the Swedish Institute for Disability Research. A distinctive feature of the symposium and the present volume is that it combines research on the situation in countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the epilogue, Monika Baar explains that the ideological divide that existed between socialist Eastern European and democratic Western
countries in the postwar period was less structure forming than often assumed and that the different welfare state regimes had provoked similar development trajectories on the poor employment situation for people with disabilities. It is notable, however, that despite their omnipresence in disability studies as well as in allusions in this volume, there are no chapters devoted to either the United Kingdom or the United States. Instead, the reader becomes more acquainted with the developments in Scandinavia and with the situation of working-aged people with disabilities in real socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union, Romania, and Bulgaria. The main time period under investigation extends from the reconstruction after the Second World War and the accompanying expansion of the welfare state in the 1950s and 1960s to the emergence of neoliberalism and austerity policies from the 1970s onward, up to the United Nations Year of Disabled Persons (1981) and the decline (since the mid-1970s) and final collapse of the real socialist regimes (1990s) serving as a cut of point for most of the authors.

Collectively, these case studies investigate the multiple meanings of work in different economic and political systems through the lens of disability, at times also in combination with other intersectional axes of injustice, such as gender or class. Geographically, the contributions cover the Scandinavian countries, Western Europe, North America (chapters 1-5), and Eastern Europe (chapters 6-11), but the common ground is the role of disabled people’s work within a modern welfare state.

A general finding of all the contributions is that, despite ideologically very differently constructed systems, one version of a democratic capitalist welfare regime in the West and an egalitarian, dictatorial command economy in the East, the trajectory of the situation of disabled people is not markedly different. In both areas, the economic model of disability individualizes disability and subsequently equates it with an apparently reduced capacity for paid work. Accordingly, Sweden also used the category “partially able to work” for people with less severe impairments. In the communist countries, however, there was no approximate equivalent to the term “disability.” According to the contributing authors, the terms were best translated as “invalid,” which again corresponds to the stigmatizing economic model of disability. Because of the massive importance that work was having in both types of societies, for a long time the only conceivable way to integrate people into society was via facilitating their way into paid labor. However, despite some rhetoric, quotas, or regulations in this regard on both sides of the Iron Curtain, the promised goals for the benefit of disabled people were not actually met. Very little was accomplished beyond the construction of segregated workshops. The resources made available were too scarce and the prevalent attitudes of employers were too dis/ableist to achieve meaningful integration into employment for a significant number of people with disabilities.

The similarity of the conclusions on a very broad level should not hide the fact that the chapters differ substantially, not only in the subpopulation studied, that is, people with different mobility impairments, blind people, or people with cognitive or mental impairments, but more importantly also in the research approach and scope. Irrespective of other distinctions, the introduction attempts to group the essays into three clusters of research approaches. In the first cluster, researchers examine disability issues in the context of actual work and labor policies. Frances Bernstein examines social and employment policies for the rehabilitation of Second World War invalids in the Soviet Union. She highlights the contradictions between state propaganda and the implementation of rehabilitation programs by regional administrations. While war veterans were supposed to be reintegrated into the mainstream labor market, the Soviet system for assessing disability restricted the criteria for disability pensions and other benefits. A key tenet
was the notion that remaining able to work determined war veterans’ social entitlements. Drawing on archival sources, Ina Dimitrova analyzes how medical professionals drew attention to social and attitudinal barriers, thus changing the previously common definition of disability as the inability to work. She shows how Bulgarian psychiatrists gradually formed a self-serving alliance with their patients to challenge work-related concepts of disability in the context of mental health.

The second cluster remains at the level of discourses and constructions through careful analysis of documents, reports, or laws. In this vein, Cristina Diac meticulously traces the different phrasings and orientations of disability and work-related provisions in three versions of the Romanian constitution and other legal documents. Through this almost pedantic work, she traces the prominent role that work played for the Romanian socialist regime, as well as the rather complex notions of work ethics within the Romanian social security system. Diac also shows how social legislation established a hierarchy of disability categories based on an individual’s ability to work. The transformations of the French disabled worker from the postwar period onward are similarly investigated by Cristina Popescu. In his analysis of the proposal worked out by the Swedish Kjellman Committee established in 1943, Staffan Bengtsson shows that ideas around the social or relational nature of disability, as well as the notion of the state’s duty to facilitate inclusion, were being considered in Scandinavia long before the manifesto of the British Union for Physically Impaired against Segregation. These almost progressive notions were still discussed with the underlying premise that every citizen, regardless of functional capabilities, had an obligation to contribute to society through work, and people with disabilities should not automatically be relegated to the existence of a benefit recipient.

The third cluster is supposed to consist of bottom-up approaches that take the point of view of the people concerned. However, only Marcin Stasiak’s study elaborates on what actual disabled people have to say. He interviewed adult polio survivors in Poland about their educational and vocational experiences. He asked what challenges they faced and what strategies they used to try to overcome them. One interesting finding is that the best life outcomes, at least in terms of education and wealth, seem to have been achieved by those who were able to bypass their invalidity, that is, their parents (and themselves) had enough willpower to send their children to regular school or proper rehabilitation facilities where they learned important life lessons. Although school attendance was very burdensome due to a plethora of barriers and obstacles that had to be faced, it allowed pupils with polio to obtain a normal school diploma and often paved the way for an academic education and thus a good life. In another contribution to this cluster, Dustin Galer focuses on the cooperation, or lack thereof, between disability organizations and anti-poverty movements. Ylva Söderfeldt, on the other hand, examines the constructions of disability, gender, and (reproductive) work in two magazines for multiple sclerosis patients, one in Sweden and one in West Germany, thereby detecting differences. While the German magazine focuses on the reinterpretation of the role of the hausfrau and domestic handicrafts in the context of multiple sclerosis, the Swedish one appeals to women’s gendered desire for chic, comfort, and fashion by advertising for customized consumer goods. Anna Derksen looks at the trajectories of disability activism for the right to work in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. She finds that disability organizations appeal for a right to work for everyone and discusses Nordic welfare ideals. As the ideals progress and change with time, so do the demands of disability activism. So, despite the claims in the introduction, even in the third cluster, not all chapters are genuine bottom-up approaches bringing out the real experience of people with disabilities in the face of institutions that demand paid labor for inclusion without
really facilitating it. In most instances, the authors content themselves with analyzing such documents as pamphlets and magazines.

In conclusion, although the collection's regional scope is large and the collection is, in many cases, interdisciplinary, in most case studies people with disabilities are only marginally represented as subjects with their own experiences. Most of the essays are quite comprehensible and give a remarkable insight into the respective countries' employment policies regarding disabled people. However, there are also some essays that are not always fully coherent, requiring the reader to have considerable prior or insider knowledge (e.g., Victoria Shmidt, Diac), or cover too many topics or use too many acronyms, making it difficult to keep track of the main thread (e.g., Galer, Derksen). In these instances, the conclusions provided by the authors prove invaluable to understand the gist of their arguments. Nevertheless, the relatively young historiographical study of disability has received another flagship work in the form of this thought-provoking publication. The anthology is certainly a stimulating door opener for further research in this field, especially in connection with a stronger focus on the perspectives and evaluations of people with disabilities themselves.

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