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Dimitrova, Ina; Mladenov, Teodor

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Decolonising disability in contexts of illiberalism and social abandonment: the case for a double-edged critique from the postsocialist margins

Ina Dimitrova, University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria
Teodor Mladenov, University of Dundee, UK

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of the decolonial approach for analyses of postsocialist disablement, taking as its test case the analytical tool of the 'postsocialist disability matrix' (Mladenov, 2018). The question we pose is how much decolonial critique can the analyses of postsocialist disablement embrace without becoming reactionary amidst growing illiberalism and social abandonment in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)? We provide an overview of postsocialist illiberalism, assess critically some central arguments in decolonial disability studies, and outline the production of 'southern bodies/minds' as a key feature of social abandonment in CEE. We conclude that decolonising disability in the postsocialist region needs to go beyond the North vs. South binary to account for the specific experiences of disabled people inhabiting the 'poor North'. Given these considerations, the double-edged critique implied in the original formulation of the 'postsocialist disability matrix' as scepticism towards both the state and the market could also help embrace the decolonising imperative while remaining sceptical towards both Northern *and* Southern theory production in disability studies.

Keywords: decolonisation; illiberalism; social abandonment; state socialism; postsocialism; neoliberalism; Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

...the premises of the Pastra social care home were in a deplorable state of repair and hygiene and the home was inadequately heated. In particular, the buildings did not have running water. The residents washed in cold water in the yard and were often unshaven and dirty. The bathroom, to which they had access once a week, was rudimentary and dilapidated. The toilets, likewise located in the yard, consisted of decrepit shelters with holes dug in the ground. They were in an execrable state and access to them was dangerous. ... Residents received three meals a day, including 750 g of bread. Milk and eggs were never on offer, and fresh fruit and vegetables were rarely available. No provision was made for special diets. ... Apart from the administration of medication, no therapeutic activities were organised for residents, who led passive, monotonous lives. (*Stanev vs. Bulgaria*, no. 36760/06, p. 20, ECHR 2012)

...patients were nearly exclusively restrained to beds with metal chains to wrists and ankles, secured with padlocks, often for days on end. (Council of Europe, 2020: 4)

On the male chronic ward, the delegation received allegations of orderlies slapping, punching and kicking patients; also, of orderlies carrying sticks and occasionally beating patients with them (a wooden stick matching the description given was found in the staff room on the ward).

Furthermore, a patient complained that after being mechanically restrained with four-point fixation, he had been beaten by an orderly with a restraint belt. (Council of Europe, 2020: 12)

The case of *Stanev vs. Bulgaria*, considered in the European Court of Human Rights in the period 2006-2012, has revealed some of the ugliest features of disablement in present-day Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The applicant, Rusi Stanev, was unlawfully detained in 2002 in a state-run institution located in a remote region in Bulgaria, where the conditions were nothing less than inhuman. The violation of his rights was possible due to the deprivation of his legal capacity, a key instrument of the state socialist governing of disability that has continued to shape disability policy after the fall of state socialism in 1989. The case clearly demonstrates the sinister overlapping of the state socialist legacy and the postsocialist abandonment of 'unproductive' people and social spaces that will be the focus of this paper.

The picture painted almost a decade later by the Council of Europe's (2020) Committee for the Prevention of Torture after its ad hoc visit to Bulgaria in August 2020 to examine psychiatric and 'social care' institutions is even more disturbing and evidences lack of progress. The report of the Committee is just one instance in a constant flow of evidence of the dire conditions in which many disabled Bulgarians currently live (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2017; Council of Europe, 2021; National Statistical Institute and Fundamental Rights Agency, 2021). The situation in the rest of the postsocialist CEE is similar. In many CEE countries, high institutionalisation rates inherited from state socialist disability policies have been compounded during the years of postsocialist transformations by a host of socioeconomic problems disproportionately affecting disabled people. These problems include high poverty levels, lack of access to education, employment and healthcare, inadequate social security benefits, and weaknesses of political participation – as evidenced, for example, in the country reports of the Academic Network of European Disability Experts / ANED (see www.disability-europe.net). The reports on mental health systems in the region are equally alarming (Winkler et al. 2017).

Our analysis starts from the premise that the specificity (and sometimes sheer monstrosity) of postsocialist disablement consists in its rootedness in the intersection between the state socialist order and the postsocialist neoliberal order in the economic, cultural, and political spheres. Simply put, people of present-day CEE have had the worst of both worlds – the world of socialism, and the world of capitalism. Our socialism was much more undemocratic than Western European social democracy, and our capitalism was much more neoliberal than Western European capitalism (even in its Thatcherist English version). In addition, our neoliberal capitalism articulated with our state socialist legacies, producing intersecting harms as the ones evidenced in the cases mentioned above. These harms may not be unique when taken in isolation, but when taken together, they outline the unique physiognomy of the disabled people's marginalisation and oppression in the region. To understand disablement in the postsocialist CEE, Mladenov (2018) has developed a conceptual tool called the 'postsocialist disability matrix'. In this paper, our aim is to update this sociological framework so that it considers critically the decolonising imperative in the context of the overlapping crises that characterise the latest stage of postsocialist transformations in CEE.

In the original version of Mladenov's (2018) 'matrix', the analysis of disablement in the postsocialist region was marked by scepticism towards both the state and the market, with the intention to address the overlapping forms of disablement generated by both the legacy of socialist statism and postsocialist neoliberalisation. We argue that Mladenov's 'matrix' needs to embrace a host of other scepticisms to keep up with the rising illiberalism and deepening social abandonment in the CEE region. Engaging with decolonial disability studies would help but needs to be itself approached critically. An updated

‘postsocialist disability matrix’ would expose a layered structure of superimposed harmful legacies, illiberal trends, and worsening material conditions. We hope that such an analysis could not only help understand better present-day disablement in CEE, but also point towards an effective activist agenda – an agenda capable of instigating collective action and achieving progressive social change in the disability policy area.

We begin with an overview of the original ‘postsocialist disability matrix’ and the new constellation of factors that urgently need to be taken into account. We continue with a more in-depth examination of illiberalism in the CEE region that prepares the ground for our subsequent discussion of the decolonising imperative in contemporary disability studies. We then consider social abandonment in the postsocialist countries, utilising the decolonial concept of ‘southern bodies/minds’. Finally, we outline the implications of these developments for the ‘postsocialist disability matrix’ and sketch some future directions for the critical sociology of disablement in the region. In terms of method, we draw on existing analyses and grey literature. In terms of scope, our observations and experiences are grounded in the Bulgarian context, but we believe that our reflections are applicable to other CEE countries as well, considering the recurrence and spread of the key issues we identify.

Understanding disablement in CEE

The conceptual tool of the ‘postsocialist disability matrix’ draws on disability studies’ social-constructionist understanding of disability (Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Stone, 1984), Nancy Fraser’s (1996, 2005, 2013; Fraser and Honneth, 2003) three-dimensional theory of justice, and critical studies of postsocialism (Ferge, 1997; Dale, 2011; Phillips, 2011; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014). Accordingly, the ‘matrix’ illuminates the intersecting impact on disabled people in CEE of state socialist legacies and postsocialist neoliberalisation in each of Fraser’s three dimensions of social justice – economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. From the perspective of the postsocialist disability matrix, the disability policy legacy of state socialism has included segregated service provision, a medical-productivist framing of disability, and weakened disability organising (among other issues). On their behalf, postsocialist neoliberal reforms have resulted in retrenchment of public support, overvaluation of self-sufficiency, and depoliticisation of disability organising (again, among other issues). These issues constitute intersecting instances of disablement in the economic, the cultural, and the political dimensions of justice (see Table 1).

Table 1: Postsocialist disability matrix (based on Mladenov [2018: 100])

	State socialist legacy	Postsocialist neoliberalisation
Economic redistribution	<i>segregated service provision (e.g., residential institutions for social care)</i>	<i>retrenchment of public support (e.g., direct and indirect cuts)</i>
Cultural recognition	<i>medical-productivist framing of disability (e.g., medical-productivist systems for disability assessment)</i>	<i>overvaluation of self-sufficiency (e.g., the discourse of ‘welfare dependency’)</i>
Political representation	<i>weakened disability organising (as an instance of the more general suppression of the political public sphere)</i>	<i>depoliticisation of disability organising (e.g., nudging towards service provision; tokenistic participation)</i>

The postsocialist disability matrix shows that a *double-edged critique* – implying scepticism towards both the market and the state – is needed to understand disablement in the postsocialist CEE. Admittedly, strong scepticism has often fed distrust in institutions and support for populist politicians and authoritarian governments, particularly in CEE (Brunnbauer, 2022: 15). However, we argue that such an essentially *deconstructive* approach is also able to underpin nuanced analysis and progressive action in the disability policy area. For example, a double-edged critique of policies that (at least ostensibly) promote ‘living independently and being included in the community’ (as demanded by Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) would amount to asserting self-determination while simultaneously deconstructing the binaries that prioritise market-based individualism and undermine the structural and collective determinations of agency; and defending the welfare state while simultaneously continuing to criticise its expert-centred maltreatment of disabled people (Mladenov, 2015: 456).

Moreover, embracing and practicing this double-edged critique could help invent novel activist frames that reconcile two approaches to disability policy that have traditionally been in tension. The first one construes disability as residing in the need-based system (Stone, 1984) and demands mainly social assistance and state provided support. It was typical of the state socialist disability policy and is a central feature of its legacy. The second approach privileges the work-based system and embraces the neoliberal imagery of the able-disabled citizen (Titchkosky, 2003). It recognises as worthy only those disabled people who are able to cope on their own in the open labour market. The work-based approach characterises postsocialist neoliberalisation and is evidenced in austerity measures, in workfare policies that make social support conditional on participation in paid employment (such as the Bulgarian ‘Welfare to Work’ programme – see Mladenov, 2017), and in toxic public discourses that measure human worth through productivity (Dimitrova, 2020).

It is important to emphasise that – in the spirit of our deconstructive double-edged critique – we regard both the need-based policies inherited from state socialism and the work-based approach that has reshaped the postsocialist disability landscape as products of colonial influence. We consider the former as stemming from the Soviet colonial past, and the latter as rooted in the ideology of ‘development’ along neoliberal lines framed by both experts and funders as the only possible and ‘natural’ future for the region after 1989 (Kolářová, 2014; Mladenov, 2015). In this sense, the current populist critique of ‘liberal colonialism’ and the calls to return to and preserve ‘traditional family values’ serve the purpose of maintaining the previous – also colonial – status quo of paternalism, medicalisation, segregation, and patriarchal division of labour in disability policy and other areas of social welfare.

This additionally makes double-edged critique an urgent task. However, it has never been easy in the region known during the Cold War as being part of the ‘Second World’ (Giddens, 2009: 118-119). The term has become obsolete but the intermediary status that it implied has continued to plague the postsocialist countries of CEE. Dogmatic anticommunism has made the postsocialist Right suspicious of even a qualified critique of the market, whereas the excesses of postsocialist neoliberalisation have made the postsocialist New Left reluctant to engage with even a qualified critique of the state. (The traditional Left’s position have mostly been opportunistic, hence indeterminate.) In recent years, the possibility of double-edged critique has been additionally undermined by some novel developments in the region such as deepening social abandonment, accompanied by accelerating illiberalism (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021).

This conceptual bottleneck has made it difficult to come up with locally specific and viable answers to the question about policy and practice: What is to be done to achieve real inclusion and self-

determination of disabled people in CEE? For us, this question is still essentially grounded in the social model of disability, the disability rights paradigm, and the independent living values, legally embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The social model of disability is a critique of disabling barriers, including 'the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment' (Oliver, 2009: 47). The disability rights paradigm (Degener, 2016) complements the social model by creating corresponding legal norms and policy prescriptions through the CRPD (Lawson and Beckett, 2021). The independent living philosophy (underpinning Article 19 of the CRPD) is about self-determination of disabled people, 'an assertion that disabled people should have the same opportunities for choice and control as non-disabled people' (Morris, 2004: 427).

We argue that the elaboration and implementation of policies and practices of disabled people's empowerment in CEE, informed by the social model of disability, the disability rights paradigm, and the independent living philosophy, have been precluded not only by the legacy of state socialism and postsocialist neoliberalisation, but also by more recent developments. Nowadays, the principles of disability rights *themselves* start getting questioned. The attack is taking place before these principles could even 'trickle down' and reach the fabric of the everyday life of disabled people and their families. These processes start depriving disability activists of a key resource for their struggles. In a vicious cycle, attacking the principles of disability rights is further encouraged by the bitter realisation that the CRPD feeds into a self-serving spectacle. The states provide only external facades of the reforms, turning the implementation of the CRPD into 'Potemkin villages' – fake constructs that reside only in the hollow phrases filling the official documents prepared for the monitoring and reporting rounds of the European Union (Petri et al., 2017).

The current constellation of factors that undermine the rights paradigm adds another layer of intersecting harms to the ones originally identified in the postsocialist disability matrix (Mladenov, 2018). Broadly conceived, we can speak of three areas of concern within this constellation. Firstly, the region is flooded by a strong wave of illiberalism. It could be defined as a conservative agenda gaining public support due to its self-representation as a viable response to neoliberalism's excesses and failures (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021: 11). It also appropriates the (sometimes much needed and justified) critique of the mechanical use and transportation of 'Western' models into 'local' mentalities and realities. The dark side of practicing such a critique is that it indiscriminately fuels distrust in democracy, and the human rights agenda is engulfed as well.

Secondly, in this situation, the local disability discourse could hardly find any conceptual support within the broader academic discussion on disability, since the latter is focused to a significant extent – and *especially when (allegedly) 'non-Western' issues are in the focus* – on the decolonisation imperative (Meekosha, 2011). This imperative seeks to uncover knowledges and voices from the Global South that have been silenced by concepts, frameworks, and expertise produced and controlled by powerful Global North actors. However, in the context of growing illiberalism, the decolonial critique not only helps identify the oppressiveness of 'imported' notions, but also risks undermining the very grounds of the rights agenda and the CRPD, encouraging ethnocentric sentiments within disability scholars and activists. This could only strengthen the paternalistic attitudes and other mentalities and practices of disablement that are still widespread in the CEE region.

Thirdly, the CEE countries experience deepening social abandonment in a context of collapsing healthcare systems, armed conflicts, refugee crises, poverty, and increasing inequalities, with dire consequences for disabled people (Zaviršek and Fischbach, 2023). Most recently, these issues have been

exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the soaring energy prices, and the steep rise in the cost of living. There are strong parallels here with the socio-economic construction of 'southern bodies', analysed by decolonial disability studies scholars (e.g., Soldatic, 2013). This might encourage 'resomatising' tendencies within disability studies and activism – that is, tendencies towards reverting to an understanding of disability as an individual bodily issue, in contrast to the social-structural understanding of disability promoted by the social model of disability (Oliver, 2009). However, is such a 'resomatisation' of disability commensurate with critical analyses of disablement such as the one enabled by the postsocialist disability matrix?

In the context of accelerating illiberalism, calls for decolonisation, and creeping social abandonment, drawing on the CPRD and, by extension, on the disability rights paradigm to make claims for disability policy reform or criticise existing practices such as institutional confinement becomes increasingly difficult (Petri et al., 2023). This background also increases the likelihood that the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged with disability rights advocacy would be vilified as carriers of external and harmful influences. Indeed, such attempts at vilification can already be detected in the postsocialist CEE (for a Bulgarian example, see Podkrepa, 2018). In turn, demonising disability rights NGOs as conductors of colonial power could only lead to further strengthening of the paternalist and medicalising, needs-based practices and attitudes towards disability that still prevail in CEE. To understand better the mechanisms driving these processes, as well as their implications for the 'postsocialist disability matrix', we will now explore in depth each of the three areas of concern outlined above – illiberalism, the decolonial imperative, and social abandonment.

The deepening illiberalism in CEE

After the demise of state socialism in CEE, the master narrative that conquered the postsocialist scene mobilised the following end-of-history imagery:

here was a region, they seemed to say, that was shifting from immobility to mobility, passivity to activity, the old to the modern, obsolete planning to the market, and inertia to development. Eastern Europe's transformation underpinned and nurtured ideas about the superiority of the Western liberal model: '1989' confirmed to many that the dynamic mix of liberal democracy, free markets, and Western-led globalisation would be the future of modern statehood. (Mark et al., 2019: 2)

To make this future a reality and to accelerate its arrival, many new civil society organisations emerged that promoted human rights and affirmed human difference and individual liberty. These processes were supported by international stakeholders and funders. But while heated discussions on whether and to what extent a 'real' civil society – understood by liberal actors as the everyday fabric and basis of the processes of democratisation – was actually built or was possible at all in the postsocialist space, were still going on, many voices globally were already declaring war on liberalism. This attack was embraced in CEE with a characteristic zeal. As Mark et al. (2020: 3) note, since the beginning of the 2010s, the idea of the region's natural transitioning into yet another embodiment of liberalism and its values, and inevitable 'Westernisation' have been regarded with increasing scepticism: 'Right-wing populist governments across Eastern Europe have turned against the liberal interpretation of "1989": they drastically cut funding for institutions charged with preserving the democratic values of 1989.'

The attack on liberalism gained momentum and public appeal to a large extent thanks to its anti-gender focus and powerful rhetoric aimed at protecting ‘traditional family values’ (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021). However, it has essentially been a ‘conservative version of anti-colonial rhetoric’ (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021: 93) that has managed to ‘combine ultraconservatism with a critique of neoliberalism’. Not unexpectedly, the main tool of the alleged ‘liberal colonisation’ is claimed to be the paradigm of rights. The latter is framed by right-wing populists as the key vehicle of ‘foreign toxic influence’, which puts individualism first, corrupts the children and the youth, destroys the family, undermines the key role of women as mothers, and erodes the local ‘authentic’ forms of coexistence and solidarity. The alleged agents of this ‘colonisation’ are the NGOs, which are funded by the West and by international institutions such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

This narrative has a particular attraction in the postsocialist region due to the deep and widespread sense of constant failure of the project of ‘development’. In essence, the history refused to end with the demise of state socialism. The feeling that the ‘catching up’ and the democratisation, Europeanisation, and ‘normalisation’ have been unaccomplished and, more importantly, perhaps *unaccomplishable* imperatives, serves as a rich soil for anti-western and anti-globalist sentiments. It also provides a fertile ground for mistrust in the institutions of liberal democracy.

The effects of this illiberal wave on the civil society actors have been identified in varying but overlapping ways, including as ‘democratic backsliding’ (Bermeo, 2016; Greskovits, 2015), ‘closing space’ (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014), and ‘shrinking space’ (Muiznieks, 2017) for rights advocacy. In the case of women’s rights, this regressive ‘backsliding mainly leads to decreased inclusion of women’s rights advocates in policy processes... marginalization or exclusion from consultative platforms, decreased funding or outright persecution of groups’ (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018: 97-98). In the case of disabled people’s rights, the illiberal wave converged with the ‘re-familialisation’ of support – a process of returning to the traditional (heavily gendered) provision of informal support in the family as a key alternative to the erosion or withdrawal of state-provided assistance. This trend has enhanced paternalism in disability support, thus restricting the opportunities for self-determination of both disabled people and women (Zaviršek and Fischbach, 2023).

However, although the inner workings and consequences of the illiberal turn have been extensively discussed in relation to gender issues, they have not received due attention in relation to its effects on the disability politics in the region. A major reason for this disregard is the persistent depoliticisation of disability in the postsocialist space (Borodina, 2023) that has prevented the analysts (together with the politicians and the general public) from perceiving disability rights as disruptive of the established order. One possible reaction to this depoliticisation of disability is the decolonial approach explored in the next section. However, we will argue that the decolonial critique of the disability rights paradigm and the related call for resomatizing disability issues can backfire by feeding the aforementioned illiberal trends.

The decolonising imperative in disability studies

The anti-colonial narrative of the growing right-wing populism in CEE echoes an approach in the academic research on disability that has become increasingly prominent since the 2000s – the critique of the Western epistemic framework and its political implications. This attempt at epistemic resistance, initiated by the Global South perspective in disability studies, has been identified as a decolonising gesture and a ‘fundamental change in thinking in disability studies that amounts to a paradigm shift’

(Meekosha, 2011: 668; see also Grech, 2009, 2011, 2015; Grech and Soldatic, 2016; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Soldatic, 2013).

Recently, Goodley et al. (2019: 979) defined the agenda of critical disability studies in a way that brings it closer to this decolonising endeavour, pointing to the urgent need 'to trouble the self-referential elitism' of the Global North scholarship through contesting 'the normative and universalising theories of human and societal development'. This has initiated a new round of the 'self-troubling' efforts undertaken by leading disability studies theorists from the Global North, after the earlier step that challenged the 'whiteness' of disability studies and 'modestly proposed' to its practitioners to be honest enough and simply rename the discipline to 'white disability studies' (Bell, 2006). Consequently, Lennard Davis (2011: xi) spoke of the 'Bell imperative' that inspires 'to think more clearly, more politically, about disability'.

A key target of this critique is the cultural imperialism of disability concepts and models that grew within the context of the affluent Global North. The latter imagines the universalisation of these constructs as possible and desirable and, accordingly, prescribes and imposes it. This hegemony is claimed to be subverted through exposing not only the thoroughly different lived experiences in the Global South but also the global power dynamics of colonialism and post-colonialism that historically dooms the Global South to dwell on the margins of 'progress'. The struggle initiated by this decolonising pursuit takes place to a great extent on the epistemic arena (Grech, 2009) – it is an effort to radically question the epistemic privilege of the Global North disability imagery, models, and politics. This privilege can be unsettled by a process of 'intellectual decolonisation' in disability studies and activism, enabled by including disabled people from the Global South in knowledge production and emancipatory action (Meekosha, 2011: 671). Accordingly, a key stake is the reaffirmation of indigenous knowledge, which must be 'recognised as another casualty of colonialism' (Meekosha, 2011: 678).

One of the main targets of this decolonisation effort has been the rights agenda, regarded as a continuation of colonialism by other means (Meekosha and Soldatic, 2013: 1388). Although the Global South authors admit the value of the rights framework for the activist struggles in the South as well – including the social model of disability, independent living, anti-discrimination legislation, and the CRPD – they emphasise that these notions are nonetheless products of an entirely different context. In the countries of the Global North, stigmatisation of charity or disability pride might be empowering, but in the Global South, where poverty and lack of basic resources reign and the stake is survival, such gestures seem inadequate, and the focus on them rings alien, irrelevant, and elitist – only the local urban elites could afford to embrace these principles (Ghai, 2002; Grech, 2009).

It must be emphasised that the Global South perspective positions the CRPD differently as compared to the mainstream rights discourse, absolving it – at least to a certain extent – of the sins of the Western hegemonic and colonialising ambitions. Instead, the CRPD is regarded as a kind of a non-hegemonic, truly global embodiment of rights, solidarity, and inclusion. As Meekosha (2011: 679) states, the 'CRPD constitutes a major achievement for disability communities around the world', highlighting the mobilisation of the disabled people in the South for its ratification and implementation. Of key importance is the fact that the CRPD was initially 'proposed by Mexico as a southern nation-state strategy to intervene in the international development arena that is dictated by the North' (Soldatic, 2013: 245). On this base, it would be possible to create a 'southern disability theory'. Meekosha and Soldatic (2013: 1394-5) even suggest that the CRPD could be welcomed and 'subverted' by local actors to serve context specific ends.

The exceptional status which the CRPD enjoys – itself clearly an elaborate embodiment of the human rights paradigm (Degener, 2016) – shows that its tenets are obviously difficult to be dismissed as products of colonialism. This suggests that behind the stark oppositions and binaries such as North vs South lies a complex social fabric of interactions, and if we cling too passionately to the decolonising imperative, we may find ourselves adopting a monocausal scheme and depriving ‘the colonised’ of agency:

This facile attribution to colonial causation of many practices and processes comes from an absolutisation of colonialism and its supposedly almost undefeatable capacity to bend the will of the colonised... That is, it must and does foreclose the possibility that the colonised could find anything of worth in the life and thought of the coloniser which they could repurpose for their own societies, both during and after colonialism. (Táiwò, 2022: 7)

The state of social abandonment and the production of ‘southern bodies/minds’ in CEE

The guilt of the Global North perspective is not rooted entirely in the epistemic and cultural colonisation sketched above. The consequences of its power are also deeply material and corporeal – armed conflicts, transnational exploitation, and ecological degradation ultimately originating in the North have produced impairments on a mass scale in the South (Meekosha, 2011: 671; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011: 1394; Mladenov, 2016: 1237). In other words, the ravages of poverty, lack of basic resources and healthcare, pollution, and wars are not ‘natural’ or inherent features of the South but products of the global, unjust, and exploitative interaction between the colonisers and the colonised that continues up to these days. This insight entails questioning the very divide between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’, which stands as the ground of the social model of disability (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: 21). Consequently, the Global South perspective calls for a ‘politicisation of impairment’ and insist on paying due attention to the fact that impairments in the Global South are ‘geopolitically produced’ (Soldatic, 2013: 745).

Transnational disability justice – if accepted as a stake – compels us to recognise that the ‘southern bodies/minds’ are systematically subjected to the harmful effects of international trade, monocrops agriculture, the North’s overconsumption of rare metals, and its proxy wars. Global capitalism resolves its internal crises by transferring them to the peripheral markets (Harvey, 2001). The global production chains in garment industry, for example, exploit (and injure) large parts of the populations left without any alternative means of subsistence (Medarov et al., 2018; Mladenov 2016b). This means that we cannot accept the notion of impairment as politically neutral, while disability as a ‘product of oppression’. Accordingly, decolonial disability scholars identify as a key flaw in the CPRD that it does not consider the socioeconomic and political production of impairments, which results in disregarding injustices inflicted on the ‘southern body/mind’ (Soldatic, 2013: 750). That is why these authors advocate for alternatives to the social and the human rights models of disability, seeking frameworks that are less ‘desomatised’. Examples of such frameworks include ‘social suffering’ (Kleinman et al., 1997) and ‘biological citizenship’ (Rose and Novas, 2005; see also Hughes, 2009).

Indeed, the postsocialist region of CEE invites such a resomatising gesture. The local colonial legacies – the remnants of the failed economic model of state socialism, coupled with the effects of neoliberalisation during postsocialist transformations – have in recent years been exacerbated by the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic (Brennan et al., 2020) and the war in Ukraine (ENIL, 2021). This constellation raises the question about the geopolitical production of injuries that increasingly threaten the sheer survival of large groups of the population – a question similar to the one posed by decolonial disability studies scholars in their analyses of ‘southern bodies/minds’.

The CEE has been characterised as ‘bloodlands’ (Snyder, 2010) that have suffered Nazi atrocities, Stalinist terror, and attendant economic and political devastations. As Brunnbauer (2022: 15) explains, this dramatic formulation ‘helps us keep in mind that the experience of discontinuity, of war, of state destruction, and state resurrection was peculiar to the societies of Southeast and Eastern Europe’, when compared to Western Europe. Besides these radical manifestations of ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembé, 2003), the gradual wearing out and dying identified by concepts such as ‘slow death’ (Berlant, 2007) and ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) also characterise the somatic fate of the region. The forced modernisation of state socialism, and especially its radical industrialisation and urbanisation projects, took their toll on the populations. In the aftermath of 1989, the slow violence of the catching up development imposed by the state socialist regime morphed into the slow violence of neoliberal deregulation, deindustrialisation, and impoverishment. Paradoxically, this has been accompanied by a ‘toxic attachments to optimism, progress, and an affective politics of positivity’ amidst chronic austerity (Kolářová, 2014: 258).

The postsocialist space can easily be framed as a ‘victim’ of the global neoliberal order in purely biological terms as well – post-1989, many CEE countries have experienced low fertility rates, high mortality rates, low life expectancy at birth, collapsing healthcare systems, sheer lack of medical professionals, and demographic death of the countryside. In some Bulgarian districts, for example, there are currently less than 10 psychiatrists or internal medicine specialists serving populations of over 100,000 inhabitants (NSI, 2021). Bodies are also affected through the ‘brain drain’ of the massive immigration to the West of the active population, as well as through the new role of the region as a site for offshored clinical trials (Petryna, 2007), similarly to the ways in which ‘southern body/minds’ have long been exploited. At that, CEE has offered some advantages to the global pharmaceutical industry:

Postsocialist healthcare institutions are conducive to running efficient trials because they remain centralized and have a reasonable scientific infrastructure. Given the unmet demand for specialized care, patient enrollment is said to be quick. High literacy rates in these areas mean that subjects offer more ‘meaningful’ informed consent, thus minimizing potential problems with auditors. (Petryna, 2007: 28)

Implications for the postsocialist disability matrix

In the context of the growing right-wing populism in CEE, the decolonising agenda outlined by the Global South disability studies scholars, as well as the global solidarity it envisions, have several possible implications for the analyses of postsocialist disablement, and particularly for the postsocialist disability matrix (Mladenov, 2018). First, the criticism levelled at the Global North and West obviously converges with the illiberal conservative and populist rhetoric in the region. The portrayal of the ‘Western stuff’ as a sinister plot and propaganda used by corrupt elites against ordinary people, and the aggressive demonisation of the rights paradigm threaten to undermine and delegitimise the local activist efforts which rely on the rights narrative and demand implementation of the CRPD. As we argued, gender studies scholars have already shown how this has been happening with regard to women’s rights advocacy in CEE (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018).

Therefore, the postsocialist disability matrix cannot uncritically incorporate and yield benefits from the broader academic shifts towards subverting Western conceptual hegemony. To begin with, the decolonial critique that promises recognition of the local authentic knowledges and practices in the Global South is in discord with the analytical armature of the matrix. In academic research, the latter has been developed by using concepts that are branded as ‘colonial’ by Global South scholars – such as the

social model of disability and independent living (Mladenov, 2018). But even if it were possible to expose postsocialist disablement on local terms, without making recourse to ‘Western’, ‘colonising’ notions, that would not reveal inspirational ‘indigenous knowledges’. Rather, the ‘local terms’ would amount to yet another unfinished modernisation project, namely the state socialist one – a project that the postsocialist disability matrix exposes as disabling. Certainly, it could be framed as ‘authentic’ by the conservative populist forces and by the ‘caring’ professionals who still lament (and, in many cases, enjoy) their formerly unquestioned status and expertise (Mladenov and Dimitrova, 2022). However, in the realm of disability politics, the supposedly ‘indigenous knowledges’ would continue to discharge paternalism, segregation, and medicalisation.

Yet despite this discord with the mainstream decolonial narrative and despite its reliance on allegedly ‘Western’ conceptsⁱ, the postsocialist disability matrix *has already served decolonial ends* since it has reflected contextual specificity. However, this has been the specificity of a third term that has remained largely invisible amidst the dualisms of the decolonial debates. The postsocialist space has been conceptualised as ‘doubly postcolonial’ (Kołodziejczyk and Şandru, 2012: 115), and perhaps this superimposition and intersection of colonial and imperial legacies has turned the region in a casualty of a grand erasure. It has been erased doubly, both by the Global North and the Global South perspectives. This demonstrates that, as already suggested by transnational feminist scholars, the three-worlds metageography may need to be resurrected (Suchland, 2011). The *poor* North (Tlostanova, 2012) does not belong to the Global *affluent* North, nor to the Global South. The ‘persistent neglect of the former second world’ (Suchland, 2011: 837) has prompted a reconfiguration of the transnational feminist theorising (Koobak and Marling, 2014) where the ‘uneasy affinities between the postcolonial and the postsocialist’ have already been discussed (Koobak et al., 2021). In a similar effort to complicate the simple schemes and escape ‘the binary logic of colonizer/colonized, civilized West/backward East, coloniality/independence’, Ştefănescu (2022a: 77; see also Ştefănescu 2022b) has introduced the notion of ‘transcolonialism’.

Obviously, however, in global disability studies the postsocialist space still has the status of a ‘non-region’ (Suchland, 2011) and remains largely a ‘void in the global coloniality’ (Tlostanova, 2012: 130). This is despite the efforts of postsocialist disability scholars to generate a specifically postsocialist perspective on disablement (e.g., Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014), one of the results of which has been the elaboration of the postsocialist disability matrix. The linguistic and institutional marginalisation of postsocialist scholarship has been exacerbated by decades of research underfunding at home, resulting from neoliberal retrenchment. This has restricted the opportunities of postsocialist disability scholars to participate on equal terms in global knowledge production. The work they have generated has remained in the middle, falling through the cracks of the North vs. South binary. As Madina Tlostanova (2012: 131) points out, by

introducing [the second world] into the dichotomous scheme of west versus east or north versus south we immediately complicate and disrupt the binarism through a strange and disturbing agent which acts simultaneously as the colonizer and the colonized, unable to join any of the extremes, and generating oxymoronic subcategories instead, such as the poor north, or the south of the poor north.

In essence, a renewed ‘Statement from the Non-Region’ (Nowicka, 1995, cited in Suchland, 2011: 837)ⁱⁱ is very much needed today in the global disability dialogue. As many instances of epistemic injustice, the silencing, excluding, or marginalising of the voices and experiences of the postsocialist world are also generated unintentionally by the structural features of the systems themselves, in this case – by the features of the global dynamic of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Thus, even when ‘decolonised’, the

horizon and sensitivity of disability studies remains stuck in the opposition between the North and the South, which makes it epistemically oblivious to the specific intersecting legacies and harms that have been accumulating in CEE. It is these specific legacies and harms that have been illuminated by the postsocialist disability matrix.

The epistemic erasure of postsocialist experiences of disablement has characterised both the work of the scholars from the Global North, who otherwise distance themselves from elitist Eurocentric schemes and invite new voices in critical disability studies, and studies from the Southern perspective, which appropriate the adjective 'global' and claim to represent the 'global disability studies' without even mentioning the specificity of the 'Second World'. But in the postsocialist space, even 'whiteness' is not the 'colonial whiteness' of the Global North (Imre, 2005). Thus, the Global South perspective can also be accused of privileging and imposing one particular way of framing the world's metageography, namely the way that recognises only the North vs. South divide. That said, the affinities and resemblances between postsocialism and postcolonialism are numerous and become more and more visible due to the deepening economic and political crises in the postsocialist region. It certainly appears that many of the key issues debated in the Global South perspective are similar to the problems of disablement in the 'poor North', as exposed by the postsocialist disability matrix.

In a nutshell, postsocialist disability scholars should try to create alternative geographical imaginaries that overcome the North-South binary, while also claiming, owning, and subverting (allegedly) 'Western' concepts and framework (thus recognising that the sovereignty of the Northern author has always already been decentred). This would be in line with the emerging historical accounts that challenge the bipolar scheme and offer insights into the interactions between the 'Second' and the 'Third' worlds post-1945, thus overcoming the erasures of the mainstream decolonisation narratives (Mark et al., 2019; Mark et al., 2020; Mark et al., 2022; Ghodsee, 2019). Maybe after Bell's (2006) 'modest proposal' to admit that disability studies are essentially 'white disability studies', it is time for another proposal, namely to admit that 'global disability studies' currently are still reproducing ethnocentric narratives that do not contain a vision of genuine global solidarity projects.

Such global solidarity imagery is similar to the aspirations of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) in the 1960s (Okihiro, 2016). However, as TWLF's successors have emphasised recently (Okihiro, 2016: 3-5), this initiative should be seen as a desire to unite 'the wretched of the Earth', who – importantly – are not only the peoples of the 'Third World', but also the oppressed from the 'First' and 'Second' worlds'. This also means overcoming the 'white-and-black racialized binary' and the 'claims of priority and possession' that are raised from particular marginalised or oppressed positions (Okihiro, 2016: 3). Such an approach could avoid turning the decolonial projects that have already taken place within certain pockets of resistance in the West into yet another means of (re)colonising the 'Second World', or, in other words, into renewed colonisation of the postsocialist CEE through foreign decolonial narratives.

What about the implications for analyses of postsocialist disablement of processes of social abandonment and the production of 'southern bodies/minds'? As already argued, these (re)somatising concepts – together with ideas such as 'necropolitics', 'slow death', and 'slow violence' – strongly resonate with the experiences of people in CEE. However, despite their undeniable relevance, the calls for resomatisation of disability studies should be regarded with caution when considering postsocialist disablement. As was the case with the decolonial critique of disability studies' cultural imperialism, here again we have to practice a double-edged scepticism – in this case, scepticism both towards the radical desomatisation of the social model (sometimes appropriately chastised as 'somatophobic' – see Hughes,

2009) and towards the calls for resomatisation, inspired by decolonial analyses of transnational economic, military, and ecological injustices.

Accordingly, the postsocialist disability matrix requires a *qualified* resomatisation to account for transnationally produced impairments, suffering, and death in CEE. At the same time, such a move should be attempted carefully, accompanied by a strong emphasis on the *politics* of *creating* 'southern bodies/minds'. Otherwise, resomatisation is unlikely to turn into a collective claim for national or transnational justice in the postsocialist region. Rather, it is likely to strengthen the medical model of disability, which dominates anyway, and enhance the symbiosis between 'nationally representative' disability charities and 'caring' professionals, which sustains the status quo of disablement while fuelling corruption and tokenism.

Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrated that the double-edged critique engendered by applying the postsocialist disability matrix needs to embrace a host of other scepticisms to keep up with the rising illiberalism and deepening social abandonment in the region. An updated double-edged critique could then serve as a road map for effective epistemic resistance (Mladenov and Dimitrova, 2022) that could be useful not only for reinvigorating the postsocialist epistemologies of disablement but also for reimagining wider collective epistemic frameworks in the region that operate within binaries such as statism vs. liberalism, East vs. West, North vs. South, local vs. global, or tradition vs. modernity. The impact of these increasingly dominant binaries on postsocialist disability politics has been reactionary; their double-edged deconstruction is a key epistemic prerequisite for overcoming the ensuing cultural and economic impasses.

In the cultural dimension, the social model of disability, the independent living philosophy, and the human rights paradigm are all undermined by illiberal sentiments and policies that engulf the region, as well as by the currently dominant version of the decolonial critique within disability studies. In the economic dimension, these three frameworks could also be easily dismissed as irrelevant, considering the current state of crisis and social abandonment. The social model of disability, independent living advocacy, and human rights discourses appear elitist or out of touch in contexts of severe poverty. They also appear as absurdly 'somatophobic' when exactly the bodies/minds – their survival, health, and systematic injury – are at stake. At the same time, if we allow the social model, independent living, and the rights agenda to be dismissed, and choose to promote more 'somatised' versions of activism, we risk returning to the medicalised and paternalist legacy of state socialism, which nonetheless continues to be deeply entrenched in the region.

In a similar way, the already mainstreamed decolonising imperative in disability studies cannot serve as a leading narrative in the local disability landscape, despite its call for more solidarity and justice, because its anti-colonial agenda converges with the illiberal wave in CEE. These narratives have the potential to reinforce each other and this would have toxic effects on the disability politics – again affirming the paternalist (familial and institutional – see Dimitrova and Goncharova, 2023) forms of support and rejecting working solutions (such as user-led personal assistance, for example) through their framing as 'Western propaganda' (see Podkrepa, 2018). Thus, it seems that if we set to re-assemble the layered structure of the postsocialist disability matrix by drawing uncritically on any of these currently available narratives, we risk releasing the monsters of more paternalism, more institutionalisation, and more segregation of disabled people, while marginalising key tools for activism such as the CRPD.

The way out of this impasse might lay in the political dimension – for example, by seeking more cross-disability, intersectional, and transnational alliances based on carefully ‘somatised’ versions of the social model of disability and independent living, as well as on locally sensitive interpretations of the CRPD. The latter need to emphasise the CRPD’s Southern origins, thus making it difficult to dismiss its provisions as ‘Western propaganda’, as well as CRPD’s defence of positive rights, thus placing the emancipatory agenda of disability struggles within a ‘political context of demands for public assistance and collective provision’ (Mckeown et al., 2014: 153). This is a crucial stake in the postsocialist reality of continuing necropolitics, slow violence, and slow death. Additionally, positive rights could serve as a common ground where alliances could be forged with other oppressed groups or with progressive ‘caring’ professionals.

Prioritising lived experiences and self-advocacy are also important but not enough. The danger here is to water down the disability rights message for the sake of political expediency. The guiding opposition of the disability rights movement in the Global North has been between professional power and user empowerment. But how to criticise professional power amidst social abandonment, and how to assert user empowerment when it is framed as ‘Western propaganda’ or, worse, as an elitist, out-of-touch fantasy?

The task still seems to be to reclaim, in the local idiom, the meaning of self-determination while simultaneously deconstructing the binaries that prioritise market-based individualism and undermine the structural and collective determinations of agency; and to defend the welfare state, while simultaneously continuing to criticise – again in the local idiom – expert-based undermining of disabled people (Mladenov, 2015). Together with this, stakeholders need to embrace the decolonising imperative while remaining sceptical towards both Northern *and* Southern theory production in disability studies. This could help the activists and analysts avoid feeding the creeping illiberal narratives and sentiments. In essence, the creation and assertion of the ‘local idiom’ requires the development of double-edged, radically sceptical, and politically engaged postsocialist disability studies, aided by – but also maintaining a critical distance from – the decolonial agenda, and firmly grounded in the ongoing struggles of disabled people in the region with professional power, neoliberal marketisation, illiberalism, and social abandonment.

Notes

ⁱ Notably, the social model of disability has its roots in anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa through the experiences of its conceptual founder, Vik Finkelstein (2005). We are grateful to Mark Priestly for making this point during a seminar discussion.

ⁱⁱThe letter was a ‘response to the rigidity of the global women’s rights discourse at that time. It seemed that in 1995, at the pinnacle of the international expression of women’s rights, there was no room to let a whole new (second) world into the conversation.’ (Suchland, 2011: 837)

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For correspondence:

Ina Dimitrova, Department of Philosophy, University of Plovdiv, 4000, Tsar Assen str. 24, Bulgaria. Email: ina.d.dimitrova@gmail.com.

Teodor Mladenov, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, University of Dundee, Nethergate, Dundee, Scotland, DD1 4HN, UK. Email: teomladenov@gmail.com.