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‘There is no place for you here’: a phenomenological study of exclusion

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Abstract

On the 19th of July, 2008, a group of young disabled visitors (wheelchair users) were expelled from the Troyan Monastery in Bulgaria by the hegumen of the monastery with the stipulation that ‘obviously you pay for others’ sins, since you are like this’. Two years later the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination found the hegumen guilty of harassment on the basis of disability. In this paper I analyse the Commission’s decision from a phenomenological perspective. I draw on Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and also on concepts borrowed from the domain of Science and Technology Studies. I explore the existential-ontological patterns that are implicitly at work in the event as recounted in the Commission’s decision. Thus, a spatio-temporal distribution of human beings according to a rigid interiority/exteriority logic is identified. This spatio-temporal pattern is informed by an understanding of space that prioritizes proximity, and by an understanding of time that prioritizes permanence. The interiority/exteriority division, on its behalf, is sustained by a highly contested ‘boundary-work’, in which different non-human entities are recruited as mediators.

Keywords: disability, discrimination, phenomenology, boundary-work, science and technology Studies

‘Il n’y pas de place pour toi ici’: Une étude phénoménologique de l’exclusion

Résumé

Le 19 juillet 2008, un groupe de jeunes visiteurs handicapés (utilisateurs de fauteuils roulants) ont été expulsés du monastère Troyen en Bulgarie, par le hégumen du monastère, en stipulant « qu’évidemment, vous devez payer pour les fautes des autres puisque vous êtes ainsi. » Deux ans plus tard, la commission Bulgare pour la protection contre la discrimination trouva le hégumen coupable de harcèlement basé sur le handicap à leur rencontre. Dans cet article,

j'analyse la décision de la commission d'un point de vue phénoménologique. Pour ce faire, je fais appel à la phénoménologie existentielle de Heidegger, ainsi que de certains concepts en usage courant dans le domaine des études de la science et de la technologie. J'explore dans cet article les schémas implicites dans cet évènement, tel que relaté dans la décision de la commission. Il devient alors possible d'identifier une distribution spatio-temporelle des êtres humains suivant une logique rigide de l'intériorité/extériorité. Ce schéma spatio-temporel est inspiré par une compréhension de l'espace qui privilégie la proximité, et par une compréhension du temps qui privilégie la permanence. La division entre intériorité/extériorité, en tant que tel, est maintenue par un 'travail-limite' hautement controversé, à travers lequel différentes entités non-humaines sont utilisées comme médiateurs pour ce faire.

Mots Clefs: handicap, discrimination, phénoménologie, travail-limite, études sur la science et la technologie

‘There is no place for you here’: A phenomenological study of exclusion

Introduction

On the 5th of October, 2010, the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination found the hegumen of the Troyan Monastery¹ guilty of harassment on the basis of disability. Referring to the provisions of the Bulgarian *Protection against Discrimination Act*, the Commission defined the hegumen’s actions as unlawful and penalized him with a fine of BGN 250 (EUR 128). In addition, it stated that the monastery had violated the *Protection against Discrimination Act* by failing to make its architectural environment accessible for disabled people. The Commission prescribed that the hegumen should take the necessary actions in order to ensure the accessibility of the monastery. The incident in question happened two years earlier, on the 19th of July, 2008. The story is recounted in the Commission’s decision (number 259, issued on the 23rd of November, 2010). The excerpt from the decision that is cited below is based on the testimony of Petar Kichashki, the claimant. The original document is in Bulgarian and is available on the internet (http://cil.bg/userfiles/media/RESHENIE259_10_PR110_09.pdf); the present translation is mine, with my glosses in square brackets:

The claimant is a person with disability with 100% invalidity entitled to assistance, who uses a wheelchair. He reports that from the 18th till the 25th of July he participated in a Program for Youth Exchange between Bulgaria and Finland. On the 19th of July, 2008, the Bulgarian-Finnish group visited the Troyan Monastery. They requested for someone to tell them about and show them around the monastery and a young priest responded.

¹ The hegumen (in Bulgarian: *игумен*) is the head of an Eastern Orthodox monastery, the Catholic equivalent being the abbot. The Troyan Monastery or the Monastery of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God (in Bulgarian: *Троянският манастир “Успение Богородично”*) is one of the largest monasteries in Bulgaria. It was founded in the 16 c. and is located in the central-northern part of the country.

While he was narrating the history of the monastery to the group, he was interrupted by an elder man in cassock, with a beard, who was carrying a wooden stick in his hand. The claimant argues that the elder man in the cassock “slapped through the feet and rudely growled out to the young priest: ‘Out you go, you have no business with these. You have other things to do.’” Then the young man apologized and left the group, while the elderly man urged everybody with a broad gesture of his hands to leave and went inside the premises of the monastery. The claimant points out that after this rude interruption and unequivocal expulsion of the group he nevertheless decided to continue and to enter inside in order to pray before the miraculous icon, for which he was helped by his mother who accompanied him. While he was praying, the same elderly monk showed up and, clattering with his stick, told his mother: “The bikes out! Quick, quick, quick. Get the one with that bike out of here”, while pointing nervously with his hand towards the exit. Kichashki later found out that this is the hegumen of the monastery Teodosiy. He [Kichashki] points out that at this moment the group’s interpreter Yanina joined them. She asked why the monastery is not adapted for people with disabilities, to which question the hegumen responded with anger and shouts: “What do you want, huh? To adapt, no way! This is a cultural heritage building, such [referring to the disabled people] do not even have the right to enter here! Petition the Council of Ministers, the Parliament, whoever you want. I will adapt nothing for you here!” With these words and clattering frequently with his stick, the hegumen chased them out. The claimant shares that this made him feel insulted, defiled, and affected because according to him this was the last place where he expected to find such manifestations of cruelty. Kichashki’s mother turned to the hegumen with the words: “Excuse me, I’m very sorry, but I would have been very happy if my son had entered with a bicycle, as you said, and if you had chased

him out because of that – and not with a wheelchair, which according to you is a sin.” The claimant also asked him: “Is it that according to you I am a sinner because I am on a wheelchair?! Do I not have the right to pray before an icon?!” At that moment the hegumen looked at him for the first time, clearly displaying his indignation, and stated: “Well, obviously you pay for others’ sins, since you are like this.” Then he insisted again: “C’mon, everybody out. Out, out, out. Off, there is no place for you here. It is written on the door outside. There is an interdiction for such like you. C’mon, off!” The hegumen hurried to exit together with some of the visitors in order to show them the interdiction that did not exist. He refused to disclose his name and position. The claimant states that all the visitors were shocked by this event.

The incident can easily be interpreted as a case of religiously motivated intolerance leading to a blatant discrimination on the basis of disability. First, the hegumen seems to display a fervent adherence to a one-sided interpretation of the Bible by regarding disability exclusively in terms of ‘a punishment meted out by God’ (Braddock & Parish, 2001, p. 14; see also Shildrick, 2005, pp. 759-760). Second, the conduct of the hegumen, corroborated by numerous witnesses including the ‘young priest’, is institutionally recognized as harassment on the basis of disability by the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination; consequently, due sanctions were imposed.²

I take both these readings of the event – the theological and the juridical one – as legitimate. Understanding the hegumen’s motivation in terms of his own interpretation of holy

² Elsewhere in the Commission’s decision the hegumen refuses the allegations, defining them as ‘untrue’ and ‘tendentious’. He admits to have expelled the disabled visitors, but justifies his actions with the stipulation that the visitors were ‘disturbing the order in the church’. The Commission discards this statement as lacking in evidence. Two of the monastery employees (candle-sellers) who witnessed the incident support the hegumen’s version of the story. The Commission discards their testimonies too as ‘subjective and markedly interested, since the candle-sellers are financially dependent on the defendant and therefore they are not to be trusted’.

texts and sanctioning his actions by penalizing him with a fine and prescribing accessibility within the framework of the modern anti-discrimination legislation are indispensable for making sense of the event and taking a stand on it. I also consider the penalty and the prescription imposed by the Commission as just, albeit incommensurable with the harm inflicted. Nevertheless, this theological and juridical approach to interpreting the incident seems too narrow. It tends to individualize the problem, focusing on the attitudes and activities of a single person (the hegumen). This might suggest that the incident is an isolated event, an accident, an exception, a fortuitous and atypical excess of inhospitality. Such inhospitality could appear to be grounded in prejudices which allegedly have long ago loosened their grip on the collective consciousness of advanced and secularized liberal societies.

I would like to explore the possibility of interpreting the event differently. Even in its extreme manifestations, the reduction of disabled people to flawed bodies and their concomitant exclusion from the domain of the human draws on the mundane, the everyday, the ordinary. It invokes familiar spatial and temporal relationships, along whose axes selves, others and non-human entities are distributed and thus assigned a value. This is one of the reasons why the ‘violence of disablism’³ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011) is (still) ubiquitous – it is grounded in that which is closest, thereby remaining invisible and immutable. Proceeding from these presumptions, in this article I will attempt to go *beyond* the theological and the juridical readings of the event in the Troyan Monastery by drawing on phenomenology. The value of this approach is not in generating new knowledge, but in highlighting what we *already know*, for phenomenology is primarily ‘a work of “explication”, “elucidation”, or “description” of something we, in some way, already understand, or with which we are already, in some way,

³ The term ‘disablism’ is defined by Thomas (2007) as referring to ‘the social beliefs and actions that oppress/exclude/disadvantage people with impairments’ (p. 13). The term is akin to concepts such as racism, sexism and ageism and is widely used in Disability Studies (p. 13).

familiar but which, for some reason, we cannot get into clear focus for ourselves without more ado' (Glendinning, 2004, p. 35). Consequently, phenomenology can help with uncovering the ways in which disablism operates on the level of the mundane and the taken-for-granted.

Moreover, the phenomenological defamiliarization of the familiar bears its own transformative potential. It is not necessary to resort to Foucault (1991) in order to realize that there is something beyond the individual and/or the juridical which needs to be addressed so that violence, physical as well as symbolic, can be exposed and challenged. The failure to address these ubiquitous but ghostly existential-ontological patterns explains the limited success of many attempts to overcome the detrimental effects of power through purely juridical means. These detrimental effects are experienced by disabled people as exclusion, oppression and violence, as was the case in the Trojan Monastery. What made this incident possible, besides the exclusionist mindset of an enraged servant of the church?

Method

In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) insists on exploring space and time in existential-ontological terms – ontological, because related to being (*Sein*), and existential, because concerning the specifically human way of being or what Heidegger denotes as 'Dasein'. This insight provides an important interpretive clue by suggesting that human existence is *intrinsically* spatio-temporal. On the one hand, humans understand themselves through certain distribution of selves, others and non-human entities in space and time. I am *here*, you are *there*, or both of us are *in*, while they (the 'others') are *out*. I continue certain *tradition*, you interrupt it with *novelty*, or both of us share a *heritage*, while they (the 'others') threaten its permanence with *change*. These spatial and temporal proximities and distances, permanence and transience make me *who* I am, provide me with the possibility to *be someone* vis-à-vis 'you' and 'them'. On the other hand, certain organization of space and time itself calls for a specific positioning of self and others.

This place is *accessible* for me, it *lets* me in, you too, but not them; this history *accommodates* me, it narrates my identity in positive terms, probably yours, but not theirs. Boundaries are embedded in space, inscribed in time; people are thrown into aggregates of entrances and exits, walls and doors, thresholds and leeways, past axioms and futural question marks. These aggregates have the power to grant human status to some, while relegating others to the domain of the non-human. They embody understandings of human being – i.e., they mediate certain notions of what it means to be human.

This phenomenological approach invites us to suspend our ordinary understanding of space and time as extrinsic to the core of our existence – that is, our understanding of space and time as empty vessels filled up with our bodily (objective) and/or mental (subjective) presence. As Heidegger (1962) puts it, ‘Dasein’s spatiality is not to be defined by citing the position at which some corporeal Thing is present-at-hand’ (p. 142); and, with regard to temporality, ‘Dasein does not fill up a track or stretch ‘of life’ – one which is somehow present-at-hand – with the phases of its momentary actualities’ (p. 426). In methodological terms, the suspension of these ordinary spatio-temporal notions stems from Husserl’s (2006) *epoché* – or ‘bracketing’ of what is identified by Husserl as the ‘natural attitude’, i.e., the common, everyday way of thinking and acting, ‘in which we all live and from which we thus start when we bring about the philosophical transformation of our viewpoint’ (p. 2). It is characteristic of this ‘natural attitude’ to posit extended objects over against thinking subjects. Husserl’s *epoché* suspends the assumption of objects, retaining only the consciousness and its content as a proper phenomenon for study. Heidegger, on the other hand, goes beyond the subject-object distinction, focusing on a third term or what he calls ‘being-in-the-world’ (*In-der-Welt-sein*) – an engaged way of existing amongst entities and others that is more primary than the subject and its consciousness. Notwithstanding these differences between their positions, both thinkers invite us to suspend or

‘bracket’ our taken for granted notions of space, time and our place within them, amongst other entities.

Such an approach makes it possible to show that *even* in the most extreme instances of exclusion there are common, everyday existential-ontological patterns at work, too familiar to be ordinarily noticed. In what follows, I will attempt to highlight their traces in the Trojan Monastery incident, as recounted by Petar Kichashki and recorded in the decision of the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The juridical representation of the event has the advantage over other instances of its depiction⁴ of being institutionally sanctioned as *true*. In addition, Kichashki’s testimony, as recorded in the Commission’s decision, had obvious real-life, material consequences, since on its basis a financial penalty and an obligation to change the built environment were imposed. Therefore, I take it as a truthful and influential account. What is more, its representation of exclusion goes way *beyond* its juridical character and purpose. Hence, if in terms of content I am interested in highlighting the mundane aspects of an excessive event, in terms of form I embark on highlighting the existential-ontological aspects of a juridical representation. This, I hope, will strengthen my argument about the ubiquity of the patterns I explore.

Objectification

The first thing of interest in the excerpt from the Commission’s decision presented above is that the hegumen strives to avoid any immediate contact with the disabled people who nevertheless are *there with him*. Instead of directly addressing them, he speaks to others *about them*. These others – the young priest, the mother, the interpreter – are approached as ‘proxies’

⁴ For example, in Bulgarian media reports. A particularly revealing transcript from a radio interview with the hegumen, conducted soon after the incident, can be found here: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=286579 A recent TV interview with Petar Kichashki can be found here: http://www.btv.bg/shows/shouto-na-slavi/videos/video/1439744218-Kak_jiveyat_horata_s_uvredaniya_v_Bulgaria.html

for the visitors in wheelchairs. Among disability scholars and activists such pattern of interaction has long ago been identified as the ‘does he take sugar syndrome’ (Brisenden, 1989). In it, disabled people are excluded from social interchange by people addressing their companions (friends, assistants, relatives) in their stead. Thus, it is these companions who are expected to make decisions and take action on behalf of the disabled person. Indeed, ‘does (s)he take sugar’ usually signifies benevolent intention, whereas the attitude of the hegumen is inimical; nevertheless, the pattern is the same.

From a phenomenological point of view, the result is an objectification of the other. Heidegger (1962) points out that ‘any entity is either a “*who*” (existence) or a “*what*” (presence-at-hand in the broadest sense)’ (p. 71). In ‘speaking about’ someone, I regard him/her as a ‘what’, not a ‘who’. Thus, I tend towards *reducing* the other to an object-like entity, an entity ‘present-at-hand’ (*vorhanden*) – i.e., available for manipulation; an entity that can be submitted to external forces – kept in place or removed, shown or concealed, described or disregarded. This effect of objectification is greatly enhanced when the other is willing to communicate but is nevertheless denied the opportunity to do so. In such cases the reductive operation silences the person, deprives him or her of voice and therefore of agency. It neutralizes the other, makes him/her ‘docile’ (Foucault, 1991).

The hegumen reduces disabled people to objects by *speaking about* them instead of *speaking to* them in their presence. He speaks about them with others, who on their behalf are in direct contact with the disabled visitors. Thus, the hegumen tells the young priest that he has ‘no business with these’ (enhancing his message with a physical assault); he commands the mother to get the ‘bikes’ and ‘the one with that bicycle out of here’; he retorts to the interpreter that ‘such do not even have the right to enter here’. The mediation of these ‘proxies’ – the priest, the mother, the interpreter – allows the hegumen to keep a safe *distance* from the people in

wheelchairs. To this end, his speech is also cleansed from all the particularities of those who are *spoken about* – it is easier to keep distance from objectified others, if they are anonymous and generalized. All this results in an ‘ontological invalidation’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011, p. 7) of disabled people – they are negated in their very *being*.

Notably, this strategy works until the hegumen is compelled *to speak to* them by being addressed by one of the visitors in wheelchairs, that is, by being *spoken to*. It is this event that triggers the accusation of sinfulness. The hegumen cannot keep the objectifying distance any longer; the other breaks out of his/her imposed passivity and impersonal generality and *demand*s recognition. This makes the hegumen to resort to other tactics – the invocation of divine providence. His suggestion is that it is not something secular, this-worldly which is wrong with the disabled people, but something transcendent, other-worldly. The attempt to *reinscribe* the other in the domain of passive, docile objectivity appeals to a transcendent order: ‘obviously you pay for others’ sins, since you are like this’. What does the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’ imply here?

Resistance

Before proceeding with the analysis of space and time, I would like to expand on this question about the meaning of the demonstrative pronoun used by the hegumen in his explanation of disability: ‘Well, obviously you pay for others’ sins, since you are like *this*’. Stripped from all particularities, the demonstrative bears the full weight of disablism, for it identifies Kichashki’s bodily difference as inherently negative, ‘ontologically intolerable’ (Campbell, 2009). At the same time, it betrays anxiety in the face of that which comes with such a dangerous difference. For as an ‘extraordinary body’, the impaired body *demand*s accommodation, while resisting assimilation (Thomson, 1997, p. 130). It will soon become clear that this is a major concern for the hegumen and a major source of his inhospitality. From such a

perspective, the impaired body is ‘nonconformity incarnate’ (Thomson, 1997, p. 130) – a feature which no normative regime can tolerate. It is resistive in its very materiality, because it defies control, command, normalization (Goodley, 2007, p. 154).

But there is something else besides the embodied nonconformity of the wheelchair users’ presence that epitomizes the resistance against the normative and exclusionary order instituted by the hegumen – it is Kichashki’s resolute action. His entering of the church *despite* the ‘rude interruption and unequivocal expulsion of the group’ anticipates the whole chain of events to follow, culminating with the Commission’s decision, but also going beyond it to include the media reports of the incident, my writing and your reading about it, and so forth. Thus, Kichashki’s action can be regarded in phenomenological terms as *world-disclosing*, i.e., as setting up a whole new context that changes the meaning of past and present events while also opening up possibilities for the happening of previously unforeseen (and even unthinkable) future ones. With his action, Kichashki resists victimization, refusing to internalize the blame for the violence perpetuated by the external conditions and the hegumen’s conduct. He also reclaims agency that has been forfeited by being ‘spoken about’. As will be explained in more detail below, Kichashki’s action challenges certain distribution of human beings in space; it also lays claim to a particular past, thus bringing about new possibilities for the future. In this way, Kichashki’s entering of the church opens up a ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*) (Heidegger, 1962, p. 171) in which all subsequent utterances and actions will show up in terms of exclusion and its interrogation. Whatever happens next will either solidify exclusion or challenge it.

Thus, Kichashki’s action sets the stage for a series of subsequent problematizations – one being articulated by the interpreter who inquires about the inaccessibility of the monastery, another assuming a juridical form in the decision of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, yet another being formulated in this very moment of my writing about the event.

The framework of these problematizations is lucidly pinpointed by Kichashki himself, as recorded in the Commission's decision:

Kichashki points out that he is a law student in New Bulgarian University, *he does not perceive himself as a second class person and he cannot allow such treatment of himself and other people* in this situation on behalf of the hegumen of the Troyan Monastery. The claimant deems that he has been subjected to discrimination on the basis of disability.
(emphasis added)

I now turn towards the phenomena that were addressed in the aforementioned problematizations. They are related to the meaning of space and time, yet their familiarity makes them too obvious to be immediately noticed.

Space

From a phenomenological perspective, the *distance* instituted by the hegumen between himself and the disabled visitors can best be grasped in existential-ontological terms. He affirms one way of being human, while denying another. *I* (implies the hegumen) am a human being; *you* – the priest, the mother, the interpreter – are most probably too (for I speak to you); but *these* – such like ‘the one with that bike’ – are certainly not. Therefore, they can only be *spoken about*, not *spoken to*.

This affirmation/denial of humanness shapes space. It *orders* spatiality along a series of topological dichotomies like in/out, inside/outside, here/there, entering/leaving, entrance/exit, accessible (adapted)/inaccessible (not adapted). Let me italicize the words indicating these topological binaries in the excerpt from the Commission's decision cited above. ‘*Out* you go’, growls the hegumen to the young priest, then urges the group ‘to *leave*’ and goes ‘*inside* the premises’. But Kichashki also decides to ‘*enter inside*’. The hegumen reappears, commanding

everybody to get ‘*out of here*’, pointing ‘towards the *exit*’. Asked why ‘the monastery is *not adapted* for people with disabilities’, he retorts that ‘such do not even have the right to *enter here*. ... I will *adapt nothing* for you *here!*’ The visitors are ‘chased ... *out*’ again. The mother complains, Kichashki himself asks for an explanation. The hegumen vociferously reiterates: ‘everybody *out*. *Out, out, out*. Off, there is *no place* for you *here*. It is written on the door *outside*.’ Thus, bodies are distributed within a strategically divided space. Some remain ‘in’, others are pushed ‘out’. With this, humanness is distributed too. Those who are expelled from the *proximity* of the ‘inside’ – those for whom ‘there is no place ... here’, ‘such like you’ – are denied the possibility of being fully human. For ‘to have a place’ means also to be recognized as a human being, and vice versa.

On the other hand, the affirmation/denial of humanness enacted by the hegumen is itself *ordered* by the apparatus of physical space. The shape and distribution of planes, boundaries and ways of passage exert their own performativity. Being ‘adapted’ for some and ‘not adapted’ for others, the built environment embodies a norm, a tacit statement about what it means to be a human being (Paterson and Hughes, 1999). The space itself *speaks to* some, while *speaking about* others; it addresses some in their ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 78-86), while reducing others to their presentness-at-hand, i.e., to an object-like state of passivity. Space matters. That is why the question about the architectural adaptation of the monastery for disabled people is taken by the hegumen as challenging a higher (divine, transcendent) order. For him, this is not a technical but an existential-ontological issue. It is a matter of knowing *who* you are and *what* you are not, of being able to recognize good from bad, right from wrong, etc. All these issues are embedded in the space inhabited.

The proper *space of disability* according to the transcendent order invoked by the hegumen is ‘out’ (in Bulgarian: *вън*) – i.e., the externality, the periphery, the margins of

humanness, within a neutralizing distance safeguarded by architectural boundaries, interdictions and reportive utterances ('speaking about'). What, then, is the proper *time of disability* according to this logic? Is there a temporal counterpart to the spatial distribution of humans according to the in/out pattern of exclusion?

Time

The clash between the visitors from the Youth Exchange Programme and the hegumen is prefigured by the brief collision between the hegumen and the young priest. Both these encounters happen against the background of a more general tension. Its poles can be provisionally subsumed under the opposing temporal categories of 'the new' and 'the old'. These categories are not rooted in biological age, although age-specific characteristics might be recruited to express the distinction, as is the case in counterposing the 'young priest' to the 'elder man'. The ageist connotations of this and other similar temporal binaries set up in the Commission's decision should not distract from what I take to be their *primary* significance – to manifest the contest over a particular understanding of time and its existential-ontological implications. The following analysis also demonstrates that these binary oppositions are inherently unstable, intrinsically unsustainable.

The Commission's decision recounts the event in such a way that 'the new' is framed as the domain of what is coming (the future), which implies *change*. On the other hand, 'the old' is bound up with what is gone (the past), understood as *permanence*. Both are enacted in the present, where the former is associated with admission, permission and desire to adapt, whereas the latter – with expulsion, interdiction and refusal to adapt. This dichotomy has its institutional expression too. The hegumen relegates the claims for accessibility voiced by the visitors to particular political institutions. He mentions the Council of Ministers and the Parliament, although it will actually be the Commission for Protection against Discrimination that will be

‘petitioned’. His remark suits his overall authoritarian demeanour. On the other hand, he perceives himself as a custodian of ‘cultural heritage’, which is embedded in the building and the institution of the Troyan Monastery: ‘To adapt, no way! This is a cultural heritage building, such [referring to the disabled people] do not even have the right to enter here! Petition the Council of Ministers, the Parliament, whoever you want. I will adapt nothing for you here!’

On such a reading, the hegumen resists the change which comes with ‘the new’, while safeguarding the permanence of ‘the old’. That is, he clings to the past of tradition and is suspicious towards the future of novelty. For him, disabled *young* people (with their ‘bicycles’) are part of an unwelcome coming which challenges tradition. The demand for architectural accessibility is a major expression of this threat. Tradition is embedded in the build environment of the monastery – therefore, any change in this environment might be taken as challenging tradition itself. In contrast to the hegumen, the visitors are represented as prioritising ‘the new’ and questioning ‘the old’. They insist on changes in the attitudes, behaviours and environment. Hence, the hegumen enacts in the present the permanence of the past, the visitors – the changeability of the future. All these temporal binaries can be summarized as follows:

‘the old’	‘the new’
the ‘elder man’ (the hegumen)	visitors from the Youth Exchange Programme; the ‘young priest’
past, understood as permanence	future, understood as change
expulsion, interdiction, refusal to adapt	admission, permission, desire to adapt
tradition, ‘cultural heritage’, Troyan Monastery	Council of Ministers, Parliament, Commission against Discrimination

Most importantly though, the incident is actually a contest over the *boundary* separating these two series of opposing terms. The boundary is put into question by the young priest and the visitors; the hegumen reacts by trying to reinforce the boundary, thus engaging in what Science and Technology Studies scholars have termed ‘boundary-work’ (Gieryn, 1983) – an activity of constructing a social boundary in order to enhance one’s status and authority (p. 782). The young priest is friendly towards the visitors, but he is also part of the monastery and its ‘cultural heritage’. He knows its history and obeys its hierarchy. The visitors demand accessibility – that is, environmental change, but they are also willing to get in contact with the ‘permanence’ of tradition (indeed, this is the reason why they demand accessibility in the first place). They request for someone to tell them the history of the monastery. It is this narration which is interrupted by the hegumen – violently, relentlessly, ‘slapping’ the narrator ‘through the feet’ with the wooden stick. The physical intensity with which the historical narration is disrupted suggests that the hegumen does not merely interrupt storytelling, but *denies access to the past*. Later, when put under pressure by Kichashki’s resolute action and the problematizations that follow, the hegumen will admit the possibility of such an access, but *only in negative terms*, in terms of ‘sin’. Within this logic, the only possibility for disabled people to be included in the domain of the past and tradition is through a kind of inclusive *exclusion* (Agamben, 1998).

The temporal distinctions outlined here overlap with the spatial ones highlighted in the preceding section. Keeping outside certain spatial interiority (one of *proximity*) is coextensive with keeping outside certain temporal interiority (one of *permanence*). Both mediate denial of human status. With the very act of entering the ‘inside’ of the monastery building, disabled people and their companions also demand access to the ‘inside’ of the monastery past. But this building and this past are domains over which the hegumen asserts monopoly. He needs this monopoly in order to *safeguard* a particular existential-ontological order, sustaining at that his

own identity and authority. On the other hand, for the disabled people to challenge the spatio-temporal boundary upheld by the hegumen is a matter of *gaining* human status. It is a matter of not being treated as ‘second class persons’, as Kichashki has aptly put it – hence the resoluteness of his entering the church in order to pray before the ‘miraculous icon’.

The last point suggests that the spatial and temporal relations highlighted so far are also mediated by non-human entities: the wheelchairs, the stick, the door, the icon. It is this aspect of the Commission’s account that remains to be explored in order to complete the present phenomenological study of exclusion.

Non-humans

Letting some humans *in* while keeping others *out* is related to the constituting and the maintaining of identity and authority. Accordingly, the control over the boundary around the spatio-temporal interiority is pivotal and often infused with conflicts and contestations – or even, as the present case study suggests, with symbolic and/or physical violence. Different non-human entities partake in this process.

First, the *wheelchairs* – it seems that the hegumen misnames them as ‘bicycles’ strategically. The misnomer injects his effort to deny spatio-temporal access to disabled people with certain legitimacy by obliterating the difference between assistive and non-assistive technology. The twisted syllogism suggests that (1) if wheelchairs are similar to bicycles, and (2) it is forbidden to enter a church with a bicycle, than (3) it should be forbidden to enter with wheelchairs as well. At least this is the way Kichashki’s mother reads the hegumen’s logic. Accordingly, she insists on the difference, thus challenging the hegumen’s ‘boundary-work’ (Gieryn, 1983): ‘I would have been very happy if my son had entered with a bicycle, as you said, and if you had chased him out because of that – and not with a wheelchair, which according to you is a sin’.

Second, in his constitution of the boundary the hegumen uses his *stick* for assault, intimidation or as an authority-enhancing prop. The three Bulgarian words with which the stick is designated in the excerpt – *пръчка, тояга, сона* – connote such aggressive usage since in Bulgarian they are strongly associated with punishment and assault, especially the words *тояга* and *сона*. Yet it is at least conceivable that the stick can also be utilized as a *cane* – that is, as a mobility aid, especially considering the advanced age of the hegumen. Indeed, the corresponding Bulgarian word *бастун* does not figure in the Commission’s decision. Yet at some point in their testimony the two candle-sellers note that ‘the hegumen sometimes walks with a small stick, on which he leans when climbing the stairs in the monastery’. From this perspective, the stick implies ambiguity, mediating both power and vulnerability. In the first case it facilitates exclusion; in the second it enlists the hegumen amongst those to be excluded. Thus it is also a reminder that it is actually able-bodiedness and not impairment that is *temporary and transitory* (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). As such an ambivalent piece of equipment, the stick is yet another non-human entity which both enhances (when used for assault or intimidation) and challenges (when considered as a walking aid) the ‘boundary-work’ undertaken by the hegumen.

Third, the *door*. Its ambiguity is related to its double function of allowing access when open and of denying access when closed or locked and/or when there is an interdiction inscribed on it. The door in the Commission’s decision is even more ambiguous, since the alleged interdiction written on it is actually non-existent: ‘Off, there is no place for you here. It is written on the door outside. ... The hegumen hurried to exit together with some of the visitors in order to show them *the interdiction that did not exist.*’ (emphasis added).

Finally, the *miraculous icon*. The one referred to here is the ‘Three-Handed Virgin’ (in Bulgarian: *Троеруцница*) – an important image within the Eastern Orthodox tradition (see Tradigo, 2006). According to the legend, the 8th-century Christian saint John of Damascus lost

his hand as a punishment for his defence of holy images during the First Byzantine Iconoclasm. He subsequently prayed devotedly before the icon of Virgin Mary and his hand got miraculously restored. In gratitude, he attached a third, silver hand to the icon, which thereafter became known and reproduced as the ‘Three-Handed Virgin’. This story makes the ‘miraculous icon’ in the Troyan Monastery a symbol of restored able-bodiedness. Yet it is also a representation of corporeal difference because, outside the interpretive framework imposed by the legend, one can easily perceive Mary to be depicted as *having* three hands. But icons are also ambiguous from a more general perspective, functioning as exemplary ‘boundary objects’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989) – a term widely used by Science and Technology Studies scholars in order to explain the way in which specific entities partake in the constitution of social boundaries. On the one hand, icons *maintain the boundary* between the secular and the religious spaces, distinguishing the latter as places of worship, prayer and meditation. Yet on the other hand, they also *facilitate the interaction* between these two domains. They bridge the gap between the ‘this-worldly’ and the ‘other-worldly’. Within the tradition of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a preferred way for a secular person to gain access to the religious domain is through the mediation of icons. Thus, icons are often sold as souvenirs on stalls in the vicinities of the Bulgarian monasteries (the Troyan Monastery included); people buy and display them in their homes; secular painters draw their own versions of icons; rich collectors store originals in their estates, etc.

In sum, the paraphernalia figuring in the Commission’s decision contribute both to the *consolidation* and to the *undermining* of the boundary around the spatio-temporal interiority of proximity and permanence, sustained by the hegumen in his boundary-work. Expressing thus their own ‘agency’, these non-human mediators resist full appropriation and defy ultimate control. Bruno Latour (2005) points out that ‘[m]ediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (p. 39). Similarly, the wheelchairs, the

stick, the door and the miraculous icon in the Troyan Monastery incident modify the boundary-work they are supposed to carry.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, on the 19th of July, 2008, the hegumen of the Troyan Monastery expelled a group of disabled visitors from the cloister. The *explicitness* of this action provided good grounds for the Bulgarian Commission for Protection against Discrimination to judge it unlawful, to penalise the defendant and to prescribe environmental corrections. In the present analysis, I tried to complement this juridical understanding of the incident – as recounted in the Commission’s decision – with a phenomenological clarification of the patterns *implicitly* at work in it. Compared with the crudeness of the hegumen’s unlawful conduct, these patterns are much milder; compared with its exclusivity, they are much more mundane; compared with its conspicuousness, they are rather clandestine; compared with its extraordinariness, they are all too familiar; finally, compared with its origins in individual intention and reasoning, they are highly impersonal. Being a case of outright disablism (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011; Thomas, 2007), the event in the Troyan Monastery is nevertheless saturated with familiar, common, everyday ways of thinking and acting.

These patterns include the *objectification* of disabled people by ‘speaking about’ them instead of ‘speaking to’ them; as well as the attendant reduction of disabled people to their *inherently negative* bodies (which, when translated into the hegumen’s language, means *inherently sin-full* bodies: ‘obviously you pay for others’ sins, since you are like this’). In Disability Studies, the former has been referred to as the ‘does he take sugar’ syndrome (Brisenden, 1989), while the latter – as the treatment of disability as ‘ontologically intolerable’ (Campbell, 2009); both have been regarded as ubiquitous in the contemporary society. On a more general level, a spatio-temporal distribution of human beings according to a rigid

interiority/exteriority logic is also at work in the incident. This spatio-temporal pattern is informed by an understanding of space that prioritizes *proximity* and by an understanding of time that prioritizes *permanence*. Finally, the interiority/exteriority division, on its behalf, is sustained by highly contested boundary-work, where different non-human entities are recruited as mediators. Boundary-work has been extensively studied in the context of Science and Technology Studies, forming a core of an ‘anti-essentialist approach to understanding authority’ (Sismondo, 2004, p. 30).

On the other hand, each and every one of these patterns contains the seeds of its own collapse. ‘Speaking about’ presupposes ‘speaking to’ – in terms of the speech act theory, ‘there is no cut-and-dried reportive utterance. Some ‘primary’ performative value is always presupposed’ (Derrida, 2005, p. 214). Further, being ‘inherently negative’, the impaired body is also ‘nonconformity incarnate’ (Thomson, 1997, p. 130) – it resists assimilation and demands accommodation. Most importantly, the domain of ‘here’ – that is, of *proximity* – can never be completely closed; it requires and reaches towards the domain of ‘yonder’ in the very moment of its constitution (Heidegger, 1962, p. 142). Similarly, the time of the ‘past’ can never be irreversibly ‘gone’ and cannot for that reason guarantee *permanence*. From a phenomenological point of view, the human past always already reaches towards the human future in order to constitute itself as ‘past’ – as Heidegger’s (1962, p. 373) analysis of existential temporality suggests. Thus, phenomenologically speaking, human space and time – that is, the space and the time of the world inhabited by human beings – are inherently *decentred*. This feature is easily discernible in the instances of boundary-work highlighted above. As shown in the penultimate section of this text, the non-human entities recruited in such efforts at boundary-work *themselves transform* and therefore problematize what they are supposed to mediate.

Such an approach suggests that disablism and the practices of exclusion more generally are inherently unstable, problematic, self-denying. They cannot succeed completely or permanently. Still, on the other hand, they are widespread because they are rooted in what is closest, most common, taken-for-granted. This familiarity makes them inconspicuous too. Hence they need to be highlighted – and the phenomenological *epoché* (Husserl, 2006), by suspending our ‘natural attitude’, facilitates such an analysis. That way, what is familiar becomes *uncanny*; its spatio-temporal grip on thought and imagination gets loosened. It is in this sense that phenomenology can be useful for Disability Studies. Nevertheless, one should be reminded that the present analysis is deployed in a space opened up by Petar Kichashki’s resolute action. If there is any worth in this academic exercise, it builds upon such resoluteness, which has dared to challenge disablism in the midst of its exclusionist fury.

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