

DISABILITY AND CIVIL COURAGE UNDER STATE SOCIALISM: THE SCANDAL OVER THE HUNGARIAN GUIDE-DOG SCHOOL*

I

Over the last two decades emerging scholarship has demonstrated that the concept of disability is relevant for understanding how cultures create and maintain social order as well as how they define progress.¹ Scholars have also recognized that the history of disability may provide clues about the underlying beliefs and values of society, since communities reveal themselves through the way they treat their vulnerable members.² Traditional histories of disability have adopted a top-down approach to the subject, focusing on social policy and rehabilitation, but more recently the burgeoning field of disability studies has drawn attention to the agency of disabled citizens, particularly in relation to their grass-roots activities and emancipatory struggles. Research into the field has shown that in several countries, from about the 1960s onwards, disabled people, who were at the time still not regarded as part of the ‘general public’ but as a group with separate and special needs, started to instigate a discourse of their own by raising their voices against patronizing and discriminatory societal attitudes. They began to demand the removal of the physical and social barriers that prevented them from participating fully in the community. At the centre of this campaign was the concept of self-determination, as epitomized by the slogan: ‘Nothing about us without us’.³ This process of politicization created a sense of belonging and disabled

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¹ Cathy Kudlick, ‘Disability History: Why We Need Another “Other”’, *American Historical Review*, cviii (2003), 765.

² William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (eds.), *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present. Theory and Practice* (Pittsburgh, 1989), 3.

³ See Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia, 2001).

people gradually developed a distinct identity. This new emancipatory agenda no longer perceived disability as a medical category revolving around individual physical limitation, but asserted that it was a social construct: it is through politics, culture, economics and larger ideological notions of normality that the disabled are defined.⁴ The shift from a medical to a social understanding was accompanied by another fundamental transformation: while previously disability had been typically considered a welfare issue, from the 1960s onwards (the timeline varied between countries) it was redefined and assimilated into the framework of human rights.

British and North American scholars have been at the forefront of research into disabled people's emancipatory objectives. Many of them were personally involved in those struggles as activists and they levelled criticism at capitalist society for subordinating disabled people and for excluding them from social participation. While the process of emancipation is relatively well-documented for Anglo-Saxon countries, our knowledge is very fragmentary about other parts of Europe (and even more so in a global context): very few accounts exist that consider disabled people as active agents operating on their own terms and contributing to societal change through self-empowerment. One reason for this is that the everyday experiences and grass-roots initiatives of disabled people rarely leave a trace in historical records, a situation which is further exacerbated in societies that lack a free civic sphere and where the most significant events often happen in informal settings. This lack of knowledge is particularly acute in the context of the former Eastern bloc, although it is clear that non-capitalist societies could be as harsh in their treatment of bodily and mental difference as their capitalist counterparts. Moreover, under authoritarian regimes alternative viewpoints were typically silenced and independent organizations of disabled people were not permitted.⁵

This article, which benefited from access to some extraordinary sources,⁶ seeks to redress the aforementioned omission by

⁴ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds.), *The New Disability History* (New York, 2001), 20 (editors' intro.).

⁵ Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova (eds.), *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy and Everyday Life* (London, 2013), 7.

⁶ These include extensive correspondence retained in the private archives of two founding members of the guide-dog school. János Rithnovszky's private archive is

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focusing on the agency of disabled people under state socialism and by seeking to accommodate their experiences within the broader context of Cold-War Europe. It revolves around the momentous efforts of a handful of Hungarian blind people in the 1970s and early 1980s, who succeeded in creating a guide-dog training school entirely on their own initiative, with virtually no financial help from the state, while battling against formidable resistance from the official welfare organization for the blind. When the authorities took the bizarre decision to close the school after it had been operational for a mere two years, they formed an action group whose persistent protests led to it being reopened. Subsequently, after a further series of conflicts with the official welfare organization for the blind, they also succeeded in securing the rights to oversee the management of the school.

By analysing the grass-roots activities of Hungarian blind people, this article seeks to add new and comparative dimensions to existing literature. Published research shows that attitudes towards disabled citizens were fraught with contradictions under both capitalist and socialist systems. Scholars studying Western Europe emphasize the importance of the strong, healthy body and of employment performance in capitalist societies, while those studying Eastern Europe point to the ways in which the capacity to work became the primary criterion of citizenship with the consequence that health was seen primarily as a prerequisite for optimum productivity.⁷ Disabled people who could not contribute to productive economic activity were thus deemed less useful and were often concealed from public scrutiny, and experienced exclusion, isolation and pity. Recent research has also pointed out that caring for vulnerable citizens became the subject of ideological rivalry between the two world systems, for example at international meetings, where institutions at the heart of the

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located in the Town Museum of his birthplace, Abony. Bertalan Hubay's collection of documents can be found at his home in Budapest. However, perhaps the most interesting material comprises twenty-two audio cassettes which contain recordings of important discussions, meetings and telephone conversations. The audio cassettes belong to Bertalan Hubay, who made most of these recordings. In addition, interviews conducted between 2009 and 2010 with three members of the initiative, János Rithnovszky, Bertalan Hubay and József Kiss, have helped to complete my account.

⁷ Kudlick, 'Disability History', 766; and Sarah D. Phillips, '"There Are No Invalids in the USSR!": A Missing Soviet Chapter in the History of Disability', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, xxix, 3 (2009, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/936/1111>).

socialist welfare state were systematically positioned against their Western counterparts.⁸ While Western politicians frequently lambasted Soviet-style despotism for its violation of human rights, the socialist regimes responded to such criticism by highlighting the poverty and unemployment prevalent in parts of the West as well as by claiming to provide a more humane alternative to the policies pursued in consumer societies dominated by market forces.⁹

Exploring the opportunities available for disabled people to exercise their agency under authoritarian regimes is an essential prerequisite for asking questions from a comparative perspective. Scholarly intuition would not necessarily expect agility and determination on the part of disabled people under state socialism. On the contrary, it might suppose that passivity and conformity were the norm; partly because of what is often, however unjustifiably, considered the limiting effect of disability and partly because of the restrictive milieu of an unfree society. The relationship between the regime and the population during the post-Stalinist period has often been described in terms of a tacit social contract. According to this, the state expected political compliance and acquiescence in return for the comprehensive provision of social and economic security, including full employment, heavily subsidized prices for essential goods and free education, medical care and childcare.¹⁰ This relationship between care and coercion lies at the core of the concept of 'welfare dictatorship'. It highlights the humanitarian, progressive claims of regimes that stood for egalitarian social reform for the benefit of the lower classes and, at the same time, accentuates the imposed character of this social vision and the coercive nature of the practices employed by the state to advance its aims.¹¹ Although originally devised in the context of the German Democratic Republic, welfare dictatorship is also appropriate for socialist Hungary, where, as in other socialist countries, welfare measures constituted a very powerful legitimating principle for the state.

⁸ McCagg and Siegelbaum (eds.), *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 4.

⁹ Paul Betts, 'Socialism, Social Rights and Human Rights: The Case of East Germany', *Humanity*, iii, 3 (2012), 410.

¹⁰ Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

¹¹ Konrad H. Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York and Oxford, 1999), ch. 3.

To that end, social benefits reached such a generous level that by the 1980s they comprised one-third of people's incomes.¹²

While the concept of welfare dictatorship implies passivity and therefore cannot easily accommodate grass-roots initiatives, another concept, known as *Eigen-Sinn*, emphasizes the 'wilfulness' of individuals even when they operate in a controlled environment.¹³ It complements the more traditional top-down scholarly perspective by investigating individual strategies of 'putting up with political power to the degree that one must, while pursuing one's own ends to the degree that one can'.¹⁴ *Eigen-Sinn* is concerned with the extent to which citizens were coerced by the regime and the extent to which they retained agency. In that context it has been demonstrated that a broad range of individual attitudes existed between the binary opposites of total state control and unrelenting opposition.¹⁵ Although *Eigen-Sinn* focuses on grass-roots activities, the concept is seldom extended beyond the local level, and it seems to imply that life at the grass roots was inconsequential for central policymakers.¹⁶ More recent studies suggest that enthusiasm for the concept has led to its becoming so widely used as a description for all kinds of patterns of behaviour (albeit only in the context of the GDR) that it has become devoid of meaning, other than to denote processes of muddling through everyday life.¹⁷ In revealing the strategies pursued by members of a grass-roots initiative to mobilize support among the general public in a country that lacked a genuine civil society, this study seeks to reflect on the relevance of concepts of welfare dictatorship and

¹² Sándor Horváth, *Két emelet boldogság: Mindennapi szociálpolitika Budapesten a Kádár korban* [Two Floors of Happiness: Everyday Social Policy in Budapest under the Kádár Regime] (Budapest, 2012), 51. Paradoxically, however, redistribution by the state did not help to create a more egalitarian society, but further contributed to the growth of social inequalities. See *ibid.*, 67.

¹³ The concept was originally coined by Alf Lüdtke and then refined for the context of everyday life in the GDR by Thomas Lindenberger. Alf Lüdtke, *Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993). See also Thomas Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1999).

¹⁴ John R. Eidson, 'Compulsion, Compliance or Eigensinn? Examining Theories of Power in an East German Field Site', *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Paper* 61 (Halle, 2003), 21.

¹⁵ Jan Palmowski, 'Between Conformity and *Eigen-Sinn*: New Approaches to GDR History', *German History*, xx (2002).

¹⁶ Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR* (New York, 2009), 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Eigen-Simm and concludes by arguing for a broadening of the concept of civil society under state-socialist dictatorships and for a more nuanced perception of its relationship with the state.

II

Within the disabled community in Hungary blind people (and those with other sensory disabilities) enjoyed a privileged status, because their interests were represented through an official organization. The Association of the Blind (*Vakok Szövetsége*) was founded in 1918, with the aim of representing the interests of veterans who had been blinded in the war. After 1945 the leaders of this institution were careful to distance their mission from that of the inter-war period, when 'the feudal, exploitative, and capitalist society offered barely any opportunities for blind people, most of whom led their lives performing demeaning jobs or begging'.¹⁸ According to a publication produced by the Association, blind people need no longer rely on charity, but could rely on the care of the socialist state for its blind citizens. Blind people were now promised the opportunity to live full lives and to make a useful contribution to the building of socialism. The publication proudly declared that, 'in our society the integration of blind citizens has been achieved'.¹⁹ Membership of the Association was voluntary and, during the 1960s, it comprised approximately one-third of the country's blind population of about 34,000 people. In the early 1970s, membership saw an unprecedented increase from 10,500 to 18,000.²⁰ This happened as a reaction to the introduction of a special allowance for blind people in 1972, intended to cover the extra expenses arising from their disability. It was paid by the state to every registered blind person, irrespective of whether they belonged to the Association.²¹ Thus, the increase in

¹⁸ Lajos Völgyi, Introduction, in Tibor Vas (ed.), *A vakok és gyengénlátók érdekvédelmének 60 éve* [Interest Representation of Blind and Partially Sighted People in the last 60 years] (Budapest, 1978), 11–13.

¹⁹ Geróné Daru and Anna Joódy, 'Szövetségünk helye a szociális gondolkodási rendszerben' [The Role of Our Association in the Social Welfare System], in Vas (ed.), *A vakok és gyengénlátók*, 25.

²⁰ Ferenc Erdelics, 'Szociális juttatások, kedvezmények' [Social Benefits and Allowances], in Vas (ed.), *A vakok és gyengénlátók*, 29.

²¹ Egészségügyi miniszteri rendelet a vakok személyi járadékának bevezetéséről szóló 1032/1971. (VII/14) kormányhatározat végrehajtásáról [the Minister of Health's decree on the implementation of the introduction of a personal allowance

membership appears to have been motivated not by material considerations, but by a desire symbolically to express their gratitude for this new benefit.

Ironically, the Association had played no role whatever in the introduction of this allowance; it merely reaped the benefits of the independent action by some of its members who had lobbied the government, together with ministers and trade-union representatives.²² In fact, the Association's leaders considered János Rithnovszky, the mastermind behind this initiative, to be a notorious troublemaker. Rithnovszky consciously exploited his unique position. He had lost his sight in 1953, when a landmine exploded next to him during his obligatory military service in the Hungarian People's Army. This meant that, unlike the veterans of the Second World War, who were actively discriminated against for 'having fought on the wrong side' as enemies of the Soviet Union, he could derive benefits from his status as a military hero.²³ He did not shy away from criticizing what he regarded as the authoritarian attitude of the Association's leadership towards its members.²⁴ It was also mainly due to Rithnovszky's strenuous efforts that in 1977 a guide-dog training centre was created in Hungary. After his accident he had started working as a switchboard operator in a telephone centre and, as a young man, was determined to lead as dynamic a life as any sighted person. Yet he was constantly left with bruises, bumps and broken bones. It was in the light of this experience that he began to think that a guide dog might be the solution to his problems, yet there was no tradition of guide-dog training in Hungary. Although his expectations were not high, he wrote a letter to the German Institute of the Blind (Deutsche Blindenanstalt) in Marburg, West Germany, requesting literature on the topic and eventually he received some material. He then acquired his first dog and trained it successfully. This was an exceptional achievement, considering that guide dogs are usually bred and trained by professional organizations. The experiment

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for the blind, 1032/1971], available online at http://www.valasztas.hu/onkval2002/esz/esz_hu/inf/vf2/vf330500.htm.

²² Interview with János Rithnovszky and Bertalan Hubay, 2 Nov. 2011.

²³ Rithnovszky's reputation however was tarnished for a short time because of his involvement in the revolution of 1956.

²⁴ *Módosítási javaslatok a VAGYOSZ alapszabályához*, 15 June 1963 [Proposed changes to the statutes of the Association of the Blind], Rithnovszky's private archive, Abony.

attracted considerable attention both from the general public and from the media.²⁵

Following this, a small group of blind people approached Rithnovszky to ask if he would help them train guide dogs of their own. The success of a series of pilot courses led him to envisage the establishment of a permanent professional school. Such a school required substantial investment, however, and in the absence of private charities, only the official welfare organization, the Association of the Blind, was in a position to lobby for this from the state. The Association strenuously resisted the idea, as its leaders considered guide dogs to be an unnecessary extravagance, and instead recommended that blind people's spouses should help them find their way around. The guide-dog advocates retaliated with the slogan: 'My wife is not a guide dog!'²⁶ In the absence of support from the Association of the Blind, independent approaches by Rithnovszky and his friends to the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Defence and the Red Cross came to nothing, since the representatives of these organizations were unwilling to take any action without the support of the official representative body.²⁷

Rithnovszky tried to use his status as a military hero to solicit help from the army. However, the Deputy Minister for Defence refused to help on the same grounds as the Red Cross, namely that the leadership of the Association condemned the idea as impractical and unfeasible. Although the Deputy Minister of Defence explained that the Army and the Ministry of Defence were not in a position to grant the request for financial help and voluntary work, he did agree, as the plea obviously served 'humanitarian interests', to organize voluntary work by the Young Communists' Organization of the Army.²⁸ Nevertheless, machinations by the Association's leadership caused him to withdraw this offer of assistance from the Army with the excuse that energies were needed more urgently in places 'much more

²⁵ Rithnovszky and his dog even won a medal in an international dog competition in Budapest, and the German journal *Der Hund* reported on this achievement and published a photograph of them, *Der Hund* (1964), 18.

²⁶ Interview with Rithnovszky, 29 Jan. 2011.

²⁷ Undated letter of János Hantos of the Red Cross to comrade Bódy, Party Secretary of the Association of the Blind, Rithnovszky's private archive.

²⁸ General Kárpáthy's letter to Tibor Vas, 14 July 1973, Rithnovszky's private archive.

important for the national economy'.²⁹ Rithnovszky was not abashed by these setbacks but decided to revise his strategy. Mindful of the limited success achieved by lengthy correspondence with the authorities, he decided instead to pay personal visits to high-ranking politicians. As he put it: 'The legs do not work, so let's approach the head'. Moreover, realizing that his most powerful weapon was his own guide dog, he organized demonstrations throughout Budapest to show people first-hand the navigation skills of his canine companion. Many a bureaucrat who had previously condemned guide dogs as useless was 'converted' upon seeing them in action.³⁰

An important turning point came in 1973 when, after persistent lobbying, the council of the twenty-first district in Budapest assigned a building plot for a guide-dog training school on Csepel Island, near the river Danube. This was potentially excellent news, but when Rithnovszky and his team paid a visit to the plot they were dismayed. What they found was an enormous dumping ground, full of all sorts of waste, with holes ranging from half a metre to twelve metres in diameter, deactivated bombs, the remnants of equipment from old telephone centres and wrecked cars. Most could only laugh when they saw the place.³¹ Nevertheless a small but committed group started work on the building site, unsure whether sufficient resources would ever be made available for the project. The breakthrough, or, in Rithnovszky's sardonic description, 'the socialist miracle', happened when a committee from the local Young Communist organization arrived to inspect the site. They were so impressed by the heavy physical work undertaken by the enthusiasts that they decided to offer their support.³² To this end, they signed a 'socialist contract' which stipulated that, 'With this enterprise of great social significance we are addressing those people who are exposed to the mercy of society to a greater extent than usual. Our aim is to bring them closer to our goal of building a socialist society. In the interest of this aim the 20,000-strong membership of the Young Communists

²⁹ János Rithnovszky, *A fény túlsó oldalán* [At the Other End of the Light] (Budapest, 1991), 244.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³² All the documentation on the building of the school is held in the so-called Fehér Könyv [White Book] in Rithnovszky's private archive.

undertakes to help with the building operations'.³³ The contract listed tasks such as digging out holes for two gateposts and iron columns, the building of an electronic network to enable the installation of traffic lights on the practice path, digging gutters, smoothing out the land and planting three hundred trees.

Another admiring visitor was the director of the Volán Elektronika Company, Dr Tamás Tápai. When he saw the hard-working volunteers, sweating in swimming trunks on a hot summer day, he decided to offer, on behalf of his company, another socialist contract designed to help 'to complete the school as soon as possible and thereby render the everyday activities of blind people easier'.³⁴ The contract included building a house to serve as the school's headquarters, as well as painting the fences and carrying out all the necessary maintenance work on the entire plot of two hectares. Tápai himself frequently joined in with mixing concrete or working as a pick-and-shovel man.³⁵ Appeals in the media ensured the arrival of hundreds of volunteers from all walks of life — doctors, pilots, pupils, workers, professors, young mothers and grandmothers. Several companies made donations: the building materials, the lawn and the furniture were all donated as was twenty thousand cubic metres of soil which had been excavated during the building of the metro in Budapest. Moreover, bricks, tiles, parquet and windows from two houses on the brink of demolition were offered; the dismantling was undertaken by the Young Communists with assistance from a Soviet army battalion. The headquarters was designed by the young employees of a building company, while Csepel Iron and Steelworks provided the materials for the fence. The building brigade of the Hungarian Railways carried out the welding work, and also helped to find puppies suitable for future training.³⁶

Once the building operations were completed, calls in various newspapers, and on the radio as well as on TV, attracted seventy-seven applicants for guide dogs. This meant that a waiting list had to be drawn up, because only sixteen dogs could be trained in a

³³ Szocialista szerződés [Socialist Contract] between the Young Communists' of Budapest and the Association of the Blind, signed by comrade Csillik and Rithnovszky, 18 Oct. 1973, Rithnovszky's private archive.

³⁴ Undated socialist contract, offered by Dr Tamás Tápai, Rithnovszky's private archive.

³⁵ Rithnovszky, *A fény túlsó oldalán*, 245.

³⁶ Fehér könyv.

year. In 1977 the school's work began in earnest under the leadership of a military dog trainer. Despite the slightly amateur set-up, some thirty people became proud guide-dog owners over the next two years. Then, in 1979, on the very day that the two-year period in which the Young Communists had contracted to oversee the guide-dog school expired, the Ministry of Health closed it down abruptly and without explanation.³⁷ The small group of guide-dog owners was appalled by this development. Not only did they feel that their newly forged identity was being undermined, they also knew that the provision of future guide dogs was now in jeopardy, since the average working life of a guide dog was no more than seven or eight years. Coincidentally and ironically, just a few days before the closure, one of Hungary's finest documentary filmmakers, Imre Schuller, had been commissioned to produce a documentary film about guide-dog training in Hungary. Full of enthusiasm, Schuller arrived on a previously agreed day only to find the school closed. He later received a telephone call from the Ministry of Health informing him that he was banned from entering the premises. By this time, however, Schuller had already conducted interviews with the guide-dog owners and become convinced that the school served an extremely valuable and important purpose. He therefore decided to go ahead and make the film anyway.³⁸ He travelled to East Berlin and shot some of the scenes in a guide-dog training centre there. Back home, he edited the film to include the interviews with the Hungarian blind dog-owners. The last interview concluded with the following words: 'My dog has given me full independence and I would not be able to go back to my earlier ways of tapping the wall with a stick in order to get around. It would be disastrous if the school ceased to exist, but I trust the leadership (of the country) will never allow that to happen'.³⁹ The final scene of the film zoomed in on the locked gates of the school, to reveal an inscription which stated that it had ceased to operate on 30 June 1979.

³⁷ The guide-dog owners received a letter informing them that their dogs had now become their own property, because the school was closed on 30 June 1979. The letter can be found in Bertalan Hubay's private archive.

³⁸ The film, entitled *Vakon követnek* [I am followed blindly] was directed by Schuller in 1979: its permission number is M/9459/79.

³⁹ Script of Imre Schuller's documentary film, held in the Hungarian Film Archive, Budapest, catalogue no. NT/36.

Meanwhile, the guide-dog owners started to organize themselves. Their first meeting, at which twelve people were present, took place in Bertalan Hubay's garden; he subsequently emerged as the initiative's leading figure. Fortuitously, their discussions were recorded, meaning that we have a first-hand account of the strategies adopted by the group in their struggle to get the school reopened.⁴⁰ From the outset, the participants agreed that they should establish a platform for their views, an interest group with the aim of monitoring future developments. They called this initiative the 'Professional Group of Guide-Dog Users' and their intention was to run it within the framework of the Association.⁴¹ They were aware that the leaders of the Association would not necessarily welcome their proposal, and sought to pre-empt any objection they might raise by referring to the statutes, which stipulated the right to form a new group if at least ten members requested it. It was agreed that a 'middle-ground' approach towards the protest would be most effective and hence they declared: 'Let's not ask for favours in a cowardly fashion, but let's not make aggressive demands either'. The group decided to launch a media-offensive. Their plight attracted considerable public sympathy and in the ensuing months the closure of the school was discussed on countless radio and television programmes.⁴² In accordance with the Hungarian state's promise to guarantee blind people the right to work, they were given priority in securing employment as switchboard operators in telephone centres.⁴³ Indeed, most group members worked as switchboard operators and having constant access to telephone communication in a country where there was a chronic shortage of telephone lines even in the late 1980s greatly helped the group to organize themselves rapidly and efficiently, as they could make conference calls from their workplaces.⁴⁴ On one occasion, a group member telephoned a very eminent live radio programme dedicated to traffic issues. To the reporter's astonishment, instead

⁴⁰ The meeting took place on 8 September 1979 and the discussions were recorded on two cassettes, Bertalan Hubay's private archive.

⁴¹ The Hungarian name is Vakvezető Kutyával Közlekedők Szakcsoportja.

⁴² For example, the popular radio programme 168 óra [168 hours] discussed the case three times in total, and this was unprecedented.

⁴³ Ferenc Erdelics, 'Szociális juttatások, kedvezmények', 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

of announcing a traffic jam or a road block, he called the listeners' attention to the shameful closure of the school.⁴⁵

The Association of the Blind grudgingly agreed to incorporate the Professional Group of Guide-Dog Users into its framework and the group's second meeting in October 1979 was held on its premises.⁴⁶ By this time, the publicity campaign had started to bear fruit and the number of applicants for dogs had risen to 101, which strengthened the case for the school. Members of the group agreed that despite their aversion to being patronized and pitied, on this occasion they would need to overcome their pride and consciously exploit their image as vulnerable victims to promote their cause. As one member stated: 'Sighted people pity us, let's capitalize on this, we need their support!'⁴⁷ A major concern was how to counter the authorities' claim that 'the contemporary economic conditions make it impossible for the school to operate. Instead, the money should be spent on the elementary rehabilitation of recently blinded people'.⁴⁸ Rithnovszky formulated a twofold rebuttal. Firstly, he reminded the authorities of the official ideological line, according to which the concept of economic viability was not applicable to social expenditure: 'Social expenses always demand financial sacrifice, but this is voluntarily undertaken by society in the name of socialist humanity', he argued. Secondly, Rithnovszky pointed out that even if the economic argument was valid, this would lead to the conclusion that closing the school was a false economy and 'an anti-humanitarian measure', which would mean that thousands of hours of voluntary work had been wasted. To destroy something which already existed equated to an abuse of the state's financial resources. Moreover, because the school was purpose-built for guide-dog training, using it as a pioneer camp — which was being proposed — would constitute a gross misuse. Finally, Rithnovszky asserted that the chances of a new guide-dog school being built through voluntary work were very remote, as people would be unwilling to sacrifice their time again now that

⁴⁵ The caller was József Kiss, and the radio programme was *Útközben* [On the way], interview with József Kiss, 16 March 2011.

⁴⁶ The meeting of 6 Oct. 1979 was recorded by Imre Schuller, Hubay's private archive.

⁴⁷ Audio cassette recording of the meeting, comment by 'comrade Iváncsó', Hubay's private archive.

⁴⁸ Audio cassette recording of the same meeting, excerpt from a letter read aloud by one of the participants, Hubay's private archive.

they knew their previous efforts had been in vain.⁴⁹ Extending Rithnovszky's line of argument, other members of the group were similarly critical of the 'economic principle', pointing out that although guide dogs were expensive, so was the treatment of injuries sustained by blind people who were deprived of their mobility aids. They also emphasized that guide dogs enabled them to continue working and by doing so they too were contributing to the welfare budget. Moreover, one member compared the role of guide dogs as mobility aids to that of Trabant Hycomats, cars adapted for use by disabled people by the fitting of an automatic clutch. He argued that a Hycomat was similarly expensive and therefore accessible only to a very small segment of the disabled community; yet, the car's usefulness was never questioned.⁵⁰

The group also decided to continue pursuing Rithnovszky's earlier tactics of 'direct democracy' by contacting or preferably even paying personal visits to high-ranking officials, regardless of how knowledgeable they were about the guide-dog issue. A huge bunch of roses and the attractive sight of guide dogs turned one of the very few high-profile female politicians, the Deputy-President of the Parliament and Party Secretary of Budapest, Istvánné Vas, into an enthusiastic supporter.⁵¹ One group member telephoned the office of the Minister of Culture, György Aczél, and was immediately put through to him in person. The infamous Minister and chief ideologue of cultural life in Hungary asked for further particulars to be submitted in writing and pledged his support. Members were well aware that the Ministry of Culture was not equipped to help them achieve their aims. Nonetheless, they knew the Minister was an extremely influential person with useful connections and they felt that they had nothing to lose. Perhaps the most memorable meeting took place in the Ministry of Health with the Deputy Minister, Alajos Juszti.⁵² When the Minister's secretary opened the door and saw four members of the group, accompanied by two German Shepherds, one Bernadiner and one Airedale Terrier, she began screaming hysterically, jumped onto the table and shouted for help. Hearing

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Rithnovszky, *A fény tülső oldalán*, 259.

⁵² Interview with three of the four participants, Hubay, Rithnovszky and Kiss, on 16 March 2011.

the commotion, a man entered the room, and members of the group rattled off their complaints without even realizing that he was the Deputy Minister. When these meetings failed to produce tangible results, the group decided to take their case to the 'highest' echelon, which involved writing a letter of complaint to the First Secretary of the Communist Party, János Kádár. Subsequently they even telephoned Kádár's secretariat to enquire whether he had had the opportunity to respond to their concerns. They were reminded that Kádár did not have time to attend to a myriad of individual requests, but they were also assured that their case was being examined.⁵³

Ultimately, the tactic of wearing the authorities down yielded the desired outcome and the school was reopened. At some point the officials must have realized that continuing to resist the guide-dog owners' request would consume more energy than acquiescing to it. However, this was no happy ending but rather the beginning of a new series of clashes between the Professional Group and the management of the school. Many of the disputes were fairly petty. For example, when the school was reopened, the Professional Group was allocated a column in the journal, *The World of the Blind*, with the aim of informing fellow blind people about developments relating to guide dogs. The first article included a playful first-person 'interview' between the group leader and his guide dog, a German Shepherd called Bonny, entitled 'Between four eyes and on six legs'.⁵⁴ In the next number of the journal the main adviser to the guide-dog school, who was also a cynologist in the army, published an angry riposte. Under the heading 'Subjective comments on guide dogs', the author condemned the 'anthropomorphic' tendencies of the previous article, arguing that 'the dog is not a moral-ethical being, but a selfish creature'. The statement was fortified with quotations from Marx: 'It is existence that determines consciousness' and Engels: 'Life is a mode of motion of proteins'.⁵⁵

Members of the group took their self-imposed task of overseeing the school very seriously, much to the annoyance of its employees. Members of the Professional Group had carefully formulated criteria setting out conditions for acquiring a guide

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Vakok Világa*, xlii (1981), 1, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9, 19.

dog, and were particularly irritated when these criteria were ignored by the school's manager. The Professional Group received numerous complaints about the manager to the effect that he handed over inadequately trained dogs to clients, used aggressive language and consumed excessive alcohol. Anyone who dared to complain was likely to suffer the manager's 'revenge', which could involve either being denied a dog or being deliberately given a sick dog.⁵⁶ In 1981 and 1982 members of the group repeatedly lodged complaints with the Ministry of Health and the Association for the Blind, but these elicited no response. One reason was that the school staff were employed by the Association, and its bureaucrats wanted to avoid yet another conflict with the group. This inaction infuriated the group, and at a meeting held on 10 December 1983, which was recorded by the film-maker Imre Schuller, the group's honorary and only sighted member, the issue once again appeared on the agenda. The membership resolved that: 'If nothing happens we will turn to Kádár again!'⁵⁷ According to the agreement with the Association's leadership school employees were not supposed to be present, but in the event they were allowed to sneak in secretly to this 'scandalous' meeting and subsequently took three members of the group to court on charges of defamation. In conjunction with this incident, in 1984 the Association suspended the leadership of the Professional Group alleging that their criticism of the trainers' work was indirectly aimed at the Association. This accusation was upheld even when, following several months of investigation, the court concluded that the criticisms levelled by the group members at the dog trainers were justified and they were cleared of the charges.⁵⁸

To the irritation of the Association's officers, the leaders of the Professional Group refused to resign from their posts, even after several warnings and threats. They simply referred to the protocols, which made it clear that unless they were charged with anti-state activities, the group's leaders could only be asked to resign by the membership of the Association. Accordingly, they argued that the Association's arbitrary suspension of the group's leaders was unlawful. Moreover, the members of the group argued

⁵⁶ Complaints of blind people in Rithnovszky's private archive.

⁵⁷ Audio cassette recording of the meeting, 10 Dec. 1983, Hubay's private archive.

⁵⁸ *Rithnovszky-Zaharovits per iratai* [Documents of the Rithnovszky-Zaharovits legal case], i, 10, Rithnovszky's private archive.

that the very reason for their existence was to exercise control on behalf of society. They also insisted that both the building and the reopening of the school were achievements that were entirely due to the group.⁵⁹ Following another series of conflicts, in 1986 the officials of the Association announced that the group would only be permitted to resume its activities within an altered framework. Among other proposals, the 'Professional Group' had to change its name, since it 'gave the false impression that its members had professional knowledge about guide dogs'. The new, imposed name was 'Friends' Circle'.⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, the membership rejected this framework and instead proposed that, in the light of the democratic changes that were then taking place, the group should become a proper legal entity.⁶¹ This eventually happened in 1989 and since that time the Professional Group has functioned as a charitable foundation.

III

How should the Hungarian guide-dog owners' initiative and its societal response be viewed and what does it add to received knowledge? A closer look at the strategies employed by the Professional Group reveals that their arguments alternated between two fundamentally different strands of rhetoric. When circumstances dictated, they emphasized their abilities and strength, as manifested in one of their slogans: 'We are blind, but we are not idiots'.⁶² This stance became particularly prominent when group members found themselves confronted with the patronizing bureaucrats from the Association of the Blind. On other occasions, however, as when appealing to the media and the general public, and also when approaching high-profile politicians, it seemed much more practicable to employ the discourse of vulnerability. This approach capitalized on the images and prejudices associated with blind people's limitations and suffering. It endowed the group with the power of the powerless, and allowed them to behave in a more confrontational manner than their able-bodied counterparts.

⁵⁹ Recording of the meeting, 10 Dec. 1983, Hubay's private archive.

⁶⁰ *Vakok Világa*, xlvii (1986), 5, 8-9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I (1989), 10, 3.

⁶² Interview with János Rithnovszky, 29 Jan. 2011.

This reliance on vulnerability as an asset reveals parallels with the strategies chosen by other groups who were likewise traditionally considered feeble. For example, a comparison may be drawn with the protest activities of women workers in communist Poland, who exploited the awkward situation faced by their male leaders when dealing with female employees. Male elites were condescending towards these women, but at the same time were expected to revere them. The men had to be seen to treat them with courtesy and protectiveness, above all because of their powerful symbolic status as mothers. Empowered by this symbolic role, women could afford to behave boldly and were not obliged to avoid direct confrontation. For example, in 1947, the women workers at a cotton mill in the city of Łódź embarked on a strike that practically shut down the city's entire textile industry for a fortnight. During the course of the strike, upon hearing that a communist agitator had allegedly kicked a pregnant woman, twenty-seven women staged a mass fainting protest.⁶³ Decades later, in July 1981 in the same city, leaders of the Solidarity movement condemned the acute food shortages by announcing a four-day protest, involving a so-called 'hunger march', and on the last day women joined the march. They arrived wheeling prams and carrying children, while disabled women participated in wheelchairs. They also carried a banner bearing the slogan: 'Hungry people of the world unite'.⁶⁴ Thus, the strategy favoured by Polish women was not to try to compete with the fierce rhetoric used by their male counterparts but, like the Hungarian guide-dog owners, to emphasize their own vulnerability and thereby magnify the brutality of their opponents.

The agency of vulnerability was used elsewhere in the socialist bloc by disabled people, who did not always remain passive within the restrictive social milieus in which they found themselves. Even in the Soviet Union, the disabled voiced dissent, ranging from relatively mild complaints, such as 'We have reached the cosmos but cannot produce enough wheelchairs' to the forthright rhetoric of the dissident Action Group for Defending the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR.⁶⁵ More typically, initiatives sought to

⁶³ Padraic Kenney, 'The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland', *American Historical Review*, civ, 2 (1999), 416.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁶⁵ See Paul D. Raymond, 'Disability as Dissidence: The Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR', in McCagg and Siegelbaum (eds.), *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 235.

improve the system from within, with disabled people challenging their state-imposed roles by writing to officials and appealing to the press, highlighting the gap between official promises and mundane realities and, implicitly, exploiting the tension that derived from a regime that sought to buy political stability through the provision of extensive welfare measures, yet did not have the economic resources to do so. Thus the state which purported to do 'everything for the well-being of the people' had to accept complaints levelled against its failure to live up to its promises.⁶⁶ In this respect, one guide-dog owner who was interviewed by Imre Schuller for his documentary film complained that, 'I had to wait for my dog for eighteen months. I would not be surprised if we soon reach a stage where we have to wait for a guide dog longer than for a Trabant'.⁶⁷

This attitude, whereby citizens were driven to remind the state of the promises it had seemingly reneged on, has been characterized as a 'whingeing culture',⁶⁸ since such criticism did not necessarily imply fundamental disagreement with the basic principles of the system. This was certainly true of the activists among the Hungarian blind people: they did not shy away from expressing criticism, but their disapproval, which included frequent references to 'socialist humanity' and an emphasis on the incompatibility of economic arguments and 'humanitarian' aims, was directed against specific policies rather than against state socialism per se. What made the Professional Group's case special, however, is that theirs was a collective plight, whereas most traditional channels of complaint, interest representation and conflict resolution were usually the work of individuals.⁶⁹

The origins of the Hungarian guide-dog owners' conflict lay in the idiosyncratic paternalistic policies of the socialist system which tried to create the impression that social welfare was possible even without genuine interest representation.⁷⁰ While the group initially expected the state to provide them with a

⁶⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005), 20.

⁶⁷ Script of the film *Vakon követnek* [I am followed blindly].

⁶⁸ Judd Stitzel, 'Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationship between State and Society in the GDR', in Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (eds.), *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Michigan, 2008), 265.

⁶⁹ Fulbrook, *The People's State*, 269.

⁷⁰ Horváth, *Két emelet boldogság*, 241.

guide-dog school, since in the absence of private charities, no opportunities existed for an alternative form of provision, when that did not happen they took it upon themselves to act autonomously. Using their informal networks and enlisting support from the general public, they created an institution of substantial financial and moral value 'with their own hands' and against all the odds. When the fruit of their efforts was misused, they devised innovative ways to rectify the situation. Moreover, while the group campaigned courageously for the guide-dog training school, their dynamism and resourcefulness had repercussions for the blind community in a general sense. As we have seen, Rithnovszky was the mastermind behind the successful proposal that led to the introduction of the special allowance for blind people in 1972. Another instance of similar resourcefulness was provided by Bertalan Hubay, the leader of the Professional Group, who came up with an ingenious idea concerning the introduction of a long cane. According to the authorities, this device was unavailable in Hungary due to the high costs involved in producing fibreglass. But Hubay was aware that his fishing rod was made of the same material, so he telephoned the manufacturing company and secured a promise from them that blind people could obtain fibreglass free of charge, which, although not of the highest quality, would still be perfectly adequate.⁷¹ Ultimately this idea was not implemented, but the episode reveals the resourcefulness that the shortage economy could generate in its citizens.

The activities of the Hungarian guide-dog owners contribute little to a portrayal of a people suffering under the heavy hand of the state. Their achievements went far beyond the realm of 'whingeing culture' and revealed a higher degree of agency than that which could be accommodated within the conceptual framework of either welfare dictatorship or *Eigen-Sinn*, rendering these relevant, but not entirely satisfactory as categories of analysis. This appears to be all the more obvious in light of the huge amount of support from all levels of society which they succeeded in mobilizing for their cause. Such support is particularly remarkable because it included not just symbolic commitment, but commitment in a very real and practical sense, involving several thousand hours of hard work by hundreds of people who

⁷¹ Interview with Bertalan Hubay, 16 March 2011.

sacrificed their free time to help build the guide-dog school. Many projects that fell under the aegis of 'voluntary work' in state socialism were actually activities imposed by the authorities, and while they probably had positive effects in terms of community-building, they did not necessarily lead to significant social gains. What distinguished the building of the guide-dog school from those enforced activities is that people participated in it of their own accord. Furthermore, the concepts of welfare dictatorship and *Eigen-Sinn* are inadequate in this case because, as has been hinted previously, they do not normally consider people's influence beyond the local level. In contrast, one of the most instructive facets of this story is the fact that it proved possible to exercise a significant impact on high politics from the grass-roots level.

Another remarkable feature is the interconnection and cooperation between agents of the state and society which defies the dichotomy that tends to characterize accounts that rely on the concepts of welfare dictatorship and *Eigen-sinn*.⁷² A considerable degree of communication, negotiation and interdependence informs this story, which cannot be reduced to the pattern of society creating autonomous spaces within which it could mark its distance from the state. Informal networks played a crucial role at all levels, providing arenas for socializing and for the development of social capital. They may even be considered, to a certain degree, as substitutes for the social ties that are acquired through voluntary organizations in Western societies. The group always had an extensive network of helpers at its disposal when dealing with everyday matters. Members usually reciprocated with small gifts, and Rithnovszky once jokingly observed that over the years he had purchased so many sweets from his local corner shop that the shopkeeper would have been able to live off his transactions alone.⁷³ But, as the story has revealed, informal connections were also helpful in enlisting support from influential politicians who, occasionally, offered to liaise with their colleagues. The aforementioned Deputy-President of the Parliament and Party Secretary of Budapest, Istvánné Vas had no responsibility for welfare matters, yet as a private person she took on a 'motherly role' and represented the guide-dog owners' cause to other influential (male) politicians. Her jocular comment that

⁷² Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses*, 12.

⁷³ Rithnovszky, *A fény tülso oldalán*, 229.

her intervention would see either herself or the high-ranking official against whom she pitted herself departing from office indicates that she was aware of the risk she was taking. Similarly, the Young Communists, while theoretically acting as ideological representatives of the state and the party, had no qualms about offering their full support to a grass-roots initiative that had only very ambiguous official recognition. Also striking is the role of people employed in reputable and, from an ideological point of view, more neutral professions, such as lawyers, doctors, journalists and company directors, who took on the role of representing a grass-roots interest and mediating between the interests of the highest and lowest levels of society. In this context the lobbying and fundraising activities of the group resembled the campaigns of comparable Western organizations, with the qualification that in their case they were undertaken informally and involved material goods and voluntary work in lieu of financial donations.

A possible alternative concept to welfare dictatorship and *Eigen-Sinn*, which may better articulate the activities of the blind people, is that of 'everyday citizenship', a term devised to illuminate the everyday affirmation of citizenship in the Iberian states in a way that avoided the dichotomy of repression versus resistance.⁷⁴ While the scope of this study does not allow for a comparison between the ways in which the authoritarian state's use of welfare for social control and legitimization altered the nature of relations between state and society in the Iberian states and Eastern Europe, it points to the opportunities (and limitations) offered by such a comparison. In this context, it is worth noting that despite their socially conservative ideologies, the Iberian dictatorships were essentially modernist projects in the sense that they saw state power as an instrument to be deployed in the moral and political education of their countries and citizens.⁷⁵ The concept of everyday citizenship seeks to add new dimensions to earlier research on classic civil society activism in authoritarian regimes, which for too long focused on formal structures and was therefore unable to capture the complex ways in which society expresses itself in more informal arenas. It

⁷⁴ Pedro Ramos Pinto, 'Everyday Citizenship under Authoritarianism: the Cases of Spain and Portugal', in Francesco Cavatorta, *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective* (London, 2013), 17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

defines citizenship in terms of participation, as all citizens have a particular relationship to the state even if they do not act upon it; and it recognizes that citizenship relations can range from 'thin' to 'thick'; that is, from the simple duty of obedience to complex interchanges of rights and duties.⁷⁶ By encompassing a much wider array of citizenship practices that were not outwardly political, but could still have important political implications, this concept may be better suited to explaining the guide-dog owners' mundane encounters with the state and their everyday affirmation of citizenship. In addition, the use of this concept may also open up new perspectives in the study of protests of the kind described in this article, because it shifts attention away from the arguably limited expression of dissent in high politics to the less visible, but equally important strategies employed by members of the general public.

A glance at the situation of disabled people in Western democracies in the 1970s and 1980s reveals similar ambiguities to those highlighted by this account of Hungarian blind people. The presumption on the part of politicians and welfare authorities that disabled citizens were unable to take responsibility for their own lives and required permanent supervision by non-disabled 'experts' appears to have been a widespread phenomenon, regardless of ideological or regional differences. In capitalist societies, charities often actively encouraged disabled people to assume a dependent role because their *raison d'être* rested on the premise that their clients were incapable of acting for themselves. As in Eastern Europe, disabled people were provided with a multitude of benefits, but were not consulted about their actual needs. The differences therefore lay not so much in their aims and experiences, but in the means and opportunities that were available to them. On the other hand, while disabled citizens in Western democracies could exercise freedom of expression, this does not necessarily mean that their views were listened to and that their rights to employment, access and social security were guaranteed.

The desire to emancipate themselves both from a dependent role and external control was thus a common desire of disabled people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In that context, several statements by the Hungarian guide-dog owners indicate that, similarly to their Western counterparts who were engaged in the

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

'disability movement', they did not perceive their condition in medical terms. While they never denied that their blindness came with restrictions — that was the precise reason why they needed dogs — they frequently had to remind people that their blindness did not impose limitations on their mental and intellectual capacities and neither did it prevent them from making their own decisions. Their frequent references to the idea that 'the blind are not those who cannot (physically) see, but those who cannot comprehend things' seem to indicate that they considered negative societal attitudes to be just as disabling as the physical impairment itself. Furthermore, another shift associated with the emergence of the social model can also be observed in the Hungarian guide-dog owners' arguments, namely that they did not view their condition as a tragedy that needed to be overcome and were no longer satisfied with mere survival. Instead of just trying to cope, they enjoyed fulfilled and varied lives, although it is true that because most were university-educated and in employment, and also thanks to their dogs, they were probably more ambitious and outgoing than their peers. Many of them were given the opportunity to travel to neighbouring socialist countries and they also organized fishing vacations together. They later jokingly explained their surprising success at fishing by claiming that the sight of pretty girls in bikinis did not divert their attention.⁷⁷ Another piece of evidence which reveals that assertions about the right to a quality of life were not confined to 'prosperous' Western democracies is a recent study on the history of deaf people in the Soviet Union. It too reveals that their claim to agency encompassed more than the right to mere survival by obtaining basic education and employment skills. In the case of the Soviet deaf people it included, among other things, the right to recreation and the opportunity to cultivate artistic and advanced educational talents.⁷⁸

Overall, it appears therefore that the bipolar model which contrasts the dictatorial East with the democratic West has only limited applicability for the study of disabled citizens' experiences, because these people did not necessarily exemplify the assumption that the West had a more inclusive, democratic vision of citizenship

⁷⁷ Interview with Bertalan Hubay, 2 Nov. 2010.

⁷⁸ Claire Louise Shaw, 'Deaf in the USSR: "Defect" and the New Soviet Person, 1917–1991' (University College London Ph.D. thesis, 2011), 258.

than the intolerant and authoritarian Eastern bloc. Instead, a democracy deficit seems to have existed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and disabled people sought to achieve autonomy and self-sufficiency by seeking to liberate themselves from condescending and patronizing societal attitudes. Financial considerations undoubtedly exerted a huge impact on the opportunities available to disabled people and their quality of life; common to both capitalist countries and the socialist bloc was the effect of the economic recession of the late 1970s which further widened the gap between official promises made to disabled citizens and the everyday realities of their lives. It is certain that in material terms, for example in relation to the provision of prosthetics, Western societies out-performed their socialist counterparts. Overall, however, the similarities in the situation of disabled people in both capitalist and socialist countries appear to have been greater than the differences.⁷⁹ Even in those countries where the social services were exemplary, such as in West Germany, widespread prejudice prevailed and the majority of the population failed to recognize the potential of disabled people.⁸⁰ The slogan: 'We are blind, but we are not idiots', therefore, resonated far beyond the community of Hungarian guide-dog owners.

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⁷⁹ Carol Poore makes this argument when comparing the situation of severely disabled persons in West and East Germany in her *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Michigan, 2007), 253.

⁸⁰ Carol Poore, 'Disability as Disobedience?: An Essay on Germany in the Aftermath of the United Nations Year for People with Disabilities', *New German Critique*, xxvii (Autumn, 1982), 163.

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