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Body politics and urban spaces: disabled people's encounter with and resistance to disabling urban environments in Hungary

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HUNGARY'S RENEWAL



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Outline

1. Problems, starting-point for research
2. Aims, research questions and argument
3. Conceptual framework
4. Empirical research – method
5. Urban spaces in Hungary: disabling power geometries and resistance
6. Concluding remarks

1. Issues, concerns

- Social marginality of people with impairments/chronic illnesses...
- and its spatial aspects
- Disabled people's recent struggles around material and cultural issues in Hungary: oppressive character of social space; resistance to it

2. Aim, questions, argument

Aim: critically analyze the disabling sociospatial processes and disabled people's resistant acts in Hungarian urban context

Questions

1. what are the main disabling features of urban spaces in Hungary?
2. what forms of resistance are employed?

Approach:

- poststructuralist explanation of power and resistance; „feminist” concepts of the body
- semi-structured interviews, case study (Békéscsaba)

Argument: the body has key importance in sociospatial oppression and resistance of disabled people

3. Conceptual framework – disabling cities: an explanation

- Contemporary capitalist cities are disabling (Imrie, 1996; Gleeson, 1998, 1999); varied spatial forms and explanations
- One promising technique: feminist geographical theory of the body
- Social body (Foucault, 1980; Freund, 2001): „appropriate” appearance and behaviour
- Human body as „fixed”, „ideally average” (see e.g. Imrie, 1996, 1999)
- Urban public spaces: sites of control over human bodies

3. Conceptual framework – resistance

- „The body as a site of regulation, oppression and control”: nexus of power relations (Moss & Dyck, 2003)
- Material and discursive entity – dialectic
- Disablement as a spatial process → restructured geographies of the everyday life (Dyck, 1995, 1999; Crooks, 2004, 2006; Crooks & Chouinard, 2006; Crooks et al., 2008)
- The body as a site of resistance →
- The materiality of and the discourses on the body

4. Empirical research – method

Semi-structured interviews

- 17 participants
- People with different physical impairments (blind and vis. imp., wheelchair users) and chronic illnesses
- Békéscsaba
- Focus:
 - daily activities, practices, space usage
 - problems, barriers
 - personal interactions
 - social attitudes, ideas, narratives
 - reactions of the interview partners, strategies

5. Urban spaces in Hungary – disabling features (a)

- Physical barriers (ableist norms)
- Prejudicial attitude (visibility in public space; see also Butler & Bowlby, 1997)
 - bodily differences (e.g. size)
 - technical aid / assisting devices (e.g. wheelchair)
 - „unusual” behaviour, gestures (e.g. spaces of consumption)

„... for example, as I look everything at short range, and there has already been precedent when I was thought to be a thief or something. And then the security guard came to me and asked: what's up?” (Gregory, 29, visually impaired)

5. Urban spaces in Hungary – disabling features (b)

- Sociocultural norms – dominant discourses (e.g. „little people” – see also: Kruse, 2001, 2003, 2010)

„...a pedagogue has to exude authority with his/her stature as well. So they [the parents, teachers] feared the students would laugh at me or mock me” (Emma, 61, vis. imp. and little person).

- Material effects (e.g. workspace, labour market)

„As a consequence of prejudice, it happened that I knew I could do that job but I would not be hired” (Gregory, 29, visually impaired).

5. Urban spaces in Hungary – resistance (a)

Physical presence of disabled bodies in different
spaces and places



Source: <http://www.bekesmegye.com>

5. Urban spaces in Hungary – resistance (b)



Source: <http://www.beol.hu>

5. Urban spaces in Hungary – resistance (c)

- Discursive strategies: impaired body is „normal” ...

„Those who do not accept the society of the disabled people or their rights, are practically the real disabled”

(Theodore, 37, visually impaired).

- or „more normal than...” (defensive othering)

„To be honest, for me this word 'disability', it means a kind of corporal disability, that someone misses an arm or a leg... Just because I suffer from asthma, I am not disabled, I think” (Irine, 56, visually impaired).

6. Concluding remarks

- Example of Békéscsaba → oppressive sociospatial processes operate at the level of the body; but the body is mobilized for resistance
- Implications for
 - geography, social sciences: critical research on disability and the body; post-socialist experiences
 - policy makers: creating accessible urban spaces

Thank you for your attention!

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