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**COMMUNISM AND DISABILITY: AN IMPROBABLE PARTNERSHIP**

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on my personal experience in communist and ex-communist countries, as well as in reliable written sources, this article deals with Communism and its impact on the life and “survival of the unfittest”, that is, of the disabled. In communist societies, disabled people are more than not seen as useless and unsuitable in a world considered to be “perfect” (or at least as the best of all possible worlds). In what regards the future of disabled people in the communist societies, to that there is no easy answer.

*Life to a great extent becomes like a masquerade ball, in which we know that everyone is wearing a mask, and yet there is a tacit agreement that no one will tear off another's mask. (...)The assumption here is that right and wrong are questions merely of mob judgement, rather than of standards. It forgets that right is right if nobody is right, and wrong is wrong if everybody is wrong.*

Fulton Sheen

*It is time we take political correctness and throw it in the garbage where it belongs.*

Brigitte Gabriel

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“Communism is not love; Communism is a hammer which we use to crush the enemy.”

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The sentences were said and written by Mao Zedong; the drawings were made by me.

*Keywords- Communism, Disability etc.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Inspired by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), for whom life tends to be seen as mere struggle for survival and its corollary, that is, the *law of the survival of the fittest*, Karl Marx (1818-1883) reduced the history of mankind to class struggle. Darwin has as premise the primacy of the species over the individual; in like manner, what matters for Marx is never this or that person as such: he is concerned with the mass, and only with it. A few generations before Russia became the first living laboratory of Communism, Dostoevski (1821-1881) had already realized that the more one loves this abstract being that is “humanity” or “social class”, the less one loves this concrete and individualized human being that is Peter, Maria, Daniel or Louise [1]. Not surprisingly, in a communist society, disabled people – seen as useless and unsuitable in a world considered to be “perfect” (or at least as the best of all possible worlds) – are a frequent target of discrimination. The final death toll of Communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still unknown, but minimum estimates have been displayed by reliable sources: 20 millions in the USSR, 65 millions in China, 1 million in Vietnam, 2 millions in North Korea, 2 millions in Cambodia, 1 million in the communist States of Central and East Europe, 1,7 million in Africa, 150 thousand in Latin America, 1,5 million in Afghanistan, not forgetting 10 thousand deaths provoked by the International Communist Movement and its many satellites around the world, in their relentless pursuit of power [2]. The number of disabilities caused by Communism, as well as of disabled people persecuted, segregated or killed in communist countries is totally unknown. Notwithstanding, testimonies in this regard are uncountable. The following lines will present and comment a few of them, always keeping in mind that the history of disability is mostly a history made of silences and gaps in general [3].

## **II. IN LEON TROTSKY’S UTOPIAN WORLD, “MAN WILL BECOME IMMENSELY STRONGER, SMARTER, AND WISER”, BUT...**

In North Korea, the most repressive Communist State in the world, disabled people are forbidden to enter – let alone live in – big cities. Dwarves have been systematically “hunted down, arrested and sent to prison camps, where they are not only isolated from the rest of the Korean society, but also prevented from having children” [4]. A few decades ago, more precisely in the 1970s, the Cambodian government sanctioned the killing of the disabled; from Pol Pot, supreme leader of Cambodia on that occasion, is the sentence: “We must give [the Cambodian population] a pure and perfect history of the Party” [5]. These being the circumstances, it is not surprising that in their wars (in which they were always the aggressors), Communists leaders use to give express orders for the tank drivers to run over their own wounded companions [6]. In Laos, one of the poorest countries in the world, disabled people have to cope not only with the almost complete lack of accessibility, but also with numerous social stigmas [7]. As for disability in Vietnam,

Though there is little agreement on how many disabled live in Vietnam, one indisputable fact is that this group is at a huge disadvantage compared to the non-disabled. Data from the United Nations Population Fund shows that the literacy rate for disabled adults is 76.3 percent, compared to 95.2 percent for other adults. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 14 percent, while it is just 4.3 percent for the rest of the population [8].

The communist project of a perfect society to be achieved in an always postponed future has its „consoling“ corollary in the idea of „continuous improvement of the human being“ through reincarnation. In Leon Trotsky’s (1879-1940) utopian world,

Man will become immensely stronger, smarter, and wiser; his body will become more shapely, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become more dynamically dramatic. The average human type will reach the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx. And, furthermore, new summits will rise [9].

There is, as mentioned, a close relationship between Spiritism and Darwin's evolutionist ideas:

The *Origin of Species* was first published in 1859. Herbert Spencer, in his *First Principles* (1862), expanded the range of evolutionary ideas, turning them into a sociological principle. In parallel with this, occultists such as Allan Kardec and Madame Blavatski seized the term 'evolution' and gave it a 'mystical' sense: it is no longer only the amphibians that evolve into reptiles, and these into mammals; the very disembodied souls, in the Beyond, evolve into 'beings of light', climbing the cosmic ladder while the monkeys descended from the trees. Used in a thousand and one senses, the word 'evolution' spreads, and political debates arise, attracting the attention of intellectuals for the ideological and political potential of evolutionism. (...) In Brazil, a country where time goes the other way around, Spiritism, an European fashion that died around the First World War and never reincarnated, is still almost an official religion [10].

Materialistic, Communism assumes that material poverty is the cause of human wickedness; the truth, however, is quite the opposite: it is human wickedness that causes all sorts of misery. Spirit has chronological – as well as ontological – precedence over matter, just as thoughts precede acts: "If we do not live the way we think, we will soon begin to think the way we live", Fulton Sheen used to say and write [11].

As the anthropologist Sarah Phillips revealed in a recent article, the Soviet Union went so far as to deny the existence of disabled people within its borders; segregation was total [12]. In Eastern Europe, the number of disabled people has increased dramatically since the 1986 atomic disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine, the worst in History [13]. As for the communist authorities, neglect and discrimination were the rule in their dealing with babies born disabled as a result of the radioactive contamination in that Ukrainian city located near the border with Belarus [14]. Nation that played a key-role in triggering the collapse of the Soviet Empire between 1989 and 1991, Poland is still trying to recover from the backwardness that Communism has represented for the Polish disabled – not to mention the Polish people as a whole, exception made to the members of the Communist Party and their *protégés*, of course. During the more than four decades that spanned the Cold War and in which Poland was reduced to mere satellite of the U.R.S.S., Polish disabled were forced to enter the category of *invisible*: for the Communist Party, they just did not exist [15].

In communist Romania (1945-1989), there were basically two "solutions" to be employed when it came to disabled people: a) to be cared for by their own families and "hidden from the neighbors' looks"; B) to be sent to State institutions, authentic "dumping ground", where Romanian disabled were literally treated like garbage [16]. A similar situation can be observed in Bulgaria, where the communist "crowded and isolated institutions that once housed its disabled children were closed, but is still a long way from providing the care they need" [17]. In communist Hungary,

disabled people were not compatible with communist ideals of physical strength, production and the triumph of the socialist man over the decadence of the West. While there has been significant change for the better since 1989, people with disabilities have generally continued their relative invisibility and disability issues continue to occupy a very low status on the national agenda [18].

Former and communist Czechoslovakia

had an extensive system of special schools, sheltered workshops and institutions to segregate individuals with disabilities and to keep them hidden from public view. Because of such segregation and isolation, there was little motivation to eliminate the architectural or social barriers in the general society [19].

During its 47 years (1946-1992) of Communism, the whole of Albania become a concentration camp; Albania had its agricultural collectivized and its religion banned; the non-existence of God was prescribed by Albanian law. Nowadays,

In spite of obvious progress, the condition of the country, in all sectors (medical, educational, social, etc.) remains seriously degraded. Infrastructures should be rehabilitated, the facilities are rare or little adapted, and the staff is untrained. Such a context encourages the creation of vulnerability situations. Five categories of people are especially at risk: women, the elderly people, children, the youngsters and the disabled persons [20].

In the German “Democratic” Republic – i.e., East and Communist Germany –, disabled people had to face numerous disadvantages, starting with the educational conditions, in the “equal” socialistic society [21]. Yugoslavia seems to have been the exception that confirms the rule. In Tito’s times (1892-1980), the situation of the disabled was considerably better than in any other communist country. Tito proved that “there was life after defying Stalin” [22].

### **III. IN COMMUNISM, MAN IS IN FACT “A MECHANIZED ANT IN THIS ANTHILL THAT IS THE STATE”**

Communism, instead of creating a classless society, accentuates social divisions, creating abysses between them; it is all about the absolute dehumanization of man: “Communism denies God. Denying the Spirit, man no longer imprints his personality on things; he no longer has personality; he is reduced to a tool of the State, a mechanized ant in this anthill that is the State” [23]. The principle of total State planning and of the inevitable granting of full powers to State officials necessarily leads to the creation of privileged castes and institutionalized corruption. In communist China, as Henry Kissinger had observed, everything came to depend upon “some kind of personal relationship” with State officials, a fact that never ceases to be a great irony of History: “vaunted as the path to a classless society, Communism generated a privileged class of feudal proportions” [24]. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) chose as his model the ancient Emperor Qin Shi (221-210 BC), notorious for his acts of perversity, e.g., to order the burying alive of 460 scholars and lawyers. Enemy of the past, the first Chinese emperor caused all the classical literature of his time to be burned (the mere fact of mentioning it was criminal offense punishable by death penalty), condemned to death twenty thousand feudal lords, and sacrificed tens (maybe hundreds) of thousands of Chinese lives for the construction of the first Great Wall [25]. In Maoist China, by its turn, “a person was arrested not because she was guilty of something; having been arrested, she was immediately guilty of something” [26]. In nowadays China, where abortion and State-enforced sterilization are part of daily life, it is common practice not only discriminating, but also financially exploiting the disabled. Born in 1971, Chen Guangcheng is a blind activist and rights advocate for Chinese disabled people, he himself blind and Chinese. Having publically protested against this state of affairs in China, he was soon considered by the Chinese authorities as “enemy of the People” and ended up in a Chinese prison. Thanks to the intermediation and support of the US Embassy in China and the US Catholic Church, Chen Guangcheng, a self-taught lawyer, emigrated to the United States, where he lives and works in peace [27].

Let it be remembered that taking profit of the disabled and the less fortunate in general is not an isolated phenomenon. Far from such an assumption, we find precedents of it in pre-Columbian America. Within the Inca Empire, which had more than one affinity with Stalinism, subjugated populations were required to pay taxes; indeed,

The Inca Empire (Quechua: *Tawantinsuyu*, lit. “The Four Regions”), also known as the Incan Empire and the Inka Empire, was the largest empire in pre-Columbian America, and possibly the largest empire in the world in the early 16th century. The administrative, political and military center of the empire was located in Cusco in modern-day Peru. The Inca civilization arose from the highlands of Peru sometime in the early 13th century. Its last stronghold was conquered by the Spanish in 1572. From 1438 to 1533, the Incas incorporated a large portion of western South America, centered on the Andean Mountains, using conquest and peaceful assimilation, among other methods. At its largest, the empire joined Peru, large parts of modern Ecuador, western and south central Bolivia, northwest Argentina, north and central Chile and a

small part of southern Colombia into a state comparable to the historical empires of Eurasia. (...)The Incan economy has been described as “feudal, slave, socialist (here one may choose between socialist paradise or socialist tyranny)” [28].

According to the Inca Law, the elderly, the poor, the sick and the disabled were not spared: everyone had to give something to the tax collector, even if all they had to give were lice they removed from their own heads [29]. More: in Inca society, a disabled man could only marry a disabled woman and vice-versa. However paradoxical as it may seem, this was a reflex of the inbred mentality of the very Inca nobility, in which consanguine marriages were the rule – a rule that usually promotes the most diverse types of disability, notably mental retardation [30]. This reminds me of situation that still occurs in Goiás Velho, a Brazilian city characterized by the great number of victims of mental deficiency caused by inbreeding. In her recent studies on the subject, the Brazilian psychoanalyst Marilucia Melo Meireles attempts to deny the obvious, already proven by medical studies: that inbreeding tends to provoke mental disability. The author reveals, on the other hand, some true data, e.g., that those victims usually suffer all kinds of abuses [31]. I remember a serious report, made in the 1980s, in which it was asserted that Goiás Velho’s inbreeding had become a “cultural practice”, stimulated by its inhabitants with the firm purpose of obtaining “reliable slaves”. Needless to say that “a lot has yet to be done to provide full integration of disabled people with Brazilian society as whole” [32].

In the prison-island of Cuba (whose Communism has been the pattern *par excellence* followed by Brazilian and many other Latin-American leaders especially since the 1980’s), despite the myth of the “excellence of Cuban medicine” (one of the countless lies invented with the objective of magnifying the tyrannical regime imposed by Fidel Castro on Cuban citizens), a disabled person who does not belong to the Party elite is, more often than not, in a situation of helplessness [33]. Venezuela, another satellite of Havana, “has been in the center of attention of international news for various reasons. Crimes, violence, inflation and shortages of food and other basic necessities have been the topics most often covered by the media” [34]. As for the Venezuelan disabled, their needs and rights are far from being a priority in the eyes of the government [35]. Another “Bolivarian State”, Bolivia is also far from being an “earthly paradise” for the disabled. Recently, pro-accessibility and equality of rights demonstrations in La Paz were harshly repressed by the police:

In La Paz, regular demonstrations have been organized [by Bolivian disabled people]. The police response has been heavy-handed and involved water cannon and tear gas. “They plastered us with water,” Guarita says. “After we fall out of our wheelchairs, we can’t get back up. But still, they kept shooting us with jets, savagely, vindictively. It was as if they wanted to drown people” [36].

#### IV. “FROM NOW ON, WHAT IS MINE IS MINE, WHAT IS YOURS IS OURS”

To close, I can not help making reference to one of the best definitions of Communism I was ever have introduced to. It came from an Albanian with whom I shared a taxi to cross the border with Macedonia. The year was 2009. According to him, Communism is just like that: “One day, a member of the Communist Party knocks on your door and says ‘From now on, what is mine is mine, what is yours is ours’”. And from that day on, you become a slave of the Communist State. In what regards the future of disabled people in the communist societies, to that there is no easy answer.

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