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RETHINKING DISABILITY

the global impact of the International
Year of Disabled Persons (1981)
in historical perspective

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RE THIN KING DISA BILITY

the global impact of
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perspective

Approximately 10%-15% of the world's population is estimated to be disabled and this number is expected to rise in the next few decades. **How did disability become a global concern and how can the concept be understood in a multicultural world?**

This **European Research Council**-funded project seeks to answer these questions by undertaking the first study of the far-reaching implications of the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), a landmark event organized by the United Nations in 1981, which appears to have gone virtually unrecognized in scholarship. Its hypothesis is that the International Year, together with its counterpart, the International Decade of Disabled Persons (1982-1993) was the most significant watershed in the modern history of disability, which placed this issue into a global context. By focusing on four closely-related themes, the project examines the interaction and tension between the universal and particularistic aspects of disability.

IYDP & HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSES

By catalyzing pre-existing tendencies, the International Year shifted disability from the margins to the mainstream of the international human rights agenda. Non-binding resolutions paved the way for the first legally enforceable UN Convention in 2006. The project explores the challenges that the employment of human



rights discourses has presented in regions characterized by repressive regimes, extreme poverty, displacement and lack of access to basic healthcare.

IYDP AS A CATALYST OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The International Year was marked not only by celebrations, but also by vigorous protests in several countries. The official rhetoric associated with the event raised expectations significantly, but these could not be met in a period which coincided with the first major financial crisis in post-war history and the advent of neoliberal ideology. This tension catalyzed the politicization of disabled citizens, who realized that they were better equipped than anyone else to understand their own needs. The project documents the different trajectories of emancipation in various parts of the world.

IYDP'S IMPACT ON EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE FORMATION OF A NEW CULTURAL IDENTITY

The Year inspired disabled people to think about their status in new ways. It encouraged them to no longer hide their condition and take pride in it. Disability gradually evolved into a distinct identity, giving rise to an alternative lifestyle and unleashing artistic potentials. The project assesses the ways in which the IYDP influenced everyday life experiences, galvanized identity formation and inspired the emergence of a distinct subculture.

DISABILITY GOES GLOBAL: TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGES AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

In 1980, in preparation for the Year, WHO produced the first classification of disability which focused on the individual and assumed that equality, independence and personal self-fulfillment are universally desirable values. The

conscience of the international community was stirred during the Year, spawning numerous governmental and non-governmental initiatives in 'developing' countries. The project examines how such development projects interacted and conflicted with the local environment in regions where the disabled person is seen as part of a larger whole: the caregiving family and kinship networks.



SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

By undertaking comparative case studies, the project offers a cross-sectional view of the activities at international, national, regional and local levels worldwide. It involves research in the archives of the UN and its specialized agencies (WHO, ILO, UNESCO, UNHCR etc.), in national and institutional archives and in those of disabled people's organizations. At the grassroots level it utilizes memoirs, visual material and artwork (photographs, comic strips, protest songs etc.) and oral history interviews.

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

The project provides an unconventional lens through which to illuminate how the later stages of the Cold War played out globally and how the care of disabled citizens constituted a point of ideological rivalry. It historicizes and relativizes the concepts of autonomy and independence and instead emphasizes shared vulnerability and interdependence. It brings the hitherto neglected concept of disability to the attention of mainstream historical scholarship and demonstrates that its analytical potentials are comparable to those of class, race and gender.



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