

Book Review

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism

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Chapman, R. (ed.) (2023). *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Dr Robert Chapman's *Empire of Normality* is a meticulous contribution to the field of neurodiversity studies, charting the rise of the concept of neurodivergence through the history of normality ideology. Following the pioneering work of Remi Yergeau (2018), Nick Walker (2021) and autistic rights activists including Jim Sinclair (1993) and Kassiane Asasumasu, *Empire of Normality* galvanises the project of neurodivergent liberation by undertaking the first historical analysis of neurodiversity itself.

Theorising a different route out of neurodivergent oppression than that offered by the 'liberal, rights-based' reformism of mainstream neurodiversity activism (p. 7), Chapman offers a practical theoretical outlook for all those subjugated by "cognitive capitalism" (p. 115) in the post-Fordist, high-tech economies of the Global North (p. ix). Making a renewed case for Marxism as a critical disability paradigm, this outlook is presented in the form of Neurodivergent Marxism: a framework for analysing the economic apparatus undergirding dominant understandings of neurodivergence-as-pathology, which naturalises cultural associations between productivity and normality.

Chapman has shown the undeniable reality of the neurological domination driving workers' pursuits of 'normal' cognitive functioning in the Global North, in a text which lifts the veil on the widespread stress, panic and trauma which now characterise our emotional lives (p. 164). Liberation from this state will not be possible, Chapman argues, until the economic structures which constrain the pathology paradigm's acceptable ranges of mental and physical 'normality' are finally, collectively brought down.

Chapman's articulation of the empire of normality is compelling for the accessibility of its central thesis, and for the sheer scale of the historical narrative which it systematically sets out. The book has noticeably been designed with lay readers as well as academic audiences in mind, conscientiously yet concisely laying out each of the key theoretical concepts it employs such that those without expert knowledge of political economy or critical disability studies will not be put off. Chapman has been careful to create a theoretical resource of use to scholars and students of neurodiversity and disability studies, as well as community organisers, support workers and neurodivergent readers themselves seeking an understanding of themselves beyond dominant models of mental distress as pathology.

Beginning with conceptions of physical and mental health as matters of harmony, in a wide array of cultures across the ancient world (p. 23), Chapman charts the advent of normality as a measure of health through mechanical understandings of the human body that arose alongside the technological advancements of the Enlightenment. Taking Cartesian analogies of the body as machine, alongside Adolphe Quetelet's statistical development of 'the average man', Chapman shows how measures of human normality went from fringe ideas to

necessary ideological foundations for the emerging capitalist economy. As the ‘normal man’ began to be shaped by the Industrial Revolution’s requirements of the worker’s body and mind, mental and physical ‘abnormality’ and sub-normality came concurrently into form; concretised through the eugenicist Francis Galton’s efforts “to naturalise the cognitive, economic, gendered, and racial hierarchies of capitalist and imperialist Britain.” (p. 52)

Chapman’s materialist analysis of the anti-psychiatry movement stands out as an especially valuable chapter, for its illustration of how state capitalism inevitably subsumes efforts to effect neurodivergent revolution when normality ideology is not accounted for. Chapter 5 details the legacy of Thomas Szasz, forerunner of the antipsychiatry movement until its culmination in the 1970s, revealing the distinctly neoliberal foundations of his convictions that mental illnesses were no more than the ‘problems in living’ of those “pretend[ing] to be disabled by illnesses that do not exist.” (p. 80) Chapman persuasively attributes the failure of the movement to its misunderstanding of the nature of psychiatric harm; arguing that the social control of patients did not stem from misunderstood notions of mental illness, but from institutions and practices generated out of “the broader neuronormative logics of the capitalist system” (pp. 82-83).

Chapman’s historical account guides readers step-by-step to Chapter 8’s dénouement, at the generation of widespread neurodivergent disablement under post-Fordism. The rise of the service economy has been predicated on a degree of cognitive and emotional labour never before necessitated of the workforce, pushing more workers outside the boundaries of ‘normality’ and into neurodivergent disablement than ever before. Although such an analysis might appear to suggest a causal link between oppressive working conditions and disabilities such as ADHD and autism – and hence, a curative route out of such disabilities completely – Chapman shows how late-capitalist neuro-normativity stifled “the development and thriving of even those who diverge in a relatively minimal way from the ever-more restrictive cognitive norms of the age” (p. 117). Neurodivergence, as we call it today, is historically and culturally relative; yet is always a lived reality. Extending social model approaches to neurodivergent liberation, Chapman here illustrates the limits of accessibility for those who can never be made to live neuro-normatively.

Readers should not expect a fully fleshed-out strategy for overcoming the domination of normality ideology from the author. On the contrary, Chapman anticipates that their book will be succeeded by “many years or decades” of “mass consciousness-raising, critique, and collective imagining” of what a post-normal future might look like (p. 160). It is notable that Chapman leaves room for imagination as a liberatory strategy, despite situating their framework as a response to neurodiversity theory’s limited focus on changing individual thinking (p. 137). Alongside recent cases for autistic narrative agency and neuroqueer embodiment as neurodivergent resistance strategies (Smilges, 2022; Stenning, 2024), the political-economic analysis offered here will be most useful to neurodivergent workers in the Global North, whilst our collective understandings of ‘neurodivergent’ in this region remain so strongly adhered to perceived deficiencies in productivity, time management, attention and sensory sensitivity.

Empire of Normality is a catalytic, clear-eyed view of the mechanisms by which so many workers in the Global North have been rendered divergent from the neurological norms of our time. Anyone who has ever felt the pain of being deemed ‘abnormal’ will hear its urgent call to divest from the myth of mental normality, and to strive instead towards a truly revolutionary neurodiversity movement.

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