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## Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation

When thinking about normality, we in disability studies have generally made the error, I would say, of confining our discussions more or less exclusively to impairment and disease. But there is really a larger picture that includes disability along with any nonstandard behaviors. Language usage, which is as much a physical function as any other somatic activity, has become subject to an enforcement of normalcy, as have sexuality, gender, racial identity, national identity, and so on. As Georges Canguilhem writes, "There is no difference between the birth of grammar [ . . . ] and the establishment of the metric system. [ . . . ] It began with grammatical norms and ended with morphological norms of men and horses for national defense, passing through industrial and sanitary norms" (150).

Let me backtrack here for a moment and rehearse the argument I made in *Enforcing Normalcy* so that I can make clear to readers of this essay the direction in which I am going. In that book, I claimed that before the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, Western society lacked a concept of normalcy. Indeed, the word *normal* appeared in English only about 150 years ago, and in French fifty years before that. Before the rise of the concept of normalcy, there appears not to have been a concept of the normal; instead the regnant paradigm was one revolving around the word *ideal*. If people have a concept of the ideal, then all human beings fall below that standard and so exist in varying degrees of imperfection. The key point is that in a culture of the ideal, physical imperfections are

seen not as absolute but part of a descending continuum from top to bottom. No one, for example, can have an ideal body, and therefore no one has to have an ideal body. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, we begin to see the development of statistics and of the concept of the bell curve, called early on the normal curve. With the development of statistics comes the idea of a norm. In this paradigm, the majority of bodies fall under the main umbrella of the curve. Those that do not are at the extremes—and therefore are abnormal. Thus, there is an imperative placed on people to conform, to fit in, under the rubric of normality. Instead of being resigned to a less than ideal body in the earlier paradigm, people in the past 150 years have been encouraged to strive to be normal, to huddle under the main part of the curve.

Is it a coincidence, then, that normalcy and linguistic standardization begin at roughly the same time? If we look at that confluence in one area in particular, we see that language and normalcy come together under the larger category of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, the rise of the modern nation took place largely in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the polyglotism that had existed in a politically controlled area was standardized into a single national language. Without this linguistic homogeneity, the notion of the modern nation-state would have had great difficulty coming into being. In addition, national literatures, both in prose and poetry, were made possible through the standardization of languages, the prescriptive creation of normal language practices.

While few now object to Anderson's thesis that language practices had to be standardized, homogenized, and normalized to allow for the creation of the modern nation-state, I think that the next step, which I propose in this essay, might be more objectionable: that for the formation of the modern nation-state not simply language but also bodies and bodily practices had to be standardized, homogenized, and normalized.<sup>1</sup> A national physical type, a national ethical type, and an antinational physical type had to be constructed. We see much work done in the nineteenth century on racial studies, studies of pathology, deviance, and so on—all with the aim of creating the bourgeois subject in opposition to all abnormal occurrences.

We need to think through ableism in a somewhat different way than we have in the past. Rather than conceptualize it as a trait or habit of thought on the part of certain somatically prejudiced people, we can consider it to be one aspect of a far-ranging change in European and perhaps global culture and ideology that is part of Enlightenment

thought and part of modernization. Further, we can begin to move away from the victim-victimizer scenario, with which ableism, along with racism, sexism, and the other isms, has been saddled and which leaves so little room for agency. Instead, one can see ableism as an aspect of modifications of political and social practice that have both positive and negative implications.

Let us look at the development of bourgeois representative democracy as an example of how ideological structures can shape notions of the body. The feudal model of society encouraged, for its own ends, the notion of inequality, that the king or queen represented an ideal below which all subjects fell. The feudal system was based on the hierarchical notion of perfection, power, and wealth massed at the top of the social and political pyramid, in less abundance among the aristocracy, and even less among the peasantry. This model looks to a justification of such inequality in religion, in the patriarchal family, and in the violence inherent in visible trappings of state. Enlightenment writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson rejected the concept of an idealized ruler holding all the power and wealth in favor of a representative government that postulated individuals who were equal to all other individuals. Thus the ruling entity, whose power derived from a social contract, was theoretically made up of individuals who were not different in kind from one another. Thus, for example, a well-known statue of George Washington can show a button missing on his coat without fear of diminishing his authority, which derives not from his embodying an ideal but from the delegated power of a social contract.

Yet the notion of an individual equal to other individuals, as expressed in the phrase of the Declaration of Independence for the United States of America that "all men are created equal," has at base several contradictions. First, how is it possible that someone can be an individual and yet be the same as other individuals? This paradox is contained in the word *identity*, which signifies both individual existence and similarity with others. In order to postulate a government, at least theoretically, in which citizens are individuals equal to other individuals, you need a notion of the average citizen. This being is seen as representative of all citizens. Likewise, in a representative democracy, you have to postulate that the elected officials represent each of these equal individuals.

The word *represent* conveys the next paradox. If the elected representative is a stand-in for any citizen, then he or she must act to convey

the opinion of the individual. So the representative must both convey and literally be, or represent the existence of, the citizen. But for a government to be truly representative, there would have to be one elected official for each citizen. The notion of an individual representative representing groups of citizens contains the fundamental paradox of representative democracy: How is it possible to represent an individual citizen when you are elected by a majority or plurality of a segment of voters?

None of these issues were a problem for feudal or monarchical governments, since no representation of citizens had to take place. You had to postulate not individuals but rather groups, classes, realms of control. But in order to represent a citizen—as a painter or a novelist would, for example—you must visualize, create, postulate a simulacrum of that citizen.

Here is where we see the development of the average citizen in the literary form, of the average character in the novel, a genre that is devoted to the depiction of daily life, the quotidian: the average citizen as hero rather than the epic hero as larger-than-life victor. Thus the novel is a form centrally concerned with the norm.

We may say of the norm, as a concept, that it is the perfect ideological and technical solution to the paradox of the early modern individual. The norm provides an efficient explanation that reconciles the contradiction required in representative democracy concerning the notion of the represented individual. The problem of how is it possible to be an individual equal to other individuals and the further problem of how to represent such individuals are solved through the concept of the norm and the bell curve. Instantiations of individuals become statistically possible. Each entry has an existence and integrity, each person is an individual with his or her place on the bell curve. Yet, at the same time, each person is part of a continuum and fits into the whole. In addition, there is an average, a normal citizen who can be described. These are the hypothetical people whose cumulative characteristics fall under the center of the curve. Thus, the concept of the norm permits the idea of individual variation while enforcing a homogeneous standard or average.<sup>2</sup>

Further, with the concept of a norm, representation is made possible, since the average citizen can be seen, postulated, consulted in this way. Individuals can be represented in government as a collective. Indeed, the very idea of voting in an election for a representative has much to do with the formulation of an ideology of the norm. A collective voting decision is nothing more than the tabulation of individual variations. When the vote is taken, the result is the election of a person who represents a

norm of opinion or sentiment. Thus the majority or plurality vote describes a kind of bell curve whose distribution can be graphed. The House of Representatives in the United States, for example, is supposed to be a kind of living embodiment of the norm. Representative democracy is normalcy or, to try a neologism, normocracy.

Bourgeois, representative democracy implies normalcy—the two are really one form of government. As Canguilhem writes, “Between 1759, when the word ‘normal’ appeared [in French], and 1834, when the word ‘normalized’ appeared, a normative class had won the power to identify [ . . . ] the function of social norms, whose content it determined, with the use that that class made of them” (151). Democracy needs the illusion of equality, and equality needs the fiction of the equal or average citizen. So with the creation of representative democracy comes the need for an ideology that will support and generate the aims of normalcy.

If democracy fosters notions of individualism, equality, and liberty, it also requires an ideology that reconciles those aims with the aims of capitalism, under whose watchful eye democracy is shaped. Capitalism conceptualizes equality as equality among workers rather than as financial equality—since the latter would eliminate the difference in capital between ruling classes and workers and therefore eliminate capitalism. But there is a fundamental paradox in Enlightenment thinking. Enlightenment philosophers have argued for equality, freedom, and liberty in an ethical sense, hoping to have a society in which all people are theoretically free as regards rights. However, the unequal distribution of wealth required by capitalism starkly contradicts that ethical goal. So capitalism must explain logically or through ideology why it is just and fair that some people have so much wealth and by virtue of that wealth so much power to influence government.

The concepts behind normalcy allow such an explanation. If you take the bell curve as a model, you notice that all variations fall into the unremitting logic of this distribution. Indeed, even random instantiations fall into a bell curve, as Francis Galton demonstrated through his construction of the quincunx, a device that allowed steel balls to fall randomly through a series of pegs and accumulate at the bottom. Galton could demonstrate that because the balls always accumulated in the form of the bell curve, the normal curve was in effect a law of nature. Therefore, it is logical to say that something like individual wealth will conform to the curve of normal distribution—on the one side will be the poor; in the middle, people of means; and on the other extreme, the

very wealthy. So the very theory that allows the individual to be instantiated in the collective on an equal basis also allows for wealth to be unequally distributed. Equality and normalcy demand, by the unbending laws of mathematics, that there will always be inequality.

Equality among citizens is therefore based not on an ethical notion but on a quasi-scientific one. Once the ethical is reconditioned by the statistical, equality is transformed. Indeed, the operative notion of equality, especially as it applies to the working classes, is really one of interchangeability. As the average man can be constructed, so can the average worker. All working bodies are equal to all other working bodies, because they are interchangeable. This interchangeability, particularly in nineteenth-century factories, means that workers’ bodies have been conceptualized as identical. And able-bodied workers came to be interchangeable with able-bodied citizens. This ideological module has obvious references to the issue of disability. If all workers are equal and all workers are citizens, then all citizens must have standard bodies to be able to fit into the industrial-political notion of democracy, equality, and normality. Clearly people with disabilities pose problems to work situations in which labor is standardized and bodies conceptualized as interchangeable.<sup>3</sup>

The patient or citizen governed by the norm of representation and by the hegemony of normalcy passes, in one lifetime, through a series of institutions—day-care; primary, secondary, and higher educational facilities; corporate employment; hospitals; marriage and family; managed care; and finally nursing homes—all of which are based around legally, juridically, medically, and culturally normalizing concepts. The interlocking demands of these normalizing institutions are overwhelming and even totalitarian. Has there ever been such total control of people in history? Arguably even in the most unfair feudal rule by a single all-powerful despot the ability to control all aspects of the mind and body seems trivial compared with the rule of normalcy as it has developed over the past two hundred years.

In the midst of this system, the person with disabilities is only one casualty among many. Under normalcy, no one is or can be normal, just as no one is or can be equal. All have to work hard to make it seem that they conform, and so the person with disabilities is singled out as a dramatic case of not belonging. This identification makes it easier for the rest to think they fit the paradigm.

As the media unfold endless tales of people with disabilities, take alone many Academy Award nominees: *Shine*, *The English Patient*,

*Slingblade*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *I Am Sam*, all disability films—for the examination and comfort of people who believe themselves to be able-bodied. Society continues, groaning, to single out disability as the other and to define itself by that other. Whether we are talking about AIDS, low-birth-weight babies, special education issues, euthanasia, and the thousand other topics listed in the newspapers every day, the examination, discussion, anatomizing of this form of difference is nothing less than people's desperate attempt to consolidate their normality. If more effort was spent on describing the variety of human experience and less in trying to categorize into forms (literary and visual) that proscribe anomalous states of physical identity, we would be able to explore the ways that society, narrative, and politics work to oppress bodies of difference.

#### NOTES

1. I am following Foucault's lead in this claim. Foucault talked about the control of deviant bodies—criminal, sexual, and medical (*Discipline, Birth, and History*). He never fully accounted for why these bodies were considered deviant, never really explained the ontology of deviance. My emphasis here is to speak of deviance as pressured by concepts of the norm. In other words, the creation of the modern sense of deviance for bodies is located in the work of statisticians, medical doctors, and eugenicists attempting to normalize physical variation.
2. You can see how easily the ideology of the norm then permits a management of individual variation into ideas of biodiversity that make up the theory of evolution. As soon as some variation becomes dominant, the bell curve just shifts over. So, for example, as giraffes' necks get longer through evolution, the data on giraffes shift, with shorter-necked giraffes being seen as anomalous rather than the norm.
3. It is interesting that this formulation of an average worker is a necessity not only for capitalism but also for socialism and communism. Marx, for example, used Quetelet's idea of the average man to come up with his formulations of labor value or average wages. For more on this, see Davis, *Enforcing* 28–29.

## Autobiographical Subjects