

Book Review: *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* by Jasbir Puar

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Political Theory/Disability Studies

In *The Right to Maim*, Jasbir Puar combines assemblage theory, queer theory, disability studies and feminist theory to map the relationship between debilitation, disability, capacitation, and racial capitalism. Taking the Black Lives Matter movement, Free Palestine Movement and the “It Gets Better” campaign as her units of analysis, Puar makes an argument that mainstream disability studies have and continue to risk foreclosing how regulatory mechanisms such as the American with Disabilities Association (ADA) produce and maintain debility globally. Her central argument is that debility which ranges from physical incapacitation, lack of access to enabling environment, food insecurity and lack of social support are biopolitical ends unto themselves; are investments in neoliberal capitalism and a means of preventing active forms of resistance to the racial capitalist system. Under the rubric of debility and capacitation, from “Hands Up, Don't shoot” to “Treatment without Checkpoints” (preface to post-script), Puar connects what she argues in the U.S. context as the ‘right to kill’ with the Palestinian context of the ‘right to maim’ (injure), establishing both as biopolitical control. Important for Puar is debunking the notion of debility and capacitation as binary and reframing them as interdependent. Thus she writes that “[they] exist in a mutually reinforcing constellation, are often overlapping or coexistent, and that debilitation is a necessary component that both exposes and sutures the non-disabled/disabled binary.” (xv)

Puar's introduction, as well as her first three chapters, lay the ground for an understanding of how resistance to hegemonic white supremacy "might be stripped without actually terminating a population" (136) (she frames this as a question in chapter 4). By looking at queer suicide in the context of "slow death," the relationship between disability rights movement and transgender activism, passing and piecing, accident and mutilation, disaster capitalism and pinkwashing, Puar exposes some problematics of initiatives seemingly based on the idea of human rights and inclusiveness. She argues that the distinction between those produced as disabled and those who are not should not be cause for celebration. Quoting Mignus she writes:

As organizers, we need to think of access with an understanding of disability justice, moving away from an equality-based model of sameness and 'we are just like you' to a model of disability that embraces difference, confronts privilege and challenges what is considered 'normal' on every front. We don't simply want to join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them (16).

Puar analysis here is in line with women of color feminists who have similarly articulated the "dangers" of the inclusion narrative. Further, Puar comments on the operation of biopolitical control as most pernicious and efficient through "reifying intersectional identity frames- these frames that will hinge on discrete notions of inclusion and exclusion- as the most pertinent ones for political intervention, thus obfuscating forms of control that insidiously include in order to exclude, and exclude in order to include" (23). To insist on equality and inclusion would be to reify the hegemonic, ableist, white cis-heteronormativity that is the very ground from which the right to maim emerges and racial capitalism flourishes. Puar's examination of what she calls the medical-industrial complex (illustrated on page 17) is particularly helpful for making these connections.

Turning away from an analysis of bodies and groups as historically and geographically available for killing and maiming, she argues in chapter 4 that some populations are not injured as collateral damage but are targeted for injury. This targeting is the core of what she refers to as the ‘sovereign right to maim.’ The central arguments of this chapter, which is the meat and meeting of her ideas are: (1) maiming is productive through the profitability of a rehabilitative economy (the medical industrial complex) (128); (2) the interfacing of physical enclosure and virtual high tech enclosure is the epitome of an asphyxiatory regime of power (135); (3) under occupation, distance is stretched and manipulated to create an entire population with mobility disabilities (136); (4) maiming expands biopolitics beyond simply the question of the ‘right of death and power over life’- it is a primary vector through which biopolitical control is deployed in colonized space (136); (5) maiming is not merely another version of slow death or death-in-life but is a status unto itself, a status that triangulates the hierarchies of living and dying that is standardly deployed in theorization of biopolitics (137); and (6) that maiming functions not as an incomplete death or an accidental assault on life, but as the end goal in the dual production of permanent disability via the infliction of harm and the attrition of the life support systems that might allow populations to heal from the harm (143).

Aside from the apparent use of this chapter to highlight the atrocities of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the “will not let die” imperative of settler colonialism, Puar does the work of reorienting our approach and understanding of the functionality of disability and debility in other geographies and temporalities. To see debility through her lens deepens our understanding of racialization and the weaponization of services and access not just to health but also to job security and education. For example, we might think about debility as linked to

carcerality, the prison industrial complex- as part of racial capitalism. Outside of the obvious and deliberate targeting of black and other non-white bodies for death and incarceration we can read debility here as strain- a heightened vulnerability to engage in “criminal” activity for survival. How do these bodies rendered as criminal support neoliberal capitalism? We might even go further to link this to other areas including immigration, where especially undocumented migrants- who are produced as criminals are trying to escape debilitating conditions in their home countries. It is to this end that Puar writes “ the right to maim allows us to differently apprehend the wielding of Israeli state power while also challenging the current limits of biopolitical theorizing such that it may revise our thinking on other times and other places” (144).

Finally, this paper highlights the connection Puar maps between debility and resistance through her examination of the ‘stunting’ of Palestinian Children via caloric deficits. Her analysis lays bare debility as a pre-emptive strike against active forms of resistance. She asks “ what are productive, resistant, indeed creative effects of such attempts to squash Palestinian vitality, fortitude, and revolt?” (136) . Maiming here is preventative of future resistance and uprisings against occupation but could be applied to other geographies where the goal might not be to physically or nutritionally stunt but to limit access to material, social, economic and political avenues of mobility and empowerment.

The Right to Maim is thought-provoking. Its incorporation of frameworks from Foucault (the power to keep alive), Lauren Berlant (slow death), Deleuze and Guattari (accident and mutilation), Alexendar Wehiliye (habeas Viscus- human, non-human and not quite human), David Michelle and Sharon Synder (futurity), Achille Mmembe (necropolitics) and Gayatri

Spivak (can the subaltern speak), while not always clear and accessible in terms of language, helps her to make the convincing case that disability and debility are productive to neoliberal capitalism and cannot be untied from other racializing processes.