

In her book *The Right to Maim*, Jasbir Puar introduces the concept “debility,” distinguished from disability. The former is a process of slow wearing out, while the latter centralizes the event of becoming disabled and the entitlement afterward. In the disability framework, disability is exceptional, a condition caused by an accident that may affect anyone and for which we should blame no one. Disability framework ignores that most disabilities around the world are generated by wars, capitalism, and colonial occupation. In these cases, entitlement is less likely. Under late capitalism, most people are in the betweenness of able-bodied and disabled in which people are neither recognized as disabled, nor able enough to meet the neoliberal demands. They are in the “debilitated state in relation to what one’s bodily capacity is imaged to be” (Puar 2009, 167). By debility, she refers to a process that

“foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled. While the latter concept creates and hinges on a narrative of before and after for individuals who will eventually be identified as disabled, the former comprehends those bodies that are sustained in a perpetual state of debilitation precisely through foreclosing the social, cultural, and political translation to disability” (2017, xiii).

Debilitation is a useful concept as it covers people who do not constitute a disability identity. They may or may not feel they are disabled despite body impairments. They may feel disabled at one moment but healthy at the next. They share the characteristics of having some kinds of ongoing condition, some chronic illness. Writing on Botswana, Julie Livingston has a similar definition of debilitation, which “denotes here [in Botswana] both the frailties associated with chronic illness and aging and as the impairments underlying the word disability” (2005, 6). Both scholars use debility in a broader way, referring to any functional differences or losses in the body.

Debility is a chronic state that occurs largely in the global south and among people of color, for whom it is at best invisible, at worst viewed as the result of individual lifestyle choices. These people manifest Berlant’s notion of slow death, in which “the bodies...[are] more fatigued, in more pain, less capable of ordinary breathing and working, and die earlier than the average for higher-income workers” (2007, 775). According to Puar (2017), debility in the global south and among people of color is the product of the disability rights framework and policy set by white disabled people in the global north. She suggests these disabled people “impel the investment of service economies and neoliberal strategies of intervention and rehabilitation” (77). The disability framework obscures the debilitating effects of capitalist exploitation. Entitled disabled people became profitable objects for the health care industry at the expense of worn-out waged workers.

These worn-out waged workers (in Puar's terminology, the debilitated) are disabled but excluded from accessing health care and rehabilitation projects.

What makes disability a problematic concept for Jasbir Puar is not only its relation with capitalism but with nations' attempts to distinguish themselves from others and valorize their past. Which impairments are deemed worthy of entitlements depends on the state's pursuit of political legitimacy. To determine who is recognized as disabled is to ask who is entitled to resources. As such, disabled bodies can be capitalized because disability entitlement guarantees economic and social inclusion. In other words, disability determination demonstrates both how a state simultaneously legitimizes some bodies and delegitimizes others, and what the consequence is of making such a distinction. Throughout the twentieth century, the distinction between the deserving and undeserving guided U.S. disability policy. The government did not cover those in need, but those who "deserved," mainly maimed veterans and maimed workers (Scotch 2001; Adams, Reiss and Berlin, 2016). Other people with disabilities fell into the category of the undeserving, who were thought to incur impairments through self-destructive habits such as alcoholism.

Work cited

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