

**A PRIVILEGED BODYMIND: THE  
ENTANGLEMENT OF ABLEISM AND  
CAPITALISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

When identifying and addressing the causes and consequences of ableism, it is necessary to consider capitalistic influences. When considering the inequalities produced or perpetuated by capitalism, it is necessary to consider ableism. Central to this connection are knowledge production systems that favor certain bodyminds and means of production. From these systems emerge both knowledge claims about ideal bodyminds as well as material artifacts and other technologies reproducing these claims. While the context of our argument is primarily that of the United States, it is our opinion that the linkages between ableism and capitalism have critical import elsewhere. Additionally, the application of anarchist thought to the ableist-capitalist relationship helps advance incisive critiques rooted in social constructionism and the interrogation of inequities rooted in a shared knowledge inheritance. This perspective piece aims not to be prescriptive, but to highlight oppressive linkages heretofore relegated to afterthought.

*Keywords:* ableism, capitalism, disability, bodymind, knowledge, anarchism

## INTRODUCTION

In economics, technology development, and a range of other academic sites of inquiry, researchers work to illuminate the social impact on the creation of wealth. Alperovitz and Daly (2008) state, “At the heart of this revolution in understanding is a fundamental reconsideration of the extraordinary role of knowledge in economic growth—and of how ever-increasing knowledge, accumulating across the generations, is central to the creation of all wealth.” Indeed, this accumulation has manifold economic impacts, as well as political and cultural ones. In light of knowledge-driven revolutions throughout industry (e.g., medicine and food production) one forecast is the effects of knowledge accumulation will also impact “the distribution of income, wealth, and power throughout society.” Moreover, given the social contribution to wealth generation in the United States (U.S.), a thoroughly capitalist and quintessentially neoliberal country, it becomes increasingly untenable for individuals to make unquestionable claims about “earning” and “deserving” (pp. 1-3). Now, at a time when America’s three richest individuals possess as much wealth as half the country’s population (i.e., its poorest half), and when 82% of the wealth created last year funneled upward to a mere 1% of people, globally, wealth increases because of structured social frameworks and knowledge production systems—and very few enjoy the spoils (Pimentel et al., 2018).

Some theorists yet believe it possible to utilize capitalism for utilitarian, and even democratic, purposes. Hobbes (1651) addresses this in *Leviathan*:

[In nature] there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by the sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and

removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (as cited in Reich, 2016, pp. 4-5)

Essentially, competition in civilization is not marked by survival but rules. Figures and organizations with authority—whether centralized governments or scientific authorities—engender rules, which create markets; thus, markets can ideally benefit all. Reich states, “A market—any market—requires that government make and enforce the rules of the game. In most modern democracies, such rules emanate from legislatures, administrative agencies, and courts.” Reich’s point, ultimately, is that government is not an encumbrance on “free markets” but rather the creator of markets, the underwriter of contracts, the steward of monopoly. Reich further notes that the phenomena related to capitalism in the U.S., the seat of global capitalism, are common and relevant elsewhere. Furthermore, the periodic alteration of economic rules in the U.S. whose aim has been to create a freer society and to curb the power of a financially elite minority constitutes a project at once economic and political. “The two cannot be separated,” states Reich (pp. xv-5).

Ultimately, Reich and others suggest paradigm shifts about government and markets because they are interested in a specific kind of future, one that involves justice but also indefinite capitalism. Anarchist thought contributes much to the conversation surrounding political economy and justice, providing much constructive criticism of capitalism. Chomsky (2013) states, “Anarchism is necessarily anticapitalist in that it ‘opposes the exploitation of man by man. But anarchism also opposes ‘the dominion of man over man’” (p. 9). A major anarchist contribution to the conversation on political economy and justice pertains to

freedom, which is fitting given the role freedom plays in justifying economic and political parameters that make current global capitalism possible. Historian Rudolf Rocker (1938) states, “For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account” (as cited in Chomsky, 2013, p. 2). Though some of capitalism’s economic and political stalwarts surely dismiss anarchist thought as naively utopian Chomsky argues that “at every stage of history our concern must be to dismantle those forms of authority and oppression that survive from an era when they might have been justified in terms of the need for security or survival or economic development, but that now contribute to—rather than alleviate—material and cultural deficit” (p. 2).

For anarchists, perhaps like Rocker, the point of radicalizing the debate on political economy and justice is to liberate humankind from “the curse of economic exploitation and political and social enslavement” without having to resort to methods of conquest or state power. Instead, the objective is the reconstruction of people’s economic lives from bottom to top in a just and egalitarian spirit—or, as Rocker states, “in the spirit of Socialism” (Rocker, as cited in Chomsky, 2013, p. 3). To realize such a project, however, will require due consideration for two essential items. The first is “the equity issues posed by our scientific and technological knowledge inheritance,” which manifest several ways (Alperovitz & Daly, 2008, p. 5). Second is the relationship between ableism and capitalism. Finally, it is our opinion that without explicitly contemplating the relationship between ableism and capitalism, and without applying an anarchist lens, issues of equity, justice, and freedom will remain invisible and untenable.

## ABLEISM, DISABILITY STUDIES, AND THE MARKET

While the term “ableism” has only entered academic and activist writings recently the normative orientation to which it refers has been immensely consequential in American society. The key feature of ableism is the privileging of certain arrangements of bodyminds, often labeled “typical” or “average,” and the subsequent discrimination against non-normative bodyminds. In this context ‘bodymind’ refers to what Price (2015) calls the “imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’...” (p. 270). This phrase not only challenges Cartesian dualism but flags cognitive and mental difference as an important category of analysis. Wolbring (2008), a bioethicist who has written extensively on the subject, describes ableism as a “set of beliefs, processes and practices that produce—based on abilities one exhibits or values—a particular understanding of oneself, one’s body and one’s relationship with others of humanity, other species and the environment, and includes how one is judged by others” (p. 90). Goodley et al. (2014) further describe ableism as “normatively privileg[ing] able-bodiedness...encourag[ing] an institutional bias towards autonomous, independent bodies...lend[ing] support to economic and material dependence on neoliberal and *hyper-capitalist forms of production*” (p. 21, emphasis added). Critical disability studies, which allows disability “to be understood from the perspective of the person who experiences it,” has been a rich academic site to explore the entanglements of knowledge systems which privilege certain bodyminds (Reaume, 2014, p. 1248). It is an explicitly normative interdisciplinary commitment to understanding disability as more than individual

impairment, and to interrogating deeply entrenched social and political injustices.

Simi Linton (1998) holds that the subject matter of disability studies is “not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations” (p. 2). Ben-Moshe and Magaña (2014) add that such meaning is “socially constructed by people’s thoughts, words, and physical manifestations (such as the built environment) and become ways of defining human experiences that take on cultural and historical meaning, often of a negative tint” (p. 106). Moreover, the production of meaning, whether creative or symbolic, is cultural, and it structures identities, social imaginaries, and opinions (de Lauretis, as cited in Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 25). If as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observe in *The German Ideology* (1970) the “ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas,” then it is necessary to question how capitalism and capitalist ideology informs the meanings and constructions that are often the focus of disability studies (p. 64). This work should contribute to disability studies and disability culture, as both “aim at breaking down the perception of disability as personal tragedy, pathology, or deficiency” (Ben-Moshe and Magaña, 2014, p. 106). Nor should capitalism’s critics take for granted how “major advances might be made in eroding aversive and rejecting perceptions of persons with disabilities.” Additionally, questioning the effects that capitalism and capitalist ideology have on meaning and its social construction, especially with regards to the intangible dimensions on which society is predicated, does not suffice for understanding the ableist-capitalist relationship. Thus, critiquing capitalism also requires an interrogation of the built environment, which facilitates so much of the productive output and functioning of capitalist societies—and which imposes on so many kinds of bodyminds. Indeed,

it is necessary to ask why the built environment is designed the way it is, how and why it should to be adapted to “accommodate a broad range of human abilities and disabilities,” and what the resultant political implications are (Hahn, 1986, pp. 273-87).

Understanding disability as “fluid and contextual rather than biological” makes it possible to understand disability as something “imposed on certain kinds of minds and bodies.” Also, if disability is understood as a construction begotten by centuries of processes, both cultural and historical, then disability should be conceived of as a continuum, not as a binary. The fact is, “One is always dis/abled in relation to the context in which one is put.” For instance, if the definition and understanding of certain disabilities is medical, and thus contributive to the social construction of disabilities as medical “problems” to be mitigated by science and technology, it is imperative to acknowledge this understanding stems from culturally hegemonic standards about what “normal” is. Furthermore, such matters are determined by those who have enough power to enforce their standards and impose them on others (Ben-Moshe et al., 2013, pp. 210-11). In a capitalist society, this is necessarily the social group or class that controls or owns the means of production.

Finally, it is necessary to take up an intersectional perspective when interrogating capitalistic forces and the hegemonies. Complex and multi-faceted identities may vary across contexts and exist along a continuum. Certainly, identities are not monolithic constructs; nor can they be fully interrogated on an individual basis. This notion provides a point of departure for considering disability in capitalist context. Intersectionality additionally provides grounds for understanding how ableism and capitalism are so caught up with one another, and how they work across populations and time. For example, examining the “shifting definitions and outcomes of being labeled ‘feble-minded’ and incompetent”

throughout American slavery is impossible without also confronting “the historical conflation of disability and race” (Ben-Moshe and Magaña, 2014, pp. 105-106). According to Barclay (2014), American slaveholders defined disability among slaves by determining the value of bonded persons. This exemplifies the deeply entangled relationship between race, ability, and capitalism.

Both Goodley and Wolbring, as well as other scholars of (dis)ableism, are explicit about the deeply intertwined relationship between the economic and social dimensions of this normative framework. The abilities that are privileged, and are thus deemed “essential” (Wolbring, 2011), are those that enhance efficiency and productivity. Taylor (2004), referencing Gleeson (1999), notes the relationship between disability and capitalistic labor, writing that “with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, impaired people became unproductive members of society and thus disabled. The rise of commodity relations profoundly changed those processes of social embodiment that originated in work patterns” (para. 15). In other words characteristics well-suited for the types of labor necessary for the success of the market are deemed essential, and any deviance or deficits in these characteristics is labeled disability.

The relationship between “able-bodiedness” and the market is explicit. To be able-bodied—in this context meaning possessing certain privileged physical and mental characteristics—is to be fit for profitable labor. Able-bodiedness as it is currently understood in the United States, in fact, emerged as an identity simultaneously with industrial capitalism. “In the emergent industrial capitalist system,” McRuer (2010) writes, “free to sell one’s labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else.” (p. 303). Characteristics well-suited for industrial labor became synonymous not with idealized bodyminds but with *default*



bodyminds. What an “able bodymind” is *able* to do is implicit; such a bodymind is capable of joining the labor market, capable of being efficient, productive work, capable of turning a profit for themselves, or more likely, for their employer. Any bodymind that does not meet such criteria is thus considered “disabled.” Kafer (2013), when writing on growth attenuation procedures for individuals with intellectual disabilities, also notes the relationship between able-bodiedness and ability to work. “Disability, then, is defined as a lack of productivity,” she writes, “We are all to be smoothly running engines, and disability renders us defective products” (p. 54). Saxton (2006) challenges the inverse relationship between disability and productivity with a call to action, writing that “contributions of human beings cannot be judged by how we fit into the mold of normalcy, *productivity, or cost-benefit*” (p. 90, emphasis added).

### **THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Technology has long been leveraged in the United States to increase labor efficiency. “Efficiency was upheld as a goal supremely valuable in its own right,” Winner (1986) writes, describing the perceptions of 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans, “one strongly linked to the progress of science, the growth of industry, the rise of professionalism, and the conservation of natural resources” (p. 46). Winner then describes the way technology has been adopted, quickly and without foresight, to achieve this end.

Assistive technologies, as defined by the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act (Public Law 100-407), refers to “any item, piece of equipment or product system that is used to increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” It is vital to recognize several implicit presumptions in this definition, however, in order to fully explore the role that assistive technology development

plays in the perpetuation of ableism. First, disability is assumed to be something located within the bodymind, not the social or physical environment. In such a conceptualization technology is used as a means of mitigating some mismatch between environment and a non-normative body. Bodily characteristics thus become pathologized. Conrad (1992) refers to this process by which non-medical human phenomena become redefined and treated as medical problems as “medicalization.” Technologies developed with such an ideology reinforce “certain moral landscapes of reading difference and cultural ordering” (Campbell, 2009, p. 80). In other words these technologies serve to both signify and attempt to correct corporeal deviance. Assistive technologies seek to approximate typical human behavior, which reveals an underlying orientation towards a certain type of bodymind. One could easily see the orientation of engineers designing assistive technology mirroring what McRuer (2006) illuminates in the American society at large:

The culture asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question. Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me? (p. 93)

The medical interrogation and reshaping of disabled bodyminds to approximate the bodminds of able, efficient workers is deeply intertwined with perceptions of ability emerging from industrial capitalism and labor. It is not difficult, given these orientations, to begin to tease out an entangled relationship between ableism, the competitive labor market, and assistive technologies. At the time of this writing, however, little has been written on how the

development, marketing, and distribution of assistive technologies contribute to, and are influenced by, ableist ideologies.

Alperovitz and Daly argue there is consensus among researchers who canvass a broad spectrum of technological, economic, and other fields, as to the ways in which society engenders wealth-creation. What a single individual contributes to this wealth is certainly meager in comparison to the social contribution. Hence, determining what any one person has earned, or is deserving of, is not a straightforward task. The research uncovering this problem has also given rise to moral and political questions that are at once profound and ever more difficult to avoid due to increasing inequality. Furthermore, inequality in the United States is not “simply a natural outgrowth of the differences in individual effort, skills, and intelligence” (p. 2). Rather, “Technological progress ... has provided society with what economists call a ‘free lunch,’ that is, an increase in output that is not commensurate with the increase in effort and cost necessary to bring it about” (Joel Mokyr, 1990, as cited in Alperovitz & Daly). Alperovitz and Daly rightly asks that “if most of what we have today is attributable to advances we inherit in common—what another economic historian, Nathan Rosenberg, has termed a ‘huge overhang of technological inheritance’—why, specifically, should this gift of our collective history not more generously and broadly benefit all members of society?” (p. 5).

The political and social contexts in which technologies are designed and distributed have profound effects on the design and use of those technologies. Winner describes these as embedded politics and stresses the importance of examining technologies not only for “their contributions to efficiency and productivity ... but also the ways in which they embody specific forms of power and authority” (p. 19). The production of certain types of technologies have in them embedded ideas about *how*

bodminds should interact with their surroundings; for example, speech-to-text technologies rather than sign language interpretation suggests that communication should happen in specific ways—either through vocalization or through written text. Other forms of communication, including sign language, are excluded regardless of user preference. Furthermore, technologies designed to transform a disabled bodymind into one approximating a non-disabled bodymind have embedded in them a specific orientation toward disability. This approach, commonly referred to as the individual or medical model of disability, is grounded in treatment of the individual rather than disabling social contexts. She further writes that this orientation is insidious in that it is assumed “both objective fact and common sense” (p. 5). Interrogating such assumptions is crucial because, as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) states, “Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance” (p. 221). Moreover, knowledge claims about how bodyminds should perform emerge not only in material technologies, but in complex systems like education. Alperovitz and Daly state,

...if today’s high earners are typically highly educated, this is clearly not primarily because they are more intelligent or work harder, and it is not mainly because they were lucky in the ‘birth lottery,’ as some argue. Above all, they are highly educated because there is more knowledge for them to obtain and more opportunity to do so. ‘A college-educated engineer working today and one working 100 years ago have the same human capital,’ Stanford economist Paul Romer observes. But the engineer working today is far, far more productive. The reason, again, is self-evident: ‘He or she can take advantage of all the additional knowledge accumulated as design problems were solved during the last 100 years. (p. 4)

## SOCIAL ASYMMETRY

In a capitalist society, one apparent presumption is that a market logic can effectively atone for the harms caused to disabled people, racial and ethnic minorities, women, the LGBTQ community, the poor, the non-English speaking, and so on. Empirical knowing plays a vital part in sustaining this arbitrary philosophy, and economic injustice abounds as a result. Callon (1990) states, “Science and technology lie at the heart of social asymmetry,” and so technology bears responsibility for creating systems, which “close off other options and generates novel, unpredictable and indeed previously unthinkable, options” (p. 132). Empiricism, knowing, and production make for a culturally powerful cocktail that dates back to Bacon, and even further back to Aristotle. As Hawkesworth observes, “[T]he use of scientific knowledge to develop instruments to help humans solve problems and improve their condition” gave rise to a significant means of discerning truth. Hawkesworth adds, “Bacon anticipated the ‘pragmatic theory of truth,’ which links the assessment of knowledge claims to outcomes.” This means that “both theories and technological innovations are true if ‘they work,’ if they enable people to achieve the objectives that they set for themselves” (p. 29). For Aristotle efficacy determines truth relative to practical and productive knowledge. If these knowledges yield individual happiness, then the truth that substantiates them has merit. Along these lines if markets produce individual happiness, then the moral presumptions that substantiate the existence of markets would be validated. One question remains, however, and that is whether a given market uses knowledge to produce “the products, emotions, and convictions that it sets out to produce in particular instances.” The success of any market thus depends in part

on whether practical and productive knowledge “get the world right” (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 25).

Yet, in citing Foray (1989), Callon is mindful that technological growth rarely happens in “a predictable and unilinear manner within a relatively stable social and industrial context.” Callon further argues, “Models which assume this cannot explain its radical, and sometimes revolutionary, character. Instead, the new sociology and economics of technology suggest that science and technology are a product of interaction between a large number of diverse actors” (p. 132). When an intersectional analysis takes up several constructs of diverse actors, such as race, ability, sexuality, class, and gender, analyzers run the risk of complication. For example, the work of depathologizing disability from “notions of deficiency” can be complicated and may address relevant science and technology. Ben-Moshe and Magaña write, “For many people of color or those who have no access to quality medical care, not being diagnosed is due less to viewing disability as a source of pride or as a fluid state and more to disparities. We see these disparities in service provision and access to doctors and medical services...because of inequalities based on class, color, language, and geographical barriers” (pp. 106-107). Additionally, Sears et al. (2012) recognize that, frequently, along with poorer socioeconomic standing, as well as the status of foreigner, or immigrant, people of color are at a higher risk of diminished and/or lost abilities and capacities. The connections among disability, race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on, are overwhelming and bear on the reproduction of inequalities underscored by capitalistic influences (Ben-Moshe and Magaña, 2014). So how can the knowledge that apprehends the best gambit (i.e., products, services, etc.) for markets to function ever be intersectional enough to facilitate maximal individual, or collective, happiness?

## CONCLUSION

This article has traced historical and contemporary linkages between capitalist modes of knowing and ableism as an oppressive paradigm. The application of anarchist thought to this relationship creates space for critique and highlights injustice inherent in capitalist practices and knowledge production systems. Historically, the struggle against hegemonic relations involving ableism and capitalism, racism, sexism, etc.—anything lending itself to dominion over others and the “systematization of domination” commonly labeled “hierarchy”—has been key in anarchist thought. In lieu of “a world constructed for so-called ‘able bodies,’ patriarchy, heteronormativity and all relations of domination” anarchism propounds “new sets of social relations that do not arrange groups hierarchically in terms of their access to economic, political, and cultural power” (daring et al., 2013, pp. 11-13). Yet, under a capitalist regime the privileging of profitable bodyminds necessitates the delegitimizing of bodyminds that fall outside those boundaries. The development and deployment of assistive technologies reproduce and perpetuate a binary division of dis/ability while simultaneously transforming a disabled bodymind into one more closely resembling the maximally productive, idealized form. The entanglement of ableism and capitalism is not merely theoretical one, however. In the age of neoliberalism, those possessing divergent bodyminds are most at risk. In this era, which Goodley and colleagues refer to as the age of “neoliberal-ableism”, people are increasingly subjected to “slow death, increased precarity and growing debility” (p. 980). Certainly, governments are wont to promote themselves as committed to the entrepreneurs, the producers, and the fiscally responsible, and they principally signal techno-scientific progress and modernizing projects as proof that such is the case. What neoliberal states have actively

engendered through austerity and attacks on social safety nets is a decline in sharing, whether civic or social, the widespread isolation of households and individuals, a reduction in participation in activities, whether work, volunteering, or training (Goodley et al., 2014). As Wood (2012) observes, though, this runs contrary to neoliberal government messages of strong and active publics, and austerity measures have adversely affected disabled people in particular. People with disabilities are forced to “adher[e] to ableism’s ideals, its narrow conceptions of personhood, its arrogance, and its propensity to buddy-up with other fascistic ideologies that celebrate the minority over the majority,” resulting in a system that “bulldoze[s] the disparate variegated nature of human kind” (Goodley et al., 2014, p. 981). Certainly, ableism and capitalism are deeply entangled and mutually reinforcing. It is necessary to engage deeply with their entanglement when attempting to imagine alternative, just, and equal knowledge production systems and practices.



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