

Philosophy of Medicine

Book Review

Neurodiversity, Liberal Capitalism, and Self-Understanding: A Review of Robert Chapman's *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*

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1. Introduction

Robert Chapman's *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism* (2023) charts thinking about normality and pathology, showing how both have links to the historical conditions set by capitalism. The book also outlines a Marxist notion of neurodiversity, which rejects liberal capitalism. In this review, I outline Chapman's argument and highlight its strengths. I also explore a potential consequence of what Chapman does not explore in their book, which is significant for notions of neurodiversity: if we reject liberal capitalism, we might also need to reject a key assumption of liberal capitalism; namely, that people have good self-understanding.

2. Overview

Chapman writes: "My project here looks backwards while striving forwards" (2023, ix). They aim to outline how we got to the present and show how things can be different. The book thus aims to provide a basis for thinking differently about neurodiversity, psychiatric diagnoses, and society.

Chapman outlines changing notions of health over time. Since the ancient Greeks, European medicine thought of health as being in harmony. This notion survived until a new set of historical conditions led to a shift in thinking. Firstly, Descartes's metaphysics encouraged us to see the body as a machine. Second, the growth of capitalism started encouraging seeing people as being more productive and less productive. Third, the growth of mathematics and statistical methods led to attempts to establish the "average person." All this led to a shift from "viewing health as *harmony* to viewing health as *normality*" (Chapman 2023, 34). Healthcare became about returning people to an average state of normality. Eventually, during the second half of the 1800s, "middle-class, cognitively abled white people increasingly came to see themselves as naturally closer to an idealised 'normal', even super-normal, way of being and thinking compared to disabled, working-class and Black and Brown colonised subjects" (41). Also, primarily in the early to mid-



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1900s, eugenics aimed to remove or stop the reproduction of all those who were abnormal in ways considered undesirable. Chapman outlines the influence of all this thinking on psychiatry.

Chapman closely analyses the link between notions of normality and capitalism. They argue that at any given time capitalism requires a range of certain types of bodies and certain types of minds. People who do not fit any of the required types are unable to work, and so are disabled. A trait that might make someone productive in one time period would disable them in another time period. Additionally, since around the 1980s and the move from industry to a service and tech economy, capitalism has required more specific roles and simultaneously placed more demand upon those in those roles. Consequently, more people are moving from being able to fit productive roles to not fitting any productive roles. This means levels of disability are increasing and this can also explain rising diagnoses of autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Chapman outlines the development of notions of neurodiversity and provides a novel approach. Neurodiversity is where different brains and minds are “celebrated and [are] a locus of pride rather than being seen as an inherently tragic deviation” (Chapman 2023, 130). However, they outline how most neurodiversity activism has taken place within a liberal capitalist framework. For example, we can argue for neurodiversity by showing how some neurodivergences have useful skills, such as some autistic people being good with computers. Chapman argues that these strengths are only strengths in relation to current economic conditions. Additionally, those economic conditions ultimately favor those who own capital, rather than the workers or the wider society. They maintain that we need to move beyond a liberal capitalist framework in favor of a Marxist approach to neurodiversity. Fully implementing neurodiversity ultimately requires replacing liberal capitalism with an alternative system. *Empire of Normality* does not actually outline what this alternative is. Chapman believes that “what this turns out to look like will only be determined through mass consciousness-raising, critique, and collective imagining. This will be a mass theoretical, scientific, political, and revolutionary project of many years or decades” (2023, 160). They aim to raise consciousness through highlighting the historical conditions that have led to where we are now.

3. Notions of Neurodiversity

I think there are lots of problematic ways to think about neurodiversity and it pleases me to see that Chapman avoids them. Nick Walker's popular book on neurodiversity, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, highlights some problematic approaches to neurodiversity.

Firstly, it is commonly stated that neurodiversity is natural—as Walker claims, “neurodiversity as a natural form of human diversity” (2021, 18). This claim is absent in *Empire of Normality*. Philosophy of medicine has shown that getting a working definition of natural is very difficult. Even harder is showing why something being natural means that it is good. For example, tooth decay seems to be natural but this does not mean we should close all dentists. Additionally, appeals to naturalness have been used to justify many unethical acts, such as in relation to terrible attitudes toward homosexuality.

Second, neurodiversity has sometimes been associated with denials of mental illness: if something is a neurodiversity, it cannot be a mental illness and since autism is a neurodiversity it cannot be a mental illness. Walker writes that if you “accept the premises of the

neurodiversity paradigm, then it turns out that you don't have a disorder after all" (2021, 21). Rather, any autistic person who thinks they are mentally ill has internalized ableism. Walker, however, makes no attempt in *Neuroqueer Heresies* to engage with autistic people who think that autism manifests in themselves as a mental illness (this is how I think autism manifests in myself). Chapman, in contrast, accepts that mental illness exists (2023, 164).

Third, neurodiversity is sometimes associated with denying that normality exists or is a legitimate concept. Walker writes that "the concept of a 'normal brain' or a 'normal person' has no more objective scientific validity—and serves no better purpose—than the concept of a 'master race'" (2021, 17). While Chapman gives a history of thinking about normality and shows the social conditions that influenced that thinking, they also say normality is real (2023, 147). It seems fully scientifically legitimate to use methodologies that posit means and averages. There can be many practical uses to doing so. The problem is when we take normality to mean good. Anyone familiar with the is-ought problem in philosophy can see that "how things are" does not entail "how things should be." If normality, or significant degrees of closeness to normality, is how many people are, this does not mean it is how people should be.

4. Anti-psychiatry

I found Chapman's discussion of anti-psychiatry nuanced and helpful. I find anti-psychiatry to be very polarizing as people tend to either strongly support or strongly reject it. Chapman's work provides a more balanced view. They outline how there were both left-wing and right-wing anti-psychiatrists. Also, they describe how some ultimately helped challenge dominant social and economic structures whereas others helped reinforce those structures. Finally, Chapman points out that even some of the right-wing anti-psychiatrists whom they reject (and I also reject) still sometimes raised some important issues. I have spent a long time defending psychiatric diagnoses (Fellowes 2022) but I still think we need to consider the nuance of different anti-psychiatry positions, something Chapman helpfully brings out.

5. Rising Rates of Psychiatric Diagnoses

Some rates of psychiatric diagnoses, such as autism and ADHD, have skyrocketed in recent decades. This can be taken to pose a challenge to the legitimacy of psychiatry. If all those people actually are autistic, how is it possible that 40 years ago only 1 percent were actually detected whereas now they are all being detected? How could psychiatrists be so wrong in the recent past and so right today? Chapman has a potential solution here: capitalism is increasingly making some people who previously would have been able to cope no longer able to do so. If a trait is compatible with economic functioning in one decade but not in a future decade, it would be unsurprising that rates of diagnoses could undergo a significant change. In this regard Chapman has made a valuable contribution to this debate.

At the same time, I think the claim that we are generally more depressed and anxious (Chapman 2023, 14) can be questioned. For example, potentially a very significant proportion of the European population underwent potentially highly traumatizing experiences in the Great War and World War II. Similarly, even if factory life a century ago was less stressful than modern office work, workplaces were more dangerous and placed

greater long-term physical strain on the body, both of which could impact mental health. Also, after work, there were overcrowded slums and fewer options for how to spend free time. Whether people in the past did or did not have better mental health, but this went largely undetected at the time, is a very complicated empirical question but equal or higher rates of anxiety and depression in the last century compared to today—whether as a result of capitalism or factors other than capitalism—are a realistic possibility. I think *Empire of Normality* is on the strongest ground when it compares the period of the 1950s to the 1970s with the 1980s onward. Whether Chapman is right or wrong, it is in relation to this period where they supply the most evidence and make the most arguments about rising rates of depression and anxiety, and how this could be linked to capitalism.

6. Neurodiversity, Liberalism, and Self-Understanding

My main critique of *Empire of Normality* relates not to what is said but instead to a potential consequence of what is said but not explored any further. On a Marxist viewpoint, as Chapman writes, “our consciousness, thought, and perception [are] significantly constrained by the broader material and economic conditions of the age” (2023, 10). This seems to entail something that is not made explicit in *Empire of Normality*. It seems that our attempts to move to a better alternative, which Chapman desires, will also be heavily constrained by the age we live in and by future ages. As I understand Marx, economic conditions would only stop generating ideologies that constrain our thinking when the state withers away. Even if Marx was right about this (I suspect he significantly underestimated sources of generating ideology other than economic structures), we have to try and develop alternatives long before the state withers away.

If our thinking is constrained by the age we live in, we need be very cautious when thinking about neurodiversity and how to change society. Our constrained thinking means the chances are that we are going to significantly struggle to see the problems and limitations of any solutions we come up with. The solutions we posit will likely seem considerably better than they actually are. I think the best chance of succeeding will be caution and humility; we need to assume that our seemingly best ideas have significant flaws and are in need of critique. I think this stance is less common than it should be. For example, my perception of autistic individuals on social media, including some who are academics, is that some critiques of neurodiversity and related issues are typically really not welcome. I do not feel this atmosphere is conducive to trying to mitigate the challenges of producing good notions of neurodiversity, given the constraints on our thinking.

Additionally, liberalism and capitalism have generated an ideology that many neurodiversity advocates seem strongly adhered to. This is the notion that people have good self-understanding. There is, however, good reason to believe this ideology is false but abandoning this ideology will have consequences for neurodiversity.

On a traditional liberal understanding, people are seen as atomized individuals who are able to reliably assess their options and have the freedom to choose between them. Justifying some strands of liberalism requires that citizens meet “competency conditions [which] specify that agents must have various capacities for rational thought, self-control,

self-understanding” (Christman and Anderson 2005, 3).¹ Similarly, adherents of capitalism generally assume that citizens have sufficient self-understanding of their desires to sell their labor and purchase goods in a manner that improves their lives and the lives of others in the society (Casassas and Wagner 2016). Good self-understanding is a common, if often implicit, assumption of supporters of liberalism and capitalism. However, there is lots of empirical evidence from psychology that most people are bad at introspection (Bayne and Spencer 2010; Schwitzgebel 2008) and that cognitive biases are widespread (MacLean and Dror 2016; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2015). Being bad at introspection means people typically only have limited awareness of their mental states, their beliefs, and their motives. Cognitive biases mean that they are bad at reasoning. Most people are bad at gathering data about themselves and bad at reasoning about that data. Additionally, it is worth noting that Marxism challenges the notion that people have good self-understanding (Christman and Anderson 2005, 7). We have good reason to think that this key ideology of liberalism and capitalism—that people have good self-understanding—is false.

We typically think those who hold very different social and political opinions to us are confused but these problems with self-understanding also affect left-wing and socially liberal people (positions that I and likely many readers of *Empire of Normality* follow). For example, the modern social justice movement has done some great work but simultaneously is highly limited in ways that are almost not being discussed in our social and political discourse. If one subscribes to a general position of social justice, one should not support our current fashion industry, which gives people in other countries little pay in boring, insecure jobs, so that people in the Western world can buy clothes at low prices. Just as we should be outraged by racism in our own society, we should also be outraged by people who support the current fashion industry, rather than fair-trade clothing, but this is literally almost every adult in the Western world, including many left-wing and socially liberal people. Even if we make a contestable dispensation for people in the Western world who are in poverty, my only explanation for the remainder is low levels of self-understanding.

If we need to reject liberal capitalism, we also need to reject a key notion of liberalism and capitalism—that people have good self-understanding. This, however, means we need to rethink how we approach some notions that neurodiversity advocates typically support.

Firstly, lots of neurodiversity advocates think that neurodivergent people should reject normality and embrace their neurotype and way of thinking (Walker 2021, 131). I fully support rejecting normality but embracing your neurodivergence and way of thinking will often mean embracing problems with introspection and embracing cognitive biases. These are common ways of thinking in the general population and the neurodivergent population, and I would say that both groups should not embrace these ways of thinking but rather challenge them, given how extremely harmful they are.

Second, neurodiversity advocates often strongly support experts-by-experience in psychiatric research. This is where people with psychiatric diagnoses study those diagnoses. One motive for this is lived experience. For example, autistic people have lived experience of autism and this gives them knowledge of autism. While I also think expert-by-experience research should be done, the move from lived experience to knowledge is quite epistemologically complicated if people generally have low self-understanding.

¹ Within academic literature, it is typically supporters of procedural or political liberalism that support competency conditions, whereas adherents of perfectionist or substantialist notions of liberalism may not endorse them (Christman and Anderson 2005, 5).

Third, neurodiversity advocates often strongly support self-diagnosis. Lived experience is again appealed to when claiming that, for example, autistic people are in a better position to judge that they are autistic than a diagnostician. While I think that self-diagnosis is not illegitimate, the accuracy of self-diagnosis is likely lower than many neurodiversity advocates believe if people have low self-understanding.

To be clear, if neurodivergent people, like the rest of the population, typically have low self-understanding, this does not then mean that psychiatrists, psychologists, policymakers, or anyone else has a better understanding of neurodivergent people. Rather, it is simply acknowledging that there are many barriers to accurate understanding that affect many different groups.

7. Mental Healthcare after Capitalism

Lots of neurodiversity advocates think we should increase the level of support given to people with psychiatric diagnoses and implement reasonable accommodations for people with psychiatric diagnoses. This, by itself, seems unobjectionable. However, once we move from liberal capitalism to a better system, what level of resources will we have to do this? This is difficult to answer without knowing what this alternative system is but it is plausible that we will have fewer spare resources available than today. If we move to a system that puts much less strain upon the planet, the level of economic activity might be significantly decreased. Also, if we pay people who make our goods a fair wage, we might see a significant cut in profits. This might mean the level of tax receipts drop significantly compared to today, even if this superior system increases the percentage paid in tax by those who are more well off. Meanwhile, this might not be offset by a reduction in mental health problems once we have a superior system. Put simply, once we stop destroying the planet and start paying those who make our goods a decent wage, we might find an inadequate level of funds available for the required mental health services and required reasonable accommodations, even when implementing a fairer taxation system. This would be a great shame but, given the wider harms caused by capitalism, it does not seem sufficient justification to retain capitalism. Perhaps a superior alternative to capitalism will allow sufficient resources to meet the demands of mental healthcare but I think we should start considering how we should go about mental healthcare if this is not possible.

8. Conclusion

Empire of Normality is a valuable contribution, which is worth reading. It contains important historical and philosophical insights that help develop neurodiversity theory. Compared to other well-known and influential books on neurodiversity, I think it is radically better than Walker's *Neuroqueer Heresies* (criticized earlier in this review) and Steve Silberman's *Neurotribes* (2015), which I have criticized in a separate review (Fellowes 2017).

The main issue I have highlighted relates not to problems with Chapman's argument but with the consequences of their argument, which they do not explore. I support rejecting liberal capitalism but in doing so I think we need also reject the assumption that people have good self-understanding. This, however, should then reduce our optimism about

producing a good notion of neurodiversity and about some approaches that neurodiversity advocates commonly support.

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