

# Strategies of debilitation

Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). 296pp., £76.00 hb., £20.99 pb., 978 0 82236 892 2 hb., 978 0 82236 918 9 pb.

On March 30th 2018, Palestinian activists in Gaza began what they called The Great March of Return. Throughout a period beginning on Land Day and ending on Nakba Day, thousands of Palestinians marched towards the fence separating Gaza from the rest of Palestine and attempted to return to the family homes they lost in 1948. In response, Israel's military designated the marchers a threat to the State, branding them terrorists, and gave orders to fire upon demonstrators. Over the ensuing weeks, more than 120 Palestinians were killed by Israeli live fire. Just as striking was the sheer number of Palestinians injured – some 15,000 according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. Palestinian doctors observed that Israel appeared to have used sniper rounds with an expanding 'butterfly effect', which were designed to permanently disable targets. Indeed, a notable feature of the marchers was the prominence of those with existing disabilities among them, including many amputees who had lost limbs at the hands of previous rounds of Israeli military violence. An iconic image of double amputee Saber al-Ashqar launching a rock from a slingshot in his wheelchair circulated widely on social media. Another double amputee, Fadi Abu Saleh, was one of the many fatalities.

Watching these events unfold, I almost found it hard to believe that Jasbir Puar had written and published her book well in advance of the Great March of Return. It was as if *The Right to Maim* had anticipated these developments. Puar's work, bringing together disability studies, queer theory, Foucauldian biopolitics and settler colonial studies, focuses for the most part on Palestine and reveals the centrality of the phenomena of debility, disability and capacity for understanding contemporary politics there. Reading her text in conjunction with current events, it becomes tempting to interpret the Palestinian struggle not only as a globally significant national liberation movement, but also as one of the most radical disability justice campaigns in the world. Or at least it would

be, were it not for the fact that Puar's work also successfully challenges the very framework of disability justice itself, pushing, dismantling and reassembling it to encompass a far broader terrain of struggle.

At the heart of the analysis is Puar's distinction between disability and debility. In disability studies, 'disability' usually denotes a differential bodily capacity hailed in dominant social frames as non-normative. Traditional disability rights activism, and more recent radical crip activism, challenges the basis of this non-normativity, arguing either for measures to include people with disabilities in society, or, more radically, challenging the very distinction between normative and non-normative capacities as the basis for social organisation. Puar does not reject this framework, but she does note the many exclusions and hierarchies which the framework of disability risks engendering. She proposes 'debility' as a necessary supplement to this analysis, by which she means the general societal production of differential capacities in ways not traditionally captured by the notion of disability, such as unequal access to healthcare, working in dangerous conditions or living under military occupation. Very often, she argues, the selective recapacitation of people identified as disabled is accompanied by the continued production of debility elsewhere.

Access to opportunities for inclusion, or even for more far-reaching transformative resignifications of disability, are stratified by race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality and colonial difference. And forms of debility which are not usually hailed as disability often continue undisturbed alongside these stratifications, and may even be perpetuated by them. Readers will recognise here the same critical impulse that animated Puar's first book *Terrorist Assemblages*, which examined the co-optation of Westernised gay rights struggles under the banner of imperialist homonationalism and the simultaneous stigmatisation of racialised groups as monstrous queers. In *The Right*

to *Maim*, Puar builds on existing scholarship in critical disability studies, such as that of Robert McRuer and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, which adapted the insights of her earlier work to develop the concepts of ‘disability nationalism’, ‘able-nationalism’ and ‘crip-nationalism’.

Thought-provoking examples of her argument are explored throughout the book. For instance, when capacitating technologies or social policies are made available in Western countries, this depends on patterns of production in an uneven global political economy which systematically incapacitates working class and racialised bodies, especially in the Global South. When the US military celebrates the bodily re-capacitation and recruitment of trans\* soldiers, this move relies on the continued functioning of American imperialism and militarism for success. When potentially suicidal young gay men are targeted with publicity campaigns for therapy, these initiatives often invoke a neoliberal affective and political economy (characterised by Lauren Berlant as ‘cruel optimism’) that ruins lives as it offers (often illusory) pathways to salvation.

However, it is in Palestine that Puar is most concerned to demonstrate the mutual imbrications of disability, debility and capacity. She shows that while Israeli families struggling to conceive can expect generous fertility treatment and Israeli military veterans receive generous compensation for their injuries, Palestinians are systematically denied the same opportunities. Meanwhile they must subsist under conditions of military occupation, restricted mobility, a devastated local economy, ruined infrastructure and aid dependency. Puar also argues, in a refinement of the insights of settler colonial studies, that Israel’s logic of elimination unfolds as a logic of deliberate debilitation. Riffing on Foucault’s theory of biopolitics and Mbembe’s account of necropolitics, she terms this strategy a practice of ‘will not let die’, whereby military violence can be more easily internationally legitimated if it slowly incapacitates Palestinian society while holding back from total slaughter. In such conditions, she demonstrates, it is meaningless for Palestinians simply to demand biomedical interventions, reasonable adjustments or the exploration of radical crip subjectivities as correctives to disability

injustice. In Palestine, meaningful disability justice also involves fighting Israeli practices of debilitation – and that means decolonisation. This inseparability is a vital lesson which the Palestinian struggle can teach disability campaigning elsewhere.

The real strengths of this book lie in the extremely broad range of conceptual sources and theoretical debates it engages, and Puar’s ability to combine these multiple vectors into her argument. Central to this is the deployment of her own brand of assemblage theory, which constantly proliferates the possible points of contact between racialisation, disability, gender, sexuality, political economy, colonialism, and more, to present an often kaleidoscopic analysis. The attempt to combine these elements and still further to apply them to a context which has not been fully theorised in this way is what delivers the book’s most significant achievements. This approach is, however, also the source of several limitations, which occasionally prevent the book from being equal to the sum of its constituent parts. In places the book simply attempts too much and becomes either bewildering (at least to this reader) or unsatisfying as a result. The forays into engagements with animal studies are a case in point. This is not to say that such an engagement could not be fruitful. However, there is insufficient space to do it justice within the confines of this project. A more charitable reading would account for these diversions as Deleuzian lines of flight which reflect Puar’s analytic method, but there should be no necessity for this approach to trade off with thoroughness. Indeed, it is not a surprise to read in the acknowledgements that Puar originally thought she was writing two books before condensing them into one. This is reflected in the slightly awkward structure: the text seems to begin at least three times, with a preface, followed by acknowledgements, followed by an introduction and chapter one which feel more like distinct empirical case studies and which oddly precede the theoretical overview that appears in its fullest form in chapter two.

Another dimension to the book’s overambitious tendencies is a preference for synthesis over new analysis. The temptation to combine ever more components into the assemblage often swamps the most novel contributions of the book. At one point, Puar

professes neither ‘to approximate nor replicate an ethnographic or area studies analysis’, but some of the book’s strongest elements do just that. For example, one of the most effective and elegant sections uses original fieldwork in the West Bank and observation of disability activists there to brilliantly crystallise the overall argument. However, rather than taking centre stage, this analysis is confined to a brief Postscript. By contrast, an entire chapter is devoted to reproductive politics in Palestine-Israel, even though this analysis is much more dependent on existing scholarship. This reflects a wider difficulty with the text. While the disability/debility distinction is a new and brilliant formulation, the bulk of the theoretical argument is indebted to existing work in disability studies, especially that of Nirmala Erevelles. This means that one of the main potential contributions

of the project was to take this analysis beyond ‘Euro-American framings’ and to explore the new ramifications of this argument when considered in relation to Palestine. Puar appears more than capable of this, perhaps more than she allows herself; yet the book’s startling transdisciplinary and synthetic ambitions mean that it cannot fully deliver the sustained treatment that her chosen empirical context invites and deserves. One should not force this point too far, however. In some ways, this is a great gift to future scholars who should find in the book rich inspiration for further work. A fascinating intellectual agenda has been demarcated, and a prescient window into the politics of the colonisation of Palestine has been opened here.

James Eastwood

## Without further ado

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). 376pp., £55.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 0 74567 939 6 hb., 978 0 74567 940 2 pb.

Amongst the writings of canonised thinkers, there often exist ambiguous yet generative gaps between those works published during their lifetime and those made posthumously available. The task of bridging these two bodies of work, and according philosophical intent, is one fraught with complications. Questions as to the ‘authentic’ kernel of a thought, the marginal history of a concept or the speculative shape of unrealised work remain open and contestable. The stakes are heightened when, for instance, the border between published and unpublished is complicated by historical dramas and institutional positioning, as in the case of Walter Benjamin, or when archival or private material is said to unsettle otherwise rehearsed conceptual formations, as in the case of Martin Heidegger. When it comes to the work of Theodor W. Adorno, one of the most testing divides is the one that separates his *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Writings] from the *Nachgelassene Schriften* [Posthumous Writings]. If it is clear that such a divide cannot settle in either direction each and every dispute, it does, for a Germanophone audience at least, raise the

distinction to the point of articulation. In an Anglophone context, despite the well-known shortcomings of existing translations of major works, it is becoming something of a tradition to pursue those works contained in the latter of these two, his *Nachgelassene Schriften*. The latest book-length work to be published in English falls squarely within this tradition.

Delivered during the winter semester of 1958–59, Adorno’s *Aesthetics* is the eighth lecture course to have been translated and published by Polity, with one other announced (the 1960–61 course *Ontology and Dialectics*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann) and several more (possibly nine) likely to follow. The course documents the fourth of six occasions in which Adorno lectured students on the topic of art and philosophical aesthetics between 1950 and 1968, and, of all six, it is the earliest to have been recorded on tape and transcribed in full (the fifth occasion, delivered during the winter semester of 1961–62, exists as a transcript and will be published by Suhrkamp in the future).

As the book’s editor, Eberhard Ortland, underscores in his German-afterword-cum-English-