

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture – 27.2
The Normal and its End
Part 2

Welcome back to the second part on 'normalcy'. You just heard the interview with Professor Davis. Unfortunately Professor Davis was not able to spend more than half an hour. So, I decided to give some contextual notes to his work on normalcy. So, 'normalcy and its context' is probably the title of this lecture. Well, to start with the normalcy problem, I think Professor Davis is able to do intellectual history of the word normal or normalcy in western canon because of his Foucauldian persuasion, and Foucauldian persuasion can be explained through frameworks such as governmentality and biopolitics. Let me first talk about governmentality. Well, let me talk practically. Here we have state; state does administration, state is responsible for governing, state also implements laws and up it is also responsible for implementation and upkeep of a peace in the society.

Similarly, we have institutional arrangements such as school education, medicine, hospital, services and much more. So, when these things are in place, they in fact, decide how we look like, how we act like and how we think about ourselves and this is what is called governmentality. Meaning we become active participants of law or education once we buy into it. For example, our idea of meritocracy.

For now enable millions of us young people to write IIT entrance exam. So, and then some of us get into IIT and then and pass out meritoriously. So, the idea of meritocracy runs a huge industry surrounding our engineering institutions for example. The nature of the state has changed when Foucault analyzed the state, the state was a bit different; state was an overwhelming, singular entity. In fact, he uses Bentham's panopticon to for his notion of governmentality. Panopticon is a kind of a structure where prison cells will be around and there would be a watch tower at the top and there may be a person sitting at the watchtower and prison cells' people will be around; within the prison cells prisoners will be there. Because the prisoners assume that the somebody is at the watchtower sitting there they will always act as though somebody is watching them.

So, they will sleep carefully, they will think carefully, they will gossip carefully, they will monetize, they will supervise their own bodies and mind and soul because they assume that somebody is at the watch tower. And most importantly that observer may not be at the watch tower at all.

Now, that Bentham's 19th century panopticon may not be the actual structure around. Look at the current state; the current state in many ways is given to corporate pressures. There are intergovernmental panels, there are civil societies and also think about the observer. We have complex tools of observation unlike before. What do I mean? I do not mean binoculars, I mean internet for example.

For example, my young students have recourse to instagram, whatsapp they have youth culture, they have other narrative arrangements to look at this world which I may not have recourse to. So,

similarly internet is a huge possibility and a limitation. Besides internet there are societies of different kind, subalterns framing a group among themselves, groups based on experience, pain, hierarchy much more. So, the tools and media of observation have become different, so the simple panopticon model may not work.

For this reason normalcy that Professor Davis talk about has evolved and he keeps fuller cognizance of that. For example, you heard him, so succinctly talk about the history of the word normal but later on in his book in his latest book, *The End of Normal* he talks about how an issue like diversity would presume the norm the word normal and in a sense it would hide disability because it is not seen as normal, it is seen as an exception.

To understand this evolution of his thought and the word normal and so on it is useful to understand the word dismodernism. Let me explain the word. You all know, what is a modernism? Well, modernism is an intellectual movement around the globe usually seen or attributed, or remembered to be forming the early part of the 20th century where people were trying to grapple with tradition, change, narrative diversity grand ideas and so on.

It is usually contrasted with the word postmodern where the word postmodern is associated with consumer choices, the emergence of consumer capitalism etc. In a word, postmodern could be iconoclasm where grand traditions are broken and in place of it you see multiplicity, bricolage and so on.

So, dismodern is different; dismodern is about dissing the modern, meaning it kind of breaks the modern session with progress, wholesomeness, speed normalcy and so on. So, what are the positions and arguments offered in Davis's dismodern? Let us look at look at them like this, dismodern when he was talking about dismodernism 10, 15 years ago, Davis articulated the idea that dismodern concerns with the care about the body. Well, we care for the body; do not we? We apply makeup, we dress up really well, we want to present well everywhere when you go for a job interview and so on but, this is care for the body; deodorants, makeup sets, hairstyles, branded T-shirts and so on.

Care of the body means we in a sense presents ourselves together as identifiable community groups. For example, deaf pride, blindness and reading books. So, people with similar bodily orientation come together and form a group, maybe care just about animal rights and so on. But care about the body is a larger thing, you go beyond consumerism that concerns the body, you go beyond parochialism that is exclusive identity politics. But generally care about body; that means, you care for everything that moves- meaning, human and animal they have to coexist, humans and other weaker humans they have to coexist.

So checking the progress, checking the fastest, checking the exclusionary is what Davis called dismodern that care about the body. So, it began that way, but later on, 10-15 years down the lane he sort of added qualifications to this idea. For example, he cites Agamben who sort of says there are lives worth living and then there are lives which are not worth living. He uses Agamben, sort of comes with the term bios, there are lives that are worth living which belong to the polis (the metropolitan places) and which flourish and zoe, basically near to the zoological just they are just bare life - like people who are drug addicts, people living in coma condition, people living in so called vegetative state perhaps in our country, people living in abject poverty and people who are seen to be amounting to nothing. That kind of people Agamben would say they are zoe people.

So, Davis revised his position and said dismodern would concern and care about the body with particular emphasis on the zoe, the mere, bare-life people. And therefore, would give because of

this position Davis advocates that one should also revise the static definition and idea that people give to disability. Remember he was talking about how in one second a person can become a wheelchair and in many seconds one can also become multiply disabled.

So, there is amount of uncertainty about disability and even uncertainty about the human body. So, fixing disability as a certain static category needs to be challenged and that is what the dismodern position will be. So, let me revise it again for you. One needs to understand the idea of governmentality and bioculture to understand where the intellectual history of normalcy is done and second, one needs to understand the framework such as dismodernism. Having said that let me talk a little bit about bioculture.

Well, bioculture is sort of a symbolic idea, it is both a symbolic idea and pragmatic disciplinary persuasion. I remember in our context in India notoriously we are all divided from childhood. When people get into 11th standard for example, we talk about hey which group are you from; first group, second group, third group, fourth group, fifth group, my god! That is like saying, "you are first group; that means, you can take medicine, you are second group; that means you can do computer science and third group commerce and fourth maybe history and that kind of stuff".

So that means, some inbuilt hierarchy in the young minds is already laid about the deep divide between science and humanities. Actually that deep divide is a false idea okay. Why is it a false idea? On the one hand we need disciplinary autonomy. We cannot dissolve everything, "oh yeah everybody study everything yeah", I am not advocating that nonsense.

Let us specialize, but understand that specialization is contextual. For example, we cannot understand our bodies without having some idea of medicine, some idea of beauty, some idea of youthfulness, some idea of nutrition, beautification and so on.

So, now than ever before, knowledge in sciences and humanities are becoming fused, they are coming together to form some understanding together. For example, here Davis says "cells today are embodied, biologized and shaped by medical knowledge".

So, it seems for example, to understand the word normal we you need to have lexicographical insight, that is look at the dictionary, you remember he went to Oxford English dictionary to look at the word and so on. You need to understand the history of statistics in the nineteenth century when colonial imperial powers were expanding, so was statistics, mapping the world marine engineering, so it was developing. One also needs to understand how complex measurement values such as meter, miles they were developing. Observing space, observing oceans they were developing and, so was biology, so was biology; Darwin's theory of evolution - survival of the fittest, the telephone came in early 20th century; Graham Bell and how he advocated the idea of hearing culture.

So, it is like a jigsaw puzzle. They will be scattered. It is you as a thinker you have to bring them together and read and interpret using one to the other you know what? This is called bioculture, and I strongly recommend that you read his work on bioculture which will help you form a useful opinion.

Well, how does it help him apart from normalcy and all that in what way is it (this knowledge of bioculture and the rest) useful? Well, Davis's essay on depression is a telling example. So, he works on the idea of depression on two-three fronts; one, the biochemistry of the brain. Serotonin if it is lacking you give a pill and the serotonin content goes up, but how much, and how little, nobody knows.

So, general state of sadness and all they become depression at the recent time. How to understand depression in its context. For example, what depression means in New York and what depression means in Delhi and Chennai or Kumbakonam will be very different with depending on the life context. At the same time psychiatry profession is gaining prominence. How to read things together you need a broader understanding of bioculture.

All right, I think I have explained sufficiently the context surrounding the word normal, such as governmentality, biopolitics that is politics around bioculture, the word dismodern and so on. I think in your own lives observe the word normal how you use, how others use on you whether you are disabled or not. Just observe it for a day; did anyone use it on you or you ended up using on somebody else? Do not worry whether the context is about disability. Then come up with your own insight; I think that will be a fabulous thing to do.

Thank you.