

Multimedia

Book Review: Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*

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Abstract

Jasbir K. Puar's 2017 monograph *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* is a veritable landmark intervention into a number of theoretical fields. Puar is Professor and Graduate Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University and obtained her Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies from the University of California at Berkeley. In her analysis of the Israeli state's policies of maiming, predicated on ideological reference to Palestinian homophobia, Puar extends and recontextualizes themes in affect theory, disability studies, queer theory, trans studies, critical race theory, rights-based discourse and activism, posthumanism, and de/postcolonial theory. The work is published by Duke University Press, 221 pages.

Keywords: debility, capacity, settler colonialism biopolitics, necropolitics

Jasbir K. Puar's 2017 monograph *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* is a veritable landmark intervention into a number of theoretical fields. In her analysis of the Israeli state's policies of maiming—policies at least partially predicated on ideological reference to Palestinian homophobia—Puar extends and recontextualizes themes in affect theory, disability studies, queer theory, trans studies, critical race theory, rights-based discourse and activism, posthumanism, and de/postcolonial theory. As Puar states, “the ultimate purpose of this analysis is to labor in the service of a Free Palestine,” a commitment which tragically continues to be necessary in 2021, as the Israeli state continues to ramp up its colonial and genocidal occupation of the Palestinian people and their land (154). Towards the abolishment of this occupation, Puar engages in a thorough analysis of the relationships between settler-colonial logic and the bio/necropolitical control of the nation-state.

I will first give a brief summary of the arguments elaborated in the preface and the six chapters of the book. I will then contextualize the theoretical interventions of the text within the dominant categories of theoretical work and attempt to show that this book works against such compartmentalization. Finally, I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this text and position it as a must read for anyone interested in nuanced analysis of the conditions of possibility for coalitional politics which might actively fight all forms of oppression, and particularly the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.

Summary

Puar's preface sets up her analysis through the political moment which necessitated its writing. The book finds its roots in the summer of 2014, both in the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and in the fifty-one day assault on Gaza carried out by Israel and named Operation Protective Edge (ix). The “Ferguson-to-Gaza” approach Puar sees

developing within the activism of this period clearly influences Puar's own formulation of the nature of spatio-temporally dislodged but conceptually and materially connected oppressions and violences, as well as resistances and activisms (ix). Following the trajectory of these activisms, Puar's analysis rejects either/or thinking but also argues that both/and formulations of these struggles fail to resolve the tension between them. Instead, the author mobilizes this tension and makes it productive (xi-xii).

The preface also gives us an important note on Puar's conceptualization of the book's three titular terms: debility, capacity and disability. The author is careful to note that she is not arguing that all bodies are disabled to some degree, nor attempting to replace the concept of disability with those of debility and capacity. Instead, Puar says,

I am arguing that the three vectors, capacity, debility, and disability, exist in a mutually reinforcing constellation, are often overlapping or coexistent, and that debilitation is a necessary component that both exposes and sutures the non-disabled/disabled binary. (xv)

In this framework, the "overkill" of death mobilized against Black communities by police in the U.S. (ix), the repression of protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (xxiv), the sparing of life (through debilitation) by the Israeli Defense Forces (x), and other struggles, are neither the same nor are they separable. All are fluctuations in the fields of power which mark out and debilitate populations deemed available for maiming. Where debility and capacity are mapped against each other, disability marks a z-axis on which different positions along the gradient of debility and capacity are differentially recognized as deserving of either systems of support, or deserving of their debilitation in the first instance, according to their membership in one population or another (xvii, xxiii).

The introductory chapter is a tour de force in theoretical framing. Most notably, it is in this section that Puar extends her conceptualization of the operative analytics of the text *capacity, debility, and disability*. In search of a nuanced disability studies framework for thinking through the emergence of the *right to maim*, Puar introduces the spectrum of debility and capacity as a means for moving beyond the disabled/non-disabled binary (2). Instead, all bodies are positioned on a gradient in relation to two poles—capacity and debility—pure versions of which are impossible (22). This vantage point provides a framework for understanding the relationship between homonationalism, the integration of non-hetero sexualities into the legitimation functions of state power, and the right to maim mobilized by the Israeli state toward Palestinian bodies.

The *It Gets Better* campaign, a global-north-centric narrative of inclusion for non-hetero subjectivities, is read as a capacitation mechanism wherein the market, rather than the state, is produced as the site of redress for queer subjects (7-9). Extending this capacitation mechanism to disability rights activism, Puar argues that the disability rights mode of inclusion constitutes a reclamation of white privilege (10, 15). In this sense, the

moving of bodies which are identified as capable of re-capacitation—bodies in certain intersectional positions—into spheres of profitability and productivity functions to exclude those bodies which are incapable of re-capacitation—colonial, raced, and transgressively gendered bodies—displaced both spatially and temporally (9, 15, 22).

Chapter one then builds on this analysis in order to frame contemporary trans rights discourse which assumes a linear, teleological narrative of civil rights progress (33). Against this, Puar analyzes the Americans with Disabilities Act and its exclusion of trans and gender non-conforming sexualities as a moment which produces conflict between disability and trans rights activism (37-40). Within these two discourses, there seem to be divergent tendencies in theorizing the body. Where disability rights discourse must exceptionalize bodily transgression and survivorship, trans rights discourse sees the body as “endlessly available for hormonal and surgical manipulation and becoming, a body producing towards ableist norms,” (42). Puar notes two vectors of *becoming* in relation to trans discourse. Trans-becoming marks a capacitation of the body which seeks inclusion in logics of privilege—raced, gendered, and abled (56). Becoming-trans, however, produces attentiveness to the multiplicity of self-constitution and bodily difference which works against the very foundations of privilege (56).

Chapter two traces the production of disability ‘elsewhere’ by the colonial metropole (the U.S.) both temporally and spatially—the accident prone, and the foreign, respectively (92). The most notable intervention in this chapter follows Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of the accident in its two main forms: the work myth, and the war myth. Puar says it best,

Fusing these two together—the work myth and the war myth—Deleuze and Guattari insist on the utility of what they call “predisabled people” to the braided operations of capitalism and the war machine of the state. Mutilation and amputation are thus no accident but are part of the biopolitical scripting of populations available for injury, whether through laboring or through warring or both: laboring in the service of war that mutilates both national bodies and foreign entities denoted as enemies; or laboring as an inverted form of warfare against a disposable population ensnared as laborers-consigned-to-having-an-accident. (64)

Puar mobilizes this formulation to frame the inclusion-through-exclusion of the Palestinian and disabled populations from narratives of human rights and liberal freedom (72). In this sense, debility reveals a missing component in biopolitical analysis: how disability comes to frame the historical production of populations as such (69).

Chapter three then focuses on the mobilization of this logic in the Israeli state’s relationship to Palestinians, producing disability in the West Bank and Gaza in order to capacitate the Israeli state as able-bodied (101). The Israeli state redirects the fear of being debilitated at the hands of the (homophobic) Palestinian other into the debilitation of Palestine through damaging Palestinian infrastructure and maiming Palestinian bodies (107).

The resultant policy of maiming is made productive not only through the material damage to Palestinian agency, but also through appeal to humanitarian logics of less-lethal warfare. Puar argues,

The consequence of believing that disability is worse than death is simple: “not killing” Palestinians while rendering them systematically and utterly debilitated is not humanitarian sparing of death. It is instead a biopolitical usage and articulation of the right to maim. (108)

Israeli pinkwashing produces the Israeli gay citizen as not-Palestinian, not-Arab, able-bodied, and child-rearing (117, 125). At the same time, the Israeli imposition of “mobility disability,” through occupation and its network of checkpoints, precludes the possibility of LGBTQ+ organizing within Palestine (111, 120).

Chapter four and the postscript then take this right to maim and elaborate not only its value as an analytic within the Israeli-Palestinian context, but also as a corrective within bio/necropolitical theoretical frameworks. Mapping the development of the right to maim from the breaking of stone-thrower’s arms during the first intifada, Puar shows that the target of the right to maim is nothing less than the Palestinian capacity to resist (129, 152). Furthermore, the right to maim undoes the four-quadrant analysis of bio/necropolitics as they are derived from Foucault and Mbembe. In common usage, these four quadrants are “make live,” “make die,” “let live,” and “let die.” Puar’s analysis complicates this framework,

The sovereign right to maim implicates all of the other vectors at once—make die and make live (because in some cases debilitation can be harnessed into “compliant” disability rehabilitation), as well as let live and let die, aversion of slow death, a gradual decay of bodies that are both overworked and underresourced. (139)

In this sense, the right to maim produces a vector that Puar identifies as “will not let/make die”—the actions of the Israeli state are legible as “letting live” and thus are available to discourses of humanitarianism while continuing to debilitate the agency of Palestinian actors (139, 140).

This analysis, however, is not one of totalizing power. Puar notes that the “biopolitical fantasy” of debilitating the Palestinian population’s resistant capacity is just that—a fantasy. What this text does, then, is tie together the fight against ableism, heterosexual patriarchy, settler colonialism, U.S. police violence and Israeli occupation. Puar argues that, “collective punishment is overturned into otherwise untenable lines of solidarity” (160). Anti-occupation activism constitutes a point of convergence for a number of otherwise disparate activisms. The fight against occupation is necessary for any of these activisms to obtain their goals, and without ending occupation, none will succeed (161).

Contextualization

Puar's text arrives within feminist theory mainly in the vein of transnational feminist critique, articulating the often-universalizing frameworks of feminist disability studies, queer theory and trans studies to material conditions and dynamics of populations that are systematically overlooked. In this case, Puar's analysis of the Israeli state's right to maim, and the production of disability, which is its result, complicate the rights-based activism on which so much of contemporary disability and LGBTQ+ activism is built. From this perspective, Puar complicates the *subject* of each of these discourses in relation to the mechanisms of power which exclude them. These *subjects* are revealed to have been afforded untenable individuation and essence. In this sense, Puar's work can be categorized within strains of affect theory, queer theory, and feminist disability studies which draw from post-structuralist discourses of power and subjectivity production. Her work might be situated within the affective turn which resists overdetermination of subjects by the discourses in which they live, arriving at affect as a site of collision between individual experience and discursivity.

Puar works, in this text, at the intersections of Foucauldian biopolitics, Mbembe's necropolitics, and Deleuze's analysis of control societies. However, I think this categorization not only does injustice to the breadth and depth of Puar's analytical insight, but itself reifies the taxonomic impulse which Puar's analysis works against. Puar produces complications for not only these genealogies of thought, but also for the focus on genealogical categorization in academic discourse. Yes, she works with post-structuralist authors at length, but her analysis is not the cookie-cutter imposition of these theories to material conditions. Instead, Puar shows how the nuances of material conditions of trans discourse, disability activism and Palestinian struggle for self-determination push and pull each other. They extend and complicate each other, but ultimately, they also enrich each other in such a way that their dissolution seems unproductive, if not untenable.

Evaluation and Conclusion

This book is a must read for those working within post-structuralist analysis, analysis of the qualitative turn of neoliberal power, as well as analysis of global south activism within disability, trans, queer, and class contexts. Her analysis adeptly navigates structures of power from the level of policy to that of everyday movement. However, this produces a book that is intricately dense. Every sentence feels as though it is about to burst into a paragraph—*or two*—and sometimes that explosion is sorely missed. Here is the largest obstacle between this text and its intended goal. In analyzing the imbrication of so many oppressions, socio-cultural fields of power, and histories of discourse, the book approaches the limit of density where its articulation with the practical political project of a Free Palestine collapses in on itself. Puar develops and extends analysis from a host of other theorists, past and contemporary, always with an eye towards conviviality, even if generous readings are hard to produce. This thoroughness in relation to those on whom her work builds makes for an exceedingly nuanced argument, but also makes the book an intensely laborious read: only time will tell its

role in the movement it expressly supports, but the strength of its analytical insight is undeniable.

For example, her commitment to rigorous analysis of ideological content Puar deftly articulates advertisements for Israeli inclusion of homosexual soldiers with their simultaneous violent debilitation of queer Palestinians (98). Her ability to juxtapose ideological positions with their material effects produce a stunning portrait of the insidiousness of contemporary bio/necropolitical control. Puar remains committed to something like bottom-up theorization, however, the separation of the ideological from the material is revealed to be untenable. The ideological is revealed to be always already material in its causes and effects.

In closing, Puar's analysis is heavy. It weighs down the purported humanitarianism of less-lethal control policies with the horrors they legitimate. Puar's project evades the limitations of rights-based discourse through analysis of the privileged subject positions for whom it is available as recourse, even if the gains attained by global-north rights-based activism are not the focus of this project. Most importantly, however, it ties down theoretical strands which are historically vulnerable to being blown sky-high, that is, away from the material conditions in which they are grounded. It tethers theory to its political articulations. Puar makes explicit her unabashed support for Palestinian struggle, towards which this analysis is carried out. When disability, queer and trans activism are foregrounded, they are never introduced as metaphor, nor are they divorced from their context and made universalizing. They are, however, articulated with Palestinian struggle towards a coalitional opposition which takes oppression, as such and in all its forms, as its object of action.

This coalitional approach is invaluable for those in the United States in this historical, political moment. As police brutality continues to kill black people, uprisings against this brutality have faced something akin to, if not another materialization of, the right to maim which Puar lays bare in this text. The deployment of both tear gas, during a pandemic which targets respiratory functions, and rubber bullets which break arms and cause internal organ damage are certainly presented as soft versions of control. Furthermore, the liberal centrism of the Democratic Party has done nothing to redress the U.S. funding and cooperation which is integral to the ongoing Israeli violence against Palestinians. Puar's analysis reveals the ways in which sub-U.S. populations might be targets of a domestic right to maim and how the U.S. government is implicated in its exercise in Palestine. In any case, Puar has produced an invaluable insight into contemporary state violence, and its legitimation functions.

References

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