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Norms and Deviations: Who's to Say?

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A letter published in the May 26 issue of Time magazine protests the inclusion, in Time's list of the world's 100 most influential people, of two researchers allied with the organization Cure Autism Now (a name that speaks for itself). The letter writer declares himself to be "outraged" because, in his view, "Autistic spectrum disorders are not diseases, but rather markers of 'genetic difference' in the same vein as skin color [and] gender." He equates the search for a cure with genocide — it's "part of a campaign to wipe out ASDs" [autism spectrum disorder] — and he wants the world to know that those to whom the cure would be offered neither need it nor desire it: "I speak for many when I say we are happy the way we are."

A genetic difference is often adaptive and can be regarded as an advance in the evolutionary process; it is well-known that autism sometimes brings with it remarkable powers in the areas of music, art and mathematics. In the 2006 movie "X-Men: The Last Stand," the augmented powers of those known as "mutants" are even more remarkable and include the ability to walk through walls, to move metal objects as large as California's Golden Gate Bridge, to auto-generate fire or ice, to be in seven places at the same time, to read minds, to assume any identity, to kill with a touch, to fly like Icarus, to change the weather. These abilities are seen by many "normal" human beings, and a few mutants, as disabilities, as an indication that the person who possesses one of them is a freak.

From this perspective, the best thing a mutant could hope for would be a cure, and it is the discovery of one that sets the plot of the movie in motion. The response of both "centrist" and militant mutants to this "medical advance" is the same. Storm (Halle Berry) declares, "They can't cure us. You know why? Because there's nothing to cure!" A crowd of mutants rallies to the chant, "We don't need a cure." The leader of the militants, Magneto (Ian McKellen), roars his defiance: "They wish to cure us. We are the cure, the cure for an imperfect and infirm condition called homo sapiens." Not only is he happy with the way he is; he pities and scorns those who walk another, inferior way.

It might seem meretricious and insensitive to link a serious condition like autism with the heroes and anti-heroes of a comic book fantasy. But the link is encouraged by the film's director, Brett Ratner, who said on About.com that the story "has strong racial, political and sexual aspects" and wonders, "What if ... African-American[s] could take a pill [that would] 'cure' them of being black or if a gay could take something that would alter his

sexuality?” That is, what if a condition scorned by the majority but prized by the minority that inhabits it could be eliminated by a simple injection? What would the minority do?

In the case of blacks and gays, the answer has already been given in the mantras “black is beautiful” and “we’re queer; we’re here; get used to it.” In the years since these battle cries were first heard, African-Americans and gay Americans have secured rights, gained in influence and earned respect, however grudging and superficial.

And why couldn’t the same thing happen to autism and mutancy or to any other mode of being that refuses the judgment of those who scorn, marginalize and seek to destroy it? For it is a question, Ratner observes, of “the use and misuse of power.” Do those labeled deviant, he asks, acquiesce and “conform” to a “prejudice,” or do they “maintain their uniqueness ... and embrace what makes them different?”

“Difference” is the key concept in these socio-political dramas, and difference is an inherently unstable measure. In order to mark it — in order to say where difference resides — you must first identify a baseline, a center; but any such identification will appear to those exiled to the periphery as arbitrary, a function of prejudice and an illegitimate exercise of power: *it’s only because there are more of you that you can consign us to the margins and refuse us respect*. Armed with this argument (which flourishes in some versions of multiculturalist and deconstructive thought), there is no form of behavior that cannot make a case for its legitimacy and for its right to be free of external coercion, whether it takes the form of legal sanctions or a forced “cure.”

For some time now, many in the deaf community — a phrase that makes an argument: we are not just persons similarly afflicted; we are a community — have resisted cochlear implants, reasoning that to accept them would be to deny their culture, their language and their identity. “An implant,” wrote the editors of *Deaf Life*, “is the ultimate invasion of the ear ... the ultimate refusal to let deaf people be deaf.”

“I’m happy with who I am,” Roslyn Rosen, then president of the National Association of the Deaf, declared on “60 Minutes” (through an interpreter), “and I don’t want to be ‘fixed.’” The story of the “hearing world,” writes Douglas Baynton, associate professor of history and American sign language at the University of Iowa, is that deafness is an incapacity; but, he explains, what we are dealing with are “physical differences” (exactly the point made in the letter to Time), and physical differences “do not carry inherent meanings.” That is, they do not come labeled “normal” and “inferior,” “abled” and “disabled”; these labels, Baynton contends, are fixed by “a culturally created web of meaning,” a web constructed by no one and everyone, a web that those who live within it find difficult to unravel, even when they know that the meanings it delivers are false.

Deafness appears, it is said, as a defect only against the background of a norm that has been put in place not by nature, but by history. It follows then, argues Lennard Davis,

editor of *The Disability Studies Reader*, that “the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create ‘the problem’ of the disabled person.” “There is no ‘handicap’ to overcome,” insists Tom Humphries of the University of California, San Diego. Paddy Ladd, a British advocate of Deaf Culture, draws the moral: “Labeling us as disabled demonstrates a failure to understand that we are not disabled in any way within our own community,” and the implicit question he asks is, Who is to say that your community is better than ours? I. King Jordan of Gallaudet University drives the point home: “People who come to our campus and who do not know sign language are communicatively disabled.” (PMLA, March 2005)

The logic of that question is the logic that has driven all the anti-discrimination movements of the last 120 years. A minority (deaf activists view themselves as a linguistic minority) is regarded by the mainstream as defective, impaired, criminal (Italians and Irish in the 19th century), inferior (Asians and blacks), immoral (gays, polygamists and gypsies), lacking in mental or physical resources (women until only recently) and either less or more than human (X-men and Jews).

Within the minority community the conviction grows that its stigmatization is the result not of “natural” deficiencies, but of a politically established norm that serves the interests of the powers that be. Exposing that norm as a mere artifact of history with no special claim to authority means first that it is no longer obligatory to honor it, and second, that the community’s norms are worthy of both loyalty and protection. What was once seen as a deviation or something to be eradicated is re-characterized as a culture, and in a short time the culture has a lobby and is demanding respect, representation and even reparations for opportunities denied and rights withheld. The formerly shunned but now legitimized community opens cultural centers, galleries (think of graffiti artists), museums, historical archives, and soon it is being courted by the very mainstream constituencies that for so long accorded it only a negative recognition.

This could happen to any group; for once the norm has been relativized (you have yours, we have ours; why can’t we just get along), there is no obvious way to declare a way of life beyond the pale. You can of course say that the test is whether those whose life style the majority finds dubious and offensive cause harm to others. But the “harm” standard (elaborated by J.S. Mill in “On Liberty”) cannot itself be neutrally applied. Smokers and pornographers say, *leave us alone; what’s it to you?* Those who want to regulate them respond that smokers drive up our medical costs and pornography erodes family values and corrupts our children. Polygamists claim that they more than any honor family values (theirs is a big love); their critics talk about forcing young children to marry long before the age of consent, and polygamists come back with the observation that the “age of consent” is a political construct and certainly wasn’t honored in the Bible. (This drama is now playing out in Texas.)

Perhaps you draw the line by marking off what is criminal from what is not. But no category is more obviously the plaything of politics and prejudice than the category of lawbreakers. Until 1967, it was criminal to engage in interracial marriage; until very recently, it was criminal to engage in sex with someone of the same sex; once, it was criminal to teach blacks how to read; rigid drug laws have made criminals out of several generations of young men; Nelson Mandela was a criminal for decades.

Maybe you apply the universal outrage test, which, one presumes, would put pedophiles and serial killers in the class of those whose actions no one could possibly appreciate or justify. But the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) advertises itself as fighting for personal freedom and “for the empowerment of youth in all areas.” NAMBLA believes that any child, regardless of age, should have the right to say “yes” or “no” to a sexual relationship. Those who would deny them that right are guilty of “ageism.” (In short, boys loved by men like the way they are.) And as for serial killers, one admiring Web site credits at least some of them with the desire to purify the world by killing bad people, as Dexter does in the cable TV series that bears his name (he is the cure); and the same Web site suggests that they are heroic individuals standing up to a repressive society: “People who become serial killers will not repress their fantasies and their true feelings just because society and morality do not accept [them].”

I am neither making nor approving these arguments. I am merely noting that they can and have been made, that they will continue to be made, that there is no theoretical way to stop them from being made, and that their structure is always the same whether the condition that asks for dignity and the removal of stigma is autism, deafness, blackness, gayness, polygamy, drug use, pedophilia or murder.

We want to say that these are all different, that there can be no equivalence between them, and that making the case for one is not to make a case for the others. And of course as a practical matter, that is true. The distinctions that can not be shored up by theory will be put in place, at least for a time, by history; and the degree to which they remain firm or are challenged will be a contingent matter depending on political, social, economic and other factors that cannot be predicted or managed.

All we can be sure of is that the struggle between the impulse to normalize — to specify a center and then police deviations from it — and the impulse to repel the normalizing gaze and live securely in a community of one’s own will never be resolved.