

The Significance and (Mis)Uses of Autism in Anti-Trans Politics and Discourse

Maddox, Rowan. 2024. *The Centrality and Marginality of Disability: Tracing the Historical Contingencies of the (Mis)Uses of Autism in Anti-Trans Politics and Discourse*. PhD diss. University of Bergen: Centre for Women's and Gender Research. (290 pages)

THE CURRENT INTENSE, public attention to what it means to be trans is a field with multiple actors, agendas, and investments. Rowan Maddox's thesis *The Centrality and Marginality of Disability: Tracing the Historical Contingencies of the (Mis)Uses of Autism in Anti-Trans Politics and Discourse* gives us a valuable look into one part of this field, namely the way autism is used to call into question young trans people's identification as trans. Maddox looks at material coming out of the United Kingdom in particular, arguing that gender critical feminists weaponise autism to invalidate the legitimacy of trans identity, rendering it effectively impossible. Across an elaborate and informative extended abstract ('kappe') and three articles, Maddox traces how autism has become a useful tool for gender critical actors to make it appear impossible for autism and transness to co-exist. Grounded in critical disability studies and queer theory and posthumanism, and with a deconstructive approach that resists traditional empirical methods, this thesis adds important and ex-

citing knowledge to all these fields, not least to the intersections and tensions between them.

Building on the work of critical disability studies, including Mitchell and Snyder (2015), Maddox situates the thesis' main focus in the history of how disability has been treated in the western part of the world. Maddox points to how disability has been met with assimilatory demands instead of recognition (and valorisation) of the difference that disability in fact may be said to constitute. The 'benevolence' underlying this form of treatment of disability (which treats autism as if it were not a legitimate form of embodied difference) is what enables the misuse of autism in relation to transness. This 'benevolence' also positions gender-critical actors as concerned protectors who seek to safeguard young autistic people from predatory trans activists. A second central, enabling factor that Maddox traces is that autism is frequently understood as being inherently connected to gender atypicality, which means that gender critical actors can argue that autistic people do not understand (binary) gender. Thus, autistic people can be argued to be 'inherently gender non-conforming' and thus easy to 'push' into transness. By examining these arguments, Maddox attempts to get under the surface of what is *really* being said in the oft-repeated claim that the 'explosion' in youth claiming they are trans actually consists of autistic young people.

It is vital both from an academic and an activist perspective to show how disability is (mis)used in relation to transgender issues, and used to discredit the possibility of a trans identity at all. Maddox succeeds in showing what autism is *doing* in these contexts: how the way gender critical actors draw on a culturally, socially and historically meaningful discourse of benevolence in relation to disability negates the possibility of being trans. Maddox finds the grounds for the discourses that make autistic transness impossible in Western humanist logic, which is "inextricable from contemporary neoliberal understandings" of what makes a valuable, included subject (8). Guided by the works of thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, Alison Kafer, and Catherine Malabou, the thesis critiques common understandings of what makes someone "human", and the unequal access people have to this category as it builds

on multiple exclusions in order to include. Maddox thus points out important connections between some central premises of liberalism and their connections to the anti-gender components of the growing far-right that dehumanise marginalised groups.

Maddox's contribution to the field of gender studies and disability studies does not end at the analysis of the intersection of autism and trans. This thesis also presents an important and engaging intervention in discussions about the conditions for creating knowledge and theories of science. The Acknowledgements section is usually an interesting part of any thesis since it tells the reader something about the support system (or lack thereof) the candidate has had during their time of writing. In this thesis we get "Acknowledgements of Enablement," where Maddox questions the implicit assumptions in academic inquiry itself. Which bodies do we assume in academic inquiry, both as academics and academic subjects? What capacities, and which social and economic conditions do we take for granted? These are familiar questions in both gender and disability studies, as well as in indigenous and decolonial methodologies. The methodology chapter picks up on these questions, challenging the academic form itself by questioning the university guidelines for PhD theses and received knowledge of how to present one's methodological choices. Having to streamline an unruly process and present problems along the way as the fault of the individual instead of protests against the system itself, makes us into 'proper' academic subjects in a Butlerian vein.

The interest in how we make knowledge about disability and gender in academia is at the heart of the data Maddox investigates. They write, "The 'trans debates' are, in essence, contestations over who should be in control of the epistemologies and organization of sex and gender and demonstrates the political, personal, and social importance of these categories" (112). Central questions informing this thesis thus concern the power and politics of epistemology itself: whose knowledge counts? On which conditions are we included in knowledge making? And how do humanist conceptions of rationality and value play into these conditions? Here, Maddox explicitly refuses the commonplace ableism inher-

ent in the so-called autism hierarchy, of lifting up one part of the autism spectrum (the so-called ‘high functioning’ people) at the expense of another (which includes people with substantial support needs). Instead, they question the mechanisms that so starkly valorise the humanity of the former and not the latter. Daring to think otherwise about how we conceive of knowledge, and the politics that go into this, is illuminating and very well done.

In the exploration of the place of race and the contribution of new materialism, Maddox ends with a view to thinking otherwise about autism and trans: they posit a co-constituted (not additive) *autistic transness* as an alternative to the mutual exclusion of autism and transgender as seen through a gender critical lens. Maddox approaches autistic transness as “a recalcitrant identity formed through its relationality” (113). This stimpoint (Maddox’s further development of Garland-Thomson’s (2002) non-ableist version of standpoint, namely sitpoint) leaves behind the pathologisation of both autism and trans, but without providing an uncritically celebratory and hopeful alternative. Instead, Maddox advocates for “staying with the trouble(d)” (ibid.), a call to take in and insist on the multiple, complicated, rich, many-faceted ways of being that is involved in embodying autistic transness. Combined with keeping a keen eye on the (mis)uses of autism in anti-trans politics and discourse, this is a call we should heed.

SARA E. S. ORNING,
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REFERENCES

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