

Of flesh and iron, living and fighting in an ableist society

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Introduction

From the moment I was born, I carried with me the obvious marks of disability. My relegation to the margins of society then became irremediable and it seemed natural that my existence would take place at the bottom of the hierarchy of human lives.

But there is nothing natural about this tragic destiny: it is written by a society which sets standards through legal measures and medical examinations and excludes certain bodies, certain lives. Going to school, working, finding accommodation, falling in love, traveling, campaigning, raising children... All the activities that make us social beings are very difficult to access for people with disabilities. More than our bodies and minds, it is the social structures that hinder our lives. In this book “Of flesh and iron, living and fighting in an ableist society”, I retrace this history of violence and discrimination that I have inherited and decipher the ideological system that supports them: ableism. But I also say that we, disabled people, can reclaim this history and make our identities tools in the fight for emancipation and sources of pride.

Like any person living in France, whether able-bodied or disabled, I grew up in the shadow of validism, that is to say the system of domination which hierarchizes lives according to people’s abilities/inabilities. These inabilities, calculated by various medical tests encompassing the physical as well as the psychological or mental, serve as measures to classify individuals and estimate their right to life. From this hierarchy, the category of so-called “disabled” people is socially constructed, and it’s opposite that of “able-bodied”, making validity the essential criterion for happiness and a good life. The disabled person is therefore an able-bodied failure, who cannot, in essence, not only be happy, but for whom it is normal not to have the same rights. The reduction of her humanity logically leads to a justification of the discrimination she suffers and a naturalization of her inferiority.

In this journey to deconstruct this system of domination, I had to acquire the right words and escape from the constant depoliticization of disability. My first activist experiences helped me in this process, and in particular thanks to the possibility of meeting other disabled activists, including in different countries, and to have access to research and disabled culture. The discovery of the social model of disability was, of course, a turning point allowing me to finally understand that disability was much more than an individual situation resulting from a failing body.

Replacing disability as a socio-political issue thus made it possible to restore the power to act, not only to disabled people, but also to society which could no longer hide behind the supposed naturalness of things. The stigmatization experienced by disabled people was above all the result of socio-political choices made by and for able-bodied people.

How, then, can we live, evolve and build ourselves in Validate land? Above all, for me it was about fighting against a global system and not

isolating the issue of disability from the rest of society. This project seems inevitably anti-capitalist to me. Already because capitalism is a major factor in the exclusion of disabled people through its criteria of productivity, profitability, etc., because it is also a very important cause of disability due to this pressurization on individuals, but also, everything simply because it is harmful to our society as a whole. Once again, anti-validist struggles form an entry point for a much broader fight.

It then seemed essential to me to challenge this myth of capacity which states that the more capable an individual is, the more valuable their life is. To reverse this ideology, addressing the issue of pride was inevitable, in light of what queer people had been able to do. Make disability a source of pride was crucial to overturning stigmas.

However, even within anti-ableist circles, it is not always easy to find your place as a disabled person, especially if you are also sexized, queer, racialized... The question of the intersection of ableist and sexist oppressions, but also the crip movement carried by disabled queer people, were also subjects of concern for me addressed in this book. Just like handiparenting (the parenting of disabled people) which opens several avenues for a reconsideration of parenting as a whole.

Finally, it seemed essential to me to cross the boundaries between disability and validity, and to ask myself what

“Being disabled” really meant? Deconstructing the binarism, the head-on opposition, between disability and validity is essential to breaking down hierarchies. This would also allow a large proportion of disabled people who have an invisible handicap to find their place. This deconstruction would make it possible to move away from the necessarily expected criteria of what a disabled person should be, and would therefore give the possibility to all people who really need it to access their rights.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.