Disability and Development: A Critical Southern Standpoint on Able-Bodied Masculinity

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Abstract:
This paper explores a Southern disabled standpoint as a theoretical and strategic approach to examine disability. In situating disabled people in the South within dominant Northern notions of development, this paper focuses on the 2004 December Tsunami. Our aim is to highlight how the separation of an episodic natural disaster from the ongoing social disaster of war and poverty, is based on a specific approach to understanding the Southern body. By explaining how able-bodied masculine notions of the body are constructed within imperialist and ethno-nationalist projects, this paper suggests a deeper understanding of disability in the South for informed social transformation.

Introduction

“I do agree that the Tsunami was a wonderful opportunity to show not just the US government, but the heart of the American people, and I think it has paid great dividends for us”.
Condoleezza Rice, Senate Confirmation Hearing, January 2005.

This paper explores a Southern disabled standpoint as a theoretical and strategic approach to examine disability. Positioned in a specific subordinated space within the global capitalist economy under the hegemony of the U.S., this Southern standpoint is a critical materialist one. In order for Southern disabled people to transform their subordination and exploitation, this paper argues for a politics of impairment that combines economic redistribution with cultural elaboration of solidarity, justice and care. By situating the analysis of ‘disability’ in terms of disabled people in the South, the aim is to encourage a
deeper understanding of disability particularly in terms of social policy and social mobilisation.

To undertake this task, we will use the 2004 December Tsunami to illustrate not only a particular disability discourse, but also the location of the Southern disabled body within North-South power relations. While some may argue, such a construction confuses ecology with typology, we will demonstrate that the Tsunami is a metaphor for Southern bodies and ecologies that are typologised within a specific power hierarchy. In brief, the representation of both the Tsunami and the disabled body are considered ‘freaks of nature’ (Thomson, 1996) which coincide with the spread of global markets and imperial violence, reconfiguring the human body.

In terms of theory, this paper elaborates the materialist social model proposed by Barnes and Mercer (2005), which merges disability with radically transforming capitalism. In highlighting how disability in the South and the Southern body are represented in times of ‘natural’ disasters, we argue that the Eurocentric masculine imperialist project situates Southern disabled people as a sub-species of nature. The complicity of ethno-nationalist strategies within the South with able-bodied masculinity has particular implications for Southern women and girls with disabilities. By juxtaposing the Tsunami with the disabled body, the aim is to further extend politics of impairment.

The 2004 December Tsunami

The majority of bodies affected by the December 2004 Tsunami belonged to women and children. According to the World Bank (2005), in Indonesia the tsunami killed 129,775 people with 39,786 missing and 192,055 displaced. In Sri Lanka, 35,322 people were killed, over 5,000 went missing, and 516,150 were internally displaced. In Aceh, the World Bank (2006) estimated that total funds needed were US$ 5.8 billion, where US$ 8.9 billion has been pledged. In Sri Lanka, the need was US$ 2.2 billion with US$ 2.8 billion in pledges (World Bank, 2006). By late 2005, almost twelve months since the disaster, the conditions of poverty and war have remained mostly unchanged. While the Tsunami’s human toll was overwhelming, the lagged and inadequate response of the rich Northern nation-sates and international development agencies also reveal the on-going human costs of market-driven ‘development’.

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Northern depictions of the Tsunami and its aftermath reproduced a popular Northern imagining - that disasters live in the South. From mudslides in Central America, earthquakes in Pakistan to famine (along with violence) in Dafur disasters seem to lurk in the South. For the dominant Northern imaginings, the ‘disastrous South’ exists as a permanent condition. Even the devastation of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans illustrated the media and state responses to marginalised southern black bodies in the U.S. During the Tsunami the Northern bodies of tourists were more important than local Southern bodies. This representation of the Southern black body is firmly anchored in flattening their histories and their culturally textured daily lives. Thus, socially entrenched dominant power relations of class, gender, ethnicity and disability are made invisible, along with a multitude of contentious collective struggles for recognition and redistribution.

Representations of natural disaster and Southern bodies are intertwined with Western anthropocentric perspectives of science, which deploys a ‘natural’ hierarchy of species and the notion of a sub-species (Soper, 1995). In this hierarchy of species, humans are situated as superior to nature but certain human beings are closer to nature than others. The idea of the sub-species conveys how human biology can be measured and layered into a ‘hierarchy of being’ (Perry and Whiteside, 1995: 5). At the pinnacle of this hierarchy are white western men where women, black and impaired bodies are located close to nature. The superiority of whiteness is in both physicality and intelligence, where knowledge about self and others is reduced to a value-neutral positivist discourse of ‘science’ and ‘rationality’ (Perry & Whiteside, 1995; Kaplan, 2000).

The proximity to nature of the colonised and the disabled represents a specific sub-species, along with others. Distinguished by the lack of rational and reasoned thought, and the propensity to indulge in the moment of being “resulting in self-loss”, these lesser beings are never capable of fully realising one-self (Ryle and Soper, 2002: 36). Living within a world of unconscious acts driven by irrationality, emotion and non-intelligence, the “unreason” of the sub-species “prevents us from determining or understanding nature itself” (Reed, 2000: 169). Nature and those parts of the sub-species are thus
overwhelmed by irrational acts, with great desires to nurture or destroy everything in its path, without thought or understanding. The impaired and disabled represent this ‘sub-status of irrationality’, which reproduce those ‘sub-human freaks’ of nature (Perry and Whiteside, 1995).

This notion of the sub-species was illustrated by the separation of the Tsunami and nature from the human. This accompanies the positioning of whiteness, the ‘human’, as disconnected from, and superior to brownness, the ‘natural’ (Prashad, 2005). By separating nature from humanity and represented as ‘otherness’, cultural and social histories are also disconnected from their geo-political landscapes and redescribed in a Eurocentric masculine worldview. In the case of the Tsunami, this reinforced dominant notions of the Tropics.

These Northern representations of the 2004 Tsunami illustrate the ways in which Western medicine draws specific geographic boundaries around ‘warm climates’, pathologising the Tropics. Referred to as ‘Tropicality’, this discourse creates a sense of otherness to “the tropical environment, the difference of plant and animal life, and the climate and topography, the indigenous societies and their cultures and the distinctive nature of disease” (Bankoff, 2001: 21). In re-enacting ‘Tropicality’, the Northern Tsunami discourse rationalises the hegemony of Western medicine by re-affirming the inherent dangers to life and health in the equatorial regions and the need for Western medical intervention. The Tsunami, in this Eurocentric hierarchy of being, was something that only lives in Southern geographical spaces, away from the safe and controllable ecologies of the North. Just like the Southern disabled and impaired body, the Tsunami is a part of nature that cannot be stopped, but something that can be prepared for, so that it can be controlled and managed by superior Western technocratic expertise.

With ecological events and Southern bodies located close to nature, this representation of black bodies as a ‘vulnerable’ sub-species form the basis for legitimising imperialist projects under U.S hegemony. The Tsunami was a “wonderful opportunity” for the North, according to Condoleezza Rice, to re-establish its superiority and enlightened imperial benevolence. The response of Northern governments masked the more brutal coercive dimensions of political and military coordination of the global spread of
markets. As Jeremy Seabrook (2005) so eloquently exposed, “Western governments, which can disburse so lavishly in the art of war, offer a few million as it were exceptional largesse”. In effect, the incapacities of local state forms to provide social protection expose the contradictions of neo-liberal strategies promoting ‘self-regulating free markets’ as ‘development’. Not only does this cater to Northern Transnational Corporations (TNCs), but it also fosters ethno-nationalist militarised counter movements based on able-bodied patriarchy. In turn, a key ‘blind-spot’ of the Northern imaginings in representing the black Southern body, battered by disaster was the ‘nature’ of the North-South relationship.

**Disability in the South**

Although most of the world’s disabled population lives in the South, there is higher “incidence of reported impairment” in the North (Barnes and Mercer, 2005: 2). According to the World Bank (2005), there are 600 million disabled people globally, of whom 400 million live in the South. As opposed to the North, life expectancies are shorter in the South, there are limited health and support services, and some conditions (such as dyslexia) are not considered as impairments (Barnes and Mercer, 2005). There are a range of preventable impairments that are caused by lack of access to basic amenities such as safe water, sanitation, electricity, and health services. The limits of state capacities to regulate and extend social provisions depict how the promotion of international competitiveness has enhanced the power of private insurance and drug (pharmaceutical) companies in driving disability policy (Albrecht and Bury, 2001). Disability in the South is situated in a subordinated status within the global disability marketplace. The market for rehabilitation goods and services related to disability is dominated by the interests of TNCs, particularly insurance and drug (pharmaceutical) companies. Major drug and medical supply companies are expanding into the South promoting deregulation and privatization of the health sectors. The current North-South tensions over intellectual property issues and prices of essential medicines, particularly HIV/AIDS drugs, highlight the role of TNCs as well as the WTO in shaping the global disability market place. While subordinating the needs of disabled people, cultural practices and the national sovereignty of the South, the profit driven disability market is
also influenced by capitalist economies recurrent crisis. Not only is the South particularly
effected by the changes in the global market place, there is a generalized amplification of
risk through food sources, genetic modification and accumulated drug resistance as well
as from the environment, climate change, unknown hazards in the workplace and
unregulated proliferation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons (Albrecht and
Bury, 2001). This relationship between the global disability market and the militarization
of the globe is of particular interest for disability in the South.

The outbreak and the maintenance of civil wars in the South relate to nation-state
strategies which are interdependent with imperialist efforts to expand and protect
markets. The post-second world war global system under U.S hegemony has promoted
an international system of "imperialism by invitation" (Panitch and Gindin, 2003). While
inviting "self-governing" states to participate in the international trading regime, the new
hegemony is sustained by “political and military coordination with other independent
governments” (Panitch and Gindin, 2003). The global trade in military weapons plays a
key role in maintaining market friendly governments while militarising conflicts in the
South.

Disability in the South is intertwined with civil wars, where both state and insurrectionary
groups use maiming rather than killing to undermine resistance and socialise fear (Barnes
and Mercer, 2005). The global military industrial networks, including international arms
trade, dominated by Northern countries and often invisible in World Bank ‘development’
discourse, illustrates the coercive dimension of market-led ‘development’. Northern
countries accounted for about 75 per cent of world military spending in 2004 but
contained only 16 per cent of the world population. The U.S accounts for nearly half of
world military spending. In 2004, the military spending of the U.S accounted for nearly
US$ 400 billion, compared with US$ 6.4 billion in Indonesia and US$ 19.1 billion in
India (Global Issues, 2006). The GDP of Sri Lanka in 2004 was around US$ 21 billion,
while military spending was nearly US$ 560 million. The role of the Indonesian military
in protecting the interests of Exxon Mobil, one of the major U.S oil TNCs, illustrates how
national politics of resource rich Southern countries are interconnected with geopolitics
of imperialism. Moreover, the productive, docile, bodies that the World Bank and nation-
state strategies promote for ‘development’ are also Southern bodies faced with human right abuses (Amnesty International, 2001).

Global market forces shape and are reshaped by underlying social structures and cultures of disability primarily in the terrain of national politics. Disability in the South is positioned within a neo-liberal ‘development’ discourse, which prioritises international competitiveness through trade liberalisation where under market-driven politics the state promotes the interests of capital through privatisation and deregulation (Leys, 2001). Consequently, government regulation or social provisioning is seen not only favouring sectional interests and encouraging inefficiencies, but also state bureaucracies are seen as inherently acting to maximise their own interests. Thus, privatisation under public-private partnerships are promoted, blurring the public-private distinction. As for disability policy, the retraction of state social provisioning and the privatization of health services have amplified household care labour, particularly women’s care work.

Under market-driven politics, disabled people are located in the periphery of labour markets, where able-bodied labour constitutes the valourised core. In order to attract international investors, the active promotion of a skilled and docile labour force also means creating a labour market which restricts basic worker rights, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining. In effect, more people are disabled by the lack of decent work, safety and health regulations and poverty level wages. However, there are other recruits from a pool of underemployed and unemployed workers, in urban slums and impoverished rural communities. This marginalisation also feeds into the proliferation of ethno-nationalist counter movements, in hope of gaining recognition and redistribution.

**Authoritarian ethno-nationalism, nature and able-bodied patriarchy**

While strengthening conditions for global capital to invest and operate, the state’s attempts to gain legitimacy is increasingly based on patriarchal ethno-nationalist strategies. In contrast to previous closed economy projects, this nationalist development discourse is committed to market-driven politics. While there are different versions of this nationalist project, they are grounded in able-bodied patriarchal constructions of nationhood where the nation is represented as masculine reason. This depiction of the
nation-state as masculine reason excludes women from the ‘social’ and ascribes them to ‘nature’. In effect, women are engaged in reproducing the nation, biologically, culturally as well as symbolically (Yuval-Davis, 1997). By casting the Tsunami as an irrational act of nature, humanity is masculinised while nature is feminised.

The masculinity implied in patriarchal ethno-nationalist strategies is an able-bodied masculinity. The emphasis on ability relates to how culturally mediated economic activities, discipline, control, subjugate and reproduce bodies as well as embodiment. The body is central to the self as a project as well as social status (Turner, 2001). In effect, the body is shaped by both cultural and material practices. The dominant forms of masculinity articulated in nationalist projects are an able-bodied masculinity, which is based on evading the shared frailty of human beings and the vulnerability as social beings (Turner. 2001). While the body is “inescapable in the construction of masculinity”, the bodily performance that valorises ability is also related to the de-valuation of the disabled body (Connell, 1995: 56). The able-bodied masculinity of ethno-nationalist projects overlaps with fascist tendencies which Connell describes as a “naked assertion of male supremacy” (1995: 193). The fascist image of masculinity combines disparate dispositions of “unrestrained violence of frontline soldiers”, rationality (bureaucratic institutionalisation of violence) and ironically, irrationality too (thinking with ‘the blood’, the triumph of the ‘will’) (Connell, 1995:193). In turn, elements of dominance as well as technical expertise are core features of able-bodied masculinity that subordinate disabled bodies and women.

The Southern disabled stand point suggested in this paper emerges from a cultural critique within the South itself. The dominant representation of nation in terms of able-bodied ethno-nationalist patriarchy is at the heart of this critique. The feminisation of both nation and nature by able-bodied ethno-nationalist patriarchy deploys notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘motherland’ with strategic intent. With women narrowed to their maternal and nurturing function, this representation of women as biological reproducers of the nation is central for the domestication of women while restricting their status as citizens. While relegating women and disabled bodies into the private sphere of the household (Das and Addlakha, 2001; Mohanty, 2002) the patriarchal ethno-nationalist projects maintain a masculinised public sphere. Just as a woman’s status as citizen within the
public domain is conditioned by the active role of the state constructing relations in the
private domain, of marriage and the family (Yuval-Davis, 1997), the citizenship status of
disabled bodies are also shaped by similar interventions (Meekosha and Dowse, 1997).
This is even more so for women with disabilities, who are regarded as unfit to reproduce
the nation (Das and Addlakha, 2001). In responding to the Tsunami, the ‘humanity’ of
the imperial state merged with able-bodied patriarchal state strategies to separate and
 evade the inhumanity of poverty and war that continue to reproduce disabling structures
and cultures in the South. By contesting the privileged/hegemonic position of the
Northern notions of development, disability, and disasters, the Southern disabled
standpoint is aimed at deepening politics of impairment.

Conclusion

The delineation of disability as ‘natural’ and disability caused by war and poverty as
‘cultural’ is a specific value-laden framework. The separation of natural and human
disasters obscures their shared properties and how culture and history mediates in
defining them. While the tsunami had a natural dimension as an ecological event, the
consequences of that event were shaped by pre-existing culturally mediated material
practices. By the time the Tsunami arrived in Sri Lanka and Aceh, the Southern body
had already endured extensive destruction and violence under ethno-nationalist state
strategies and Northern notions of ‘development’. Despite the billion dollar pledges the
response of rich Northern nation states, impairments caused by war and poverty endure.
Thus, the Tsunami can be deployed as a material metaphor to examine the Southern
disabled body, where those ‘freaks of nature’ provide ‘opportunities’ for western
scientific technocratic expertise and imperial benevolence.

For politics of impairment, disabling barriers generated by war and poverty in the South
are inseparable from market-driven ‘development’ and global military networks. With the
majority of people with disabilities located in the South or the ‘majority world’, the
ongoing articulation of North-South relations is significant for elaborating a critical
Southern standpoint on able-bodied masculinity.
References:


Blackwell.


