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Anarchism: in the Conversations of Neurodiversity

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The reading in front of you is brought to you by a perspective of a young white autistic mentally ill trans person. This person has experiences of ableism, childhood abuse and neglect, queerphobia, etc. I am that person, the one who's going to explain what neurodiversity means to us in conversations related to neurodivergent acceptance and ableism, and why the idea of anarchism is a possible key to having an anti-ableist society. I will also discuss the intersectionality of other people's experiences and why the neurodivergent experience is going to be different each every time. In this piece, I work to explain why the anarchist philosophy is the right model for dismantling the ableist system we live under today by explaining the concept of neurodiversity, give examples of ableism and discrimination, and then illustrate what the philosophy of anarchism really is. The obvious reason for the conversation to be acknowledged is that we are human, and that we have different experiences and perspectives, and it's going to always change.

We face systematic and social discrimination because of those differences, and we need to change something about it.

So, what is neurodiversity? The term neurodiversity refers to “a concept where neurological differences are to be recognized and respected as any other human variation”(What is Neurodiversity). Similar to biodiversity where there is a variety of life in a particular ecosystem, like how there are a variety of minds in a particular human environment. The idea of neurodiversity has been mentioned a lot in autistic spaces or discussions related to neurodevelopmental disabilities and disorders. Let’s look at the neurodiversity paradigm. Nick Walker, who is a local autistic author, has his own blog called Neurocosmopolitanism, which are his notes on autism and neurodiversity. He has explained that the neurodiversity paradigm is “a specific perspective on neurodiversity – a perspective or approach that boils down to these fundamental principles”(Walker). Such as “neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity”, and what Walker means is that human beings are born as healthy, unique individuals despite their neurodevelopmental differences. Then secondly, “the idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture”, and finally that “the social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential”(Walker). These points also explained how you are still normal no matter what, and that it can happen to anyone, whether if you’re a Black person, a woman, a transgender person, etc. Then finally, how we labeled other people for centuries has affected how we view them in society, which results in social in-

equalities between conventionally “superior” and “inferior” human differences of brains and minds. That’s the lesson to take in and think about, especially if you’re a neurotypical person that hasn’t been exposed to the idea of neurodiversity as a normal human trait yet.

These injustices are typical of how neurodivergent people are still treated today. We still face types of systematic discrimination such as less freedom to autonomy as adults, the cruel act of eugenics, ableist language, less access to healthcare depending on our social status similar to institutional barriers to access faced by people of color or a woman, or even have the intersectionality of the two, you will less likely to get diagnosed and be ostracized for self-diagnostic when it is most likely that you are autistic or neurodivergent in any way. Debra Muzikar in her article, “Neurodiversity, a Person, a Perspective, a Movement?” has mentioned about the struggles that various people she talked to, had explained about what it’s like for people to be treated differently because of their minds. For example, Steve Silberman, one of the people in the article mentioned about the anti-vaccine and pro-cure communities, and he stresses on that “framing autism as a disability that deserves support and reasonable accommodations (rather than, say, an epidemic caused by vaccines) would benefit everyone, including people with profound intellectual disability”(Silberman interviewed by Muzikar). Giving disabled people support and accommodations will help them to have healthy lives, and I have experienced being given school accommodations in order for me to move forward in my own pace and time.

To perform a deeper analysis on the “pro-cure” perspective, Autism Speaks is a great example of the eugenics of autistic people. Muzikar has written another recent blog on “why many people are upset with the nonprofit Autism Speaks addressed eugenics and the concern of ridding people of their neurodiversities”. There has been surveys reported that in 2013, “Autism Speaks spent over \$52 million on advertising”(Muzikar). As an autistic person, it is hon-

estly obscure and inhumane to not fund services and support that the autistic community needs, but instead fund on “awareness”, lobbying, fundraisers, and advertising that only results in family members, friends, and “allies” pitying us for just being ourselves, to think that being autistic is a bad thing to be rid of like the Black Plague in the Middle Ages. Also, most of the money is spent on research to get rid of autism itself. What is wrong with being neurologically different than others, it’s not our fault is it? Is it that bad that it needs a cure, of course not. Now, the reason why the pro-cure perspective exists is because of the long-term history of dehumanization and demonization of autistic people, and it creates a destructive rhetoric that promotes and spreads fear, stigma, and prejudice against autistic people. These ideologies also go along with systematic oppression and discrimination created to have hierarchy over people. For example, there is systematic racism, and it can definitely intersect with ableism in so many ways.

Autistic people of color actually face more disparities than white autistic people due to systematic racism and how it results in people of color having less access to healthcare. It also results in later diagnosis or self-diagnosis when being a people of color rather than being white. I currently have a partner who I know, love and trust dearly, and after being together for a while, they discovered that they are actually in the spectrum the whole time due to learning more about my disability, which resulted in learning about their own identity as an autistic person, and that hasn’t been diagnosed yet along with other neurological differences that has been diagnosed before. They’re also a black nonbinary person. I also know a few people in my life so far who are black and brown people who happen to have neurodevelopmental disabilities too. To be honest, while looking for sources about statistics on black and brown autistic people. In fact, few studies on this topic have even been conducted. It was unbelievably hard to find, and I have a source that I have to go with for now.

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What I have found, which isn't surprising to me anyways, is that "studies show that African-American children with autism are likely to be identified later than their white counterparts, and Latinos were less likely to be diagnosed than other kids"(Garcia). I would like to point out real quick that this particular study was in a website belonging to an organization called Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and it is actually an issue is that autism spectrum disorder and other conditions are still seen as a disease. Anyways, there are even studies shown that black and brown autistic children and adults are less likely to receive medical treatment they need, even if they're already diagnosed. This form of systematic racism and ableism has affected how we view disability as a whole, and how intersectionality connects with the idea of neurodiversity. Since we looked at the issues neurodivergent people faced, how about we look at anarchism as part of the discussion for fighting against ableism, and along with radical approaches that will promote neurodiversity in today's society.

While most autistic people, including I do support the concept of neurodiversity, not all people think alike on the subject, some of them like neurotypical people and entitled privileged "high-functioning" autistics will probably dispute my perspective that it is not a good representation of the autistic and neurodivergent community. To start off, Gwendolyn Kansen is an autistic writer for the Pacific Standard who views herself as "high-functioning", and she views the neurodiversity movement as not acknowledging how "disabling" being autistic can be. For example, she mentions that "many of us aren't high-functioning enough to benefit from de-pathologizing autism. The neurodiversity movement doesn't have much to say about lower-functioning autistics, who are decidedly less inspirational"(Kansen). The language used in Kansen's article has functioning labels which are ableist by default, and I believe that autistic folks deserves to have their human rights respected by other people in society, no matter where they are in the spectrum. It is not our fault that we have happen to have different skills than

other people, and we should not have our humanity be devalued on whether or not we are nonverbal or need 24/7 care for rest of our lives. Our development is always going to be in a different pace. Then, she claims that, “Some members of the neurodiversity movement will tell you that “most” autistic people don’t want to be cured – but some studies show that over half of us have an IQ below 70”. But, I disagree with Kansen’s view on our ability to think and how we view our autonomy because in reality, Intelligent Quotient tests are ableist due to the fact that intelligence is a social construct made to devalue the person’s ability to just know something. Plus, the issue is that it’s not our fault that some of us exhibit “negative” and self-destructive behavior at times or that some of us still need help communicating with other people and need care from other people as teenagers and adults. What should be the solution is to acknowledge other people’s needs, use your privilege to help others in need, no matter what, and to provide them accommodations and resources in order to survive as a human being, even though if we happen to think differently than neurotypical people.

Anarchism is to me, a philosophy that is based on organizing a society that opposes authority and unjust hierarchies, and also based on voluntary cooperation and stateless autonomy of individuals and groups. So, how we can put the philosophy of anarchism in the conversations of neurodiversity into context? Well, it simply promotes cognitive freedom for neurodivergent people, and encourages us to know that we can make autonomous decisions for what is best for our body, our mind, and our entire health. Frost, who wrote “Change Your Mind”, has made a great point for why “that’s the whole reason there’s a spectrum. Autism manifests in many different ways, and can be subtle enough to never be diagnosed, or something that is much harder to miss. Even within the autistic spectrum, there are such great differences that it can be hard for one person to even understand what is going through the mind of another”(Frost). Also, that people should not get to decide for marginalized groups on what’s best for them, and that anar-

chism is a good philosophy to approach the issue because of its views on cooperation and autonomy.

Now, how does anarchism be part of the solution to abolish ableism? That’s the real question here. I researched an amazing paper called “Anarcho-Autism: Anarchist-Communism & Autism Acceptance” by Riley Olson, and these are the solutions I agree with so far. First is to dismantle stereotypes and ableist ideologies such as the cure culture that is currently harming the concept of neurodiversity for everyone else to benefit from. Second, is to provide accessibility for autistic and other neurodivergent folks. The third thing is to educate ourselves on how to be a good ally such as by remembering that autistic and neurodivergent people should be leading the conversations about autism, neurodiversity, and their lives, read writings by those who are neurodivergent, presume competence, and be prepared to change for the benefit of everyone else, including yourself. Finally, mutual aid is the key to solidarity and compassion towards neurodivergent folks. Olson then talks about how famous Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin “claimed that mutual aid, not competitive struggle, was the dominant factor of evolution”(Olson 103). Even though the concept of mutual aid has been suppressed by capitalism and imperialism, organization and working towards to the sense of true humanity will help us conclude to the goal we’ve been waiting for centuries to come. The ability to spread positivity of neurodiversity, and to be able to not live under an ableist society that dehumanizes autistic folks, neurodivergent folks, disabled folks, and so on. So remember, in order to be an anarchist, you must be not just anti-racist, not just anti-sexist, but also be anti-ableist, to include everyone who’s part of the struggle.

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