

Disability Studies: An Introduction
Prof. Hemachandran Karah
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

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The Normal and its End An interview with Prof. Lennard Davis
Part 1

Prof Hemachandran Karah: Hello, welcome all to this session on normal or normalcy, I would say, and it is end. Here we have Professor Lennard Davis who needs no introduction but here for the sake of our conversation — he has written extensively on bio-culture, governmentality and he is an important person in Disability Studies. Welcome, Professor Davis.

Prof Lenard Davis: Thank you.

HK: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

LD: Sure! I am a Professor of English Medical Education and Disability Studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I have written books on a lot of books on disability as well as bio-culture and bio-politics. I got into this field because my parents were both deaf and, so I am a CODA, Child of Deaf Adults. And that interest in deafness led me to a larger interest in disability and so that is my area of expertise.

HK: Before talking about the idea of normalcy maybe we should talk about bio-culture What is bio-culture, Lenny?

LD: Well, bio-culture is a I guess we call it a branch of bio-politics. And it is the idea that you really cannot be a good citizen nowadays if you do not know anything about the interaction between science, technology, medicine and culture. It used to be I think that you could go to the polls and vote for politicians and all of that in a kind of civic manner if you were not particularly interested in the science is. But I think now so many ethical, moral, questions political questions are tied up to questions that have to do with science and medicine and technology. So, it is really an attempt to bring together two different worlds in many people's minds the world of the humanities and the world of the sciences and it has a strong, I think, notion that there is a political side too any scientific development. It is a political ethical moral social side, any scientific development.

HK: Is this part of a... can we say this it is an important area of intellectual history of the west.

LD: I really do think it is incredibly important and you know from the point of view of the work that I have done you know you can see and this takes us to issues of governmentality if someone like Michel Foucault has talked about very much and very accurately, I think. That you know with the rise of industrialization also came about the rise of discourses around the body whether they are medical, or whether they are psychiatric whether they are technological, whether they are issues around time, motion studies and factories. There is a there was a growth and development of a belief that science is could really explain shaped and create the vision of what it is to be human. I mean you know we have a lot of science fiction movies that you know speculate about the way that science works and how it interacts with human life. So, I think for like an ordinary student who wanted to know what I was talking about, all you have to do is think about science fiction movies. And how they postulate what life would be like under different scientific technical conditions.

HK: So, I mean tracing the history of the normal sort of fits into this larger exploration of contribution to science in fixing the problem of average, what is human, what is non-human, what is to lead a good life and so on does it fit like that.

LD: Exactly.

HK: Yeah.

LD: Yeah exactly, so my work the work that I did on the on normalcy began because kind of a just a random sort of observation that I had probably one day when I was running which is where I get a lot of good ideas. And I was just thinking that like I wonder when the word *normal* started to be used was it always used as it was it used in Shakespeare's time was it a new word. So, I just went I went to the Oxford English dictionary where I often go and I looked it up and I was really surprised to find that the word normal only really entered the English language and European language is quite late sort of mid 19th century. So, that would mean it is own the word is a hundred and fifty years old I am thinking about well.

So, what was the first of all over the world be like if we did not have the word normal. And more concretely to start doing some research about where did that word start and what are the consequences of its usage. And so what I began, so when I did that what I began to see first of all was that normal is not like an obvious thing. It is not a concept that you assume that people all over the world had at all times like the idea of milk or the idea of love. I mean that normal has this really specific origin and it really comes out of the scientific social scientific political discourse. So, the first kind of appearance of it that I was able to find is a guy named Adolf Kettle who in the very beginning of the 19th century in France came up with this idea that he wanted to measure human bodies. He wanted to measure lots of human bodies to figure out what the average human body looks like. And he came up with this concept of what he called (?) in French, so it is just like the average man.

So, measured a lot of arms, and legs, and heads, and head sizes and he came up with this person who does not exist in real life called the average man and then there what I realized about him was that he was one of the earliest early statisticians. So, somebody who does statistics we came up with statistics about the human body when you start applying statistics to the human body. So, what I am saying is that the normal curve which we now know it looks like it is the bell curve when the normal curve shaped like that. It was really a kind of artefact of scientists or astronomers looking to try to plot stars on a graph and to say like where is that star. So, you would plot all of the different places that you thought you saw it and then you would draw those lines together. And you would come up with what generally the highest point on the graph would be where the most frequently you saw the star of the most frequently.

So, that that was called the normal curve and the reason it was called the normal curve was because it was based on the idea of a carpenter's norm which was or we might call a carpenter's square. That you imagine a graph that has like an L shape underneath, and a line going up the top to the L and then down to the bottom. That L forms it is what we would call a carpenter's square you have seen carpenters use them. So, the word normal did not have any inherent meaning other than that it is a standard a kind of measurement that carpenters use when they build houses or whatever. So, then after Kettle there was a man whose name was Francis Galton. Sir Francis Galton was the cousin of Charles Darwin and Galton also was measuring lots of things about the human body. And in

addition to being a statistician who measured the body he also came up with the term Eugenics. And he was the first eugenicist who is invented German eugenics for him was the idea that you would measure all these human bodies and you would come up with the normal person. And then you would try to figure out how you could make human beings better. So, eugenics is if you break the word down it means *eu* is good and *genetics* those genes, so good genes. So, the genetics idea was that you would look and try to find what was normal in populations and then make human beings better and there was this was an era in the middle of the 19 century when animal breeding was at it is height. And, so people were very excited about the fact that they were breeding all of these different kinds of dogs and all the dogs that we have now. All the breeds really came about in this period they were breeding bigger cows you know cows that made more milk. So, they thought would be like hey if we can do this for animals, why cannot we do this for people?

And in a certain kind of way it is not a bad idea, but it definitely had bad consequences and one of them was the idea that well. So, who are these good people with good genes turns out that for Galton and many people they were Northern-white Europeans. And that became the standard of what was normal and this was also the beginning of racial “science”, you know a science in quotes, because it was not really scientific in our current terms. But it was the idea that rate certain races were less than normal, and they tended to be you know dark brown people black people from the Mediterranean Jews Italians Greeks.

So, suddenly we were using science, and using the idea of normality to create racial categories that then had devastating consequences. And included in that of course, are the idea that people with disabilities are not normal; and therefore, if you are goanna breed better humans and use eugenic ideas you would try to create what they call the fittest humans. And even our idea of fitness which we now use them when we talk about physical fitness or fitness sitters and tell their other comes from very much this idea around normality and eugenics. And the idea was that if you wanted to make a fitter country with fitter people you would do everything you could to get rid of people with Disabilities. And, you would also diminish the amount of non-normal people that is to say brown/black you know racialized others from your culture.

HK: Before the arrival of the cultural seeping of the idea of normal, you were talking about you do talk about the problem of the idea of ideal was stretching right from ancient Greek culture to the almost modern period way back to the 18 century. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

LD: Sure, so you know when I was thinking about like wow there was no word normal I was thinking what word would there have been. And the word I thought was maybe ideal. So, like the, so and if you have a culture in which you have an ideal not normal concept of normality, then you know everybody would be less than the ideal. And in a culture where you know like a King, or God would be ideal I am talking about in monotheistic cultures, because I know in India, the gods actually even though they have a certain ideal quality they are they are much more in some sense human than in the Western world. But you could have a God Jesus, Muhammad who has you know it was perfect I mean I think probably people think of Buddha as perfect as well. And then you had everybody would be below trying to be I reach the ideal but knowing that you never were going to. They do not was only possible for a divinity. But the thing about normal is that it is the opposite, everybody should try to be normal. Or better than normal, so it puts great a pressure on people, you know people are you there is a kind of relief that you know you can never be a god. But with, but the with normal there is this implication that you should try to be normal and even better than normal.

So, it puts the kind of pressure it has a hegemonic and you want to call it or you know an impetus to do better, be better and that sort of tied up with the genic idea. And also with the things that are connected up with industrialization and our modern world. We live in a world where everybody is going to the gym every ones trying to buy all kinds of products, get the best clothing, look perfect. So, that you know that pressure is there in a way that under normalcy that may not be other in the world of the ideal.

HK: Slowly working on this idea, you do talk about the idea of diversity and the idea of norm being an underlying principle that in a way binds the idea of diversity, but at the same time disabilities being excluded from the norm.

LD: Yeah, so part of what I have been have written about is that you know in especially in the States identity politics has been very big. And you know generally people talk about race/class/gender, they often leave out disability. So, one of my points has been to

include disability in that paradigm. But I also made the suggestion that maybe disability would give us a way of thinking about identity differently and more complexly in a certain kind of way. And that is because for most identities in identity politics they are pretty fixed, in other words if you are African-American you are goanna be born African-American you are goanna be African-American till you die.

If you are a woman unless you go through a lot of expensive surgery you are goanna be a woman when you born to when you die. But disability is a category that is very loose in terms of identity pop, you know there is so many different kinds of disabilities you can be deaf, you can be blind, you can be a wheelchair user, you can have a chronic disability, or you can have a mental disability. You know there is just so many different things. So, it there is in, so much a fixed identity as there is a kind of group assumed identity and the other thing is that anybody can become disabled in a second. You know I am not going to turn into an African-American woman when I go to bed tonight and get up in the morning. But I could easily become a wheelchair user in two seconds that I cross the street the wrong way I get hit by a car. So, I think the idea that disability is the malleable category it can fluctuate and change, might help us think through the larger issues about identity. And I call I have called that *Dismodernism* instead of *Postmodernism*. I thought of Dismodernism as a kind of way of thinking about the identity in our era. That we could think about it in a more complex way, and a lot of I think identity politics falls into the paradigms of Ableism. In the sense that there is a lot of thought about being independent and you know we have to pull ourselves off by our own bootstraps and you know our identity you have to be like the normal person within the identity group whereas, Dismodernism suggests that that interdependence and caring for each other would be the general rule that the idea of the independent person which is kind of an enlightenment idea. Where an independence you know solitary subject by ourselves and you know in a group maybe, but still the idea of being independent is very important.

Dismodernism asks us to rethink that about our relationship to each other and the idea that some ones dependent is not a bad thing, but actually kind of a human condition were all really dependent on each other. Especially in the United States and in the West I think there is more of a notion of independence of individuals. I am sure in India and in some

Asian countries the family is more important and the you know extended family and that in that kind of independence is perhaps less important.

HK: So, there are various normalcy in the current paradigm of diversity, because people are talking about diversity everywhere. So, where does it fit? Lenny.

LD: Well I you know this is a complicated subject, because diversity is a good idea why not. You know in other words we do not want to have a single person who represents the entire culture the way that normal kind of suggested that there would be like the white male you know would be the standard. So, diversity is a good idea in the sense that it that we are all diverse and that includes disability which I said often gets forgotten about when people talk about diversity. But, so, it is also kind of a limited concept, because from my point of view what does it really mean I mean you know in a weird way it means we are all different. And therefore, we are all the same we are all the same because we are all different, I mean it is kind of a puzzle you know and it looks to a future where diversity will be important, but actually well all be equal. So, then once were all equal then diversity kind of all disappear you know like the way Marx talks about the state disappearing, So you know diversity offers this idea that were all different, therefore all the same which seems kind of almost like a tautology what does it actually mean in the long run.

HK: But if we ask the question —different in what way? Can it open new possibilities?

LD: Yeah, sure, it can! But then that is kind of exhausting like we are we really going to be able to know about every different kind of person in all of their different ways. I mean is it just lip service to something. I mean how many people who are interested in diversity really study the life of somebody in Nepal or in Botswana or something you know in other words it kind of becomes infinite.

HK: The variable becomes infinite.

LD: Yeah and then when it becomes infinite no one's going to do the work to know everything and if and in knowing everything how are you going to talk to anybody, because they all have to know everything too.

HK: So, where does Multiculturalism fit in here, Lenny? You do talk about Multiculturalism when you talk about placing disability in the normalcy paradigm.

LD: Yeah well, multiculturalism offers a good solution to countries that are not multicultural. You know, so I mean we are seeing this all over the world now monocultures are having to rethink their existence. And therefore, to you know for us to think that they are there on multiculturalism and we need to know about them it is a similar problem to the one that I just discussed.

However, there is kind of an idealism behind the idea that like if we just celebrate multiculturalism then everything will be OK. But, in fact, I mean we are in a political moment now where multiculturalism is producing a huge backlash, you know and we would think that look oh these this is like 30 years, 40 years after people have gone to school and learned about multiculturalism. And now in so many countries in the world there is a rise of a kind of really anti-immigrant right wing reactionary position that the plea for multiculturalism has not been sufficiently strong or a nuanced or articulated or something that it would be able to help settle the issues that are being brought to the fore in these countries. I think you are aware what I am talking about.

HK: Yes, but maybe at the end of the day multiculturalism may be just a lifestyle.

LD: I think a lot of this work in the United States as you say is a lifestyle issue. I think you know my generation I am kind of 60 and I think you know we began in an when the civil rights movement in the United States began. And this whole kind of push toward multiculturalism and 'liberty for all groups', which is great in principle, But I think in fact, I know you want this for a more general audience so this is a very specific comment, but in a way, I think, we have developed a set of analysis that have not really helped us in the long run with the actual political issues. So, you know we celebrate diversity, we celebrate multiculturalism, we talk about how what we should say and call people and what we should not say and call people. But translating that into actual laws is has not been hugely successful, I mean in the United States the biggest law that has to do with the disability is the Americans with Disabilities Act that passed in 1990 in the United States. It was the biggest civil rights act of at anyone even that we know the ones in the 60s that were about African Americans and other people of colour. At was actually the most extensive law developed, and it was not really the result of a lot of academic

work was a lot result of a lot of political work and activism. And I think that that part of trying to figure out how an academic discourse can translate into really changing lives of people in the world. Other than just being a lifestyle is the challenge for us.

HK: I think we are almost with the fag end, but I would like to ask this question to you, Lenny. In what terms or in what way you grew up listening to the word normal, and you got this special insight about lexicographic inside But before that I am sure you grew up hearing this word and you would, say, you are a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA). In what are your experiences with the word normal?

LD: I guess personally I grew up in a world where my parents were deaf. But this was before deafness was really even understood to be an issue at all political or otherwise. And, so it you know I am in the 1950s when I was a little kid, deaf people were just considered animals. They had no dignity. When I grew up in New York City and my parents used to take the subway. And when we were ride the subway, all of these people would stare at my parents because they were speaking in sign language. And everybody would stare. I even as a little kid was very upset about that and what I did was I sat there on the subway and I would stare at the people who were staring at my parents and make them look away. And I would work my way down every single person on the subway car and then I go back to the beginning and stare at the ones in the beginning again. So, I mean I was very aware that people considered my parents to be less than they were. They were very intelligent; they were very creative. But all people could see was that they were not normal. And worse than that because the words they used to use were deaf and dumb when my father was very upset about the word dumb he would say were deaf, but were not dumb. You know and he meant that in that sense that of a dumb animal that was being used in there

So, I mean I grew up and I had a sense of injustice around the way that my parents were treated and that people did not understand what deafness was about. And then I really did not do much about that as an adult until I started you know thinking about it again much later on life. And getting to know deaf people again and getting to know people with disabilities and understanding that you know that normal is a terrible word. I mean, I have told people lets ban it never use it try it try to go for 24 hours without using the word normal and especially younger people. Its hard! And once they realize it is not just a word it is a word that carries a lot of discrimination and a lot of pressure. And you

know try to imagine a world where the word normal does not exist or maybe you can start that world by not using it or pointing out the people when they use it. That it there is no one who is normal and it is used as a this word of discrimination and it is used as a word of intimidation. So, yeah, so that would be my advice for younger people is you know get rid of normal.

HK: Thank you so much, Lenny. Half an hour passed by very quickly. But I am sure those who are listening, and me too, are grateful for your time.

LD: Ok well thank you very much I appreciate the opportunity.

HK: Thank you. So, much bye.

LD: Bye.