

My Disability is Manufactured

The physical aspects of disability are inherently social and economic, too.

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I am in line to board a plane and there is a teen girl behind me listening to TikToks on speakerphone, the volume at full blast. An actor-turned-content creator is on the screen, reenacting how her husband empties the dishwasher. Upbeat, comical music plays with crashing and banging sound effects and distant yelling. Each low fidelity buzz of audio is a barb under my skin.

The teen girl grows bored and flicks to the next video. Two women in leggings walk down an alley, eating corn from a can, talking about their early years of drug addiction recovery and laughing about being “gay for the stay” at rehab. It’s the kind of content I normally would like, but only being able to parse stray fragments of the sound amongst the chaos of human noise and movement around me makes it only an additional torment.

Behind the teen girl, there’s a kid playing Roblox or something similarly irritating on his Nintendo Switch, also without headphones. The girl continues to scroll through loud videos. There’s a buff man making bread and yelling about the recipe. I am feeling very tense. Someone in the waiting area is listening to their Spotify, with commercials, also without headphones. I can feel the tension moving into my stomach and my heart rate accelerating. I flinch at small things: a boarding announcement, a toddler running past me.

Long before I get to the front of the line, I am fumbling with my phone, trying to ignore the noise all around me enough to focus, trying to pull up my boarding pass but finding that the airline’s mandatory app has automatically logged me out, *again*, despite the fact I have told it repeatedly to *remember me*. To log back in, I need a verification code from my email. But the wi-fi isn’t available in this airport. I have to verbally walk myself through the next steps so I don’t get lost.

I turn the wi-fi off and the data on. I check my email. I copy the code. Nope, it’s not letting me copy it, it’s an image. I memorize the code and enter it into the airline app, repeating the numbers aloud. I tell the app to remember me for real this time. I click past a reminder that I cannot bring explosive liquids onto the plane. I reject an invitation to pay extra for early boarding. I am asked to join the airline’s reward program and I swipe it away.

I am trying to walk while doing all this, so I nearly fall over and bump into multiple people’s backpacks. My eyes hurt from having to stare at a screen all the time. I feel cranky, detached from my physical surroundings and yet incapable of escaping them, dissociated from any sensations

in my body but anxiety and physical annoyance. I find my boarding pass. I try to chill the fuck out.

The line has stopped moving. I want to preserve my phone's battery, because I will need my music in order to drown out all the ambient noise people will be making on the plane. If I don't, I might truly lose my shit. So I lock my phone. The line suddenly moves quickly. The TikToks and Switch noises are still blaring behind me. I open my phone. The airline app has manually logged me out again.

When I reach the front of the line the flight attendant asks me to turn up my phone's brightness up all the way, so her scanner can pick the QR code through its thick protective case and the cracks on its screen. This would all be so much easier with paper, but nobody uses it anymore. Moving into the airplane, I can see the staggeringly bright glow of many other people's phones pointed at their faces. I squint instinctively from the glare. I remember to turn my brightness back down this time. My battery will hopefully last for the flight. The man in the seat next to me is having a loud, screaming conversation with his mother on speakerphone.

Living with intense sensory issues is like tiptoeing along a knife's edge. Keeping myself feeling balanced and calm comes at a price, and it cannot last: at some point I run out of battery charge, my sunglasses get too many suspicious stares, my over-ear headphones start digging into my temples causing a fresh annoyance that hurts me just as badly as the ambient noise would, or I lose my sleep mask and don't have the cash to buy a new one.

There is always something going wrong: some fresh stimulus to blot out, some chronic condition to manage, some new digital demand that confuses and bombards me with notifications, all while my food, rest, and water meters dwindle and make my tolerance of difficulty far worse.

Simply being out in public for a few hours (or god forbid, a whole day) requires planning as if for a multi-day camping trip: fresh socks in case the old ones get sweaty, a collapsible water bottle that won't be too heavy, some eyeglass cleaner, ear protection, and a panoply of snacks; lotion for the flecks of dry skin that catch on the hem of my shirt, minty lip balm that can help me ignore the smells of other people's food or fragrances, a pillow that makes it possible for me to sit upright, and an aspirin for the headache that thinking about all these problems gives me.

If an Autistic person is broke, as most of us are, they probably don't get to have all of these helpful items. And if they're fixated on keeping meticulous, ongoing mental track of all their possessions, as many of us are, carrying them around is itself a stressor. Everything is always about to be lost or to break, the burden of accommodating ourselves in all ways a literal weight hanging off our bodies.

At home a person can be naked all day and wrapped in a blanket, unperturbed by belts, stitches, or elastic bands. You can eat when you need to, and dash off to the restroom on your tiptoes with urgency without catching stares. You can turn off all the lights and curl up under the bed. You can control the noise levels.

None of that is possible in public. As disabled people, we have to stuff ourselves into uncomfortable clothing and postures and then compose ourselves through the pain of it if we wish to be even tentatively accepted. We have to plan for the world to be a sensory assault and a digitally-mediated, advertiser-funded hail of confusion. I forget at home sometimes that I am disabled, but once I attempt to interact with the broader world, I am forcibly reminded.

My disability is manufactured. It is created and imposed on me daily by the pressures of capitalism.

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The rise of the speakerphone has left me more disabled in a noticeable way. I leave the house far less often these days than I did when people regularly used wired headphones, and I work from home far more.

I used to do most of my writing at cafes, where I found it helpful for both the creativity and accessibility of my writing to be surrounded by a variety of types of people. But I can't go to many cafes anymore. There are far too many people having loud phone conversations on speaker and watching TikTok videos at a high volume.

I don't eat in most fast food or fast-casual restaurants because their dining areas are filled with people listening to videos on speakerphone. I find public spaces like the DMV and my doctor's office to be a lot more disruptive and stressful to attend these days thanks to the speakerphone, too, so I put off appointments for as long as possible. I do not go to the post office at all, which creates a lot of challenges in my life.

Public transit has always been difficult for me to navigate, because the bright lights, cologne smells, and the rickety shaking of old infrastructure when all combined makes me quite nauseated. But in the era of the speakerphone it's all so much worse than it's ever been. I develop full-body malaise, a headache, and a racing heart that can last for the entirety of the day.

For a while, when my pain was fresh, I mistakenly attributed the rise of the speakerphone to human beings becoming more self-absorbed and oblivious due to the pandemic. After spending years mostly alone at home, I reasoned, many people had forgotten to be considerate members of the public.

People had been socially snacking on short Instagram Reels videos and video chatting with distant friends while locked away at home for so long they'd forgotten about the barriers between the public and the private. They no longer perceived a difference between speaking to someone in person and chatting with them online, or between consuming content in total privacy and watching a movie while grocery shopping.

The sensory overloads I was experiencing due to the sudden, dramatic uptick in speakerphone usage made me angry, and bitter, as well as incredibly sad. If my politics had not already been so focused on collective liberation and the systemic causes of individual behavior, I think this experience could have curdled inside me in a really ugly way. I might have decided that other people were fundamentally lazy and selfish and hateful toward me and become a far more dedicated hermit and misanthrope.

That didn't happen, but I still was very angry. I still perceived the use of speakerphone in public as a matter of *choice*, even while acknowledging that certain experiences might have shaped why people did make that choice. It honestly took me *months* of stewing over the problem of the speakerphone, penning outraged essays about it, and pondering how I might persuade people to stop using it before I realized it was not a matter of personal decision-making at all.

Thousands of people did not just suddenly stop using headphones one day because they felt like it, or because they stopped caring about people with sensory sensitivities like me. No, people stopped using headphones because cell phone manufacturers stopped including headphone jacks in their products.

Ever year, millions of perfectly decent phones become useless due to planned obsolescence and network changes, pushing consumers to purchase new devices that lack headphone jacks. Millions of people's wired earbuds instantly become useless to them each year. And in the early days of this switchover, Bluetooth earphones like AirPods were either prohibitively expensive or didn't work all that well, so many consumers had to learn to do without headphones entirely.

Even those who did adopt Bluetooth headphones were forced to adapt to new challenges: the earbuds would rapidly run of charge, or fall out of their ears on at the bus stop and tumble into the gutter, nowhere to be found. Wired earbuds cost about \$20 and could provide unlimited sound for months, if not years of use, if you were careful in how you treated their cords. Bluetooth earbuds can stream music for two or three hours, but then, if are the type to easily misplace a bud or forget to charge a device (due to, say, a motor disability or ADHD), you are screwed.

Three hours is less than half a work shift. It's less than some people's commutes. By the middle of the day, many cell phone users have to switch to speakerphone out of necessity, even if they are the most organized, conscientious of sorts.

The mandatory nature of Bluetooth headphones disables me. And not just because everyone around me is a hell of a lot more loud now. Keeping track of my earbuds is an added source of stress, as is ensuring my headphones are fully charged so that I can use them to drown out distracting white noise whenever I need them.

Bluetooth headphones are far less tactile and responsive than wired headphones were. When I had wired headphones, I was able to insert them into my phone's jack with a single satisfying snap, never needing to pause my stride or even look down at my device in order to do so.

Today, if I want to use my Bluetooth earbuds, I have to retrieve them from their case, put them in my ear, wait for the "G-lab On" notification to inform me they have turned on, perhaps plug them back in and remove them again if they don't turn on for some inexplicable reason, and then unlock my phone, turn on Bluetooth capability, open up the settings, open up the sound controls, connect to a Bluetooth device, and then locate my earbuds from a long list of surrounding devices. From there, I have to wait to hear a notification that confirms everything has correctly attached, which does not always happen.

For someone without so-called "executive functioning issues" (and is there anyone without them these days, really?), this screen-absorbed, janky tedium might seem like a minor annoyance. But to me it's a recurring delay introduced at regular intervals into my day. A physical, satisfying task I used to be able to perform with one hand in seconds is now a multiple-minutes-long digitally-mediated exercise in frustration, and one that forces me to look away from other people and detach from any kind of physically responsive reality around me.

This might just be one personal grievance, but it's illustrative of broader cultural and economic trends that harm all of us. Modern technology has rendered us all a bit more dissociative than we were before. We eagerly watch videos of manicured hands poking at crunchy slime, while our hands hover over frictionless glass screens. We stare at content showing hikers wandering beautiful woodland vistas while growing pale in our home offices for nine or ten hours per day. We touch almost nothing, never stretch our gaze past a distance of three feet.

Many of us crave rough textures, moving bodies of water, cool breezes, and tasks that could keep anxious fingers purposefully focused. The absence of such meaningful stimuli makes us cranky, depressive, and even self-destructive. All we get are screens approximating the things we really need. We don't even get the satisfaction of having physical buttons to press. And there's absolutely no reason, beyond a profit motive, that life has to be this way.

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My sensory-processing issues are a physical element of my disability that would absolutely still exist in a world without capitalism. Like my poor fine motor control and reduced muscle tone, my sensory processing issues debilitate me: there are tasks I simply cannot perform because of

how my body is wired, and this makes me different from most other people in ways that are non-negotiable.

Still, my physical disabilities are worsened quite clearly by capitalism: Because large corporations have both a profit motive and a vested interest in reinvesting those profits into advertisements, and because the internet does not receive public financial support, my daily life is bombarded with bright, noisy, flashing, disruptive advertisements, which makes it far more difficult for me to process relevant information and can swiftly bring me to the verge of a meltdown.

If the internet were funded as a public utility and was therefore not sandblasted in ads, I would be less disabled. If my local streets were less plastered in billboards and littered with junk mail advertising chain restaurants, I would be less disabled.

Because companies like Apple financially rely upon consumers replacing their phones on an annual basis (despite how unsustainable and murderously cruel continuing to mine cobalt in Congo for the production of all these new phones is), I must replace my phone regularly. With an updated phone model I lose my headphone jack and have to adapt to a new operating system and layout, and so my sensory issues and executive functioning challenges are exacerbated.

In a world where phones were produced in order to help human beings function rather than to make money, I would be less disabled.

Because other phone manufacturers have just as much a profit motive as Apple, I can barely find a long-lasting phone of any brand that has a headphone jack anymore. It's far more lucrative for these companies to sell a jack-free phone, forcing each new generation of cell phone consumers to switch over to Bluetooth buds they will continually have to replace, which generates more profits. Without reliable wired headphones, the world becomes louder, and I become more disabled. If headphone jacks were made mandatory, I would be less disabled.

All the needless, enshittifying changes regularly made to the applications on these phones are yet another consequence of capitalism, and they further disable me.

For example, a bid to drive more users to its new product, Threads, Instagram moved the post button from its usual position and replaced it with a link to the Threads site. I'm jarred each time I go to post and am instead directed to an entirely unfamiliar application with a feed that I haven't curated, filled with transphobic remarks and defenses of genocide that have been selected by the algorithm to bait me into fighting with strangers and generating more advertisement views (and thus more revenue) for Threads and Instagram's holding company, Meta.

Losing hours getting distracted and confused online and then fixating on the wrongness of strangers is not an innate fixture of my disability. It's not even a necessary consequence of being on the internet. It is a consequence of the decisions corporations made under capitalism, to attempt and keep users active and viewing advertisements for as long as possible. I have less time in my day and less peace as a result. If the internet belonged to the people rather than to a handful of massive companies, I would be less disabled.

Thanks to capitalism, I cannot exist in public if I am not purchasing anything. I cannot simply be *present* in a store, coffee shop, or even public plaza, enjoying my surroundings and taking the sight of other people in. I must contribute to the economy in order to justify it. If the brickwork of a nearby building fascinates me and I crave to feel it against my palms, I have to pretend that I wish to buy it, and be prepared to tell anyone who asks that that's what I intend to do. I can't even stand on the corner and feel the sun on my face without worrying my neighbors might find it unusual and send the cops.

As an Autistic person, I often can't fake being a perpetual consumer well enough. My desire to simply elope around my environment and take in new, interesting sensations registers as suspicious or concerningly mentally ill. And so I am further disabled and excluded from public life.

Of course, it's not just Autistics who are disabled by capitalism.

Because every person under capitalism is expected to live independently and often has no one else to turn to for practical, around-the-house support or tools to borrow, each person must buy and consume more objects than they otherwise would. This means requiring more storage space, and if you're an ADHDer, having far more to lose or make a mess of.

In a world with well-funded, reliable public transportation, the ADHDer would not lose their job when they misplace their car keys. They might not even need car keys, or a car, or a unique cell phone charger that doesn't fit anyone else's devices because it's proprietary to Apple — they could borrow just about anyone's charger. They could knock on their neighbor's door and ask for a hammer when they had a picture to hang, and maybe even for someone to spot them. They'd waste less money rebuying things they rarely need and keep losing. They'd be less frustrated, less likely to lose their jobs, and have fewer bruises on their hands. They'd be less alone and less disabled.

In a world without capitalism, the ADHDer would still probably deal with "clutter blindness" and tendency not to keep meticulous track of time. But the consequences of these differences would be far lesser, and many of the supposed screw ups that ADHDers today are shamed and penalized for would not even be screw-ups at all. In a real way, then, the ADHDer's biologically and psychologically real differences are made disabilities by capitalism. The difficulties they face are tied to their economic and social conditions.

For many years after discovering that I was Autistic, I held within me the sad belief that I was fundamentally socially broken. Understanding that I had a disability helped me grant myself grace for what I always found difficult, but it also made my struggles seem insurmountable and fated for me. I believed I was psychologically *incapable* of ever truly connecting with other people.

I couldn't dance my way through a conversation charmingly, building upon what other people said with deftness and art, winning closeness and enjoying the improvisation all the while. All I could do was dispense facts coldly, like a robot, my words rigid boxes dropped onto a conveyor belt for others to pick up. I could never figure out how to dress the way normal people dressed, or to style my hair in a fashion that seemed appropriate to my age or profession. I couldn't sit confidently because chairs were uncomfortable and I lacked the abdominal strength. Every move that I made signaled that I was creepy, inert, a person outside of any recognizable social categories and thus scary.

I realize now that this, too, is largely a consequence of capitalism — and related forces like imperialism and even white supremacy. It is thanks to the intertwined influences of the police state, true crime media, white supremacist fears of the "other," and state propaganda that so many people saw me as odd and chose to pull away.

It was oppressive movements such as McCarthyism, forced institutionalization, and eugenics that repeatedly trained the public to be on alert for people with odd affects and unconventional styles of speaking and dress. Going back even farther, it was colonialist, racist states that had a vested interest in defining humanity in as narrow of terms as possible, robbing everyone who deviated from that standard of their freedom and convincing everyone else to view us as an animalistic menace.

Today, powerful nation-states as well as employers still encourage us to evaluate all people (including ourselves) based on our abilities to conform to professional standards and to produce profitable work. This indoctrinates almost everyone into fearing the sides of themselves and others that are discordant, inefficient, and unruly.

There have always been conformity pressures within human society, of course. I would still likely struggle to follow mainstream cultural standards and fit in, even if a world without capitalism. But under capitalism, the consequences of being an awkward man cast apart from others is far harsher than it often would otherwise be.

I am not an easily replaced, standardized working component to be slotted into any task, used up, and thrown away. (None of us actually are, of course). I am a stone worn down into a peculiar shape by millennia of erosion, with no specific purpose, and which can only be held and appreciated by a curious hand. I only seem defective in a world that picks up all the earth's wonders and asks what it's a tool for. I am not for anything. I just am. And so are all humans, and all living things on earth.

Capitalism and its related forces of colonialism, ableism, and white supremacy demand to know what each individual is for. Under its rule, we cannot conceive of any person simply being, of the righteous inevitability that life will always exist. No matter how much we try to banish its chaos with Round Up and Lysol and bulldozers and microplastics and overprescribed antibiotics, living beings continue to creep into all the small gaps and sharp corners that capitalism has tried to erect.

My disability is *real*, in whatever sense one wants to say it is. There is a measurable, observable reality to it, a biological and psychological spanner that my funny existence throws into great human works. But my being *disabled* is a social and economic phenomenon almost entirely. It's a way that society fails at understanding itself.

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