Survival of the Fittest?

Tribal people took care of their own better than modern society.

Kelly Pflug-Back

2012

The concept of history is far from neutral. Under the monopoly of elites, narratives of the past can be erased, rewritten and taken out of their original context according to their needs.

Dominant concepts of history are often used to justify social inequalities by portraying them as natural rather than constructed. We are led to believe that groups who lack power in today's cultures have always lacked power, that inferiority is their natural state, and that there is no alternative social structure where freedom and equality could be achieved by all.

People with disabilities are no exception to this. We are told that before the saving graces of civilization and Western medicine, weak or immobile people would simply have been left to die– only the fittest survived, and life was a short, bitter struggle against a natural world that we had not yet learned to dominate.

Modern concepts of ability and disability are heavily rooted in whether people are economically productive workers. While the autoimmune disease I live with frequently renders me inefficient as an employee, I rarely feel "disabled" in my pursuits outside the realm of wage labor.

In this article, I use the word "exceptionalities" instead of "disabilities" because I find it a more neutral and accurate descriptor of the broad range of physical and mental traits that are not typical of the majority population, yet would not necessarily be considered inferior outside the context of capitalist production.

By contrast to human accounts of the past, the historical record kept by nature is not written according to the biases of those in power. Ancient logs keep their own record of the yearly amount of rainfall in long-ago centuries. Human bones from the dawn of agriculture show us a record of which modern diseases were non-existent before the domestication of animals and food crops.

In recent years, nature's record has provided significant evidence against the myth that only strong, productive individuals have ever been valued by society. One of the most famous of these comes from the Shanidar Cave in northern Iraq, a site containing the bones of seven adult Neanderthals which scientists began excavating in the late-1950's.

The cave, and its resident Neanderthals, the intelligent sub-species of Homo Sapiens with whom we shared the planet until 80,000 years ago, provide a strong argument that people with physical exceptionalities were not shunned or left to die before the advent of modern medical technology.

Two of the skeletons are the remains of people who suffered from long-term, immobilizing health conditions. Shanidar 1, an adult male, had suffered a skull fracture in his childhood, crushing his eye socket and causing brain injury leading to the right side of his body being underdeveloped and paralysed. Shanidar 3, another adult male, had abnormalities of his lumbar vertebrae and a degenerative joint disorder in his right foot that would have made walking difficult and painful.

Neither of these individuals would have been capable of hunting, gathering, providing, or defending against aggressors, yet neither skeleton showed evidence of Harris lines (a sign of stunted growth periods), perforations

of the bone, or any other indication that they experienced malnutrition at any point in their lives. Shanidar 1 is estimated to have died in his 40's, which is equivalent to being about 80 years old today.

Most Neanderthal skeletons that have been recovered show signs of numerous, often severe fractures, believed to be the result of hunting large animals with short-range weapons such as hand axes. A population with such a high prevalence of injuries among its productive adults could not have afforded to neglect or discard the ill or injured.

Many scientists today view Shanidar land 3 as evidence that Neanderthals understood the concept of charity. However, this perspective may be very skewed by our current attitudes towards disability. Did the Neanderthals of Shanidar care for these individuals because of the pity or obligation that contemporary society feels towards people with exceptionalities, or was food and care provided for them out of part of an equal exchange in which they too gave valued companionship and services that were vital to the rest of the group?

The possible social status of these two men may also be difficult to grasp for those of us raised with ingrained notions of labor being divided according to gender. Today, in many cultures men are expected to be dynamic, competitive, assertive, physically strong and capable of being a defender and an aggressor in equal capacity.

These standards of masculinity are relative to modern social, economic, and cultural norms, none of which would come even close to being established until thousands of years after Neanderthals vanished from the earth.

With the increase of ritual burials from the Middle Paleolithic to the Upper Paleolithic, evidence of the possible social status of people with exceptionalities also increases. Three of the most elaborate burials of the Upper Paleolithic all contain the remains of people with obvious physical exceptionalities, something which, among present hunter-gatherer societies, generally indicates that the deceased filled a valuable social role.

A burial site excavated in Dolni Vestonice, Czechoslovakia, contained the remains of two men and a woman whose pelvis and leg bones were severely malformed. Pierced carnivore canines and ivory pendants were found around their skulls, and the female skeleton had red ochre over her skull and pelvis.

Another burial in Sunghir, Russia, contained two children lying head to head, one of whom suffered from a congenital condition causing the long bones of her legs to be underdeveloped and bowed. They were covered with thousands of tiny hand-carved ivory beads, perforated arctic fox canines, ivory jewelry, and spears made from mammoth tusk.

A third burial in the Romito Cave, Italy, contained the remains of an adolescent boy with the typical characteristics of dwarfism and an adult woman, lying with their arms around each other beneath an intricate engraving of a bull.

People with physical exceptionalities weren't shunned, on the contrary, their difference appears to have been highly valued.

One theory explaining the special burial treatment of these individuals is that their atypical appearances were linked to spiritual or magical beliefs. In addition to the possibility of filling non-physical roles such as spiritual practitioner or oral-historian, people with mobility restrictions could have dedicated extra time to processing hides, processing and preparing food, and manufacturing tools and clothing. A person who could focus all of their labor on these tasks could gain special expertise and possibly develop a knack for innovation.

While life before modern medical technology would certainly not have been idyllic for all people with exceptionalities, today's systems of global capitalism have created the type of brutal, dog-eat-dog reality that civilization and technology supposedly saved us from in the first place. The gap between the global elite and the poor majority has never been so huge, and the playing field of daily survival has never been less even.

While recent medical technologies have offered many new, potentially life-changing options to people with physical exceptionalities, these technologies can not fulfill their potential when they are controlled and owned by a profit-driven medical and pharmaceutical industry.

On a global scale, most people with physical exceptionalities do not have access to sufficient food and clean water, let alone mobility aids and rehabilitative surgeries.

The social amnesia created by history's evacuation for the profit of a few essentially locks us in the dark room of the present, with no past to root our struggles in and no model for a better future.

Cut off from the genealogy of our struggles, marginalized people are more likely to accept our own inferior placement in society, believing that it is natural and therefore inescapable.

Encouraging this historical myopia serves the interests of the status quo. If the public has no knowledge of what existed before our current structures of power and exploitation, the risks of stepping away from those structures can be sensationalized and exaggerated, and anyone who makes practical steps towards a radically more egalitarian society can be dismissed as hopelessly utopian.

While the word utopia means "a good place," it also means "nowhere." The second part of this definition can not realistically be applied to the notion of a classless, communal society when in fact human society has been classless, communal and without bureaucratic governmental structures for the vast majority of its time on the planet.

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In June 2010, she was arrested following the G20 summit protests in Toronto and was profiled as the alleged "leader" of the Black Bloc.

After spending over a month in jail, she was released with charges of conspiracy, assaulting police with a weapon, and multiple counts of mischief over $5,000. She has pled guilty to six counts of mischief, for which the Crown is seeking 18 months in jail. The rest of her charges have been dropped.

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Fifth Estate #387, Summer, 2012

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