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#notnormal

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At the end of 2016, I was finishing the final draft of a book co-authored with my colleague Peter Cryle on the history of normality (*Normality: A Critical Genealogy*, University of Chicago Press, 2017). This book examined the strange turns in the history of the normal, a word that enters into popular discourse much later than often realised. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, the word normal was a specialist term used only in professional contexts. Not until the middle of the twentieth century did it come to be used in everyday speech. If the idea of the 'normal' is now so familiar as to be culturally ubiquitous, however, it also remains conceptually vague. Its meaning is both taken for granted and impossible to pin down.

In my experience, these are the words you want to watch out for: the ones whose influence is felt everywhere, but whose location and operation remain somehow invisible.

What sort of critical strategies can be effectively brought to bear against a concept as slippery and shape-shifting as the normal? Our method in *Normality* was to try to bring greater historical precision to our understanding of the term, by making visible the particular locations in which it emerged historically and by examining the cultural mechanisms by which its power has been (re)produced.

While our work on this book was coming to an end, in November 2016, the US presidential election campaign was also drawing to an inexorable conclusion. The public commentary on the election campaign, and its subsequent results, was striking. '2016 Isn't Normal,' announced the *US News* website (Fenn, September 21, 2016); 'Don't let Donald Trump become the new normal,' urged the *Guardian* (Thrasher, November 15 2016); 'Welcome to Washington's new normal: One Trump drama after another,' *The Washington Post* warned (Rucker and Fisher, November 22, 2016). It's impossible to overstate the number of headlines like this that appeared at this time, and the dominance of the phrase 'not normal' to describe the presidential

campaign and election. The twitter hashtag #notnormal was the most commonly used tag for critiques of the presidential campaign and election. In this way, the normal was quickly established at this time as the key conceptual framework by which the current turn of events in American politics was understood by political commentators and the general public alike, one that was located almost exclusively in progressive and left-leaning media.

The Return of the Normal

As a result, the final months of 2016 thus witnessed a sustained and often heated debate about the normal in contemporary America. This debate focused on whether the current state of affairs in American politics was normal, #notnormal or evidence of a dangerous new normal.

The speed and urgency with which ideas about the normal and the #notnormal came to occupy a central place in American public political discourse in 2016 resonated with one of the key findings of our book, in which we found that ideas about the normal have historically tended to come to the fore not when its meaning was most secure, or the subject of a critical consensus, but on the contrary when it was most contested, the subject of trenchant disagreement and debate.

What the political commentary about the US 2016 election actually revealed about the cultural status of the normal in 2016, however, came as some surprise to us.

Over the past twenty years, the normal has been the subject of extensive critique in contemporary theory, in critical race and disability studies, in queer and trans* studies, in histories of medicine and contemporary sexuality studies.¹ In these fields, normality and normativity are often understood as negative dynamics that enforce conformity or as practices of standardisation. Norms, similarly, are generally understood as harmful to those upon whom they are imposed.

In a striking contrast, the argument that the current state of political affairs in the US is 'not normal' is made in defence of a normal widely seen as imperilled by the current American president. The normal against which Trump is contrasted has a positive value; it is something to be protected and safe guarded. Moreover, the people arguing for its protection are almost exclusively left-leaning progressives: precisely not the demographic that, in any other context, we would expect to find championing the normal.

While we intended our book to contribute to the critique of the normal in contemporary cultural theory, then, we hold that it is also important to recognise the extent to which the idea of the normal still exerts a powerful appeal, and to take account of the significance of this. The history of the normal is filled with unexpected moments in which its meaning suddenly and radically transforms, and we cannot critique the normal effectively until we understand its ability to be so suddenly and unexpected recuperated.

The End of the Normal is the Beginning of the Normal

The normal is a concept that often undergoes periods of renewed cultural force and relevance immediately after announcements of its demise.² After twenty years of sustained critique across many fields of critical theory, in 2019 the idea of the normal appears as capacious and resilient as ever.

This is the strange temporality of the normal, which often appears conceptually anterior to itself: that is, it is often just after declarations of the normal have been announced that it re-emerges most strongly in the popular imaginary. As we argue in our book, the history of the

normal is one which often starts (again) after claims of its demise or sustained attempts to do away with it.

Where much contemporary theory understands the normal as a mechanism that compels conformity or standardisation, we found a more dynamic and elastic concept. The normal, we argue, is best understood not as a *standard*, but a *system*. What emerges from a genealogy of the normal is not a unified history or theory of normality, but rather greater recognition of the cultural and historical specificity of its conditions of emergence, the cultural effects of its conceptual incoherence, and its persistence as a cultural ideal.

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1. For a brief overview of key critiques of the normal and normativity in contemporary critical theory, see Stephens 2014.

2. See, for instance, Halberstam 2012 or Davis 2014.