

Pushing Limits Transcript

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Stay tuned next for Pushing Limits.

[theme music: "Keep On Pushing" by The Impressions]

Introduction

EDDIE YTUARTE: OK, good afternoon. This is Eddie Ytuarte here on Pushing Limits radio program, disability radio for and by the disability community on KPFA 94.1 in Berkeley. We're gonna talk a little bit about capitalism. Capitalism is about money. Capitalism is about 80% of disabled people who are not employed full-time. Capitalism propaganda sorta determines the way we think. And does capitalism also tell us it's OK that the majority of people in jails have learning disabilities, mental disabilities, brain injuries, and physical disabilities. This is, for example, one topic that commercial radio doesn't talk about much. So capitalism does affect us in ways that we don't always see.

We're pleased to have today disability activist Cheryl Green who will tell us about some of the ways capitalism has influenced the disability experience as well as that of other oppressed people. Cheryl Green is the prime force for StoryMinders, where she works as a filmmaker and educator and advocate. She lives with a brain injury, and the work of StoryMinders focuses on folks who have experienced traumatic brain injuries. Welcome to our program, Cheryl Green.

CHERYL: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

EDDIE: Can you give just a little bit of background to yourself and what work you've done in the disability community?

CHERYL: Sure, sure. So yeah, like you said, I'm a filmmaker. I'm also a blogger. I'm a podcaster. I help produce a show in a feminist collective in Portland's community radio station, KBOO. And I bring disability topics to that feminist radio program. I also am a Closed Captioner because anybody out there who works in independent media, you know that you cannot pay your rent with that. So I'm a Closed Captioner, and I am halfway through my training to becoming an Audio Describer for film.

So I've done a lot of presentations and trainings on challenging and disrupting ableism but then also doing some trainings for speech therapists and occupational therapists in how to be more humanizing and respectful in their rehabilitation and really focus on people's identities, rather than just trying to make them "normal." So that's the work that I do.

EDDIE: OK. And a lot of it, again, is done through StoryMinders, based up in Portland, Oregon.

CHERYL: Yep, that's me. Yep. I just had to come up with a business name, so.

Crippling Capitalism

EDDIE: Yes. Now, what came to my attention, I saw you and another activist, Caitlin Wood. You folks did a workshop called "Crippling Capitalism," which I found on YouTube, and it's something that I would recommend to other folks. What does crippling capitalism mean to you however?

CHERYL: I have to say, your introduction to the show is crippling capitalism. So what did you mention? You mentioned 80% of disabled people are unemployed or not--

EDDIE: Not fully employed, yes.

CHERYL: Right. And then, you mentioned prisons. And that is crippling capitalism. So when people go about talking about capitalism this, capitalism that, and you don't include the realities of the disabled experience, then you're leaving a ton out. So when we talked about crippling capitalism-- Well, let me back up. So this was for a Gender Studies symposium at Lewis and Clark, which is a college up here in Portland. Our main focus was to figure out how to talk about, hey, all of you feminists out there of any gender, feminists out there, you're not talking about disability. And not only are you not talking about disability, but you're using ableism to bolster your feminist arguments. And this is not OK because there are disabled feminists, and just disabled people exist period. So if you are fighting for equity in any area, then you have to include disability in that.

So I'll be honest--I think it might be my brain injury--I do not remember how we came up with the idea to focus on capitalism for this Gender Studies symposium! I just simply don't remember. But we really talked about prison, we talked about freak shows, we talked about reproductive rights, and we talked about work. The way that we crippled capitalism was to look at some of the early feminism. So for instance, hey, women are not inferior to men. We're just as good as men. Or we're superior to men. These might feel empowering to some people, but these arguments are upholding this idea that some humans are superior to some other humans, and some are inherently inferior. That's white supremacy, but that's also ableism.

So we feel like anytime women say, "We're valuable people because we work, and we earn money," or whatever the reason is, what are you saying about people who don't work and don't earn money? And what are you saying about disability community who is often incarcerated, who is often left without homes, who are sexually and physically and emotionally abused and assaulted at very high rates? Every time you step up and say, "I'm superior because I'm more like a man," yeah, just that reinforcement of inferior-superior in general. So that's the big picture of what we talked about.

Prisons, race, and disability

EDDIE: Let's talk a little bit more about that prison part.

CHERYL: Yes!

EDDIE: OK. So we've had prisons in this society since the start of it.

CHERYL: Yeah.

EDDIE: I'm thinking about after the Civil War in the South, the way Black people were oppressed in different ways and because they were poor. And they found themselves in Southern prisons and other prisons in disproportionate ways. Now, what happened to a lot of these folks who have been in those prisons? They do chain gangs where they work, and often

times the prisons--run by the state at one time, and they still are--but they would contract chain gangs out and get some very, very, very cheap labor.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

EDDIE: And that connection, there's the similarity between people with disabilities who are in the prisons currently, and there's a high number of us that are there who could be easily exploited.

CHERYL: Yes.

EDDIE: And the other thing about the prison system is that prison affects disability, creates disability, or makes disability worse. That's why I don't see, unfortunately in the disability advocacy community, we're not really talking about that much. To me, it's one of the biggest, one of the major civil rights issues that people with disabilities are having, is that we're ending up-- One of the reasons, because of our lack of education opportunities, we end up in the prisons, we get disabled, or we're easily exploited by the new trend in the prison system of private contractors that run these places.

HEARD and Deaf Justice

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. You know, one group that I love--and we didn't talk about this in our presentation, but a group that I love--is HEARD. Do you know about them? Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf Communities?

EDDIE: No, tell us about that.

CHERYL: OK. HEARD is just, oh my gosh. I can't say enough good stuff about this organization. They are a non-profit, and they really work on wrongful imprisonment, and especially for Deaf, DeafDisabled, DeafBlind, and Disabled people who are incarcerated. There's a heavy emphasis on Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. But it starts at the beginning. It starts with people saying things like, "Michael Brown: He looked like a demon. He didn't even look like a man." So it starts there with the dehumanization of somebody, specifically a Black man, making them less human in any way that you can. So to say that his face looked like a demon to make him less human. And then in terms of, in the case of, say, a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person who maybe is pulled over by the cops, they are often not given an ASL interpreter or provided communication in a form that they can access even though it's their federal right to have those things. So they can't defend themselves, they can't explain, they can't have a communication with the cops. Then they're taken into prison. They're not given access to communication or interpretation at their hearings, at their bookings, once they're in prison.

You mentioned exploitation. Well, imagine what it's like to be walking down the hallways or in a cell or wherever, and you don't hear a perpetrator coming up behind you because you're Deaf. So people are getting perpetrated against. Prisons and jails all over the place are having hearing inmates "interpret" for Deaf people when they don't know any signed languages. So there's bribery, there's sexual exploitation, there's sexual assault. You might have a prison guard come up and call out to you, and you don't follow the instructions because you didn't hear them. Well, now you're non-compliant. You can't access the classes and the rehabilitation programs that everyone else--or that some people--can access that you have to access in order to get out of prison. So that cycle continues of looking at somebody as inherently criminal, inherently inferior, and as not capable of reaching a higher potential or of getting out of prison. When in fact, we put them in there and then shut them out from communication, and yet somehow expect them to excel.

Like you said, acquiring disability in prison. I mean, assault. Anybody who's assaulted may sustain trauma, and that can be very dis-enabling and disabling. But then also, I mean people are getting their heads hit. They're sustaining traumatic brain injuries once they're in prison. And they're not getting out and going to rehab like I got to do. I mean, the cycle doesn't end because we won't end it. Because the prison system has always been a place to just lock people away and get free or cheap labor and to reinforce white supremacy. So that's my thought on that.

EDDIE: Do you know in Oregon if any of the prisons now have been contracted out to private, for-profit companies?

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah.

EDDIE: Yeah, I've heard in California, some people in the prisons are even sent out of state for a contract or private prisons. Folks, this is a real problem we're having. To me, this is one of the really prime examples of the relationship between oppression of people with disabilities and capitalism. I mean, we're commodities. That's what we are.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

EDDIE: And we shouldn't be there many times.

[Disability and other marginalized identities](#)

Anyhow, are there other similarities that people with disabilities have had with people of color and women and folks in the gay and lesbian community.

CHERYL: Oh sure. That's a great question. And this is something that Caitlin and I touched on in this presentation, and I bring it up in the lot of the presentations and trainings that I do. And that is that we use ableism and disability discrimination as a way to oppress any group that we want to. For instance, homosexuality was considered a mental illness or psychiatric disability, and some people would still casually say, "Oh, that's sick in the head." But it was a real medical diagnosis. And in the system that we live in, if you have a medical diagnosis, then your job is to get fixed and get normal. So it's not just that you're sick in the head, but you are deviant and non-compliant and need to get fixed. And that's a way to oppress people who are not monogamous and heterosexual is by calling it a disease or a disability.

Do you know the diagnosis drapetomania?

EDDIE: No, I don't.

CHERYL: OK, this is one that I think that you will be very intrigued by. Back in the times of chattel slavery, this was a diagnosis. It was coined in 1851, and this is a psychiatric diagnosis given to people who African or African descent who ran away from their own enslavement. They would be deemed to be mentally ill because if they were sane and intelligent, they would understand that being enslaved is part of God's plan and the natural order of humanity. Because they were naturally considered to be inferior. And so the simple act of running away to try to live out their own humanity, they were just given a disability diagnosis and told that they needed medical treatment. No other purpose, this served no other purpose than to continue and to bolster white supremacy. And this would be assumed a supposed inferiority of people of African descent. So yeah, you talk about similarities and commonalities. Those are two big ones that really stand out to me.

EDDIE: Well, also for women back around the same times in the 19th century. If women wanted to educate themselves, better themselves, they were accused by the male dominant culture of having a disability 'cause they were getting out of hand.

CHERYL: [laughs]

EDDIE: And women sort of suffered that same kind of false diagnosis that something was wrong with them because they're trying to better themselves and educate themselves. So in that same way, women have the same sort of similarities of people with disabilities, or else they're labeled as having a disability because of this and that.

CHERYL: Absolutely. Oh, I totally agree with you. I think when you are in disability community, and maybe you're not a straight, cisgender white man, then you get it from multiple directions where you can be oppressed in many different ways. So if we're talking about women, you have reproductive health and justice is something that is in terrible shape. So people of any gender are more likely to be sexually assaulted if they have a disability, especially a developmental disability. But then, for let's take just this one group, women with disabilities, still to this day go to the doctor and do not receive any education or information around sex or sexuality or even their own body parts. So especially if you have an intellectual disability, you're not even given the education and the tools to recognize when your body is in a healthy state, when it's not, to know what consent is and that you have the right to give or withhold consent, to know that you should go to the doctor if you have been sexually assaulted. There are so many pieces of information that people with disabilities are not given because society assumes that they're not sexual, that they don't have sexual desire, and that nobody would have sex with them.

But it's not even just that. The offices are physically inaccessible, and I have friends who are denied medical exams because they're in an inaccessible office. They come in, and they want to get the women's annual exam, and they're not allowed to get it. "Aw, you don't need that. We don't wanna lift you up onto the table, and you're probably a lifelong virgin anyway. So you don't need to get tested for any STIs or anything." And it's just outright denying people's humanity and their right to access their own healthcare and to be empowered in maintaining their own health.

EDDIE: We're talking to Cheryl Green about capitalism and its relationship to disability. Cheryl Green is a filmmaker, educator, and advocate working out of Portland, Oregon through StoryMinders. And StoryMinders by the way, if you wanna find out more information, they're easy to find, and they have a phone number.

CHERYL: Yeah!

EDDIE: Congratulations on that. You know, some organizations don't have phone numbers, and I like to work best with phone numbers.

CHERYL: Yeah.

[Tod Browning's film "Freaks" and the freak shows](#)

EDDIE: Another thing that you talked about, and Caitlin Wood also talks about this, is freak shows. Freak shows.

CHERYL: Yes.

EDDIE: They were real popular once, not so much anymore. What's the relationship to capitalism with freak shows.

CHERYL: Yeah, so there's one really interesting thing that I don't hear a lot of people acknowledge, and that is that the freak shows at the time they were big, 1800s, 1900s, early 1900s, this may be the only place that a disabled person could actually be a capitalist and earn money, earn their own money and keep their own money. So there are plenty of people, historically, in the US and in England and maybe other places who were like, "Yeah, bring on the freak shows because I'm charging. I'm getting ticket money for this, and then I can buy whatever stuff I wanna buy." But that's not the majority of people. The majority of people were people with disabilities who were essentially financially owned by non-disabled people. And they would say, "Oh yeah, no, no, we're paying that freak for sitting in a circus side show and being stared at." But they weren't. They were pretty much trapped in these relationships, and they never saw a penny of the money that was taken in by them sitting on display. So it was a lotta people with disabilities or medical diagnoses that just people kind of were disgusted by and enjoyed being able to just stand there on the other side of the ropes and look with disgust and be able to walk away.

But the other thing is that this was a place where people were disabled who didn't have a disability. So Sarah Baartman, who's also known by the name the Hotentot Venus, she was an African woman who was kidnapped from Africa and brought to the freak shows. She had no disability whatsoever. But her genitalia and her rear end didn't look like most people's from white, upper class, Victorian blah blah blah, European descent. And she was put on display as a freak of nature for the polite white people to stare at. So she was dis-abled. She didn't have a disability, but she was dis-abled in that she was not allowed to live the life that she was living when she was kidnapped and put in the freak shows alongside people with disabilities. So talk about capitalism. Her body was just a thing that people earned money off of.

EDDIE: Once again, a commodity.

CHERYL: A commodity. Totally a commodity. Not even a human. And it's really despicable. All of it is despicable.

EDDIE: Now, however, some of these freak shows, were they actually owned or operated by the people with disabilities, the people who actually appeared in these shows?

CHERYL: You know, I don't know that level of detail. I would tend to doubt it, but it is interesting because I know that there were some people with disabilities who were bringing in their own money; they were keeping their money. So I don't know the logistics of how those few individuals did that. But when there was somebody who was forced to be on display who was a child, that was all orchestrated by their parents or non-related adults who just, again kidnapped, or adopted them, and then basically they were either locked up in their bedrooms, or they were on display, or they were traveling to be put on display. But I know if any disabled people actually ran those shows. That would be interesting to know.

EDDIE: Some of them made some pretty good money. There was one individual that worked for P.T. Barnum who actually had a nice kind of retirement thing after, as Barnum got older and was no longer in the business. But that was probably just an exception. I know freak shows are not around, but I gotta say though, in the presentation that I saw, Caitlin Wood brought up the movie, "Freaks." And I think that's a really good movie for folks who are interested in disability culture to take a look at. It's a classic American movie. Maybe we could do a show about film and disability later on. We've talked about that film before, but that's more of a side.

Pre-WWII eugenics

Another thing that's kind of interesting to me, I think, that I encountered was eugenics. One of the things that I found out was that eugenics, there was something called the Eugenics Record Office that was funded by Carnegie, the Carnegie Institute got it going. It was funded by people like the Harrimans and the Rockefellers. These are the rich, rich, rich capitalists, and they were behind the eugenics movement back before the '30s, but then the eugenics movement that's associated with Hitler and what he was doing. So that kind of killed off that movement, thankfully. But that was sort of how the capitalists and this point supported eugenics, some rich folks. I never connect the connection. What's in it for them other than misplaced liberalism? I don't know.

CHERYL: [laughs] I'm glad you brought up eugenics, and I'm also glad that you brought up the Rockefellers and Carnegie and all that because most people I talk to think that Hitler, somehow on his own, invented eugenics. I always like to point out no, Hitler and his folks got their research from us in the US and over in the UK. But Darwin. I mean, come on! Eugenics. What's in it for them is I think there is just some kind of bliss in being able to control other human bodies and to be able to say who gets to access resources and who doesn't. I mean, look at the vote on that disaster of a train wreck health "care" that just passed in the House? I mean, what is that? How is it possible that right wing people are never born with a pre-existing condition? Give me a break.

It's about control. It's about limiting the number of people who could possibly ever have access. And eugenics isn't over. I mean, there's still forced sterilization of people with disabilities, poor people, people of color, Indigenous people. We still have forced sterilization, and that is part of the eugenics movement. We don't want you to reproduce because we see you to be inferior. You might have defective genes that you pass on. And so it is not as prominent as it was, but it is, I hate to say the phrase "alive and well," 'cause that's ironic when we're talking about eugenics! But it kind of is alive and well.

Disability and war

EDDIE: Yeah. OK, before we close though, here's a biggie: the relationship between capitalism and disability is war. I think a lot of times what motivates war is greed for nations to overcome other nations, to exploit the resources. But also war is great for capitalism, big-time business. And what happens when there's war? They kill people needlessly, and they create all kind of disability. War and disability like prisons, to me, are just very, very primary civil rights issues that our disability community has to pay attention to 'cause I don't see how you could avoid that if you're talking about improving the life for us disabled folks. War is one of the biggest creators of disability.

CHERYL: Yeah, that's a great point. And it's also looking at the capitalist sense. So if you wanted to be in the armed services, but you have a disability, certain kinds of disabilities, you wouldn't be allowed to. And therefore, you would not be seen as a good US citizen who's willing to serve their nation. We tend to judge people. If you could've served in the military, and you didn't, then you're a moocher. If you're a disability, and you get benefits, you're a moocher. And then you go fight in the wars, and you acquire a disability, and you wanna get services. And then you're on the street with a cardboard sign because you're not getting medical care.

The other interesting thing about war I see is that a lot of the medical treatments we have were created specifically for veterans, and then they have sort of-- Like plastic surgery.

Wrap-up

EDDIE: OK! Now, we're running almost to the end, and I wanna give you a little bit of time to give your contact information for StoryMinders.

CHERYL: OK. Great, great. You know, the website that is more active is actually WhoAmIToStopIt.com. That's named after my documentary film about artists with traumatic brain injury, "Who Am I To Stop It." So there's contact information there. My email is info@storyminders.com. My numbers' 503-432-3169. I'm Facebook and Twitter @WhoAmIToStopIt.

EDDIE: OK, thanks, Cheryl Green. OK, thanks to Erica Bridgman.

[theme music]