

Beware the Autism-Friendly City

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On 6th November, Dublin launched its Autism-Friendly City plan in a bid to become the world's most autism-friendly capital city.

'It's a really exciting day,' Dublin's Lord Mayor said. 'I do hope where Dublin leads, the rest of the country can follow also because it's so, so important that we are inclusive and, at the moment, we still have a long way to go.'

Sixteen years ago, the French collective The Invisible Committee predicted that imperial expansion in the 21st century would rely on bringing into the fold those previously on the edges of Western societies: women, children, and minorities. 'Consumer society,' they wrote, 'now seeks out its best supporters from among the marginalized elements of traditional society.'

The Invisible Committee summarized this latest phase of empire as 'YoungGirl-ism' – the strategic championing of young people, of women, and of those disadvantaged by disability, illness, or ethnicity.

Though the aim of YoungGirl-ism is to bring the general population under a new kind of control, societies' focus on cherishing previously marginal cohorts has the look of emancipation and progress. For this reason, The Invisible Committee explained, women, children, and minorities 'find themselves raised to the rank of ideal regulators of the integration of the Imperial citizenry.'

If the theory of the YoungGirl was unsettling at the time of its publication, its prescience is now borne out, as versions of the mechanism it describes dominate the societal breakdown that is the objective of government policies worldwide.

YoungGirl-ism has too many aspects to summarize here. Let it suffice to suggest the following:

That the drive to nurture our children continues to license a level of surveillance of people and censorship of the materials to which they have access that ought to be anathema in any society purporting to be free, and that the messaging of the general population by government, corporations, and legacy media has become so simplistic as to constitute a widespread infantilization.

That the rage to acknowledge and be sensitive to women's experiences supports the ongoing emotionalizing of work and of public debate and increases institutional control over human reproduction.

That centralised solicitousness for those characterised as 'vulnerable' has excused a degree of micro-management of our lives hitherto unimaginable and is the ongoing rationale for biochemical interference with the healthy population including children and the unborn.

And that the promotion of all forms of sexual expression and identification has robbed us of our most fundamental designators, making us a stranger in our mother tongue which regularly denounces us as bigots.

The Invisible Committee proposed their theory of the YoungGirl as what they called 'a vision machine.' There is no doubt that familiarity with its structure sheds much light on what might otherwise pass as disparate and well-meaning social and political enterprises.

Not least of these enterprises is Dublin's new initiative to become the world's most autism-friendly capital city. Its programme of 'inclusivity' is YoungGirl-ism by another term, rolled out by a provincial official with neither the will nor the wit to understand the havoc he wreaks, his head turned by a cheaply bought appearance of virtue.

More than this, the growing concern to be inclusive of those with autism may be YoungGirl-ism in its most intense form, the condition of autism being peculiarly fitted to the dismantling of existing ways of life and submission to newly-invented social strategies that form the basis of the expansion of a new world order.

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My son is autistic. My remarks here are made in the context of personal experience of autism and sympathy with those whose lives have been changed by the condition.

Firstly, let it be said that autism is a misfortune, not the less so for its often unfolding gradually in a young child, its profound diminution of life's hopes and joys manifesting over time as an irresistible fate, slowly but surely eroding the energy and engagement of those who live with it.

This requires to be said because there is a vague consensus abroad that autism is not a misfortune – that it is just a different way of seeing things and doing things, even a better and truer way.

The language of 'neurodiversity' is partly responsible for this misapprehension, feeding the sentiment that it is only a matter of being more open to autism, of reeducating ourselves and reorganising our society.

But the misapprehension is also bolstered by the widespread and increasing institutional practice of giving a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder to those whose connection with autism is tangential, consisting in being a little inattentive, or somewhat solitary, or otherwise troubled in some way.

We are presented with celebrities who have received a retrospective diagnosis of autism, and we conclude that it is possible in a properly inclusive milieu to live a normal life, even an abnormally successful life, with the condition.

This conclusion is pernicious for all of those who suffer from what we are reduced to describing as 'profound autism,' 'severe autism,' even 'real autism,' whose alarming increase ironically is hidden by the ease with which the label is wielded among the general population.

A 2019 study at the University of Montreal, which reviewed a series of meta-analyses of patterns of diagnosis of autism, concluded that in less than ten years it will be statistically impossible to identify those in the population who

merit the diagnosis of autism and those who do not.

As the descriptive force of 'autism' is eroded and the fiction put abroad that our main task is only to be inclusive of the condition, what is more and more concealed is the outrage of the rising prevalence of real autism among our children, the steady growth in the numbers of children whose life prospects are blighted by the condition, children who have little to no hope of being 'included' and whose being made the excuse for strategies of 'inclusion' is a travesty, children like my son who will never find gainful employment, never live independently, most likely never make a friend.

Autism is not a difference. Autism is a disability. It describes – and ought to be reserved to describe – a lack of capacity for meaningful experience of the world and those in it, condemning its sufferers to a life more or less bereft of significance and sympathy.

Autism may come with corners of aptitude, which we may like to call brilliance. But the reality is that these instances of aptitude are mostly remarkable because they occur in the context of blanket inaptitude, and at any rate that we no longer live in a society in which such uneven excellence is valued or can find an outlet.

My son can quickly add together any two of the same numbers, even very large ones, though he cannot do simple addition. The talent is mysterious and striking, but it occurs in the context of a general lack of ability at math and, even if developed, would have no use in a world where computer calculation is ubiquitous and where a base level of skills is required to access any form of employment.

And yet the myth is perpetuated that autism is a problem primarily because we are not inclusive of it.

In March 2022, the *Irish Times* published an article citing a report produced by Ireland's national autism charity AsIAM, chiding its readers because 6 in 10 Irish people were found to 'associate autism with negative characteristics.'

Rather than take this reasonable majority of the populace seriously, the article proceeded to support the view that Ireland requires enhanced policies and programmes to educate the general population that autism is in fact something between a talent and a blessing and to increase access of those with autism to all of life's opportunities.

The negative characteristics that 6 in 10 Irish people associated with autism included 'difficulty making friends,' 'not making eye contact,' and 'no to little verbal communication.' This was reported in the *Irish Times* article as regrettable prejudice against those with autism, even though these characteristics are classic symptoms of autism and often the reason that autistic children are given the diagnosis. The *Irish Times* may as well have blamed the still-thinking Irish public for associating autism with autism.

The article went on to observe that the AsIAm report found that 'people were less likely to know about the positive characteristics of autism, such as honesty, logical thinking and detail oriented [sic]'.

To describe these characteristics of autism as positive is to actively efface the reality of autism as a disability, obscuring the profound inability to attend to and understand context that is the condition of autistics' honesty, logical thinking, and attention to detail.

My son reminds me to serve him his morning tonic if I forget to do it, though he hates to drink it. This is surely endearing, but it stems from a total inability to identify his own interests, to act in accordance with them or to be strategic in any way. What we call honesty is admirable because it occurs in the context of possible dishonesty. My son is not capable of dishonesty or honesty.

Similarly, if autistic people are logical, it is likely because they have little or no understanding of context or nuance; without the ability to interpret or exercise judgment, everything is reduced to a matter of simple deduction or induction. And if autistic people are detail-oriented, it is probably because they are unable to grasp any big picture; they are attuned to minutiae because they cannot be enchanted by the world.

Living with autism has its joys; the human spirit ekes energy and interest from all kinds of calamity and takes its pleasures even if sadly. But make no mistake: autism is a blight; the rise of autism, a tragedy.

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In March 2020, NHS GPs in Somerset, Brighton, and South Wales placed blanket Do Not Resuscitate orders on several support settings for those with intellectual disabilities, including one for autistic adults of working age.

Despite acknowledged objections at the time, during the second UK shutdown similar DNR orders were placed on similar settings.

For anyone who cares for a child with autism and who faces the unhappy prospect of her child being consigned to the state once she herself is infirm or deceased, little more requires to be said about the commitment to real inclusion of those state institutions that like to bandy the term.

Meanwhile, the frenzy of so-called 'inclusion' continues apace, and with an entirely other rationale than that of promoting health and happiness.

Quite the opposite. So-called 'inclusion' of those with autism is aimed at the breakdown of what remains of our shared world, all the better to reconstruct it in accordance with the pursuit of hyper-control.

Children with autism are not worlded – above all else, that is what defines their situation. For whatever reason, the world – our world – does not speak to them. They are not carried along by the projects around them; they are not captivated by the scenes before them; they are slow even to discern the outline of another living being, often colliding with people and hardly ever hearing what they say.

Autistic children do not share our world. It is not only that they do not understand it – they appear not even to notice it.

So, what happens to a city when it commits to the inclusion of those whose situation is defined by exclusion? Anyone who spends their life in efforts at such inclusion knows very well what happens.

Because our world is not salient to young people with autism, the task for those who care for them is somehow to make our world salient, so that every event is not a shock, every arrival not a setback, every departure not a reversal, every meeting not an assault.

The task is a heavy one, requiring that you ceaselessly intercede between the world and your child so as to bring the world's most vital aspects into a stark enough relief to break through autistic indifference.

On the one hand, you are a drill sergeant, reordering the world so that some of its patterns are made stable, relentlessly establishing and maintaining routines whose finest detail cannot be allowed to alter without meltdown. A door left ajar, a word carelessly spoken, a glove dropped, a Lego brick lost: grinding trivia are assiduously marshalled under threat of the kind of prolonged and impenetrable distress that will break your heart and theirs.

On the other hand – curious combination – you are a children's TV presenter, advertising the highly-regulated scenes and scenarios produced by the drill sergeant with the most exaggerated facial expressions, the most simple and carefully articulated phrases, with pictures and signs, with the primary-coloured repetitiveness that is your only hope of selling the hyperbolic version of the world you have constructed.

Certainly, there is some success to be had through these means, though it is slow and halting. Also certainly, the need for such unrelenting efforts would be greatly relieved if our world were a more compatible one.

Children with autism – all children, no doubt – would be infinitely better off if they were surrounded by a stable cohort of familiar people; if the projects that supported them were grass roots; if their food came from the soil and their learning from routine; and if the rise and fall of season and festival were the rhythm by which they lived. Nothing would mitigate the effects of autism better than a fulsome way of life.

As it is, our world is almost the opposite of a way of life: precariousness carries the day, virtuality abounds, the human touch is reduced and anonymous, and what we eat and learn, highly processed and abstract.

Because of this, your efforts to get the attention of your child with autism cannot be suspended for a moment without threat of regression and despair, as you strive to bring our flattened-out, screened-off world up close enough and personal enough for the dawning of significance and sympathy.

And one thing is sure: only you can do it. You, who live by your child daily, who walk beside him with an arm ready to steer, who know just the hold to use to prevent destruction while allowing a modicum of self-determination, who wait just the right amount of time to let a thought reveal itself but not so long that it is lost in the mire. You, who rub along together with your child. You, who know him by heart.

Schools cannot do it, though they spend enough time describing it and documenting it and continue to relinquish their role of teaching children to read and write in their enthusiasm for recording the inventiveness of their inclusion strategies.

And – needless to say – cities cannot do it.

What, then, of the Autism-Friendly City? What can it do, if it cannot include those with autism?

If we allow our energies and understanding to be directed at finding solutions to the apparently failing strategies of our Autism-Friendly City, what we will miss is how successful its strategies really are – not at including those with autism, of course, which is an impossible task for our cities, but at controlling the rest of the population.

Something that is rarely mentioned and never broadcast is that the effect of your efforts at including your child with autism is that you yourself become excluded. As you translate the most important worldly possibilities into contrived routines with accompanying signals and slogans, the hold upon you of those possibilities is loosened. All that ought to be organic is programmed; all that should be spontaneous is controlled; all that is background recedes or is brought into too-brilliant relief; nothing is taken for granted; nothing relied upon as given.

As you strain to make the world of interest to your child, the world loses its interest for you. You become, well, like someone with autism.

Relationship breakdown is rife where there is a child with autism; some studies estimate that it runs at about 80 percent. No surprise, as shared experience is eroded by the requirement to reorder the world, to stay on message, and to start from zero a thousand times a day. Autism-for-two is no kind of companionship.

But what of autism-for-all, which is the inevitable effect of the Autism-Friendly City? How might that play out, and what would its uses be in bringing the population under control?

Luckily in this regard, we have living proof of what the Autism-Friendly City would look like. During Covid, quite startling strategies were implemented to seize the routines of human life, to regulate them artificially, and promote them with simplistic messaging.

The Covid queue is an easy example, as an implicit human arrangement was taken hold of, made painfully explicit, administered beyond endurance and promoted as for nursery children. Large, coloured dots were stuck two metres apart to pavements outside of supermarkets, sometimes with cartoon feet depicted on them. Signs were posted showing two stick-men with an arrow between them and 2M printed on top.

Gone was the human queue, the rules for its formation embedded in a shared world, relying upon and testimony to the civilized self-regulation of a reasonable people, modified in ad hoc ways by everyone who joins it to give priority to those who cannot stand easily or who appear hurried, the occasion for chat on common subjects and assistance of those with a heavy load, shuffling along effortlessly in accordance with the knowledge inscribed in our bodies' latent awareness of the proximity of those around.

Gone was one small performance of a shared world. In its place: a hyper-regulated routine, monitored by trumped-up officials, with no requirement for the exercise of judgment and every best impulse remade as a threat to order.

The Autism-Friendly City would be the Covid queue writ large – seizing upon our human rituals, dismantling their organic reciprocity, undoing their taken-for-granted equilibrium, and remaking them without the human element in primary coloured inertia and infantile slogans. The mutual experience of formation in and by a shared world, rendered null and void by an artificially constructed submission to hyperbolic routines and their garish promotion.

It is true that children with autism are not easily attuned to the human queue, lacking receptiveness to the implicit judgements that order it, being largely unaware of the presence of other people before them or behind them, and, most of all, not being prone to waiting. You must keep a firm hold of them for many years before they get a feel for the human queue. But it is good formation for them, a chance to be in sync with those about them, to share in a worldly routine, and to realise – oh so slowly – that they must stand and wait and move and wait in concert with others around.

But children with autism have no chance at all of joining the autism-friendly queue, which lacks the physical scaffolding of nearby bodies and the purposeful hum of voices. They will not appeal to the coloured dots on the pavement with their abstract depictions of feet because they will not be looking for guidance on queue formation. They will not consult the signs with the stick men because they will not be seeking assistance with queue formation.

The autism-friendly queue only works for those who already wish to form a queue – who are already part of the world but suddenly unsure about the rules that apply there. For those who are not already part of the world, nothing could be less effective than the autism-friendly queue. Nothing could be less inclusive.

The Autism-Friendly City would mean little to those with autism. It would mean control to everyone else. For, the Autism-Friendly City is blatant YoungGirl-ism, cynically championing the disadvantaged in order to replace the humanness of our shared world with a top-down deadness overlain with primary colours and Tannoy infantilism.

Let us not forget the dystopia of the Covid queue. The hush where there had been hum. The inert progress, nervous and accusatory. Let us not forget that as we inched forwards like automata, self-conscious and humiliated, we gradually ceased to make eye contact with our fellows, engaged in little to no verbal interaction and found it increasingly difficult to make a friend – those very characteristics that 6 in 10 Irish people associate with autism.

Beware the Autism-Friendly City, which delivers autism for all.

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