

Neoliberalism, noise and hearing the signal

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As I made clear on this blog last week, I suspect I have both autism and ADHD. I said so after several years of reading and research into this issue.

One response to that came from someone called Lucy Johnstone, who, with John Cromby, has contributed to the debate on this issue through the site

[Mad in the UK](#). They have questioned the way in which autism and ADHD are understood, diagnosed and discussed, and have explicitly located the rise of the neurodiversity movement within the context of neoliberal capitalism. They suggest that the rapid growth in autism and ADHD diagnoses can, at least in part, be understood as a consequence of neoliberalism, while neurodivergence itself has, in their opinion, subsequently been commodified and marketed, making it in part a neoliberal construct.

Lucy Johnstone has asked me to discuss that issue, and I may, but my thinking is taking me in a different direction. The question I increasingly want to ask is not what neoliberalism has done to neurodivergence, which is what she and John Cromby are asking. I want to ask what neurodivergence might do to neoliberalism.

Seeing things differently

Prof Simon Baron-Cohen [has recently made the point](#) that autistic people have a **particular capacity to see things differently, and that this difference has contributed significantly to human progress. That suggestion matters. If everyone sees a problem in broadly the same way, they are likely to reproduce broadly the same answers. Progress frequently requires someone to notice what everyone else has missed.**

This is where I think [Claude Shannon's work](#) offers a useful metaphor. Shannon helped found modern information theory. His great insight was into the problem of communicating information when a signal is surrounded and disrupted by noise. The problem is not simply whether information exists. It is whether the information that matters can still be recovered when noise

interferes with its transmission. Shannon, who worked for IBM, developed this idea in the context of telecommunications, but it has ramifications way beyond that.

My suggestion is that we live in an extraordinarily noisy society. We are overwhelmed with news, social media, advertising, political claims, economic forecasts, think-tank reports, corporate public relations, government announcements, opinion polls and commentary. There has probably never been more information available to ordinary people.

And yet more information does not necessarily produce more understanding. Sometimes it does the opposite. The problem is that the signal we need to hear can disappear into that noise.

That possibility matters politically because creating noise can be an extraordinarily effective way to exercise power. You do not have to suppress inconvenient information if you can overwhelm it. You do not have to demonstrate that an alternative is wrong if you can fill the available space with claims that it is impossible, unaffordable, dangerous or absurd. This is one of the ways in which neoliberalism maintains its power.

We are repeatedly told that governments must balance their books.

We are told that taxes pay for government spending.

We are told that the national debt is a burden on future generations.

We are told that markets allocate resources efficiently.

We are told that the private sector creates wealth whilst the state consumes it.

We are told that there is no money for the things society needs.

The repetition matters. Eventually these claims cease to sound like arguments at all. They become the background noise of political life. They become what supposedly sensible people know to be true.

And then someone asks, is that actually true? That person can be remarkably disruptive.

Hearing the signal

This is where neurodivergence might have political significance that has been largely overlooked.

I am not suggesting that every autistic person possesses some extraordinary ability to discover truth. Autism is far too varied for any such claim to make sense. Nor are autistic people immune from ideology, error or prejudice. The argument is subtler than that. What I am suggesting is that some characteristics associated with autism can produce a different relationship with information.

There can be intense attention to detail.

There can be a strong desire for consistency.

There can be an ability to concentrate on a subject for extraordinarily long periods.

There can be an unwillingness to ignore an anomaly simply because everyone else appears content to do so.

There can also be less willingness to accept an argument merely because the person making it possesses status or authority.

What looks like an insignificant detail to most people can then become impossible for someone else to ignore.

Why doesn't that number add up?

Why does today's explanation contradict yesterday's?

Why is everyone making an assumption that nobody has demonstrated to be true?

Why are we told that something cannot be done when the evidence suggests that it can?

Why does everyone else seem willing to move on when the question has not actually been answered?

These can be irritating questions for those in authority.

They can also be profoundly important ones.

Pattern recognition is the key to this understanding, not who says it.

In Shannon's terminology, the noise may have overwhelmed the communication channel for most people, but some can still detect the signal. In this context, the important point is that the signal is unusual and it needs an unusual antenna to notice it. Neurodivergent people tend to have that ability

That might be one reason why people who think differently have contributed disproportionately to intellectual, scientific, artistic and social change. Progress requires somebody to notice that the accepted explanation does not work.

Adding to the mix

ADHD might add another dimension to this. The capacity of those with this condition to make rapid associations between apparently unrelated ideas, combined in some people with periods of intense concentration, means they can see patterns that conventional thinking separates into different intellectual boxes.

The combination of these characteristics in AuDHD might also sometimes produce a particularly interesting combination. The mind notices connections that others have filtered out and then refuses to leave the resulting problem alone.

These characteristics can undoubtedly create difficulties. But describing them only in terms of deficit misses something important. They can also produce knowledge, and that can result in action.

Why neoliberalism should fear difference

That brings me back to neoliberalism. Neoliberal power depends upon much more than markets. It depends upon controlling what can be thought about markets, government, money, taxation, wealth and power. It has created an extraordinarily successful system for doing this.

Universities, economics departments, think tanks, newspapers, broadcasters, financial institutions, politicians and corporations continually reproduce remarkably similar assumptions about how the economy supposedly works. That does not require conspiracy. It requires conformity.

People learn what respectable opinion sounds like. They learn which questions serious people are permitted to ask. They learn which ideas are described as credible and which are dismissed before discussion begins. They adjust what I call their priors to match these expectations. Most importantly, they learn what they are not supposed to notice.

This is why neurodivergent thinking might be much more politically significant than neoliberal accounts of neurodivergence allow.

Someone who does not process social conformity in the expected way can be difficult to discipline intellectually.

The person who notices the contradiction cannot necessarily be persuaded to ignore it simply because everyone else does.

The person who becomes intensely interested in the problem may spend years examining it.

And the person who can still hear the signal when everyone else has become

overwhelmed by the noise is potentially dangerous to any hierarchy whose power depends upon maintaining that noise.

This, then, is where I depart from Johnstone and Cromby. Their work asks whether neoliberal society has helped create the circumstances in which behaviours become categorised as autism and ADHD, and whether the neurodiversity movement can, and has, itself reproduced neoliberal ideas.

I want to ask another question. What if some of the differences we call neurodivergence are not products of neoliberalism at all, but are instead amongst the cognitive differences that make resistance to neoliberalism possible?

Then the question changes completely. Instead of asking whether the neurodivergent person can function successfully within the existing system, we should ask what that person might perceive that the existing system cannot, or does not want to, see. That is a very different understanding of neurodivergence.

It does not deny disability. Nor does it deny the very real difficulties that neurodivergent people can experience in a world largely organised around neurotypical expectations. But it does reject the assumption that conformity with those expectations provides the appropriate measure of human capability.

Sometimes humanity needs the person who hears what everyone else hears.

Sometimes it needs the person who hears something different.

And sometimes, when the noise has become almost deafening, progress depends upon the person who can still hear the signal.

That might be why neurodivergence matters much more than neoliberalism would ever like us to realise.