



Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law

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Wait—what's wrong with rights?

Much of the legal advocacy for trans and gender nonconforming people in the US has reflected the civil rights and "equality" strategies of mainstream gay and lesbian organizations—agitating for legal reforms that would ostensibly guarantee equal access, nondiscrimination, and equal protection under the law. This approach assumes that the state and its legal, policing, and social services apparatus—even its policies and documents of belonging and non-belonging—are neutral and benevolent. While we all have to comply with the gender binaries set forth by regulatory bodies of law and administration, many trans people, especially the most marginalized, are even more at risk for poverty, violence, and premature death by virtue of those same "neutral" legal structures.

Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law raises revelatory critiques of the current strategies pivoting solely on a "legal rights framework," but also points to examples of an organized grassroots trans movement that is demanding the most essential of legal reforms in addition to making more comprehensive interventions into dangerous systems of repression—and the administrative violence that ultimately determines our life chances. Setting forth a politic that goes beyond the quest for mere legal inclusion, *Normal Life* is an urgent call for justice and trans liberation, and the radical transformations it will require.

An attorney, educator, and trans activist, **Dean Spade** has taught classes on sexual orientation, gender identity, poverty and law at the City University of New York (CUNY), Seattle University, Columbia University, and Harvard. In 2002 he founded the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a collective that provides free legal services and works to build trans resistance rooted in racial and economic justice.

Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law Details

Date : Published December 6th 2011 by South End Press (first published November 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780896087965

Author : Dean Spade

Format : Paperback 248 pages

Genre : Gbt, Queer, Nonfiction, Lgbt, Transgender, Law, Gender

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Kendra says

Seriously cannot recommend this book highly enough. Spade lays out clearly why legal solutions and "rights-based" advocacy, like same sex marriage, will never be enough to fix the problems for trans people. He also goes on to actually suggest how to do better - what meaningful change looks like, and how lawyers need to learn to take a step back.

I'm going to be sitting and thinking through the ideas present in this book for a long time. It's relevant to anyone who cares about social justice, on any axis of marginalization.

cj says

Through succinct, effective writing, Spade offers an intersectional analysis on the problem with "equality" and why radical movement-building is key to dismantling systemic and structural oppression, in lieu of legal reforms rooted in law enforcement and nonprofitization, which only reinforce racialized-gendered social control and violence for people of color, indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, poor people, and gender-nonconforming and trans people. By leveraging his white and class privilege, he echoes what women of color feminists and scholars have been stating and publishing for years, and makes a point to speak their names.

For folks moving through radical spaces, Spade may not seem to be saying much new here, but he does a great job of shaping his argument into a cohesive, digestible format that left-leaning audiences could appreciate.

Ryan says

brilliant book! the only thing i wish spade would have addressed is the urbancentrism and metronormativity of queer and trans politics (both liberal and radical).

Eric Toler says

This book is a fantastic view of the neoliberalism and nonprofitization that plague the mainstream "LGBT" movement, as Spade critically examines the faults of arguments and movement work that are rooted in these problems. As he articulates three specific modes of power and how they work to control people and undermine liberation, Spade offers frameworks for how the trans movement can be intersectional, truly liberatory work that actually works to dismantle oppressive systems, rather than joining the ranks of who is privileged within these systems.

l. says

Good introductory text. A few points though:

1. How American anti-discrimination law works is not how anti-discrimination law has to work i.e. Canadian anti-discrimination law is explicitly based on a concept of substantive, not formal equality. This is not to imply that Canadian anti-discrimination law is perfect; in fact, the SCC keeps on having to change the s. 15 analysis in order to respond better to s. 15 claims, but I do think that it is possible to have meaningful anti-discrimination laws. If an academic can come to an appropriate conclusion re: discrimination based on a set of facts, so can the SCC. We shouldn't let the justice system off the hook.
2. I understand what Spade means when he says that striking down explicitly homophobic etc laws makes it easier for people to claim we have Achieved Equality, but I find the criticism he aims at prioritizing striking down those laws absurd. Those laws weren't just signposts proclaiming that the law's injustice; they had profoundly negative effects on the lives of lgbt people and needed to go. Formal equality is not everything, but it's not nothing.
3. Prison abolitionism is all very well and good in theory but if you're not going to talk about what you plan to do with people convicted of violent crimes, hmm tbh. Spade does engage in that a bit at the end, but he doesn't really go into it and the pitfalls of community-based restorative justice approaches.

Kody Keckler says

A great foundation for intersectional queer and trans theory!

Morgan M. Page says

This book is an excellent summary of critical trans politics -- if you ignore the fact that Spade seems unable to utter the words "trans woman" throughout the book, leaving us to assume that all trans people face the same kinds and intensity of oppression. While there's nothing new here, it's a pretty good summary overall.

Cody VC says

three stars for quality, four for value. (would be five, but my main quibble - see below - feels too significant to warrant inflating the rating that far.)

very clear and articulate without getting too bogged down in academic contortionism - though i say this speaking as someone fluent in academic, so others might disagree. (but there's no doubt that some of his earlier essays veer quite close to impenetrability.)

there was a good deal of preaching to the choir in this reading experience because i was already starting from a radical place, yet it still seemed like he does a fine job of getting to the heart of the important issues and walking the reader through why they're important, their impacts, etc., but this book does sometimes beg the question of what to *do*. (e.g. yes, the prison industry is a terrible thing, and x reform would be great, but in

the meantime what do we do about the people already inside? it can be hard to help them without contributing one way or another to the industry's legitimacy.) in fairness there aren't easy, one-chapter answer to these questions, but the lack of suggestions does make for a rather unsatisfying finish.

Ryry says

i havent read it all but i started getting frustrated with dean spade, like i respect his work and ideas, but it jsut kinda reads to me like a white man re-explaining what women of colour, especially trans women of colour, and trans sex workers have been saying for like a billion years, but now he is saying it and its all revolutionary. And while he does credit these communities frequently i dunno i just cbf reading it all...but its probably a good introduction to these politics and explains basic ideas around why gay marriage doesn't solve everything, problems with prisons and criminalizing things and issues of class and race and trans* issues being ignored within the gay movement.

Kate Savage says

I love the ideas. I hate the sentences.

Spade is the founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (named after the trans woman of color who was instrumental in the Stonewall Riots and founded Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activist Alliance, and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). Here's how Spade differentiates their vision of critical trans resistance from mainstream, reformist LGBT groups:

- Reform groups focus on legislation or winning a court case; Critical trans resistance groups use laws as part of a larger project to build grassroots power in affected communities.
- Reform groups try to criminalize discrimination; radical groups don't want to give any more power to the prison-industrial complex.
- Reform groups try to get healthcare through marriage equality (so spouses of privileged people can get benefits); radical groups fight for universal health care and trans medical coverage through medicare/medicaid.
- Reform groups repeal don't-ask-don't-care; radical groups fight to end sexist, racist, imperialist military actions.
- Reform groups try to protect families from deportation through marriage equality (so spouses of citizens can more easily get residency); radical groups fight deportation regimes.

The theory that Spade sets out is really exciting to me: it promotes grassroots power and it connects with a lot of anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist work. And it feels really timely, with all the bathroom bills happening, as Spade identifies gender segregation of public space as a main target for critical trans resistance.

But the writing style was a challenge for me. Long and awful sentences; inaccessible jargon; repetitions of arguments. It wouldn't annoy me so much if I didn't think the ideas being presented were really important.

But this summary is good:

Trans people are told by the law, state agencies, private discriminators, and our families that we

are impossible people who cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere. We are told by the better-funded lesbian and gay rights groups, as they continually leave us aside, that we are not politically viable; our lives are not a political possibility that can be conceived. Inside this impossibility, I argue, lies our specific political potential — a potential to formulate demands and strategies to meet those demands that exceed the containment of neoliberal politics. A critical trans politics is emerging that refuses empty promises of “equal opportunity” and “safety” underwritten by settler colonialism, racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and xenophobic imprisonment, and ever-growing wealth disparity.

Cara G says

So good! An easy to read book which is a credit to Spade since a lot of the things he discusses are the same ones that many other authors make as dense as hell! I loved the combination of both theoretical arguments and on the ground practical stuff.

hhell says

I read this book for a course on LGBT Politics and Activism my last year of college, and I regret not converting my rental to a purchase at the end of the semester. It's a great introduction to administrative violence, particularly as it pertains to trans and queer people and/or people of color. The focus of the book is trans politics, but -- and this is one of the overarching points of the book -- trans politics and race politics, as well as the politics of gender, sexuality, age, ability, and class, are all interconnected. What these marginalized groups share is the plight of systemic, institutionalized oppression that is often disguised as a means of improving, while instead perpetuating and worsening, poor social conditions.

Now, this isn't news. As a few other reviewers implied, this is something that trans and queer people and people of color have been saying for years. But if you're looking for a well-written, accessible crash course in administrative violence and trans, race, and queer politics, Spade's book serves as an excellent starting point.

I also want to add that while Spade speaks from a point of privilege (white, purportedly masculine-identified), he is also a trans person. Although the book offers no account of Spade's personal experiences, I liked knowing that, unlike much of the literature on trans, queer, and race politics, this book was written by someone who would be well-served by the 'abolition' of administrative violence. One might argue that a personal perspective might have enriched this book, and that may well be true. But I think the book is compelling enough that such would have been unnecessary.

The trouble with this book is that Spade's argument doesn't extend much farther than an explication of the facts: "Here's what administrative violence is, and these are its implications." I wished Spade had developed or complicated his argument a bit more. There wasn't much information in the way of how to move forward, or the best and most critical approaches to tackling administrative violence. If I remember correctly, this information was limited to one or two chapters, and I felt that there wasn't much evidence, empirical or otherwise, to support Spade's claims. And this may be because there isn't much research on trans politics. But again, that's why this book is a good starting point -- not the be-all, end-all.

Tim McNulty says

A crash course in a future that could be. The book obviously isn't perfect, but I don't think Spade would even argue that. He lays out trans politics in a way that also highlights and emphasizes other marginalized voices, though, and for that I'm really grateful for this book.

ralowe says

this is required reading, just as the angela davis quote says on the cover of this edition. being with dean on book tours and panels and such i have been exposed to dean's genius, this book gives you all the basics of critical trans studies, the book itself is an intervention, dean is awesome and brilliant! i'm excited for my association with this project of creating a culture of radical queer and trans politics that is relevant to life under state terror. dean is really good at offering strategies to get to work on. you're supposed to read this book and immediately begin using the ideas inside, if you're not already. dean provides lots of examples of how to fight the criminal punishment system and to reject business-as-usual lgbt desperate attempts at recognition. this work is defiant and anti-authoritarian. reading this dean does go to a place that feels me with grief for the vortex that has replaced a politic that connected direct support services to radical anti-authoritarian vision and passion. dean offers some ideas, but my sense of loss caused by the corporatization of dissent and the dependency on state institutions feels pretty overwhelming at times. dean offers ideas of how to organize a liberation that begins with our bodies.

Ernesto Sanz says

When Angela Davis recommends something, run the other way, and run fast.

Instead of directly answering the arguments presented in the book, I will let it speak for itself. Here are some of the highlights

- "A critical trans politics imagines and demands an end to prisons, homelessness, landlords, bosses, immigration enforcement, poverty, and wealth." (P. 68)
- "From that vantage point we can strategize about how to use legal reform tools as part of a broader strategy to dismantle capitalism's murderous structures." (P.93)
- "For those living in white communities not targeted for policing and imprisonment, the criminal punishment system may appear to be a protector..." (P. 125)
- "Racism determine who will be arrested, what public benefits programs will be cut, and what behaviors will be considered criminal." (P.26)
- "We must examine how racism, sexism, capitalism, xenophobia, settler colonialism, and ableism combine to produce and sustain these violent systems of distribution..." (P. 161)

Sentences such as these litter the pages of the book without establishing anything of coherence.

I lost count of how many times the author threw around terms such as sexism, ableism, racism, xenophobia and others along the same line. They ceased to mean anything before long.

