The Political Economy of Autism
By Toby Rogers

Abstract

Autism is a global epidemic. An estimated 1 in 40 children in Australia, 1 in 64 children in the U.K., and 1 in 36 children in the U.S. have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This is an enormous increase from the first known autism prevalence study in the U.S. in 1970, that established an autism prevalence rate of less than 1 per 10,000. Several studies have shown that changes in diagnostic criteria account for only a small fraction of the increased prevalence. Families of children on the spectrum face extraordinary additional expenses and decreased earnings as one parent often becomes a caregiver.

Autism cost the U.S. $268 billion (1.5% of GDP) in 2015; if autism continues to increase at its current rate, autism will cost the U.S. over $1 trillion (3.6% of GDP) in 2025 (as a point of comparison, U.S. Defense Department spending is 3.1% of GDP).

Over the last decade, several groups of leading epidemiologists, doctors, and public health experts have published consensus statements declaring that toxicants in the environment are contributing to the rising prevalence of neurodevelopmental disorders including autism. Beyond the consensus statements, a range of independent researchers have identified many additional factors that appear to increase autism risk.

Given rising prevalence rates and the extraordinary impacts of ASD on individuals, families, and communities, what explains why public health authorities, thus far, have failed to ban or restrict toxicants that have been shown to increase autism risk?

I argue that autism is not only a public health issue, it also represents a crisis of political economy. In this thesis I will show that: capitalism has transformed science and medicine from a focus on use values to a focus on exchange values; regulation is largely a reflection of political power not scientific evidence; and cultural and financial capture are blocking the sorts of regulatory responses that are necessary to stop the autism epidemic.