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The case for progress

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The Mysteries of Madness

This book reviews the myriad ways madness has frightened and fascinated. Post published by Glenn C. Altschuler Ph.D. on Jun 02, 2015 in This Is America


The practitioner of Hippocratic medicine maintained that madness had “natural” causes. “My own view,” one of them wrote, “is that those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the mages, purifiers, charlatans and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge. Being at a loss and having no treatment that would help, they concealed and sheltered themselves behind the divine.”

The struggle between those who sought to understand madness as a religious or supernatural phenomenon, those who viewed it as a problem originating in the biochemistry of the body and the brain, and those who advanced social or psychological explanations of the affliction, Andrew Scull reminds us, has persisted for over two millennia in countries throughout the world. In Madness in Civilization, Scull, a professor of sociology and science studies at the University of
California, San Diego, and the author of *Hysteria, Madhouse, and Masters of Bedlam*, reviews the myriad ways in which madness has teased, puzzled, frightened, and fascinated theologians, scientists, physicians, psychoanalysts, novelists, dramatists, painters and film makers.

Adorned with 120 beautiful color illustrations, Scull’s book is full of fascinating details. The idea that madness might be a pathway to truth, he demonstrates, surfaces repeatedly, in the raptures of Christian prophets, in Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Madhouses, Scull reveals, allowed families to remove relatives from prying eyes and provided “a measure of insulation from the shame and stigma that threatened their social standing.” But, he points out, most asylum dwellers were poor people. Nor did anyone adequately explain why doctors were best qualified to run madhouses, which were dedicated to disciplining and punishing inmates. Scull also deconstructs *psychoanalysis*. Freud’s grudging acknowledgement that his case studies “lacked the serious stamp of science,” Scull writes, was “an insightful remark.” Scull notes that for decades, especially in the United States, Karl Popper’s claim that psychoanalysis was a non-falsifiable pseudoscience that explained everything and (therefore) nothing “found few sympathetic listeners.” And Scull shows how psychiatrists used electro-shock *therapy* and lobotomies (which an Associated Press story referred to as “a personality rejuvenator” that removed “the worry of nerves” and was “only a little more dangerous than an operation to remove an infected tooth”) to emphasize the unity of mind and body and successfully rebrand their profession as scientific medicine.

Informative and engaging, *Madness in Civilization* comes to a disturbing conclusion. Human beings, Scull writes, tend to console themselves with visions of progress. And, indeed, the medicalization of madness has had some payoffs, most notably with respect to tertiary syphilis, a scourge that persisted into the twentieth century. Determined to give psychological medicine “its due but no more than its due,” Scull joins many other contemporary critics in pointing to considerable evidence that “notwithstanding periodic breathless proclamations to the contrary, the roots of *schizophrenia* or of major *depression* remain wrapped in mystery and confusion.”

Scull’s skepticism extends to the promises made by psychiatrists, who now have a virtual monopoly over prescribing *drugs* for mentally ill patients, of “better living through chemistry.” These assurances may ultimately prove to be credible, Scull emphasizes, but at present “they rest on faith more than science.” Priceless as *marketing* copy, and often hyped by poorly designed or systematically *biased* studies, “biobabble is as deeply misleading and unscientific as the psychobabble it replaced.” Pills and potions, which often produce powerful and paralyzing side effects, tend to be “palliative, not curative – and often not even that.”

Of course, the new therapeutic regime is the answer to Big Pharma’s *dreams*. After all, Scull points out, drugs that cure are terrific, but those that allow diseases to be managed are gifts that keep on giving. Anti-psychotic and anti-*depression* medications and tranquilizers – from Abilify to Zyprexa, from Cymbalta to Risperdal to Zoloft - are among the most profitable on the planet.

In a private conversation, Scull indicates, Thomas Insel, the director of the National Institute of Mental *Health* made the heretical claim that there is “no reality” to many of the diseases listed in the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric*
Association. “We might have to stop using terms like depression and schizophrenia,” Insel suggested, “because they are getting in our way, confusing things.”

Insel wants to replace descriptive psychiatry with a diagnostic approach grounded in biology. Scull remains convinced that this formula, too, is “an idle fantasy.” Biology, he acknowledges, surely plays a pivotal role in severe forms of mental aberration. But “like the poor folks waiting for Godot,” we are still waiting for neuropathological causes to be identified. Almost certainly, moreover, mental illnesses have social and cultural dimensions as well. And so, Scull concludes that at least for now “madness remains an enigma, a mystery we seemingly cannot solve.”