

# Healing collectives

Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021) 240 pp., £38.00 pb, 978 0 22677 774 0

In Camille Robcis' *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France*, the history of institutional psychotherapy in France begins at the site of the hospital at Saint-Alban and is aligned with resistance to fascism during the Second World War. Saint-Alban was the first but not the only source of radical psychiatric ideas and anti-fascist politics. The historical shift away from a conservative mainstream psychiatry to psychoanalysis, guided by Jacques Lacan's early insights into psychiatry's non-biological debts to the social, yielded influential modifications of key concepts such as the subject, the unconscious and transference that would animate the institutional psychotherapeutic project. The book provides a sound account of the transformative intent of institutional psychotherapy, the limits of its influence, and its enduring lessons. Although *Disalienation* speaks to a number of key institutions, events and philosophies, it is organised around a parade of male thinkers: François Tosquelles, Frantz Fanon, Félix Guattari and Jean Oury, and Michel Foucault. Feminist literary critic and historian Joana Masó has made us aware that the story of institutional psychotherapy and its children can be told, alternatively, from the perspectives of the women who played key roles at St. Alban such as psychiatrists Agnès Masson and Germaine Balvet, as well as Frantz Fanon's colleague Alice Cherki, not to forget the later contributions of Liane Mozère and Anne Querrien in the research groups animated by Félix Guattari.

As Robcis shows, the intent to permanently reinvent the psychiatric institution was not aligned with the goals of the anti-psychiatry movement but, rather, remained more akin to an anti-anti-psychiatry. The double 'anti-' neither entails rejection of psychiatric treatment nor mental illness, but is a positive attempt to create the kind of caring institution that did not exacerbate the problems faced by patients. Félix Guattari, whose work is sometimes mistakenly aligned with anti-psychiatry, tells us in his critiques of the Oedipalism of some of the British strains of the movement, to be on the lookout for countercultural mythologising and reformist tenden-

cies masquerading as fundamental change within anti-psychiatry.

The book's guiding concept of disalienation entails a refusal to separate the psyche from the social in psychosis; they must be always thought together, always doubled, and reparable through creative 'organigrams' such as the 'grid' of work rotations at Clinique de La Borde, perhaps the finest example, but one that changed shape over time. The effort to address psychic and social alienation by means of the practice of institutional psychotherapy, from Saint-Alban through the clinics at Saumery and to La Borde, begins with the effort to address the illness (deadening) of the institution itself, curbing it of a tendency to seek 'concentrationist' forms. Alienation in the historical French psychiatric context arose from the application of fascist directives to caring facilities in occupied France that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. Saint-Alban existed outside the occupied zone of France and enjoyed a relative degree of freedom, and it remained a model of vigilance for practitioners and theorists against ingrained fascist tendencies that survived the war. Robcis is interested in what the history and theory of institutional psychotherapy can contribute to a 'different political imaginary' applicable to contemporary predicaments. This means regaining the direct connection between the unconscious and politics, as well as reformulating concepts such as transference, so that they become mobile, transversal, 'burst', 'constellated', 'multi-referential' and 'dissociated'.

Over the first two chapters, the formative contributions of Tosquelles and Fanon are discussed in depth. For readers unfamiliar with the red Catalanian psychiatrist Tosquelles, his story is nothing less than miraculous. Tosquelles was rescued from a carceral French refugee camp after fleeing Franco's Spain, where he had set up a psychiatric service, by an enterprising doctor, director of Saint-Alban, Paul Balvet. Tosquelles was an early proponent of Lacan's 'structural understanding' of subjectivity, and the requirement of dealing with madness in its 'phenomenal totality', and a listed enemy of the occupy-

ing Vichy government, but the hospital's location deep in the Lozère in the free zone allowed it to temporarily house resistance fighters, artists and intellectuals on the level of Georges Canguilhem. This is the site at which the systematic disalienation of the institution would begin in earnest, through an analysis of the space, architecture, grounds, administration, clothing, regulations of control and logistics. Walls were demolished; uniforms were abandoned; a patient's club established, named after Balvet, a newsletter printed, ergotherapy established in order to 'revive the symbolic dimension of life'. As Robcis concludes: 'constantly evolving, adapting, and always revisable, institutional psychotherapy was meant as a permanent revolution of politics, society, and psychic life'. We are talking about 'revolution' here with a small 'r', a molecular level perfusion.

Fanon's decolonial adaptation of institutional psychotherapy forms part of the book's second chapter, which is devoted to his career as a psychiatrist inverting typical accounts that fail to grasp the radical character of his clinical practice, and the departure that his theory of the subject marked from traditional psychiatry, especially the role played by the ideas of Lacan in the development of the psychosocial thesis concerning 'North Africa Syndrome'. While the two pages devoted to Fanon's 'encounter' with institutional psychotherapy in Saint-Alban are limited, in part due to the fact that Fanon did not write about this period, Fanon brought the lessons of Saint-Alban with him to Blida hospital in Algeria where he first enjoyed success developing programming and practices, but only with a ward of Western European women, whereas a ward of Muslim men did not respond to the model of the 'healing collective'. Fanon grasped the 'violence' of his imposition of an imported sociotherapy and eventually adapted to the needs of traditional Algerian society. After he was expelled from Algeria in 1957, Fanon landed in La Manouba Hospital in Tunisia, where he continued to implement ideas from institutional psychotherapy. Robcis's conclusion is that 'Fanon took institutional psychotherapy as it was conceived in Saint-Alban one step further' by 'deterritorialising' it for the North African context. Whether this makes Fanon's transformations 'the most perfected example of institutional psychotherapy' is certainly a credible claim, but one that must be measured against the example of La Borde.

The monumental figures of Tosquelles and Fanon, and their constellations, linked through Saint-Alban, loom large in *Disalienation*, even if Fanon is exceptional in the history of institutional psychotherapy, which was, Robcis states, undertaken by 'mostly male and mostly white' doctors. Robcis should have addressed Tosquelles' own candid reflections about Fanon's arrival at Saint-Alban in the spring of 1952 as they do not neglect the question of race. Indeed, Tosquelles foils any effort to cleanly re-embed Fanon into the history of institutional psychotherapy in stating that 'nobody was yet talking about institutional psychotherapy' at that time. Certainly, Fanon's escape from the 'psychiatric desert' of his purely biological medical training in Lyon, and his experiences of racial profiling and harassment there by the police, again a concern of Tosquelles, makes Saint-Alban seem even more like a revelation. Fanon was quite active at Saint-Alban, especially in the patients' club, and he wrote for the newsletter (a remarkable example is reproduced, testimony to Robcis' deep research), fully exploring the 'hypothesis' posed by the hospital as a 'healing collective'. This sets up nicely the explication of Fanon's display of ingenuity in adapting institutional psychotherapy to a new sociocultural context in a difficult clinical situation in the Blida hospital that was nothing less than remarkable. Robcis writes, 'unlike the "assimilated psychiatry" that Fanon arrived with, this was a truly disalienated and disalienating psychotherapy'.

The unity of theory and practice in the *praxical* territory of La Borde is, for Robcis, a question of 'cosmology', a strange choice of term for chapter three about the clinic's disorganisational innovations such as 'the grid', the patients' club, the many precarious committees, publications, strange nomenclatures and creative events, all of which helped to produce new subjectivities. What is valuable in this chapter is Robcis's analysis of the extent to which Jean Oury tried to balance some of the methods of traditional psychiatry with psychoanalytic understandings of psychosis, using concepts borrowed from Lacan but adapted to the setting, such as a collective transference adequate to a 'shattered Symbolic', rather than being defined only as a product of the analyst-analysand dyad. Thus, Robcis states: 'The great invention of institutional psychotherapy was the possibility of implementing and working with this dissociated transference'. Unlike certain strains of anti-psychiatry,

the clinicians at La Borde did not eschew shock therapies and anti-psychotic drugs.

Robcis explains that the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972 created a number of schisms. It seems both a 'culmination' of Guattari's experience with institutional psychotherapy and his long-time working relationship with Oury, which becomes institutional analysis and then schizoanalysis; the latter types of analysis are either continuations of the former psychotherapy or breaks from it; as well as a rejection of Lacan's structuralism (wrapped in a rejection of a 'structural Oedipus' and any generalised oedipalisation of desire, as lack). Yet, these are announced without renouncing either Lacan or psychoanalysis altogether.



Certainly, Guattari's position seemed to push Oury away because of the manner in which it foregrounded desire, especially in the context of the treatment of psychotics (arguably elevating a *trans* Daniel Schreber to anti-oedipus himself). The ways it changed Guattari's approach to psychotherapy, especially in his private practice, is still a matter of debate. Certainly, it sharpened his understanding of how institutions, in the guise of the many groups and publications he was involved with before and after this period, can produce new, creative and less-alienated subjectivations, and he enjoyed a good deal of success in these adventures. Why Robcis resorts to tired misunderstandings here – 'schizoanalysis could not possibly mean that we should all strive to become psychotics' – is unclear, but perhaps necessary in a theoretical climate that tends to favour hyperbole and zealotry while ignoring clinical grounding, but her main point is more or less well taken: she does not see *Anti-Oedipus* as constituting a profound 'break with in-

stitutional psychotherapy in favor of anti-psychiatry', although this is a bit of a straw man argument. The harder question is the extent to which Guattari changed his therapeutic approaches once he had rejected so much of psychoanalysis and distanced himself from Oury and the 'Lacano-Labordian complex', while remaining critical of much of anti-psychiatry as reformist and mystifying. Still, Robcis's purpose is to rejoin Guattari and Fanon in the unity of a shared vision: not to depart from the fold, but to carry forward with ingenuity, adaptability and in the spirit of an unrelenting omnidirectional critique.

Turning to Foucault in chapter four, Robcis situates his early work in the context of a series of encounters with psychiatry and psychology in quite different settings, including his translation of Ludwig Binswanger and visit to the Münsterlingen asylum, and translation into French of Viktor Von Weizsäcker's book *Le cycle de la Structure* (1958), but with no mention of why this might be significant; to which may be added, the facilitating role played by Georges Daumézon (from Saint-Alban and a personal supporter), the publication of *Maladie mentale et personnalité* [1954], and his refusal to have it translated, his interest in psychosis, the connection made between criminology and psychiatry while at the Fresnes prison. There are openings to the vast terrain of phenomenological psychiatry that remain to be developed. The connection made between Foucault's *Maladie mentale* and *History of Madness* is resonant, and Robcis delicately threads together conceptual interests and figures that bring Foucault quite close to the concerns of institutional psychotherapy. It is with the publication and reception of *History of Madness* during and after 1968 – his preferred 'first' book – that the threads are unravelled, but in a controlled way. What Robcis discusses is the degree to which the book's reception as a 'manual for political activism, a "toolkit" for anti-authoritarianism', shifted its value onto the social movement of anti-psychiatry despite Foucault's statements that the writing of his project, and its timeframe, predated the existence of this movement. Praised by anti-psychiatrists R.D. Laing and David Cooper for an English readership, in translation the book became a 'guideline for antipsychiatry', which circulated back onto and influenced French debates about psychiatry during this period.

However, the key point that Robcis makes with great clarity is that anti-psychiatry and institutional psycho-

therapy were quite different; the latter held onto psychiatric treatments that were anathema to the movement, even if, as Robert Castel put it, it did so in a 'sublimated' way. Indeed, Foucault personally found himself involved in certain anti-psychiatric events, alongside his prison activism. And it was out of these encounters that his theory of power took shape, as well as a shift from institutions to disciplines. Ultimately, he endeavoured to map the 'many antipsychiatries' that had emerged, bringing his affinity with the political work of Guattari (and Franco Basaglia) of 'unmasking power relations' back into focus. It would have been useful here to clarify that Guattari's psychiatry engagements included the Réseau-Alternative à la psychiatrie, from the mid-late 70s, associated with Mony Elkaïm, an internationalist and social movements-focused initiative about creating other 'places' for living as a bulwark against the ravages of both hospitalisation and of mass deinstitutionalisation (the catastrophic legacy of anti-psychiatry's integration into mainstream hospital psychiatry).

Robcis identifies the struggle against fascism, both in the historical sense and in the sense of the fascism of the mind that Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* sought to root out, but she declines to investigate the theory of microfascism, linked by Guattari through micropolitics to Foucault's microphysics of power after the latter's death, and this is one of the compromises in *Disalienation*. Instead, it is to Foucault's infamous introduction to *Anti-Oedipus* and thus to the non-fascist life that Robcis turns, with the idea of an everyday practice of living that releases personal and collective freedoms within the terms of institutional psychotherapy. However, this emphasis seeks the overlay of 'libidinal and political economy' that Guattari's antioedipalism exposed, but does not attempt to retrieve the aesthetic, as in the ethico-aesthetic paradigm, or the ecological praxes that bear a significant aesthetic dimension that helps Guattari develop a taste for the deepest ethical questions about future develop-

ments in the anthropocene that would later take shape in his thought. Indeed, the recourse to Foucault's introduction, to the later American-English edition no less, is not justified. Why not refer to Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus* lectures of 1971-72 in order to excavate fascism as a residual capitalist code and look at the advances from there in the theory of microfascism? Why can't we appreciate that capitalism searches for new models of molecularised fascism inside itself, in a fertile environment conducive to infestation and circulation? This is important because by the end of the book, when today's microfascist politics are finally broached, the bridge between historical and contemporary forms is simply given without explanation.

*Disalienation* jumps, then, to an epilogue without a conclusion proper. This is supposed to bring historical events into contemporary focus in the struggles against neoliberalism in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the political theory of 'instituent praxis' and the production of the 'collective subject', still a very relevant and very Guattarian project. The most recent return of fascism is situated in relation to the Trump presidency (it would be useful to note that Trump had been on Guattari's radar since the 80s). There are two ways to read her book, the author tells us. One, is to align the great figures of yesterday around the theory and practice of radical psychiatry in France. The other, is to read it as a work of 'critical history'. The question becomes how to map the influence of institutional psychotherapy for our world. The relevance of both fascism and psychosis for interpreting events unfolding today is unassailable. A molecular perspective on fascism would assist in the analysis of how historical phenomena never stop adapting and continue to proliferate in welcoming environments, setting up resonances among the many supercharged yet empty carriers of hate, disinformation, and recruitment of extremists, circulating virulently, forming a black hole into which even the most resilient subjectivities may be drawn.

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