

H-France Review Vol. 23 (July 2023), No. 123

Camille Robcis, *Disalienation. Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 240 pp. Lists of abbreviations and figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$105.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0226777603; \$35.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-0226777740; \$34.99 (eb). ISBN 9-78-0226777887.

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*Disalienation* is a rich, ambitious, and sophisticated account of the intellectual history and political implications of institutional psychotherapy (IP). Its four main chapters each focus on one theorist—François Tosquelles, Frantz Fanon, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault—but situate them within a broader intellectual constellation, and show how each thinker combined psychiatric practice and projects for institutional and political reform. Camille Robcis summarises complex theoretical material with admirable clarity and her study will be essential reading for anyone interested in the political trajectory of twentieth-century French psychological and psychiatric thought.

The relationship between psychological theory and political praxis is central to Robcis's work. In her first book, *The Law of Kinship*, she showed how the structuralist thinking of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan found public expression in French family policy and legislation.<sup>[1]</sup> In *Disalienation*—in some respects an expansion and development of the relevant sections of Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics*, to which Robcis acknowledges her debt—the left-wing Catalan psychiatrist Tosquelles, and his efforts to combine psychiatric and political insights, is presented as the originator of the IP movement.<sup>[2]</sup> From 1940 onwards, Tosquelles implemented radical psychiatric practices at the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole psychiatric hospital in the Lozère, ideas that were later developed at the La Borde clinic under Guattari and Jean Oury, and by Fanon at Blida-Joinville in Algeria. Robcis's ambition is not only to provide the history of IP ideas and practices, but to demonstrate their ongoing relevance; Robcis wants to invite us to “think with” IP ideas, offering *Disalienation* as a work both of intellectual history and critical theory that may help “open up perspectives for other political imaginaries” (p. 149). Robcis clearly thinks Tosquelles and his followers were on to something when they tackled alienation as a simultaneously psychical and social phenomenon, and asked: how can our societies and institutions be made less psychologically alienating? Why are people psychologically attracted to authoritarianism? Could a psychiatric methodology, in Tosquelles' words, heal life itself?

IP first emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, when the need to understand and combat fascist authoritarianism was direct and immediate. Tosquelles, born 1912, was a founder of the Spanish communist POUM and a Spanish Republican army doctor. Fleeing Franco in 1939, he was

detained at the army-run Camp des Judes refugee camp near Montauban, where he observed how coercive internment psychologically harmed the inmates. Tosquelles set up a psychiatric service in the camp before moving to Saint-Alban in January 1940. A product of the anti-Stalinist left, he promoted decentralisation, solidarity, and democratic self-management; as a Catalan nationalist, Tosquelles promoted adapting psychiatric techniques to local circumstances, something Robcis connects to France's 1960s decentralising sectorisation policy, and to Fanon's efforts to adapt IP practices in Algeria. Tosquelles studied psychoanalysis, especially in its Lacanian form, and drew from Hermann Simon's theory of more active therapy, emphasising the benefits of psychiatric patients being able to work and access libraries, workshops, and other mentally stimulating activities. He further argued that both doctors and patients should "work to cure the institution" (p. 22), transforming themselves into a "healing collective" and the hospital into an environment conducive to cure (p. 40). This involved demolishing the outer walls, abolishing uniforms, and establishing community-building institutions like cafés, libraries, ergotherapy, newsletters, and theatrical productions. At La Borde, Oury and Guattari brought patients into the organisation, abolishing salary and status hierarchies and introducing a regular rotation of staff roles to foster a chaotic, but supposedly disalienating and therapeutic disorganisation. However, IP differed from contemporary antipsychiatric currents in seeing psychosis as not only a social phenomenon but an illness that still required medical interventions, including electroshock therapy and antipsychotics.

In chapter two, Robcis explores how IP interacted with decolonisation. Alienation was a key concept for Fanon, who played on the double meaning of *aliéné*—psychically estranged / foreign—to argue that Algerians were permanently alienated under French rule. Colonies, like unreformed asylums, were enclosed, segregated, constituted by social and psychic violence. Working within colonial institutions for progressive psychiatric reform, as Fanon attempted in the early 1950s, was therefore futile since only independence could bring psychological liberation. Algerians, alienated from their land and political traditions, suffered psychologically. Similarly, the mysterious North African Syndrome suffered by Muslim immigrants in France could only be cured by acknowledging and tackling structural racism.

Fanon completed *Black Skin White Masks*—working title "Essay for the Disalienation of the Black Man"—before arriving at Saint Alban in April 1952. He stayed for 15 months, throwing himself into the IP ethos. In November 1953 he moved to the prison-like psychiatric hospital Blida-Joinville, where patients lived in overcrowded, dehumanising conditions. Acquiring oversight of one pavilion of European women and three of Muslim men, plus some forward-thinking interns, Fanon followed the IP playbook, establishing a café, newsletter, library, film screenings, and activity workshops. Instantly successful with the European women, this approach failed with the Muslim men, who either saw these activities as colonial imports or lacked the cultural background to participate. Fanon realised that importing IP unaltered from Saint-Alban was ultimately complicit with colonialism. He therefore revised it for its new audience, hiring travelling Arabic storytellers, changing the film selection, and instituting an Algerian-style Café Maure. Such disalienating changes represent for Robcis the most perfected example of IP, transforming an institution complicit in colonial and psychiatric violence into something healing and decolonised.

Chapter three centres on Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), arguing that its concepts of schizoanalysis and institutional analysis represented a continuation of institutional psychotherapy while addressing larger political questions: why, in 1968, had French workers

supposedly acted against their interests, accepting pay raises rather than pursue social revolution? Why did people continue to desire their oppression? For Deleuze and Guattari, the answer lay in how desire became oedipalised—privatised and channelled towards heteronormative family structures—and in how far-right voters are not simply misled by false information but take a libidinal, irrational pleasure in the speeches and actions of authoritarian politicians. I am not sure that either Deleuze and Guattari, or Robcis, fully explained the connection between these two ideas—but the far right’s recent coalescence around opposing trans rights is a reminder of its existence. Robcis emphasises that an important work to emerge from the circle around Guattari and the journal *Recherches* was Guy Hocquenghem’s *Le Désir homosexuel* (1972), which celebrated homosexual desire as a gateway to a broader social revolution.

Chapter four charts the development of Foucault’s thinking about psychiatry from circa 1950 to 1975. Foucault studied and taught psychology, interned at the Saint-Anne psychiatric hospital and Fresnes prison’s medical wing, and was taught by Georges Daumézon, a theorist and promoter of IP. Influenced by Marx’s psychology and alienation theory, the early Foucault also valued psychoanalysis’s contribution in restoring socio-cultural context to psychiatry. Robcis argues that his critiques of institutions, norms, and normalisation in *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (1954) and *History of Madness* (1961) resonate with IP ideas.[3] In the earlier work, Foucault argued that psychical processes always related to historical and social factors but could never be reduced to them, and wrote that the nineteenth century invented the modern notion of alienation when it stripped rights from the mentally ill and excluded them from society. Psychiatry thus needed to offer patients “concrete means to overcome their situation of conflict, to modify their milieu [or adapt better to] their conditions of existence” (p. 119). However, unlike the IP circle, by 1957 Foucault ceased hoping that psychiatry and psychology could be reformed to provide genuine disalienation, and focused instead on the historical role of psychology as a discourse / form of power-knowledge that produced and objectified madness, conscripting the mad in the service of elevating the psychiatrist’s social power. Unsurprisingly, since it effectively labelled them imposters, psychiatrists initially reacted coolly to *History of Madness*. It was May ‘68 that transformed the book’s political influence, turning it into an antipsychiatric reference point. Foucault subsequently sympathised with Groupe Information Asiles, which sought complete destruction of the medical-police apparatus, and pursued prison activism and new theories of discipline and power. Robcis thus connects the dots between *History of Madness* and *Discipline and Punish*, showing how critiquing psychiatry led to Foucault’s larger intellectual project.

As this brief overview indicates, *Disalienation* is a wide-ranging and complex intellectual history. Robcis takes the reader on the intellectual journey with her key figures, showing just what it was in the ideas of Lacan or Wilhelm Reich or Robert Castel that shaped their thinking. While she describes daily life in IP institutions, the focus remains firmly on the founders’ theories and visions. I couldn’t help wondering if we might have heard more from the patients themselves, or whether the deliberate introduction of chaos and role-swapping led to unforeseen safeguarding or abuse problems. Did the reality of care live up to the revolutionary aspirations? Further, was the sheer amount of theorising that lay behind IP practices absolutely necessary? Were Fanon’s actions at Blida-Joinville, for example, revolutionary because of their theoretical underpinnings, or because of the simple insistence that North African patients were as fully human and worthy of respect as Europeans? As I have explored in the case of Françoise Dolto, it was also possible to combine ideas drawn from IP with a far more conservative politics, which Robcis does not really acknowledge.[4]

Robcis's epilogue—completed in early 2020—returns to the idea that IP allowed psychiatric hospitals to become “a laboratory of political intervention,” producing “a set of practical tools...to erode hierarchy, domination, and forms of authoritarianism in group life” generally (p. 145). She cites Occupy, Nuit Debout, and Los Indignados as examples of movements to reclaim and rethink public spaces—and with a slightly later compilation date would presumably have added Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police, perhaps the closest modern parallel to some of the campaigns that emerged after 1968 in terms of seeking to rethink the paradigm of justice, policing and public safety. Whether such movements will take inspiration from the history of IP and its theoretical reference points remains to be seen, but Robcis's underlining of institutional psychotherapy's twin insistence that psychiatric problems require political solutions, and that the political problem of authoritarianism cannot be solved without psychological insight, is thought-provoking. As Robcis demonstrates, IP's legacy lies in its challenge not only to dismantle alienating structures where they currently exist, but to develop societies that understand how to guard against producing new ones.

#### NOTES

[1] Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[2] Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May '68 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

[3] Michel Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (Paris: PUF, 1954); *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961).

[4] Richard Bates, *Psychoanalysis and the Family in Twentieth-Century France: Françoise Dolto and her Legacy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

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