

Taking over the asylums

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- Author/Byline: Wise, Sarah
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- Abstract: A portrait of an Italian psychiatrist who initiated radical reforms in mental healthcare. By Sarah Wise
The Man Who Closed the Asylums: Franco Basaglia and the Revolution in Mental Health Care

by John Foot

Verso £20, 424 pages

It was an odd place for a revolution to begin. Gorizia straddled Italy and Yugoslavia, with the border running across the wooded parkland in which the town's large psychiatric hospital stood. Remote and isolated, Gorizia was - as John Foot writes in *The Man Who Closed the Asylums*, his biography of Dr Franco Basaglia - "highly strategic but also largely forgotten". Italo-Slav animosities were entrenched, and the town was governed by the centre-right, sometimes in alliance with neo-fascists.

In 1961 Basaglia took up his post as director of the hospital and found that its 600 or so patients were being subjected to every kind of abuse imaginable, in conditions he did not hesitate to compare to those of a concentration camp.

He gathered a team of youngish, like-minded professionals around him, gradually won over the nursing staff, and set about dismantling the institution. Some patients were liberated; many were permitted to come and go; physical restraint, solitary confinement and insulin treatment were ended; and patients began to help run the asylum. The gradual removal of walls and fences got under way.

The Gorizian experiment "made non-people into real people again," writes Foot, "with a history, an identity and a voice, and it freed doctors and nurses from purely repressive activity." But Basaglia was worried: was he simply creating a benign custodial environment - a "golden cage" that would prevent a patient ever wishing to assert his/her autonomy outside of an institution?

Foot deals deftly and in detail with the hugely contentious, mostly misleading, term "anti-psychiatry", preferring to use "radical" or "critical" psychiatry. Anti-authoritarianism informed the whole movement, and it is striking how many of these radical doctors had been part of the Italian Resistance. Basaglia himself had been an anti-fascist rebel during the war in his native Venice, was captured, beaten and spent six months in the city's prison.

The campaigns of Basaglia and his circle would eventually culminate in legislation in 1978 which, over the subsequent 20 years, saw the closure of all psychiatric hospitals and an emphasis on treatment within the community or in small local specialist centres.

In Italy, as in the UK, a number of high-profile "incidents" have left a deep stain on the decarceration movement. Basaglia himself faced a charge (later dismissed) of manslaughter when, in September 1968, a patient on a home visit killed his wife with a hammer. The jubilantly horrified press demanded an end to the reforms.

This revolution was televised: documentary-makers (as well as photographers and artists) detailed the changes at Gorizia and other reforming asylums in Italy. While this created a large, fascinating archive, Foot points out that the celebratory nature of much of this 1960s and 1970s coverage has distorted the history of the Italian radical psychiatry movement. It is the Basaglian project's complexity and plurality that Foot has sought to place on the record - how it spread and adapted to other Italian provinces, how it influenced (and was influenced by) British, US and French radical psychiatries.

Something that also emerges from the book is the intensity and earnestness with which these men and women took on their own profession, a hostile press and often toxic party politics, and at the very least won partial reform. In doing so, friendships were forged and lost, marriages collapsed and burnout occurred.

Foot admits that the Italian decarceration movement, "with its myths, splits, silences", is not easy to write about. It is not a neat and tidy story and this is not a neat and tidy book. From time to time his account feels a little laborious and repetitive. Also, I would have liked to have known what, if anything, that most powerful of Italian institutions, the church, made of these events; even if it remained silent, that in itself is of interest.

But these are minor quibbles about a work that returns to us some valuable insights about how we should care for the mentally distressed. It is fashionable in some quarters to laugh at the radical left of the 1960s. *The Man Who Closed the Asylums* feels refreshing in that regard - as a portrait of imperfect people who had the passion and pragmatism to put an end to a brutal and broken system.

Sarah Wise is author of 'Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad-Doctors in Victorian England' (Bodley Head)

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