

The Hall of Crooked Mirrors

An Inquiry into the Social Regulation of Consciousness

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For historians, and indeed for all of humanity, madness is one of the most difficult subjects to examine; the very act of writing academically is seemingly at odds with the topic. Madness constitutes “the other;” that is to say, that which cannot be categorized or controlled by conventional means. Because of this, it is often assumed that, by the same token, madness cannot be understood. With the success of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation*, such assumptions were challenged. While madness may prove incomprehensible in relation to the individual, the study of madness may prove to be a highly effective means of understanding the nature of exclusive societies, as well as the nature of humanity as a whole. This is because neither war, nor famine, neither poverty, nor disease are as dangerous to a society as that which threatens its categorical universe. Therefore, as a society’s conception of the universe shifts over time, its methods of dealing with such threats shift accordingly. Madness began, in medieval Europe, as a phenomenon that could not be decoupled from certain Judaeo-Christian conceptions of demonic possession, and divine inspiration. By the nineteenth century, madness was largely being interpreted from an utterly mechanical and positivistic viewpoint. Alongside this change was a more subtle transformation in the nature of European society: the transformation of the “subject” into the “citizen.” In terms of madness, the effects of this transformation are still being dealt with to this day. By the time the concept of the citizen was fully established, victims of madness, who were once able to remain a part of their community and family, had lost their very status as human beings. All that remained were chained animals, who could perhaps be controlled – but never cured.

In order to analyze the concept of “madness,” it is first necessary to define the term itself. As Michael Macdonald put it: “[Madness] is the most social of maladies to those who observe its effects. Every mental disorder alienates its victims from the conventions of action, thought, and emotion that bind us together with the other members of our society.”¹ Madness, in other words, is a fundamentally alienating and extra-categorical phenomenon. One need only to examine the words associated with this concept to see an illustration of this point. The very term “disorder,” for example, is a clear indication of a disruption to the “natural” order of an individual’s mind, and hence, that individual’s “natural” place within their society. When an individual’s connection to society is disrupted, the results can often be dangerous.

The best way to examine the consequences of social disruption is through a brief look at the works of Emile Durkheim, published at the beginning of the twentieth century. Durkheim’s statistical analysis of the causes of suicide brings up some interesting questions about social integration: “Without exception, Protestants show far more suicides than [Catholics] . . . The aptitude of Jews for suicide is always less than that of Protestants . . . [and] to a lesser degree, lower than that of Catholics.”² Durkheim’s analysis suggests that any society which requires individuals to rely solely on their own resources, rather than on the resources of their community, will experience high rates of suicide. Therefore in the case of Judaism, where a high level of cultural integration and community involvement is present, suicide rates are low. Conversely, in the case of Protestantism, where the focus is on the individual’s relationship to God rather than on the individual’s relationship to the community or on the community’s relationship to God, suicide rates are high. This appears to be because the less connected to society individuals are, the more vulnerable to suicide they become; in his other works, Durkheim provides a similar analysis of social alienation as a cause of crime. In his chapter on “anomic suicide,” Durkheim argues that a rapid change in

¹ Michael Macdonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1981), 1.

² Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. Johan A. Spaulding (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 154-155.

the nature of an individual's connection to society can also result in high vulnerability to suicide. A rapid loss of wealth, a rapid gain of social responsibilities, or a sudden divorce, for example, could cause a person to take their own life. What Durkheim's analysis of suicide suggests is that alienation of individuals is dangerous to societies. This conclusion becomes extremely important when dealing with madness, for madness one of is the most pronounced form of social alienation. Durkheim does not believe that individuals are responsible for suicide. Instead, he views society's response to alienated individuals as if it were the response of an immune system to a foreign body. When an individual's bonds to society are severed, that individual, like a foreign body, must be removed. In the case of suicide, the alienated individual is removed permanently. In the case of crime, the alienated individual is removed temporarily. In the case of madness, the social responses have been a good deal more complicated.

In medieval Europe, as noted above, the idea of madness could not be separated from the idea of spirit-possession. This can perhaps be understood through further exploration of madness as an extra-categorical phenomenon. In his celebrated work *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold Van Gennep made several observations that might prove useful in terms of understanding the connection between madness and religion. Van Gennep's analysis suggests that countless religious practices world-wide are centered on the movement between social categories: "Beneath a multiplicity of forms ... a typical pattern always recurs: the pattern of the rites of passage."³ European history certainly provides no exception to this observation. Whether it be marriages, funerals, initiations, or coming-of-age ceremonies, European cultures have always connected moments of transition to religion. Because a victim of madness is forced to exist outside of social categories, that person is always in a liminal state, always in transition.

If liminality is central to religion, it seems only natural that madness would be handled within a religious context. Certainly there are several cases of what one might call madness, which were seen as spiritual afflictions, and a few were even "cured" by religious

³ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. trans. Monica B. Vizendorn and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: U of Chicago P, 1960), 191.

means. Margery Kempe, for example, believed she had been possessed by demons, an assumption which later shifted to the belief that she was, in fact, possessed by the spirit of God. Mary Glover's madness was viewed as an affliction caused by witchcraft, and it was later cured through an exorcism. There is also a sound scriptural basis for the concepts of spirit possession and exorcism. It was believed that any who attempted to exorcise a demon in the name of Christ would be successful: "In my name, [those who believe] will cast out demons."⁴ The Gospels also provide several descriptions of Jesus healing those who are afflicted by demonic possession. Though madness in medieval Europe could be explained in religious terms, this does not mean that its victims did not suffer social alienation.

When one examines the most prevalent reference to madness/spirit possession in the Bible, this fact becomes clear. In the Bible there is a description of a possessed man being healed by Jesus:

A man with an evil (or unclean) spirit came from the tombs to meet [Jesus] . . . Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones . . . Jesus asked him 'What is your name?' 'My name is legion,' he replied, 'for we are many.' And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus 'Send us among the pigs' . . . He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out of him and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned . . . When they came to Jesus, [the local people] saw the man . . . dressed and in his right mind, and they were afraid . . . Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.⁵

What this account illustrates is that spirit possession can often be connected to ideas of pollution. The possessed man inhabits the tombs, performs acts of self-mutilation, and walks around naked, all of which are actions that cause a person to become contaminated, or "unclean," according to the Books of the *Torah*. Also, the demons are eventually banished

⁴ *The Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), Mark 16:17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Mark 5 1:17.

into pigs, which are specifically described in the books of *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy* as unclean. Finally, Jesus himself, because of his contact with such an unclean situation, begins to frighten the local population, who eventually ask him to leave. The connection between madness and pollution is well established elsewhere as well. In the Book of *I Samuel*, David feigns insanity by “letting his saliva run down his beard.”⁶ Such an action conforms to Levitical concepts of impurity. Mary Douglas also noted the connection between pollution and madness in other cultures: “They explicitly associate dirt [pollution] with madness; those who are mad eat filth.”⁷ Douglas’ work further suggests that the Torah refers to many animals as “unclean” because they do not fit properly within the threefold classification of animals as described in the book of *Genesis*: “any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness.”⁸ Leviticus also describes several extra-categorical social relationships, such as homosexuality, as “abominations.”

People naturally fear pollution, and shun that which is considered unclean because of the idea that contact with the unclean can result in contamination. One need only look at the early medieval European reaction to lepers, given that leprosy is another condition that is considered unclean according to the *Torah*, to see an example of this point. The fact of the matter is that, whether one looks at madness as a liminal phenomenon in terms of Durkheimian social alienation, or in terms of spiritual beliefs, madness constitutes a threat to society, and its victims are almost always alienated from their communities.

In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas provides an extremely helpful analysis of pollution: “Nothing in itself is polluting, Dirt [pollution] is matter out of place.”⁹ “Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is . . . a positive effort to organise the environment.”¹⁰ Once again, the concept of that which is not categorized, that which is liminal, that which is “out of place,” recurs. Douglas’ analysis, however, provides another dimension to the

⁶ Ibid., I Samuel 21:13.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966; reprint Routledge Classics, 2002), 217.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

argument: the concept that the way to mend the problem of pollution is to properly filter it into one's environment. Historically, this is exactly what took place. Exorcisms were an early form of this act, where the spirit could be cast out and the victim returned to his or her former place in society. Later in European history, the recategorisation of the "insane" took a more drastic turn.

This is where the work of Foucault becomes important "Confinement hid away unreason . . . but it explicitly drew attention to madness . . . If, in the case of unreason, the chief intention was to avoid scandal, in the case of madness that intention was to organise it."¹¹ In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault notes several important tendencies present in the European reactions to madness and how those tendencies shifted over time. In his first chapter, Foucault mentions the European tendency to segregate and confine lepers. As leprosy began to disappear in Europe, madmen began to fill the lazar houses.¹² If one were to apply Douglas' analysis to this, then the replacement of lepers with madmen can easily be explained. Confinement was a result of the European attempt to "positively reorganise one's environment;" it did not matter what was being reorganised, so long as organisation was taking place. Therefore, when there were no more lepers, Europe's need for organisation was fulfilled by the presence of madness. Foucault would argue that the creation of social categories to form a concept of "normality" is at the very heart of a state's hold over its citizens. In other words – organisation and categorisation equals control; and control is necessary for the success of the modern nation-state.

What emerges is a picture of the changing nature of European history. Modern Europe was created when the medieval "defensive kingdom" underwent a metamorphosis and became the modern "nation-state." The defensive kingdom is a unity of communities and kinship groups created purely to defend against invaders. The nation-state is a group of individuals who "sacrifice a portion of [their] liberty in order to enjoy the remainder in

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3-13.

security and tranquility.”¹³ When Europe was plagued by Viking invasions and the expansion of Islam, it formed defensive kingdoms. When Europe’s population and economic complexity grew large enough to justify permanent centralized authority, it formed nation-states. In the case of kingdoms, the fear of an invading enemy was enough for centralised authority to maintain control. In the nation-state, the search for an enemy turned inward. When the threat of an invading enemy disappears, the defensive kingdom reverts back to its individual communities and families unless another enemy can be found.

The thing that early modern centralised governments needed most was an enemy terrifying enough to justify their existence. The Vikings had long since been converted to Christianity, and Islam’s expansion had been halted due to internal problems. Though European nations were able to fight one another, a European enemy was never terrifying enough to the European psyche to justify any significant loss of individual freedom. It was at this point that Foucault’s “discursive regime” was born. If governments could use ideas to construct a paradigm of “normality,” they could use the common people’s fear of that which exists outside of “normality” in order to justify its existence. In other words, the presence of alienated individuals became necessary for the nation-state to function. The alienated individual, who, as my analysis of Durkheim would suggest, was once a threat to the stability of society, became the crucible of its continued survival. At the same time, the potential danger of the alienated individual was regulated through confinement.

In the “Age of Reason,” madmen and women became central to the methods of social control noted above. This occurred because the same philosophers responsible for the conceptual “birth” of the modern nation-state, men such as Beccaria and Rousseau, continually advocated equality for all under the law, and the freedom from unreasonable persecution. In a world where the social contract defines a person’s connection to society, any individual with the ability to reason could not be pushed far enough out of society’s categories to become the “enemy.” The poor were still encompassed within the social contract. Socially or religiously deviant individuals who did not harm others were not

¹³ Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, trans. David Young (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986).

sufficiently repugnant to society to become completely alienated. Finally, criminals who violated the social contract were simply shifted into a different category: they became people who needed to repay society for their misdeeds. Only “madmen,” who were completely un-fettered by considerations of “reason” and completely unable to advocate for themselves, could be completely cast out of society. Madness became a crooked mirror to society – the permanent image of that which people would become with the absence of regulatory powers. The more grievous and permanent the spectacle, the more effective the result. This had profound consequences for the treatment of madness in modern Europe.

In the medieval era, madness was a temporary and often curable ailment, one that was often dealt with at the local level. In the “Age of Reason” madness was viewed as the permanent transformation of “human” into “animal”. Foucault wrote that “it was [the] animality of madness which confinement glorified.”¹⁴ Victims of madness were chained down, kept naked, and often beaten into submission. Also, spectators were often invited to observe the inmates of madhouses. In an “Age of Reason” there is nothing more terrifying than the threat of being deprived of one’s wits, and there may be nothing more fascinating than a person who has already been deprived of their wits. Simon Schama’s description of Théroigne de Méricourt contains a perfect model of a mad-woman of the Enlightenment era.

By 1810, she had disappeared from the land of the living in all but biological fact. Clothes had become abhorrent to her, so she sat naked in her cell, angrily refusing even the simplest wool dressing gown offered to protect her from the winter cold. On the rare occasions when she emerged for air or to drink from the filthy puddles that formed in the courtyard, she consented sometimes to wear a light chemise but nothing more. Every day she would throw cold water on the straw of her bed, sometimes breaking the ice in the yard to get at it, as if only glacial saturation could cool the heat of her dementia. Periodically she was heard, still, to mutter imprecations against those who had betrayed the Revolution . . . In her little cell at La Salpêtrière, there was at least somewhere

¹⁴ Foucault, 78.

*where the revolutionary memory could persist, quite undisturbed by the quotidian mess of the human condition.*¹⁵

Not only does Théroguine exemplify the image of the “insane” as something other than hu-man, she also represents a gradual integration of all extra-categorical social anomalies into the framework of the insane. Théroguine, once an important “daughter of the revolution,” had become the bastion of ideals that were all but gone from French society. Soon there was no place for her but the madhouse and, gradually, she began to fit the part. What Théroguine’s case demonstrates is the fact that not only did society alienate and dehumanise victims of madness but also it soon began to place all those who posed a destabilising threat, however small, to social conventions into the realm of “madness.” At this point, what Foucault calls “The merciless language of non-madness”¹⁶ is born. By the nineteenth century, millions of individuals could be placed into this category, as every small “neurosis,” every inexplicable deviation from normality in a person, came to be viewed as a form of mental disorder. This included issues of sexual preference such as deviation, as well as sim-ple fears, such as claustrophobia. Even being female meant that you likely suffered from “hysteria,” or some other gender-related mental disorder. One need only examine the overbearing shadow of the DSM IV to see the “merciless language of non-madness” at work in today’s society.

By the early twentieth century, European society had become completely terrified of abnor-mality. At the time of the debut of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* in 1912, Europe’s culture of fear con-cerning the abnormal was fully developed. The irregular rhythms and dissonant chord sequences in the piece so violated the European concepts of musical normality that there was a riot on its open-ing night that grew so violent it had to be controlled by the police. Though, by the eighteenth cen-tury, the efforts of society to control deviance had become more “humane,” they had not become any less rigorous. Perhaps the ultimate incarnation of the social need to enforce normality and to regulate madness and

¹⁵ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1989), 875.

¹⁶ Foucault, ix.

deviation was the eugenics movement: “It is the aim of eugenics to conserve the higher elements of human heredity so that each succeeding generation will be able to realise a larger balance on the side of normal mentality, strong physique and high moral attainment.”¹⁷ In this case, the deviant individual was not only segregated and dehumanised, but permanently removed from the European gene pool. Eugenics was a “benign” form of Durkheim’s suicide. Its victims were still socially alienated, and the process still resulted in the eventual removal of the deviant from society, but it took place in a way that was, at the time, less inflammatory to the consciousness of the public at large.

In the thirteenth century, a madwoman could live in the care of her family and look forward to the possibility of healing through exorcism or folk remedies. By the eighteenth century, madness was a terminal illness – one that annihilated the individual, leaving only a shell of humanity to writhe in a bestial delirium. If, as I have argued, this change was partially responsible for the continuation of the modern nation state, then the world of the twenty-first century is presented with a difficult question: can society’s methods of alienation and dehumanisation be justified? If the concept of normality is truly necessary to the survival of the modern nation state, how can we condemn that which has, for so long, been an integral element of our society? Questions such as these can never be properly answered. Nevertheless, I would argue that in creating a society based on fear, one loses any hope of creating true social harmony. A society that does not respect the sacredness of human dignity and the beauty of human diversity is destined to collapse; since fear, hatred, and disgust are as damaging to the human spirit as any other form of madness.

¹⁷ Walter J. Hadden, *The Science of Eugenics and Sex Life: The Regeneration of the Human Race*, ed. Charles H. Robinson (W.R. Vasant, 1914).

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