

Asylum to Action, 'Survivors' history, and the symbols of a movement

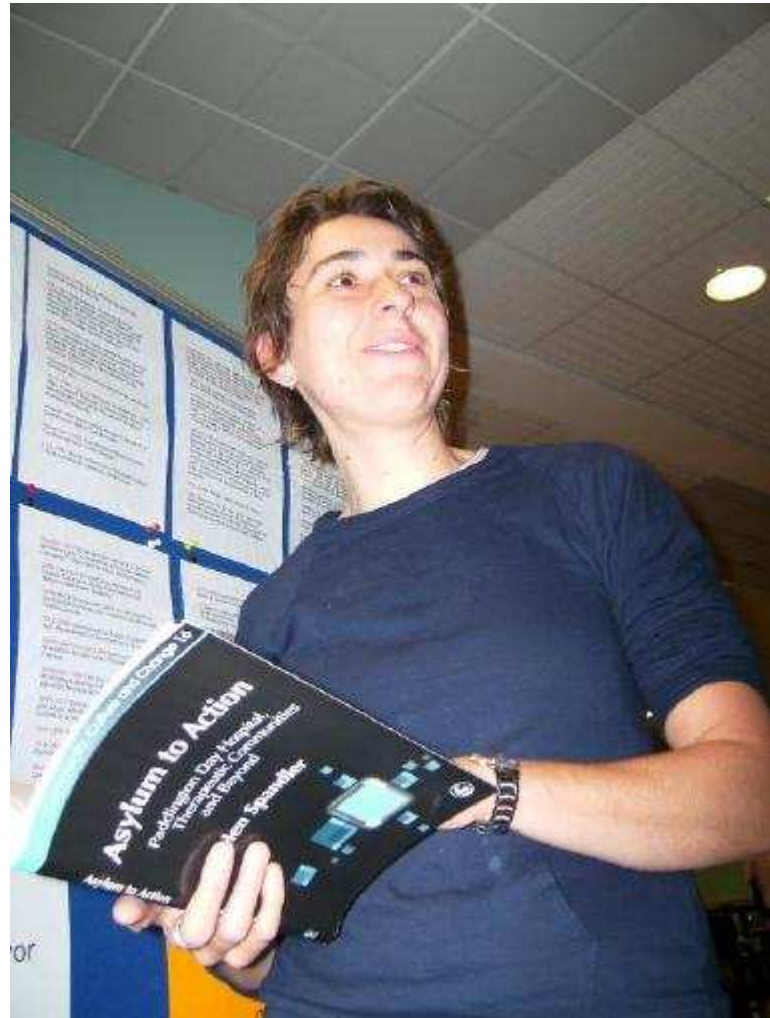
Mark Cresswell's review of Helen Spandler's

*Asylum to Action,
Paddington Day Hospital,
Therapeutic Communities and Beyond*
2006

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The ‘psychopolitical’ genre

Helen Spandler’s *Asylum to Action*, subtitled *Paddington Day Hospital, Therapeutic Communities and Beyond* (2006, Jessica Kingsley Publishing) is a superb addition to a small but significant genre – the study of political activism within the system of mental health. The exemplary text of this genre remains Peter Sedgwick’s *Psychopolitics* from 1982 (see Cresswell & Spandler, 2008) and it is to Spandler’s credit that *Asylum to Action* deserves to be mentioned in the same breath. In the same breath may also be mentioned the following: Kathryn Church’s *Forbidden Narratives* (1995), Nick Crossley’s *Contesting Psychiatry* (2006), and Linda J. Morrison’s *Talking Back to Psychiatry* (2005). As I situate my own work within the same genre, I offer the following less as a critical review and more as a critical appreciation. In what follows, ‘appreciation’ and ‘critique’ are deliberately blurred. But the ‘appreciation’ aspect may be taken as read.

Asylum to Action

Asylum to Action tells the following ‘tale’. The Therapeutic Community (TC) situated at the Paddington Day Hospital (Paddington) in London was amongst the most radical of its kind in the decade spanning the mid-1960s to mid-1970s until its closure and the dismissal of its medical director, Julian Goodburn (see Goodburn, 1986), following an official inquiry, in 1979. During this period Goodburn implemented an innovative group psychoanalytic approach within the TC, which stressed patient autonomy and the need to combine a non-medical recognition of human distress alongside a confrontation with the social and political reality ‘beyond’. In addition to its well-attested radicalism as a TC, Paddington was also noteworthy for its facilitative role in the development of the ‘User/Survivor’ movement – as a ‘New Social Movement’ akin to feminism, Black Power etc. – in Britain, especially in the organisational form of the Mental Patients Union (MPU). The MPU, formed in 1973, had its specific origin in a protest against the closure of the Paddington TC in the period 1971/72. *Asylum to Action* surveys the history of the TC, from inception to closure, including that ‘victorious protest’ (see Ward, 1972) and the formation of the MPU.

In a sense, *Asylum to Action* operates in ‘major’ and ‘minor’ keys; if the history of Paddington as a TC is the major axis, the formation of the MPU is the minor axis although Spandler wields both ‘stories’ together by treating the physical space of Paddington as a ‘paradoxical space’ (see Rose, 1993) through which radical mental health movements (TCs and ‘Survivor’ movements) appeared together for the first time.

At first sight, Spandler develops the narrative of Paddington in a straightforward and linear way. She has, however, a deeper purpose in view and this concerns the historical status of a *prior* and, as it turns out, *rival* account of Paddington as a TC – that located in Claire Baron’s well-known and contrastingly titled *Asylum to Anarchy* from 1987. It’s important to appreciate the sense in which Spandler invokes the rival concept of ‘action’ against Baron’s concept of ‘anarchy’.

There are two points to make about this contrast. First, and most obviously, Spandler’s account displays the wider historical compass insofar as, compared to Baron’s work, it incorporates the *entire* history of Paddington (1962-79), extending

the analysis to include the symbolic and disputed function it enjoys to the present day. Baron's book, on the other hand, is delimited by its narrative of 'decline and fall'; which is to say, to the controversy surrounding its practice in the post-MPU period (1973-79) during which Goodburn as medical director was accused and found guilty of unprofessional conduct and the TC closed. Deploying a combination of Foucauldian and Goffman-esque critique (see also Baron, 1984), Baron posits a *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* scenario in which institutional power, masquerading as 'therapy', systematically denies the 'lived experience' of the 'mental patient' to the latter's detriment. As Spandler readily notes, Baron's sociologically determined narrative in *Asylum to Anarchy*, as well as Ken Kesey's original novel of *Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), and Milos Forman's film of the book (1975) – released to both popular and critical acclaim during the period Baron surveyed – is truly compelling. 'Decline and fall', after all, is an aesthetically satisfying 'tale'.

But is it *too* compelling? And – as much to the point – is the narrative *true*? It's a mark of Spandler's subtlety that she's at least as concerned with the first question as with the second. Spandler argues that Baron's account functions as nothing less than a 'consumable pill of history' (Spandler, 2006: 98-115) by which she means that the narrative of 'decline and fall' cannot be separated from its historical context, specifically the resurgence of a New Right ideology, with its revulsion for 'radicalism' and its obsession with 'order'. Baron's simplistic condemnation of 'anarchy', expressed in her title, chimed harmoniously with the Reaganite/Thatcherite invocation that society was becoming 'ungovernable' (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 171-75) such that Left-wing radicalism was in need of a summary 'purge' (see Spandler, 2006: 110-115). As Spandler persuasively shows, the 'truth' about Paddington was far more complex and far more disputed than Baron allows and it is certainly possible to oppose the fatalistic narrative of 'decline and fall' with a more progressive narrative which preserves Paddington's radicalism for the political 'action' which her title invokes. Spandler sums up this counter-narrative in the following way:

[a] struggle for greater democracy neither surrenders itself to its illusions nor aspires to a permanent substitute. This means developing spaces that enable greater democratic dialogue...while it remains important to develop specific therapeutic communities...it is perhaps more important to...cultivate the radical spirit necessary to enable the creation of wider critical communities...both within and beyond TCs' (145).

Questions of history (I)

Yet, historiographically, the questions raised by the book are decidedly tricky. Gesturing towards a postmodernist 'turn' in historical writing (e.g. White, 1973; Jenkins, 1995), Spandler recognises the extent to which *all* history is connected to a narrative genre which somehow 'fixes' its meaning (see Spandler, 2006: 98-100). This doesn't mean that the 'facts' don't matter; but it does mean that we have to relinquish an older view according to which the task of historical writing is just to pile up the 'facts' in such a way as to produce an *indisputable* account of the past (e.g. Ranke, 1981). The historian E.H. Carr once suggested that, facts are not like 'fish on the fishmonger's slab' (1961: 9) – a 'fishy' symbolisation to which I'll return - and the postmodernist 'turn' tends to push this 'history-as-interpretation' rendition in a

more *relativist* direction. Why ‘relativist’? The risk here is that in opposing one narrative to another; in opposing a narrative of democratic flourishing to a narrative of ‘decline and fall’ – of ‘action’, that is, to ‘anarchy’ – we lose sight of that putative criterion – the indisputable ‘facts’ – which may permit us to adjudicate between the two.

This is precisely the sort of ‘risk’ I want to address. I aim to pursue this not just in terms of the Baron/Spandler encounter, but in terms of a wider set of questions provoked, not only by *Asylum to Action*, but also by recent reflections on the history of the ‘survivor’ movement undertaken by the Survivors History Group¹; and by other academic work on political activism within psychiatry (i.e. Crossley, 2006). Taken together these sources provoke a relay-race of relevant questions.

When we say: what is the ‘truth’ of the movement? – by which I refer to the ‘indisputable facts’ – what are we actually asking? Are we claiming that there is *one* such truth (Spandler’s *or* Baron’s?) and that it is true for all time? Or that there may be a plurality of truths (Spandler’s *and* Baron’s *and anyone else’s*) each of which is either: i) equally true, or else; ii) may be treated as such there being no adequate criterion for adjudication (i.e. precisely the risk of ‘relativism’ noted above)?

‘Fish-on-a-hook’ – the relativism of a movement symbolisation

I address these questions via a historiographical method; specifically, via analysis of what is often taken to be the founding symbol of the ‘survivor’ movement itself - that of the ‘fish-caught-on-a-hook’ - contained in the pilot committee of the MPU’s manifesto, ‘The need for a mental patient’s union’, of 1972.²

That symbol – and its significance – has been much discussed. The indisputable historical ‘facts’, though, seem to be these. The symbol of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ first appeared in 1930 as the opening passage in psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Karl Menninger’s book *The Human Mind*, where it is presented like this:

‘When a trout rising to a fly gets hooked on a line and finds himself unable to swim about freely, he begins a fight which results in struggles and splashes and sometimes an escape. Often, of course, the situation is too tough for him.

In the same way the human being struggles with his environment and with the hooks that catch him. Sometimes he masters his difficulties; sometimes they are too much for him. His struggles are all the world sees and it usually misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one’ (1937: 3).

¹ See URL:

http://www.blackhealthagency.org.uk/document/format_uploaded/download.php/doc356.pdf & URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#History>

² <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#LizDurkin>

The sense of the symbolisation is simple enough: what we call ‘mental illness’ is an attempt to cope with a hostile environment, a coping mechanism which is susceptible to misunderstanding (and/or pathologizing) by the powers-that-be. Here we encounter what will later become the classically Laingian rendition of the ‘intelligibility of madness’ (e.g. Laing, 1975: 98/99) as an anti-psychiatric motif. The symbol of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ then reappears forty two years later as the epigram, citing Menninger, to the preliminary statement of the MPU’s pilot committee ‘The need for a mental patient’s union’, a document that became famous, for obvious reasons, as the ‘Fish pamphlet’. Fast-forward, again, to the year 2000 and we find the ‘Fish pamphlet’ being reproduced by Mad Pride, one of the most significant recent survivor organisations, with the following words:

‘[t]his now rare document, also known as "The Fish Pamphlet", is said by some to mark the beginning of the organised ‘survivor movement’ in Britain as it can be recognised today. The document is therefore of great historical and political importance... Although some of the following material and the language used may appear dated, it is a timely reminder of where it is that the ‘survivor movement’ has come from, and sets the context for this book in more ways than one’.³

It’s certain that these three appearances of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ symbolisation (1930/1972/2000) are ‘indisputable facts’; that it begins its life within mainstream psychiatry – Menninger was one of the most famous psychiatrists of his day – but is later re-articulated by the social movement where it serves a symbolic function to this day. That function has been analysed by both Crossley, in *Contesting Psychiatry*⁴ and Spandler in the book here under review, and their accounts mostly concur.

One disputed issue, however, concerns the alleged ‘Marxist’ status of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ motif. As seems clear, the framers of the ‘fish pamphlet’ were largely Marxist-influenced, if not Marxist themselves, and the text is explicitly so, the symbol of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ serving to characterise the fate of the ‘mental patient’ as a member of the working-class under a system of capitalist social relations for which psychiatry is a sub-contractor of ‘social control’. This, however, proves to be a prime example of why historians should never confuse the rhetoric of a text – particularly a ‘founding’ statement - including its symbolisation, with the ideology and practice of an *actual* movement. Let us be clear about this point: the MPU was *not* a Marxist organisation. Though Crossley occasionally simplifies to the point of suggesting otherwise (e.g. 2006: 206), his usually more fine-grained analyses (e.g. 1999, 2006: 144-163) plus Spandler’s lucid account (2006: 52-67) make clear that the MPU quickly rejected the

³ From the ‘old’ Mad Pride website at: URL: <http://www.ctono.freemove.co.uk/id90.htm> . The book referred to is *Mad Pride: a celebration of mad culture* (2000).

⁴ It’s impossible briefly to do justice to Crossley’s extensive work upon the history of psychiatry in the 20th century and, particularly, of anti-psychiatry and the user/survivor movement. *Contesting Psychiatry* sums up this work and is the best point-of-departure but there are at least 15 other publications where the material is dealt with in more detail. See his website at the University of Manchester: URL:

<http://publications.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/ViewAuthorDetails.aspx?UserKey=321|SSL>

‘fish pamphlet’ in favour of a more liberal ‘Declaration of Intent’⁵ and the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ symbolisation for that of a human face enmeshed in a spiders web.⁶

The work of the Survivors History Group and its associated Mental Health History Timeline⁷ is salutary here. Through its digitised primary sources plus first-hand eye-witness testimonies, the Timeline shows that, not only was the Marxist influence of the ‘fish pamphlet’ ephemeral⁸, its ‘fish-on-a-hook’ symbolisation was not even the *only* ‘fishy’ metaphor canvassed by the MPU! For, at the time of a general meeting of 11/04/73, at which was adopted the ‘Declaration of Intent’ and the ‘face-in-a-spiders-web’ motif noted above, an *alternative* symbol was proposed but rejected – a symbol which Andrew Roberts, on the Mental Health History Timeline has described as ‘a (very beautiful) coloured *fish*’.⁹ And, in a dénouement to this history, which displays a fine ironical sense, that ‘beautiful’ symbol – rejected for the sake of a sinister ‘face-in-a-spider’s web’ - has, with the following words, been adopted as the *contemporary* symbolisation of the Survivors History Group:

[t]he picture was painted by Janet Forge in April 1973. It was the logo that the Mental Patients Union did not adopt. In it nothing twitches on a hook and nothing struggles to be free of a net. The fish swims free in the water...The case of a mental patients union had been made in a pamphlet decorated by a fish on a hook. The logo the union adopted was the face of a patient caught in a spider’s web. We are now free’.¹⁰

Questions of History (II)

In light of this brief history of a movement’s symbolisation - and with *Asylum to Action* remaining always in view - I want to close by addressing that relay-race of questions noted above apropos the ‘truth’ of a movement.

In a sense, what the Baron/Spandler encounter and the history of the ‘fish’ symbolisation demonstrate is that the ‘indisputable facts’ are a moveable feast. History ‘moves’ because we do indeed discover *more* ‘facts’: Spandler substantially *adds to* Baron’s account in the same way that the Survivors History Group *adds to* extant academic accounts of the MPU.¹¹ In one sense, then, the ‘truth of the movement’ is progressive because it’s *cumulative*.

⁵ URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#MPU>

⁶ The two symbols may be viewed together on the Mental Health History Timeline at URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#LizDurkin> & <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#MPULogo>

⁷ See URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>

⁸ It was produced in December 1972, but the actual meeting that formed the MPU (held at Paddington on 21/0373), had already dropped the ‘revolutionise question’. (URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#LizDurkin>.)

⁹ See URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#MPULogo>

¹⁰ See URL:

http://www.blackhealthagency.org.uk/document/format_uploaded/download.php/doc356.pdf

¹¹ We (‘we’ academics, I mean) may as well face up to the fact that the Mental Health History Timeline is a resource more valuable to scholarship within the history of political activism in mental health (1970-the present day) than anything within the academic archive today.

Yet, there is a right way and a wrong way to establish this point. The wrong way is to present this history of the movement as a positivistic ‘progress-story’, to believe that by due diligence to the ‘indisputable facts’ the risk of relativism is thereby removed. It is not; and the reason is this. As Claude Lefort (1986, 1988) has shown, the history of democratic societies – those which pursue as ‘survivors’ do, what he called the ‘adventure of rights’ (1988: 24/28/37) – is every bit as much ‘symbolic’ as it is ‘real’. By this I mean that what I have called, with respect to Baron and Spandler, the ‘narrative’ dimension, and what I have called with respect to the ‘fish’ motif, the ‘symbolic’ dimension, are as much a part of the movement’s history as the ‘indisputable facts’. In a strong sense, they’re more *politically* salient insofar as disputes over the ‘symbolic’ dimension – whether Paddington *is or is not* a narrative of ‘decline and fall’; whether the ‘fish’ symbol *is or is not* a Marxist motif – provide movements with what Lefort called their ‘theatre of contestation’ (1986: 259) within which political ‘action’ is formed and defined. What Lefort calls the ‘theatre of contestation’ Spandler calls a ‘paradoxical space’. It is ‘paradoxical’ precisely because it presents us with alternatives for political action *all* of which cannot be ‘true’ but *between* which we do have to choose. In this sense, ‘relativism’ is not so much a problem for historical writing as it is the precondition for a political choice; as Spandler says, a precondition for ‘action’.

In a ‘paradoxical space’, it is hard to cope with what Lefort calls ‘complications’ (2007); the ‘simplifications’ of history – that eternal ‘decline and fall’ – reassure us more.¹² But the ‘complication’ is this. I am not advocating a simplistic duality between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘real’ – between the ‘indisputable facts’, say, and the ‘values’ which surround them. I hold, rather, that the dimension of ‘indisputable facts’ is *interpenetrated* by the ‘symbolic’ dimension, by the dimension of ‘narrative’, to the extent that in the ‘theatre of contestation’ there only really exists, in practice, *disputable* ‘facts’. In any case, all such ‘facts’, if ‘facts’ they be, are capable of disputation.

And that, I conclude, is a good thing. Simply because Spandler inhabits a ‘theatre of contestation’ for which that eternal ‘decline and fall’ is antithetical; simply because she detects in that narrative *another* unspoken ‘decline’, that of the Left and of the ‘great moving right show’ (see Hall, 1979), she is at pains to dispute it. Simply because the Survivors History Group, through its primary sources, through its eye-witness testimonies, inhabits a ‘paradoxical space’ for which the symbol of the ‘fish-on-a-hook’ is opposed by the ‘beautiful fish’ that ‘swims free’, they are able to reclaim the ‘adventure of rights’ which a ‘vulgar’ Marxism would simplify out of existence.

Asylum to Action comes replete with ‘complications’. That’s an indisputable fact.

¹² See my ‘Problems with academic writing on the history of psychiatric user/survivor activism – some notes on the ‘History of Mental Health Service User/Survivor Movement Group’ meeting 29/05/08’ on the Survivors History/Mental Health Timeline website: URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/m080529.pdf>

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