

THEY'RE COMING TO TAKE YOU AWAY, HA, HA

(But, will the mental patients have the last laugh)

By: Lanny Beckman

Anyone can have anyone incarcerated involuntarily in a B.C. mental hospital if two physicians (not necessarily psychiatrists) certify that the person is "mentally disordered." Involuntary hospitalization is not a rare occurrence. In fact, more than 60% of admissions to Riverview Hospital are involuntary. By this procedure, more than 2,000 people--who have broken no laws--are committed each year in B.C. against their will.

There is only one sure fire protection against this happening to you, and that is to be rich. Almost all people committed are from the working and lower classes. The well-to-do go voluntarily . . . not to Provincial mental hospitals, but to exclusive resorts such as ^{Esso-lin} ~~Eselin~~, where the Human Potential smergasbord can be sampled at \$1,000 a month.

For those of us who can't afford such costly enlightenment, the likelihood of landing in a mental hospital is about one in five. Most of these admissions will be involuntary.

Why, one asks oneself, does a bourgeois democracy maintain such undemocratic procedures? And the answer, in a nutshell, is that it is a bourgeois democracy, an illusory democracy.

The Problem

You begin with the fact that the society produces untold misery in a huge percentage of the population. Most people who are extremely miserable do not conform to the rules of the

work-family ratrace--either because they can't or they won't, and I'm not sure there's any difference between the two.

What is to be Done?

Now some people who deviate from the norm do so in a very convenient way: they break laws. So, to "protect society" they're thrown in jail. (Illusion of democracy maintained.)

But what about deviants who don't break laws. These people are nuisances. Mainly, they're nuisances because they don't break laws. What can be done with them? ~~nothing~~ You can't just go throwing everyone in jail who refuses to conform.

On the other hand you can, but that would mean expanding the Criminal Code to the point where this would be an overtly TOTALITARIAN state. (Illusion of democracy violated. Try again.)

Well, if people are so unhappy that they can't/won't adjust to society, we could change society so that it is truly democratic, serves the needs of the people and produces general happiness. (This is a good idea, but somewhat naive, because we don't yet have the power to do so and the people with the power have some small investment in keeping the reality of bourgeois hitched to the illusion of democracy.)

How about this? There are all these miserable nuisances wandering around. Why aren't human and unrepressive communities built that people will go to voluntarily because that's where they can find happiness? (Naive-wise, this idea runs a close second to the previous one. First of all, places

like that cost a lot of money, and money is controlled by the bourgeoisie who don't want to waste their wealth producing happiness for other people. And second, who would keep working at their shitty, underpaid jobs if all they had to do in order to join a human community was to freak-out?)

The Solution: Reconstructed in the Dialogue of Two Sane Politicians

"O.K., so as a last resort we build large, impersonal, bureaucratic institutions with 60 beds to a room, inadequate food, too few facilities and militaristic rules."

"But, no nuisance in his right mind would want to go to a place like that."

"True, so we put them in against their will."

"But that makes it a prison, filled with inmates who have never broken any laws." What about the illusion of democracy?"

"Ah, yes, that will require some fancy theoretical footwork. How does this sound? There are some people--coincidentally, the ones don't want to go to these places--who are incapable of knowing what is in their best interests." . . . "

"You mean they're stupid?"

"It'll have to be a bit fancier than that. How about if we call them 'sick'?"

"Sick in the head?"

"That's the general idea, but let's refine the terminology a little." Let's call them 'mentally ill,' and we can lock them up to make them mentally healthy."

"Mentally ill? What does that mean?"

"I have no idea. I suppose it can mean whatever we want it to mean. But why should we waste our energy defining something we know nothing about? Let's hire some experts who know nothing about it." CURTAIN.

Afterword

And thus the psychiatrist was created. And the mental hospital. And the mental patient.

Being a scientist, the psychiatrist proclaimed unhappiness and deviance, not as social, political and moral problems, but as medical and scientific ones. Nuisances were said to suffer, not from poverty and exploitation, but from mental illness, or fancier yet, psychopathology.

This was a very important distinction. For according to bourgeois democratic theory, poverty and exploitation are political problems and everyone is entitled to participate in deciding how they are to be perpetuated. But psychopathology-- as well as being a mouthful--is a technical, scientific problem beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. So it must be left to experts.

The prestige and reputation of Medicine were transplanted wholesale into the field of psychiatry. "Doctors of the Mind" were commissioned to treat the mentally ill, just as physicians would treat the physically ill--to promote health, to practice the art of healing and to receive huge incomes.

There is however one crucial difference between the physically and mentally ill: the former are not crazy and so they have the right to be treated as people who can decide what is in

their own best interests. Specifically, they can refuse any and all medical treatments.

By some perverse twist of logic, however, the mentally ill are judged to be crazy, and hence incapable of understanding that involuntary hospitalization is good for them. They can be locked away indefinitely, given large doses of electricity, stuffed full of drugs and forced into involuntary servitude. All decisions regarding their treatment are entrusted to non-elected agents of the state.

Ironically, most of these agents are not even psychiatrists but are physicians, who have had no formal training in psychiatry (for a patient population of about 2,500, Riverview has on staff about 10 psychiatrists and more than 100 physicians.)

When asked why so many physicians were employed at Riverview, one of the higher officials stated that, frankly, there were not enough psychiatrists to go around. As a second choice, it would have made as much sense to turn to plumbers as to doctors.

Insane Conclusion

So long as personal misery is viewed as mental illness, in need of individual medical treatment, hospitalized patients will remain one of the most oppressed groups in capitalist society.

Neither the problems nor the solutions are individual. Both are social and political. As a first step in the liberation of mental patients, collective action must be taken, not to reform mental hospitals but to abolish them.