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RESTRAINT AS AN ACT OF WAR

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Restraint is the practice of tying psychiatric and elderly patients to their beds in Italian public hospitals and nursing homes.

INTRODUCTION

Psychiatry began as a product and consequence of the Enlightenment. This philosophical age had established the fact that all that is Real potentially has a place somewhere in the categories of Reason. No consideration had been given to so-called Unreason, which clearly by definition could not be included in those categories. Psychiatry was born out of a utopian idea, according to which the case of Unreason could be clinically managed by Reason within the framework of the hospital. During the French Revolution the most radical current wanted to abolish hospitals. This idea sprung from consideration of the fact that, far from being able to cure the ill, these were in fact institutions of social control. By hospitals, what they intended were general hospitals, as psychiatric hospitals were yet to be invented. In “The hypochondriac”, Moliere focuses most of all on the fascination and power of medicine over the patient. His main character repeatedly undergoes treatment with the only remedies known to medicine at the time, i.e. enemas and bloodletting, eventually reaching the point of exhaustion. The French revolutionaries envisaged hospitals being substituted by borough dispensaries. This concept was a forerunner of what is known today as the Mental Health Centre, which is an alternative care setting to the Psychiatric Hospital. As Robert Castel appropriately noted, history, on that occasion, hesitated¹. Subsequently, the logic of the Restoration and the principle of controlling deviant behaviour prevailed.

The National Assembly put Medicine in charge of Unreason, and appointed the physician Philippe Pinel, who became known for freeing the mentally ill from being kept in dungeons with shackles and chains. In fact, his reforms led institutional psychiatry to be constrained within a fundamental ambiguity. On the one hand there was the utopia of liberation, and on the other was the reality of new marginalization and stigma. In practice, there was a shift from shackles to “modern” restraint belts.

In the XIX century, science and the evolutionary perspective emerged. Darwin explained to the world that traces of the ancient evolutionary process survive within each of us. In our modern brain there are three cortices, which bear witness to evolution, and are placed in hierarchical order. The highest is the neopallium, the brain cortex which is the substrate of self-awareness and reason, and the lowest is the paleopallium, the “reptile” brain. The Italian Cesare Lombroso explained madness as the prevailing of an inferior consciousness on a superior one. The result was a vision and prejudice based on the biological inferiority of the mental patient. He was seen as a sub-human being, more similar to a crocodile than to a pitecanthropos. From this prejudice, in 1939, the project

¹ Robert Castel – *L'ordine psichiatrico* – Feltrinelli

of the euthanasia (extermination) of mental patients emerged, whose lives were defined as “unworthy of being lived” (“Lebensunwerte Leben”): this was known as project T4 of the Third Reich. History tells us that the Catholic and protestant churches in the III Reich, from Hamburg to the “Alpenvorland” (Bolzano province), rebelled against this project which would destroy so many lives. The German Pope Johannes Ratzinger knows this period well and has praised the efforts of the Cardinal of Muenster, von Galen, who set up a counterproject of organised public protest. It is the Pope’s intention to make von Galen a saint. A year later (1940), Hitler was forced to close down the T4². However, Christian churches under the III Reich did not stage such protests when Jews were persecuted, in tune with widespread racial prejudice.

In any case, this kind of prejudice is hard to eradicate. It continues to be at the basis of the so-called Forensic Psychiatric Hospitals of today, the existence and function of which is based on the concept of “total incapacity to understand and make decisions” (Art. 88 Italian Criminal Law Code). It goes without saying that a crocodile bites, is dangerous and is not conscious of his actions, and thus cannot be punished. The same assumptions lie behind the continuing use of the act of restraining. To restrain people means to deny their dignity and rights, including the basic right to move freely. This act clearly represents the denial of subjectivity and is in fact an act of war.

In 1978 the Radical Party organised a petition for a referendum on the abolition of asylums. On the 13th May of that year, four days after the assassination of Aldo Moro, Law 180 was approved by the Parliament. Provincial psychiatric hospitals (but not forensic psychiatric hospitals) were gradually dismantled and replaced by alternative community-based services (Mental Health Centres and variously protected housing). Law 180 was intended to signify a breach with the past, in terms of both culture and practices. However, some of the latter survived. One which remained entrenched, despite implementation of Laws 180 and 833, is restraint.

“If this is a man”. Basaglia’s work echoed Holocaust-survivor and author Primo Levi. Today we have to ask ourselves whether this man who is tied up and unable to move for hours, days and weeks can really be considered to be a man. If he was a beast, then animal rights activists would be outraged.

In fact, restraint constitutes medical malpractice, and should be classed as mistreatment and torture.

It is certainly the case that an individual sometimes needs containment. However, containment is not restraint. Containment is given through relationship. Psychotropic drugs can certainly aid this process, but their abuse must be condemned.

Relationship as an act of peace has its place among daily practices. Data demonstrate that this is possible. Yes we can. The Ministerial report Progress of 2002 – 2004 has shown that in 30 % of APWs in Italy people are not being tied up³. A “club” of “no-restraint APWs” has also been created, and includes all wards where no tying is done and doors are kept open.

The practice of “no restraint” should become an indicator of quality of care to which the variable part of staff and doctors’ salaries should be linked. No General director has so far ever proposed this.

We must continue in our struggle to go beyond fragmentation of services and civil society must claim ownership of these issues. This is what was missing in project T4 of the III Reich. Civil society must react to the scandal of this act of war against humankind which takes place daily in our cities, in our general hospitals and in our nursing homes. This act of war of Reason against Unreason must come to an end. But Unreason in itself does not exist. All that exists is the reason of each person. Our own reason and the Reason of other people. To contain a body that dissents from “common” Reason or reacts against the powers that be means to silence its voice. Those who do this do not know what they are missing out on. In the DNA of psychiatry there is always a particle of Nazism, thus psychiatry needs to be controlled.

² From Tiergartenstrasse 4, in Berlino, where the headquarters of project T4 were. Currently this is the home of the Philharmonica.

³ Acute Psychiatric Wards