

COMMENTARY

BOOK REVIEW / Philip Gold

A century ago, psychiatrists were a scruffy lot. They practiced at the margins of respectable medicine, mostly in institutions: state hospitals for the poor, "rest homes" for the respectable classes. They treated what Sigmund Freud might have called "die ganze Ausgeflipt," from demented street drunks to matrons with the vapors. Success was, by and large, accidental.

But they wanted respect. And money. And influence. So the more entrepreneurial among them decided to expand the market by defining all of society as psychiatry's proper laboratory, and everybody as at least a potential patient.

It worked. And the shrinks took over this civilization, permeating it with their categories, their vocabularies, their prescriptions and proscriptions and their preposterous certainty that, if everybody just went along with the program, a world of better orgasms, higher productivity and universal peace would ensue.

It didn't quite happen that way. And, in recent years, analysis of "the triumph of the therapeutic"

Masters of inventing mental disorders

has moved from idolatry to male-diction. And we're starting to realize, as a civilization, just how scientifically dubious (as well as culturally destructive) so much of psychiatry really is. "Making Us Crazy" helps the process along.

Herb Kutchins and Stuart A. Kirk have spent the 1990s pondering the DSM, "The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual" of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a kind of Sears catalog of dysfunction. In "The Selling of DSM" (1992), the authors challenged psychiatry's claims to scientific status. In their new book, they demonstrate, lucidly and in its full ugliness, how many "mental disorders" are not so much discovered as invented, and why.

The DSM is far more than a reference book. It helps determine what

mental conditions are eligible for insurance coverage, what defenses are admissible in court, and how human beings shall be classified and treated in myriad other ways. If it's listed in the DSM, it's kosher. If not... well, try again for the next edition.

And "next editions" there are, each one thicker than the last. Indeed, according to the authors, the APA markets the DSM like automobiles. Each model is proclaimed the absolute state-of-the-art, then tossed with derision a few years later. But the revisions do not occur because of scientific breakthroughs. They happen, rather, because of intense political and professional pressures. And all too often, mental disorders are included or dropped only after prolonged negotiations in which scientific evidence — or any evidence at all — becomes irrelevant.

The scam works like this. "Mental disorders" that lack physical causes are social constructs, i.e., labels applied to certain behaviors. With each edition, more

and more behaviors and attitudes are "medicalized" — decreed suitable for psychiatric scrutiny and treatment. This happens because two groups — the shrinks and the pharmaceutical companies — have major economic interests in expanding the market.

It also happens because political interest groups may want certain behaviors and conditions listed. Conversely, insurance companies benefit by restricting the kinds of looniness they have to pay for, and some politically active groups may desire to see certain items removed. The book provides several detailed case studies of the process at work. Examples:

- How gay activists within and outside the profession forced the removal of homosexuality from the DSM and, en passant, let something called "Ego-dystonic Homosexuality" creep in. In essence, if you're gay and comfortable, you're OK. But if you're gay and don't like it, you get a DSM entry.

- How an alliance of Vietnam veterans and left-wing shrinks got Post-traumatic Stress Disorder included and how, since then, the concept has been broadened far beyond the mental suffering caused by combat.

- How feminists defeated the inclusion of "Masochistic Personality Disorder," fearing that it might be

directed against women, but got blind-sided (sort of) when the DSM created a new appendix as a "holding tank for diagnoses" and included "Self-Defeating Personality Disorder." (Another entrant, "Delusional Dominating Personality Disorder" got axed, not least because it described behaviors of typical successful males, such as being seen in the presence of younger women.)

And, finally, the book details the often sordid relationship between psychiatry and racism, from the early days when shrinks invented mental disorders that, for example, caused slaves to want to run away, to more modern dilemmas concerning intelligence and attitudes.

In sum, this book is a public service, one more contribution to a growing body of literature that seeks, not to trash psychiatry, but to put it in its proper place, as a moderately useful, occasionally successful set of therapies. But science it is not, and to call it science in the late 20th century is not to exalt it. Rather, it is to condone a fraud, and indeed, to perpetuate one of the most destructive frauds of the century.

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MAKING US CRAZY, DSM: THE PSYCHIATRIC BIBLE AND THE CREATION OF MENTAL DISORDERS
By Herb Kutchins and Stuart A. Kirk
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REVIEWED BY PHILIP GOLD