POSTSCRIPT

Mad Studies in a maddening world

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As we have come to the end of this project and assembling this book, it has been difficult not to be struck by the powerful insights contributors have offered. As Jasna made clear in her last chapter, the struggles of survivors, their intellectual and emotional journeys and discoveries, have highlighted complexity, pluralism and diversity. They do not offer one simplistic or straightforward theory or understanding. That is except insofar as the insights they offer come from their diverse experiences of madness and of both the systems that humans have set up in response to it or what can befall you in such circumstances. Jasna raised two big questions in that chapter. The first one is about how we approach differences and move forward; the second is about the room for Mad Studies in this world and where to seek that room. Building on that, in this chapter I particularly want to focus on actual and potential relationships between madness, Mad Studies and the politics and ideology that we are subject to and which are the context of our lives.

The social relations of madness

The book highlights both the social relations of madness and the inventiveness of those experiencing it in confronting and trying to make sense of it. What survivors strongly contest are longstanding interpretations and prevailing notions of madness as a condition restricted to particular ‘special’ or ‘damaged’ individuals or groups, which is unconnected to the wider world we live in. They have also challenged whether madness is always essentially negative, reiterated its creative as well as destructive potential and have sometimes seen it as an expression of diversity and responses to it, rather than problem or defect. Instead they make the social relations of Madness much more clear. A pioneer in doing this was the survivor thinker and activist Peter Sedgwick (Beresford, 2016a) We can see both madness and conventional responses to it as ideological and political as well as personal issues. Some things may drive any of us mad; for example, bereavement and loss, personal conflict, war, family breakdown, disempowerment, impoverishment, abuse, neglect, physical loss or change and other forms of trauma that relate primarily to us and our relationships.

We cannot assume there will ever be a perfect world where people are saved from such precipitating misery and hardship. But also, as we have seen, there are societal and political pressures that can both be maddening in their impact and also be different in degree both in
different societies, at different times and in relation to different groups. In feudal times, human beings did not have the ability to control their environments. In times of dearth, famine and other natural disasters lords and rulers could suffer just as serfs and slaves went hungry. The modern world and modern industrialised societies however, do have that ability, but we have seen their continuing unwillingness to ensure that all people and all parts of the world benefit from it.

**Madness’s political relations**

The two political ideologies that came to dominate the first half of the twentieth century bear early and sharp witness to this: Soviet Communism and German Nazism. The Nazis murdered many disabled people and mental health service users in its Aktion T4 programme ‘as lives unworthy of life’ and Soviet dissidents from 1960–1986 were detained as patients in its psychiatric system (Beresford, 2021).

Madness then clearly has ideological and social relations connected with how we are treated and how we behave to each other in society. Thus the discrimination and abuse experienced by people who face structured and institutionalised oppression – whether as poor, women, Black and minoritized ethnic groups, disabled, older, etc. etc., by virtue of living in low-income countries or because of a combination of the two. Madness is not only to be understood as an internal act, but a much more situated one, as contributors to the book begin specifically to articulate in Part 4.

The twentieth century was a time when social, political and economic forces exerted an unprecedented influence on the individual. For the first time, much broader forces could have a far greater and more extensive reach, with mass media, mass production and consumption, mass conscription, mass bombing, mass produced drugs. But it was also the century of the rise of psych sciences, their rolling out of individualising explanations for people’s troubles and difficulties, despite the visibly structural issues generating them.

Thus, for example, the French sociologist Durkheim’s study Suicide (1951), highlighted the social nature of suicide. He suggested that there were different kinds of suicide and evidenced the way that suicide rates for different groups, in different societies at different times varied. Suicide is not a random individual act. In 1947 the French actor and writer Antonin Artaud, himself a psychiatric system survivor, who like Van Gogh was ultimately to end his own life and who also experienced electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) among other ‘treatments’, argued that Van Gogh’s work so disturbed society that it shunned his art and led to his despair and suicide (Artaud, 1947). He concluded that Van Gogh was a man ‘suicided by society’. Artaud dismissed crude psychiatric assessments of Van Gogh that even now continue to obscure his life and work. Instead what he offered was a pre-figurative ‘social model of madness and distress’.

**Maddening consequences**

The world in the early twenty-first century continues to be a heavily conflicted and threatening place. It is characterised by international unrest, local and proxy wars, conflicts between faiths and ethnic groups, economic and forced migration, rising ‘natural disasters’ including flooding and famine associated with climate change and human interventions and pandemics originating with the mistreatment of animals. All these have consequences for our lives and wellbeing, including our emotional and mental wellbeing and these consequences affect groups differently, as contributors to the book highlight, according to the status and treatment afforded them under different political ideologies and systems.
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As we have seen with Covid-19 globally human beings apart from a few politicians and other Covid deniers do not seem to find it hard to understand the social relations of pandemics and understand the need therefore for public health measures as opposed to narrowly individualised approaches. Yet in the context of madness and distress, despite the constant assertions that they are best understood in bio-medical and illness terms, the same barely seems to apply. There is little formal recognition of the way different social and political structures impact on such ‘mental health’, very few community or public health measures in western societies address that impact beyond the individual currently being encouraged ‘to tell their story’ when in terms of accessing employment or where applicable access to welfare benefits, it may not be a good idea. There is minimal provision for social responses or understandings. The only significant exception is the development of the psychiatric diagnostic category Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as though such a response is pathological rather than a predictable and entirely rational one to the appalling horrors of war, conflict, bombing, combat and violence.

Making connections

The broader connections between ‘mental health problems’ and political systems have now been well rehearsed by social epidemiologists. The dominant global politics in the twenty-first century has been neoliberal; that is to say based on globalized free market-driven economics with reduced expenditure on supportive welfare services (Beresford, 2016b). High profile concerns have been expressed about this ideological approach and its consequences. This has been evidenced most notably in the work of Wilkinson and Pickett. They argue that inequality in societies, which is particularly associated with free market ideology and politics, is damaging for health, including mental health. They argue that it is bad for all, rich and poor and ultimately damaging to societies suggesting that more equal societies are more successful (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Pickett and Wilkinson, 2018). As they conclude:

Societies with more equal distribution of incomes have better health, fewer social problems such as violence, drug abuse, teenage births, mental illness and obesity, and are more cohesive than ones in which the gap between the rich and poor is greater.

(University of York, 2011)

Thus political and social systems may have the potential to drive us mad by imposing pressures that are maddening and/or to force us into categories that are conceived of in terms of madness.

Leaders and madness

However, societies which create and perpetuate the conditions for madness and distress through their harshness, inequality and divisiveness may also be led by people who seem to fit the same description as those they oppress. As we have seen, for example the leaders of both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany have been subjected repeatedly to long-distance diagnoses and both have been identified as ‘mentally disordered’ (Langer, 1972 [1943]; Snow, 1967). More recently enormous international attention has been paid to the mental state of Donald Trump as US president, with major texts, articles and video calling it into question. One book compiling the views of psych professionals described what it called the ‘clear and present danger’ his ‘mental health’ posed to the ‘nation and individual wellbeing’ (Lee, 2017).

It is not being suggested here that maddening politics result from mad politicians, but rather that harsh and conventional politics and policy, including responses to madness, may tell us less
about the people oppressed by them than about the nature, aims, assumptions and attitudes of the regimes and individuals who impose and perpetuate them. Given that the term mad is so often used to describe what is seen as appallingly bad, it is perhaps not surprising if sometimes the vicious and cruel acts associated with powerful leaders are not redefined in crude psychiatric terms, just as the disempowerment and distress of those they may oppress is. Perhaps more interesting and using their own terms, are the questions raised about the ‘mental health’ of those individuals and structures which support such leaders to come to and stay in power?

Prevailing neoliberal politics seems to have developed a powerful informal alliance with the psychiatric system with both placing an emphasis on individualized explanation, which increasingly frames social problems in terms of individual pathology and deficiency, creating more and more psychiatric diagnostic categories in the process and extending the authority and reach of psychiatry. Marginal medicalized services and enforced employment are offered as the primary response in the global north and self-help and the legacy of colonialist institutionalization in the global south.

As links between ideology, politics and madness begin to emerge it may be helpful to remind ourselves about how madness tends to be defined. Of course definitions vary over time, place and culture. The medicalization of madness and distress has also created complexities and greatly added to the range of phenomena, experience and perception included in the category. There have also been and continue to be faith-based and spiritual conceptions of madness. Having said that, madness tends to be associated with a range of phenomena and behaviours, including loss of reason, unpredictability, threat, violence possession, irrationality, failure to anticipate consequences, confusion, fearfulness and dangerousness.

### The madness of politics

At this point it is interesting to note the massive gap there seems to be between the world we prepare our children for and the one they can expect to inhabit. At school, children acquire social and technical skills. They learn to get on with each other, and respect the needs and rights of others. They are taught one or other moral code, perhaps secular or faith based, which outlaw killing and stealing and instead are likely to encourage kindness and generosity, giving to charity and those less well off than yourself, while seeking to contribute to society through your abilities and skills. Children are encouraged to treat animals with love and kindness or at least to keep their distance from them, the environment with care and concern, to be aware of the potentially damaging effects humans have on the ecology, the climate, rainforest, animals and their habitats.

At home, as parents and guardians, we are encouraged to reinforce what our children learn at school to help them in turn become good citizens and parents. This includes treating others with equality, valuing our brothers and sisters and our elders, to learn and abide by a moral code, be polite and have good manners; to play our part in running the home, taking turns cleaning and washing up, going shopping, looking after pets, understanding and accepting responsibility, respecting the rights of others, telling the truth, taking on increasing responsibilities.

However the world we can expect to take our place in after childhood (if it allows us a childhood) is a very different one — as the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, environmental and peace movements currently highlight. In the US it is one where Black people run a disproportionate risk of being killed by the police who are meant to be there to protect them. Internationally it is a world where women routinely run a disproportionate risk of sexual and physical attack, rape and murder. Ours is a world:
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• Of endless destructive war, fighting and killing, where people are expected to kill others by all means possible, sometimes including children, sometimes as children;
• Of massive damaging pollution and inadequate action against it putting the future of the planet and more and more species and fauna at risk. Some of the biggest and most powerful nations have the worst records in relation to the environment;
• Where people are increasingly required to be in damaging alienating employment while the constant aim is to cut jobs to reduce costs;
• Where an ‘underclass’ of impoverished people has long been highlighted and vilified as deviant and destructive but where in reality there is a small over-powerful ‘overclass’ beyond the constraints of conventional law, moral, ethical and behavioural codes;
• Where large numbers and increasing proportions of traumatized and oppressed people are maintained by a massive pharmaceutical industry, which is related to the destructive arms and agribusiness industries, or turn to a massive exploitative, destructive and criminal illicit international drugs industry to sustain themselves;
• Where far more is spent on armed forces and the arms industry than support to look after each other;
• Where millions die from diseases that can be controlled, hunger and poverty that is created rather than alleviated and from ‘natural’ disasters that are originated and perpetuated by human hands, rather than averted by them.

Maddening the world

Perhaps this lack of fit between the expectations placed on us and on the ideologies our lives are subject to is just a means to ensure our conformity and to maintain our obedience to our governments and rulers. Perhaps it just tells us something about the shortcomings of human beings in organizing and governing themselves, with the logic of political processes an amoral and Machiavellian one. While it is important to avoid simplistic assumptions and oversimplifying rhetoric, it is, however, difficult to see how the resulting world makes any rational sense or relates helpfully to the principles we are widely brought up to value and respect. Free rein has been allowed to a global neoliberal system that puts profit and production before saving the planet and all dwelling on it. It is more a world of Dr. Strangelove complete with ‘mutually assured destruction’ (MAD) than one based on any notion of human progress, sustainability and cooperation. This would be described as madness if it were associated with any individual rather than with states and statesmen, ideology and global politics. Put simply, in ordinary understanding, it also looks like both a mad and maddening world.

My hope is that this book may help us think beyond this. Contributors have helped make so many connections; between abuse, trauma and disempowerment and discrimination, between the personal and the political, the psychological and the social. But perhaps most important are the disjunctions and inequalities they highlight between us and our struggles and the importance of challenging them. And what I have learned is that Mad Studies may be a particularly helpful and necessary lens to do this, however helpful others may also be.

The future for Mad Studies

I have also learned from the global south, in being involved in this book, the importance of Mad Studies refusing to stay within boundaries imposed by psychiatry and the medicalizing of madness in the Global North. Mad Studies can be invaluable as a critique and rejection of this, but it also needs to be and extend much further. The true focus of Mad Studies should
be one beyond the psych system and psychiatrization of everything. It will also benefit by learning from the linking of material struggles in the global south to challenge the maddening nature of our world and our often irrational political and economic structures and assumptions more generally. We have already had wise warnings in this book about pitfalls Mad Studies should avoid; becoming narrowly associated with the academy, perpetuating the inequalities and oppressions of white privilege and failing to renew itself through a determinedly inclusive and reaching out approach to its task.

But there are also the positives which cumulatively this book’s contributors highlight for us as critically important. We are still at an early stage in the history of Mad Studies so we need to work hard on developing it, building on resources like this book to do so. This will include:

- Coming to see Mad Studies as a perspective on the world not just on ‘madness’;
- Conceiving of Mad Studies not as one badged view from mad people but as the wide range of emancipatory insights that they/we and our allies may bring to bear;
- Collectively developing our own ideologies and conceptual frameworks in participatory ways rather than accepting ruling ideologies, and the exclusionary ideas and explanations imposed upon us;
- Exploring politics, organizational structures and forms of collectivity that build on the humanistic, accessible qualities, aspirations and nature of the disabled people’s, survivors and other service users’ and new social movements;
- Exploring and developing personal and other relationships based on equality;
- Exploring key current issues like climate change denial, artificial intelligence, sustainable economics, care and support from a Mad Studies perspective;
- Developing inclusive participatory approaches to making change based on working in equal coproducive ways;
- Developing our own ideas, schemes and funding for survivor-led holistic approaches to preventing and supporting madness and distress;
- Treating experiential, minoritized and indigenous knowledges with at least equal value and respect as professional, experimental and so-called ‘expert knowledge’;
- Connecting and building alliances with other emancipatory, rights-based new social movements, which will almost certainly have positive links with our own, to share insights and extend our strength and power.

We hope this book helps refine and take forward these and other tasks prioritized by our movement, offering encouragement, practical guidance and theoretical support and evidence.

References

Beresford, P. (2021), Participatory Ideology: From Exclusion to Involvement, Bristol, Policy Press.
