Away towards the Asylum
Abandonment, Confinement and Subsistence in Psychiatric (De-)institutionalization in Romania

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Declaration

I hereby declare that no parts of the thesis have been accepted for any other degrees in any other institution. This thesis contains no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

Leyla Safta-Zecheria, Budapest, 15.04.2018
Abstract

This dissertation explores the everyday role of psychiatric asylums, in order to understand how they could be reworked into less oppressive structures through psychiatric deinstitutionalization. The dissertation is built on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in northeast Romania around former and existing psychiatric institutions, as well as archival and library research and interviews with policy advocates and policymakers. I argue that despite the terrible part psychiatric asylums have played as places, where the mentally ill and disabled have been let die throughout modern history, asylums still are defended by both some of their inmates and their carers on the grounds that they offer the possibility for subsistence for those who understand themselves as abandoned by their nuclear families and in danger of becoming surplus populations to the needs of capital and the state. It is the quest for subsistence that makes people consent to their medicalization and their confinement. This is the case, since abandonment happens as a fracture in social relations, previous to the person coming to live in an asylum. But even in the absence of a desire to remain, asylums work to confine people to their premises through ableist narratives and in certain instances through actual violence. Exploring how subsistence, abandonment and confinement work to circumscribe people’s aspirations, as well as looking at the everyday life of post-asylary alternatives, allowed me to develop the modalities of sense making approach, a novel understanding of how sense is being made in practice by extending both Dvora Yanow’s ([2000] 2011) and Ian Hacking’s (1982, 1991, 2012) conceptual work. Moreover, it allowed me to develop a new mode of policymaking. This modality of policymaking is grounded in the work of educator Paulo Freire and proposes moving the locus of decision making closer to the people that are affected by projects of deinstitutionalization, thus helping to develop a politics of hope that can inform policies. This thinking is also rooted in the need to overcome anthropological representations of abandonment, as a final and hopeless process (compare Biehl, 2005). Overcoming the temptation to reproduce the vernacularly dominant hopelessness of abandonment in scholarly thinking, can inform a politics of hope that can help rework processes of abandonment in practice, by de-normalizing the meaning structures that reinforce abandonment, as the dominant imaginary of economically autonomous nuclear families. Through this the dissertation seeks to contribute to the anthropology of biopolitics and
abandonment, to the methodological question of how to conduct ethnographic policy research, as well as to opening up possibilities for a Freirean modality of policymaking.
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