

An exchange with Frank Brenner and other letters on "Mental illness and the American dream"

28 March 2000

Below we are posting an exchange of letters between a reader and Frank Brenner about his comment "Mental Illness and the American dream," as well as other correspondence about the article.

Dear Sirs/Madams,

I must congratulate you on that superb and interesting article on mental health in America. One thing though: It is unperceptive of you to dismiss the Surgeon General's comments about Descartes. I know you are ideologically driven to defend any famous rationalist against their attackers but for the US government's official representatives to begin to question things like the mind/body dualism is a great leap forward considering the current ignorant state of popular scientific debate. It is also a bit disingenuous of your writer to laugh when Descartes is blamed for inventing dualism and then say the real problem is the mechanistic approach to mental health; Descartes invented the mechanistic approach too! This may also have been what the report was groping at in its limited way. Minor straw splitting, I am sure you'll agree, with what was on the whole a most interesting article. Based of course on what is a most interesting and timely report.

Keep up the good work,

AS

24 March 2000

Dear AS,

Thanks for your kind words about the article on mental illness in America. As to Descartes, I wasn't defending his dualism, and far from being "driven to defend any famous rationalist," Marxism is profoundly opposed to rationalism as a philosophical tendency. My point was that the Surgeon-General's blaming of Descartes was a diversion from the mechanical reductionism which pervades the mental health field today, and which is all

too evident in the report itself. (Yes, Descartes also invented the mechanistic approach, but that wasn't what he was being blamed for in the report because that would have raised difficult questions about the philosophical outlook the report was endorsing.) For this reason, I can't agree with you that the report represents "a great leap forward." Is it really credible to suppose that official representatives of the US government have suddenly taken to questioning mind/body dualism for disinterested purposes? The mechanical reduction of the mind to the brain obscures the social causes of mental illness. The fact that the report can say nothing about those causes means that this initiative is, like so much else about the Clinton administration, little more than a hollow gesture.

Frank Brenner

24 March 2000

Your published work entitled "Mental illness and the American dream" was absolutely brilliant. I came to it by way of a random Yahoo link and I am fortunate for this article has had a profound effect on me.

Keep up the good work,

JS

25 March 2000

To WSWs:

I am writing to thank Frank Brenner for his very insightful article on mental illness and the American Dream. It is absolutely true that there is a move back towards (ECT) or electric shock treatment. My mother was manic depressive her entire life and withstood the dreaded (ECT) from 1960 onwards. When she recovered years later and moved back to England she had another relapse and the doctor recommended (ECT).

This was in the early 1990s. She refused, never to have that wretched treatment again and recovered on her own, even though it took much longer. I talked to the doctor and he said that (ECT) was easier now and patients were

in and out in a few hours. Doctors say they don't know what causes manic depression, but I remember that my mother went mad when my father who was a commission salesman in the 50s and 60s started to live the "American" dream by buying everything on credit like a house and a boat and a car. This terrified my mother and shortly afterwards she had a nervous breakdown. There is a great need to understand mental illness as most people say "Oh you will never know what causes it." "It's out of our hands," etc. I think what Frank Brenner says is true and the underlying causes are our very sick society.

Sincerely,

WT

25 March 2000

This was an excellent article on why there is a mental health crisis, and why the medical-psychiatric community lacks the tools to deal with it.

TA

24 March 2000

Well, while I disagree with your Bolshevik/Trotskyist take on socialism, I must say that Mr. Brenner's article on mental illness was as moving as it was enlightening. Even in Psychology 101 I do not remember the difference between neurological imbalances/diseases and mental illness being stressed very much. The general feeling seemed to be that if someone had a mental "problem," which could be anything, then there must be a physical problem with his or her brain. This makes it rather convenient to shove such people to the margins of society and denote them as "crazed" or "bad apples." After all, we cannot seem to cure them with our pills and surgeries (although we sure love trying!), so why bother too much with those who refuse or do not respond to treatment?

LA

24 March 2000



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