



Some of what we read here has become commonplace in the world of ideas, but this is where it started for many thinkers of the twentieth century. In this volume Foucault illustrates how notions like madness are socially and culturally constructed in any given age and place. The criteria for madness are made up, by us, they in part invented for particular social and political purposes. Leper colonies housed/confined/kept from society those with this disease, and when leprosy largely died out there were these places of confinement we could use for the poor, criminals, and anyone we didn't like, and this is what we do today, though our ideas about madness--what it is and how to treat it, how to exclude those that have it in various ways--are changing constantly.

Foucault goes on to write what he calls "archeologies" of other disciplines and institutions, but he begins here. This was his dissertation, or a version of it, written on the basis of his study in a variety of clinics, his study of philosophy and psychology, and his own experience with therapy. It's his first big book, maybe his masterpiece. There are books on the history of madness, done in sort of chronological fashion, getting to some sort of accumulative notion of what it is. This is how arguments are usually made since the Enlightenment, according to the rules of Reason. But Foucault isn't trying to write in this fashion, he has in mind exploring the varieties of madness (as with William James, not what religion is, but *The Varieties of Religious experience*), showing how madness is depicted in art in various periods, in the Renaissance for instance as a part of the world, as a source (sometimes) of insight and wisdom and difference and mystical or just creative vision, then shifting dramatically in the classical period to horror, to something we need to fear and confine. As I said, in the forty years since it was written, ideas of the social construction of reality have become sort of now commonplace, but it was groundbreaking then, work from one of the 2 or 3 greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, maybe, from someone who may have begun this journey in the late forties when he was taken by his parents to a therapist who suggested a "cure" for his being gay (something that was indeed considered a disorder by psychiatry until relatively recently, though as we know, some people in the world still think it is something one can "cure").

*Madness & Civ.* is also a work contending with the universalist assumptions of Grand Theory (such as psychoanalysis or Marxism) as One Central theory for understanding How the World Works. Later, he would himself explore the structures and language (or discourse) of institutions and disciplines to see the pervasive presence of Power operating everywhere, which many would see as his own Grand Theory of the World. Foucault wants to show how power is bound up with knowledge. What we understand knowledge to be is a political consideration, sometimes.

I have used this book in a class I teach which is a sort of literary inquiry into madness. How is it depicted? How is it defined in various settings, in certain stories? How is related to the psychic, paranormal, fantasy, horror, faith? Why is magic not considered knowledge in most settings? I also use the book in a course on language and literacy. We inevitably talk about our families, our own experiences with madness/psychiatry/how we treat madness today/the homeless crazies that ride public transportation, largely untreated today.

Foucault, with Thomas Szasz and others, were seen as part of an anti-psychiatry movement. Maybe the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill came about in part because of this movement. I think in general Foucault, following the Renaissance view of madness, romanticizes it as a kind of alternative truth. And I worked in a psych hospital for a number of years and worried about the over-medicalization of people. I still do. But I have a son who sometimes experiences psychotic episodes; I think without some treatment he would not be able to fully function in the world. I live in Chicago where there are thousands of mentally ill folks on the streets, inadequately treated, in my opinion. And in my view you can romanticize all of that. These folks aren't just free; many of them are actually homeless. So while I think Foucault's book is brilliant--I really do; I like *Kind Lear's* wise fool and the art of Bosch and the poetry of sweet mad John Clare--it also has to be understood with some caution.

Philosophy for Foucault is a discourse, I guess a series of texts that cluster around a single topic and have a meaning as much based on their history as their current 'meaning'. It is too easy to get tangled in knots with words here – but this book is actually quite a simple read and incredibly interesting.

There is the bit that is often quoted - the idea that hysteria was once considered to be a woman's madness caused by her womb wandering around her body and thereby causing mental problems. I'm quite sure it would.

But the truly interesting bits of this are around madness as a social construction. It is fascinating that prior to the rise of capitalism madness did not really exist. There were town idiots, but these people were often protected as being possessed by spirits or something similar. Apparently Bedlam, the mental asylum, had previously been a hospital for leprosy and once leprosy no longer infected Europe it was converted into a mental asylum - somehow we had coped prior to this without such asylums. Foucault's point being that our society needs outcasts and when there were no longer any lepers we created madmen.

There is remarkable stuff about tours of asylums conducted by the inmates who might throw a bit of a turn along and way and need to be replaced by another inmate. I know that up until the late 1800 such tours were still popular forms of weekend entertainment in Melbourne.

The relationship between madness and unemployment – how being unemployed was a clear sign of being insane – helped put many people into work houses of the mad.

This really is a fascinating book and well worth reading. If I have concerns about it, they are mainly around the idea that by defining madness as a social construction it did allow governments to close down institutions and put the mad onto the streets with no care and no protection.

Madness in the 17th century was not easily defined. There was no distinction between insanity and other conditions for the imposition of confinement. Prisoners of the Hopital General were institutionalized because of poverty, inability to work, infidelity, religion, and ethical values. The definition & the many horrible treatments for hypochondria & hysteria vary throughout the centuries: Blood transfusions, bleedings, purges, cold water treatments, powdered lobster claw, baths, showers, bitters like chimney soot, honey, coffee, tincture of quinine, soaps, soluble tartar, and vinegar. Walking, running, horse back riding and sea voyages were some of the more advantageous exercises; travel surpassed expectations as sufferers were less disturbed. But the problem of what was the actual nature of these two diseases was still unknown.

"In the first half of the 19th century psychology as a means of curing is.....organized around punishment.

Foucault outlines the evolution of society's definition, views, and treatments of madness from the middle ages to the 18th century. This sounds super interesting, but I found it took me a long time to get through all the specific names and cases Foucault uses and often had to puzzle out the "bigger picture" for myself to keep myself engaged with the text.

As Deleuze points out, the major fault of Foucault's work is that it doesn't bridge to the 20th and 21st century very easily. I was hoping to find the journey of madness through the history of human kind to the present day, but nope. I guess that will be some other philosopher or psychologist's job.

Still, I found it worthwhile to learn how the idea of madness has shifted throughout time, even if I didn't get to read about madness's manifestation in the 20th century. The emergence of psychology in relation to madness was also an interesting historical development that Foucault includes.

*Madness and Civilization* is a great read due to the enormous and eclectic erudition of its author who is able to use

sources from literature, sociology, psychology and history to make his case, that madness is a creation of society rather than a medical condition. A great injustice was committed when the rational man of the Enlightenment decided to expel madmen from society by placing them in Asylums.

Foucault feels that it is necessary to bring the mad back into civilization. Freud draws praise for reopening the dialogue with madness but much still needs to be done. Foucault may or may not have a point but his lunatic pronouncements in the style of Antonin Artaud make the book a hoot.