

Book Reviews

Participant Observer

The Absurd Healer. Perspectives of a Community Psychiatrist. MATTHEW F. DUMONT. Science House, New York, 1968. 196 pp. \$6.50.

Among psychiatrists and members of allied disciplines—and especially among community psychiatrists—there is a nagging, pressing, unanswered question: what *is* community psychiatry? Unlike some things (such as “love” or “the power structure”) which are difficult to define but rather easy to recognize, community psychiatry seems to be relatively easy to define (judging by the number of available definitions) but is hard to recognize or, rather, is hard to differentiate from other brands of psychiatry. Wherefore is this psychiatry different from all other psychiatries?

Here we have a short, extremely readable, lively, and very personal book in which the author proceeds to answer the question. He does so without, as well as I can recall, ever actually defining the term, but rather by telling what one community psychiatrist does, what he has learned, how he thinks, how he relates his work to the work of other professionals and other scientists, and, most important of all, what he has yet to find out and decide about. The author does this by taking himself as the primary object of observation, by opening himself up to us in an unusually candid manner, by describing something of his own career and his own experiences, and by sharing with us some of the details of his own conceptualization process as he reflected on, and generalized from, these experiences. The sum of all this is a book-long definition of a brand of community psychiatry which, though well rooted in the author's own medical tradition, concerns itself not merely with the illness of individual patients but with the health of populations. Now, for the first time in my judgment, we have available a book, understandable not only to mental health professionals but to any

reader, that gives a concrete, multifaceted, and convincing answer to that question, What in the world *is* community psychiatry?

Dumont's concerns are reflected in his vivid chapter titles: “The city as patient,” “The psychiatrist in space,” “The mental health of organizations,” “Baptism by beer.” The last introduces a chapter in which the author describes his experiences in a series of visits to a tavern in a blighted slum area whose regular patrons were homeless, more or less alcoholic men in their later years. One can take themes from this chapter and illustrate how Dumont works. First, it is evident that he is a physician, a healer, who resonates intensely to the loneliness, the suffering, and the hopelessness of these men. Second, he is an acute observer of social phenomena, who is able to perceive and convey to the reader the nature of the social system of the Star Tavern as a supportive structure in the lives of its patrons. Third, he is an activist; he intervenes. He is an example of what Seeley has called the “carer-helper-facilitator.” In this instance he establishes a minor system of preventive medicine by providing the bartender with a supply of vitamins to dole out to his “regulars,” in order to forestall a little the inevitable medical problems of the homeless old alcoholic. Finally, he is a social planner. He generalizes from this experience and, in a description of an ideal community mental health program, he proposes the inclusion of taverns within the realm of consultation and community programs.

Dumont uses a number of devices to illustrate his points that add to the vitality and personal quality of the book: for example, he gives detailed analyses of movies and books, such as *7½* and *Resurrection*; he summarizes case histories of patients he has treated; he provides résumés of research studies. And throughout he keeps in mind what I perceive as the major long-term value of this extraordinary book: the effort it

makes to see community psychiatry as resting on a rational, empirical body of knowledge.

From what I have written so far, *The Absurd Healer* may seem to be primarily an exciting personal document, almost a memoir. It is that; but it is much more. It is a book shaped by the author's process of conceptualization about his work. Dumont's mind is fertile, facile, and inventive, and he never unlinks himself from his early chosen role of healer-scientist. He is constantly connecting himself to other sciences and scientific practitioners—first and foremost to the archetype physician, but also to the systems analyst, whose skills may be applied to the complexities of social problems; to the experimental psychologist, whose exploration of the rat's use of space may be applicable to the gestating science of community psychiatry; to the epidemiologist, whose methods have illuminated the connections between urban problems and human misery; to the anthropologist, whose analysis of man's use of his immediate environment can provide prescriptions to the architects of institutions for the alleviation of man's distress. And in the course of 195 pages, he flicks off half a dozen or more hypotheses each of which could stimulate an important research program.

Now to a few points of disagreement. Dumont remarks that riots have occurred even in relatively competent cities, of which he takes New Haven as an example. As a resident of that unhappy city, I would disagree strongly with this judgment. New Haven is competent only in organizing a monolithic structure of repression and an uncontrollable urban renewal program that is destroying a middling little city on the basis of a delusional perception that it is a great metropolitan area. New Haven is a “Potemkin village,” well designed by highly skilled publicists to deceive even as acute an observer as Dumont.

On a more general level, I am inclined to believe that Dumont, as a psychiatrist, slightly overemphasizes pathology and treatment and slightly underemphasizes the theme of power and self-determination. I am also made nervous by the idea of centralized planning and social engineering which he, I believe, rather reluctantly accepts on the grounds of efficiency and pragmatism. I may well be reading him wrong, and in any case these are minor points that I bring up to demonstrate that I am not an uncritical gusher.

In summary, let me urge everyone with any conceivable interest in the subject to read the book. It can be read in two hours or in two days; I recommend the latter. It is an extremely well-written book (rare in psychiatry), literate, lucid, often witty. It provides a set of potentially motivating ideas for a whole range of readers, from the urban planner to the public health expert to the potential community mental health worker to the citizen at large. It gives an exciting notion of what community psychiatry could be all about if intelligent community psychiatrists like Matthew Dumont have their way.

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Not a Bad Idea

The Systems Approach. C. WEST CHURCHMAN. Delacorte, New York, 1968. xii + 243 pp. \$7.50.

It is perverse to deny the obvious, so what does one say of a book with the modest thesis "The systems approach is not a bad idea" (p. 232)? Churchman set out, he tells us, to write a book explaining the idea to laymen. There being wide disagreement about the benefits of the systems approach, he decided to let its advocates argue it out with their critics. The author himself sits back and watches, appearing only at both ends of the book. The names he gives to the two sides change bewilderingly: enthusiast, efficiency expert, management scientist, planner—these advocate systems; skeptic, humanist attack them. Their argument revolves around five basic considerations: (i) the objectives or performance measures of a total system; (ii) the fixed constraints (environment); (iii) the system's resources; (iv) the components—their activities, the goals and measures of their performances; (v) the management of the system.

It appears in the discussion that there is a recurrent problem: None of the five points can be easily isolated, because every system is embedded in or is a subsystem of a wider system (General Motors is embedded in, among other systems, the automobile industry, which in turn is embedded in, among other systems, the transport industry, and so forth) and, more problematic still, phenomena viewed in one

way are one system, in another way another system (automobiles may be seen as a transport system, as a status system, as an economic linchpin; every government department is a system and is also a subsystem of the bureaucracy; also, all departments dealing with, for example, alcoholism form a system). This makes for great difficulty in isolating a system even for analysis, and thus for discussing the five points.

Efficiency experts who want to brush all this aside and get on with making operations work more efficiently are reminded that what is more efficient depends on what the performance measures for the total system are—they may be various—and these turn on what it is that is taken to be the total system. The economically hard-headed who offer money measures are attacked with arguments from welfare economics. Two-thirds of the way through the book the reader could be forgiven for thinking that Churchman is showing up the looseness, muddle, and inapplicability of systems analysis. But this turns out not to be so. Although there are still further problems, such as politics and values and the burgeoning of information and information about information, the author comes out strongly for the systems approach as a first approximation. Against behaviorists, skeptics, the religious, he suggests that the systems approach can absorb their criticisms, indeed that a model of a system needs constant checking, holding up to reality, and hostile criticism.

At this point the philosopher of science in Churchman has taken over completely. In effect he equates the systems approach with the critical scientific method of approximating truth by trial and error. Well and good. But in analyzing an organization *qua* system, how can the earlier objections be handled? Churchman gives no clues. Yet successful systems analysis goes on all the time—some of it under the aegis of Churchman himself. Perhaps here the single clear deficiency of the book shows up. No central controlling problem is ever articulated. "What is the systems approach?" is hardly a serious problem. This lack of problem gives a feeling of weightlessness. It is also responsible for the impression that the critic of the systems approach—with his quibbles and conceptual difficulties—wins all the arguments. If only the systems analyst would come back at his critics as hard as he does in real life with a concrete problem or a brief,

he would be in a much stronger position. Systems analysis, like science, is controlled only by the problem at hand. Sometimes the result of inquiry is to attack the formulation of the problem. At other times it is possible to use the problem as a way of excluding endless ramifications into other problems. Of course, this raises the problem of what constitutes a problem, but that is another problem.

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Naturalists from Spain

For Science and National Glory. The Spanish Scientific Expedition to America, 1862–1866. ROBERT RYAL MILLER. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1968. xiv + 194 pp. + plates. \$5.95.

In the days when Spain was in sad financial state and still in uncertain difficulties with some of its former colonies, the Spaniards nevertheless attempted a full-scale scientific expedition to South America, called the Scientific Commission of the Pacific, to enrich the collections and increase the competence of its natural historians. Their skills were considerable, although most of them are not remembered outside of Spain, and the expedition was carried off surprisingly well in spite of bitter personal differences that developed, the primitive nature of transportation in South America a hundred years ago, and the difficulties of civilian and naval collaboration on a project of no particular interest to the naval officers. More than 80,000 items were collected and returned to Spain, including valuable archeological and ethnological items as well as the usual fossils, plants, and animals which were the bag of the traditional natural scientist of the day. While some of the collections still remain in various parts of Spain and constitute a valuable scientific and historical record, for the most part the material was unstudied at the time, notes were lost, and the surviving personnel of the expedition dispersed to various institutions. It is a brave story of persistence under difficulties, especially as "it was a mistake to attach the scientists to a naval squadron whose officers were unsympathetic and bellicose, as the naturalists themselves recognized." Unfortunately this sort of thing can still happen in South America.

The story is told in solid, sometimes