

Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry

by Thomas Szasz

(Basic Books; 237 pp.; \$10.00)

R.D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy

by Andrew Collier

(The Harvester Press; 212 pp.; \$10.00/\$3.95)

Henry McDonald

R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, commonly linked in the media as "radical psychiatrists," are probably more different than similar. Though both question the validity of the concept of mental illness, Laing does so from an existentialist viewpoint, concluding that madness is a general feature of society. Szasz, taking the perspective that disease is only physical, asserts that "mental" disease doesn't exist. Laing is known for his sweeping denunciations of bourgeois society; Szasz, a defender of individual liberties in the conservative tradition, for his uncompromising position on mainly one issue—involuntary confinement in mental hospitals.

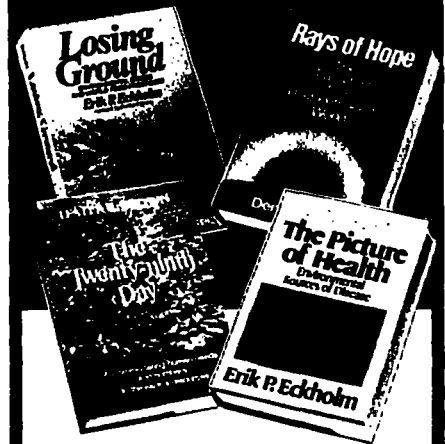
Yet despite these differences there is one generality on which both agree: that the barriers between what we term sanity and insanity, being relative to social and moral values, are in some sense "unreal" and should be broken down. Laing would do this (or so he seems to say in *The Politics of Experience*) by making everyone mad, Szasz everyone sane. Such a view departs not just from Freud, who believed that neurosis, not psychosis, was a feature of normal psychology, but, more instructively, from Nietzsche. Nietzsche, like Laing, felt that the mad were often "the mouthpieces of Truth"; like Szasz, he attached great value to the collective rationality that holds society together, what he called "the universality and universal binding force of a faith; in sum, the non-arbitrary character of judgements." Unlike Laing and Szasz, however, he believed that the collective rationality of society and the solitary madness of individuals, in their opposition, thrive on each other and that neither should be

eliminated. Madness, and all that is intensely personal and "exceptional," has great value and should be recognized—"provided it never wants to become the rule." Such a dialectical view of sanity and madness is lacking in Laing and Szasz. With Laing the lack stems from his repudiation of collective rationality in favor of the mystical experience of the individual—though such a repudiation did not come, as Andrew Collier notes in his study of Laing, until his later works. With Szasz the lack has a different source—not the promotion of personal over collective values but, rather, the leveling of both to a single, narrow rationality.

Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry is Szasz's thirteenth book, and in large part it repeats the major arguments about psychiatry he has been making since 1961, when *The Myth of Mental Illness* came out. These arguments begin with the assertion that "Strictly speaking, disease or illness can affect only the body; hence, there can be no mental illness." Schizophrenia and other so-called mental diseases were "invented" by psychiatrists to justify the status of their profession as a medical science. The real functions of psychiatry, however, are not medical but moral and political—moral in the "religious," pseudo-scientific authority given to its judgments of normal and abnormal behavior, and political in the use made of such authority to violate people's civil rights. Szasz's prescription for these problems is, first, to stop calling unconventional behavior a disease and, second, to outlaw involuntary confinement in mental hospitals.

It is important to note that Szasz does

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not (at least in the four books of his I have read) challenge any specific psychoanalytical or psychiatric techniques; rather, his concern is with the conditions under which such techniques are employed, that is, with the legal status of mental patients (oddly, he does not discuss the issue of those labeled "criminally insane," presumably because he feels they should be treated like other criminals). His program for change, beyond concern with the civil rights of mental patients, is to make explicit the moral functions of psychiatry by unmasking its scientific pretensions and religious motives.

Unfortunately the scope of such unmasking is limited by, on the one hand, his view of medicine as a neutral, value-free enterprise—an application of biochemical laws—and, on the other, by his dismissal of "revealed religion" as "patent infantilism." The former makes most of his contrasts of medicine and psychiatry trivial, as with his argument—the principal one of this book—that schizophrenia is not a disease like syphilis. The second view makes his likening of religious and psychiatric practices wildly indiscriminate, as in his theory that modern society has exchanged "arranged marital pairings" between husband and wife for "arranged medical pairings" between psychiatrist and patient. Neither of his comparisons uncovers much in the way of the moral functions of psychiatry; rather, such functions are buried beneath a rationality that is reductive to the extreme.

In contrast to Szasz's narrowness is the wide range of Laing's ideas and, in *R.D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy*, Andrew Collier rigorously analyzes these ideas from the standpoint of what he calls "the sciences of historical and mental processes"—Marxism and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Collier, a lecturer in philosophy at University College, North Wales, Bangor, sees his role as an "underlabourer to science, 'removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge.'" The "rubbish" in Laing's case is his existentialist perspective, and Collier takes great pains throughout his book to argue that such "personalistic ethics" do not necessarily negate—and where they do negate they can be rejected—what he regards as the more valuable aspects of Laing's work, namely, the extension of psychoanalytic theo-

ry to socialistic politics at the level of the family.

The problem with such a Freudian-Marxist approach (generally similar to Herbert Marcuse's, which Collier cites approvingly) is only partly that it ignores Laing's antipathy for "deterministic" psychoanalytic theory and "dogmatic" Marxism. Rather, the main problem is that it fails to give sufficient weight to what is the basis for such antipathy—Laing's grounding in Sartrean existentialism and his refusal to embrace any system of thought that does not make the individual the center of all things, free and responsible. Thus Laing derisively characterizes dialectical materialism as "...the attempt to speak of the world as though it revealed itself to no one," while psychoanalysts are accused of assuming a position of "complete exteriority" in relation to their patients in which "the person disappears."

The limitations of Collier's approach are manifest in his treatment of Laing's "mystical" period, in which Laing envisages schizophrenia as a way of shedding the "egoic" self associated with the social personality and of traveling inward to realize a more fundamental "transcendent" self. Collier feels that such notions are "in sharp contrast" to the earlier Laing, being an "inversion" of his former "personalism" in which the self he once championed against society is now regarded as illusory and egoic. In fact, however, the egoic-transcendent self duality is not an "inversion" of Laing's former notions but clearly the heir of similar dualities between "inner" and "outer" selves that he posed as early as his first book, *The Divided Self*. Collier's interpretation misses the most important point concerning Laing's mysticism: that it is an

outgrowth of and departure from his original existentialist position. Thus, throughout most of his writings, Laing followed Sartre and other existentialists when he posed a separation between the inner and outer selves, between the subjective and objective experiences of human-ness; he abandoned Sartre when he gave the inner self autonomy and made the separation complete. For Sartre the freedom of the individual, his transcendence, consists in the *act* of separating himself from the world—not, as in Laing, with any transcendent self as the end-product of this separation. Laing, in holding out the reward of inner enlightenment—and it is clear he was tending in this direction even before *The Politics of Experience*—abandoned Sartre's tragic view of the world and took on a mystical one; he relegated the objective world to an illusory status and devalued rationality. And it was precisely this devaluation of rationality that proscribed any dialectical view (common to Sartre as well as Nietzsche) of personal and collective values—or of madness and sanity.

In fairness to Collier it should be noted that he largely recognizes the limitations of his approach to Laing, and his decision to write a book unraveling the slender threads connecting Laing with Freud and Marx, rather than the stronger ones between Laing and Sartre, reflects more his own interests (and his antipathy to Sartre) than a failure to recognize the central role of existentialism in Laing's thought. Collier is a careful, discriminating thinker, and his analysis should be of great value to those readers also committed to "the sciences of historical and mental processes." For those desiring a more general exegesis of Laing's thought, however, his book will be of lesser interest.

The Relevance of Liberalism edited by Zbigniew Brzezinski

(Westview; 229 pp.; \$15.00)

Barry Rubin

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