

BOOK REVIEW

Nima Bassiri, *Madness and Enterprise: Psychiatry, Economic Reason, and the Emergence of Pathological Value*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. Pp. 344. ISBN 978-0-226-83089-6. \$35.00 (paper).

Nancy Tomes

Stony Brook University

Nima Bassiri's *Madness and Enterprise* is a fascinating, albeit challenging-to-read, effort to rethink the mental sciences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to the history of capitalism. An assistant professor of literature and co-director of the Institute for Critical Theory at Duke University, Bassiri offers a rich blend of social theory, history and philosophy of the human sciences to uncover what he terms a new 'economization of madness' that emerged at the turn of the last century. Using an approach more beholden to Michel Foucault than to Karl Marx, Bassiri presents this shift not as a deliberate adoption of economic concepts but rather a more diffuse 'style of reasoning' that emerged in neurology, psychiatry and psychology. Wrestling with the 'interpretive frustrations' of distinguishing sane from insane states of mind, mental experts began to focus more on assessing behaviour and its consequences; in this context, individuals' ability to manage their economic affairs became a key indicator of their mental status. But as psychiatrists delved into the complexity of modern economic behaviour, they came to recognize that madness could not only coexist with but 'in some form become an asset for capitalism' (all quotes on p. 12).

In the first two chapters, Bassiri lays out the problem presented by 'borderland' figures, such as eccentrics and monomaniacs, who appeared neither completely sane nor insane (p. 53). Rather than interpret their states of mind, psychiatrists turned instead to a new pathology of conduct that privileged economic competence: were individuals behaving in ways that resulted in a gain or loss of economic value? This new way of thinking produced some unexpected challenges and conclusions, which Bassiri explores in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 looks at the expert recognition not only that modern capitalism could drive some men mad, but also that 'in some cases, madness was perfectly compatible with economic competency, and in other cases, madness was a desideratum for an entrepreneur's success' (p. 114). Chapter 4 explores the medical debates around people with aphasia – a loss of the power of speech – and whether they retained the mental capacity to write wills and make other decisions about the disposition of their wealth; the answer was largely yes, thus ensuring the seamless transference of personal wealth. Chapter 5 looks at French explorations of 'sinistrosis', a form of working-class male hysteria shaped by new schemes for compensating workplace injuries. Experts concluded that 'one way or the other, an injured worker was bound to exaggerate or simulate symptoms, inevitably as an effect of being manipulated by the promise of remuneration' (p. 183). Chapter 6 returns to the figure of the eccentric businessman, exploring the celebrated case of

John Chaloner, an American entrepreneur whose promotion of his clairvoyant powers embroiled him in medical and legal controversies.

The thread running through all these debates is the conception of economic value: did people, families or classes gain or lose by the individual's pathology? For this reader, Chapters 3 and 6 elucidated this economization of madness most compellingly. The former traces how experts came to distinguish 'disorders of enterprise' – the nervous afflictions that the ups and downs of capitalism produced among male businessmen – from 'entrepreneurial madness' – the pathological pursuit of wealth that enabled some men to become fabulously wealthy (p. 77). In a fascinating reflection on E. Franklin Frazier's work on black entrepreneurs, Bassiri suggests that the 'relationship between entrepreneurial pathology and masculine whiteness was mutually enabling', so that the 'entitlement to be irrational' became a form of white male privilege (p. 110). In the last chapter, Bassiri delves deeply into the medical and legal controversies around John Chaloner's business career as he 'tirelessly struggled to showcase his X Faculty as a redemptive source of financial value' (p. 222). His pathology, in the form of his extravagant claims for his clairvoyance, became the foundation of his fortune. Bassiri presents Chaloner as 'emblematic of an unmistakable form of entrepreneurial self-fashioning, a manner of casting oneself as a wellspring of lucrative pathological value', that he sees as a precursor to the career of Donald J. Trump (p. 223).

In the conclusion, Bassiri invites his readers to think "beyond" the notion of 'pathological value' through a reflection on Frantz Fanon's work (p. 229). He concludes, 'what is needed ... is not the de-financialization of psychiatry but an undoing – a deontologization, as it were, of madness's economic rationality' (p. 241). Bassiri's is a radical re-envisioning of psychiatry as a 'spiritual medicine, perhaps more spiritual than medical, more sacred than secular' (p. 242).

For specialists in the history of the mental sciences, *Madness and Enterprise* provides many insights and provocations. Given the range of what he does cover, it seems churlish to pine for what he does not. Yet changing conceptions of sexual pleasure and sexuality seemed a bit underworked here; where do older historical arguments about the nineteenth-century 'spermatic economy', as found in the work of G.J. Barker Benfield (1976), fit into Bassiri's conception of economization? Also, respecting Bassiri's decision not to write about 'the political economy of the asylum', I could not help but want him to reflect briefly on the implications of his larger argument for the financing of institutional psychiatry, particularly state-supported mental hospitals (p. 241).

As this brief summary suggests, *Madness and Enterprise* is ambitious in its goals and sweeping in its arguments. A work of history and theory, it requires a high level of familiarity with the intellectual history of psychiatry to appreciate the twists and turns of the analysis. But for readers interested in the fascinating 'borderlands' of human behaviour not clearly legible as either sane or insane, this book is a rewarding, provocative read.