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Falun Gong and the Politics of Psychiatry

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Abstract. This article describes political facets of the institution of psychiatry.

The political facets of the institution of psychiatry have had quite a checkered history. (1) The institution has improved the welfare of the body politic in so far as psychiatric practice has (a) humanely protected those who cannot protect themselves; (b) contributed to the mental, physical, and spiritual growth of those who experience problematic growth; and (c) led to minimization of sociopolitical forces that induce problematic growth. (2) The institution has fostered the maintenance of existing political power relations by inducing a false consciousness allowing the body politic to better tolerate an alien political head that views the body only as a necessary support function. (3) In so far as some psychiatric practices are replete with noxious consequences--e.g., the side-effects of electroconvulsive (ECT) therapy and psychotropic medications--the institution reinforces a political ideology that through short-term pain one can experience long-term gain. This ideology is a handy vehicle for leaders seeking to remain in power during various policy disasters on a continuum from the democratic to the totalitarian. (The expanding notion of "short-term" here qualifies as an example of false consciousness.) (4) The institution has exhibited wild swings in political attributions of responsibility for behaviors deemed statistically or deontologically deviant. Medicalizing such deviancies locates behavioral responsibility with the behavior and often induces the analytic set that psychiatric practice must be applied to the behavior as opposed to the political context in which the behavior exists and the behavior occurs. (5) The institution has been intentionally and cynically used to punish political opponents through applying psychiatric practices that are most replete with noxious consequences--e.g., ECT, psychotropic medications with severe extrapyramidal and anticholinergic side-effects, and incarceration in extremely austere and dangerous environments.

It is the last--intentional and cynical punishment--that most riles those who critique the institution of psychiatry. Thus the current furor about members of the Falun Gong being involuntarily detained in psychiatric hospitals within the People's Republic of China (PRC)--and past furors in many other countries and eras involving the institution of psychiatry as political deterrent, rehabilitation, and punishment. Yet, political consequences (2) through (4) may have the most pervasive and insidious consequences for human welfare. (See Bloch, S. (1980). The political misuse of Soviet psychiatry: Honolulu and beyond. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 14, 109-114; Brown, C.J., & Lago, A.M. (1991). The politics of psychiatry in revolutionary Cuba. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers; Halpern, A.L. (February 15, 2000). Detaining Falun Gong. *The New York Times*, p. A30; Halpern, A.L. (1992). Misuse of post-acquittal hospitalization for punitive purposes. *Psychiatric Annals*, 22, 561-565; Stover, E., & Nightingale, E.O. (1985). The breaking of bodies and minds: Torture, psychiatric abuse, and the health professions. NY, NY: W.H. Freeman & Co.) (Keywords: Falun Gong, Political Control, Psychiatry.)