

IPW LECTURES

The politics of psychiatry today and tomorrow: Is another psychiatric biopolitics possible?



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Abstract:

Psychiatry, since it took its modern form in the mid-nineteenth century, has always been a 'political' science - historically in relation to degeneracy and eugenics, mental hygiene, and the management of 'dangerous individuals' in the court and psychiatric system'; today in relation to the 'economic burden' of mental ill health, the Global Mental Health Movement seeking to expand Euro-America psychiatry to the Global South, the challenges of mental disorder refugees, migrants and children in the Global North and so forth. While much focus has been on the emergence of new 'neurobiological' styles of thought in psychiatric research, there are signs that a new psychiatric strategy is taking shape. This new biopolitics of psychiatry would focus less on treatment in the clinic, and more on the integration of psychiatry into the domain of public health. In this talk I will consider the possibilities that psychiatry could become a branch of social medicine, identifying and addressing the forms of social adversity that give rise to mental distress, understanding the pathways by which they act, and transforming the power relations that have always characterised this form of expert knowledge. I will suggest that we are at a potential turning point and outline the possibilities for a new, different and politically progressive psychiatric biopolitics.