

‘There is no abolition without anti-psychiatry’

The Fight for Psychiatric Abolition

Campaign for Psychiatric Abolition

2022

We are the Campaign for Psychiatric Abolition (CPA), a collective of psychiatric survivors who are fighting against the violence of policing, prisons and psychiatry. We want to demonstrate that our collective struggles against imperialism, racism, capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy and the climate catastrophe are also a struggle against psychiatry. We came together to form CPA after seeing how sometimes hostile radical spaces can be towards anti-psychiatry and mad liberation — it often feels like some of those who understand the need for police and prison abolition still see psychiatry, the institution that locked up and tortured so many of us, as benevolent and caring — a liberal myth that has insidiously made its way into places that should be safe for victims of state violence.

It is clear from the history that psychiatry is there to control, not care for, us. The birth of psychiatry cannot be separated from eugenics and colonialism — psychiatry was the soil from which eugenics was allowed to grow. It was created as a tool to justify the violent plundering and torture of colonised people around the world. By psychiatry diagnosing some people as inferior, deranged, deviant and delusional, western oppressors were able to legitimise their abuse of the people they colonised. Enslaved people escaping their bondage were labelled as having ‘drapetomania’, a supposed mental illness, because white society refused to accept the idea that Black people could revolt against their oppression. In the current day, psychiatry is also wielded against Muslim communities, working in tandem with PREVENT to heighten surveillance and policing efforts, labelling mentally ill Muslims as an automatic terrorism risk.

The long history of queerphobia at the hands of psychiatry is also well-documented, with conversion therapy and electro-shock therapy their ‘cure’ of homosexuality, deemed a mental illness up until 1973, whilst our transness continues to be medicalised and pathologized. Women too were and are to this day brandished as hysterical and locked in asylums, often as a result of their natural trauma responses to patriarchal violence. We also know too well, as seen with Nazi Germany, Mussolini and the US sterilization of Puerto Rican, Black and Indigenous women, that psychiatry has been a tool of the far-right — any institution so easily incorporated into fascism should have its legitimacy questioned.

Very little has changed — psychiatry continues to be wielded against oppressed communities, the lunatic asylums of the 1800s still standing (for now) with the haunting echoes of past patients drowned out only by the desperate screams of current ones. We are all screaming for the same thing: abolition. Psychiatry may have learned to portray a more respectable veneer, but the lunatic asylum, electroshock therapy and tranquilisation lay just below the surface.

We formed CPA to fight back against this violence and death that permeates the lives of every psych survivor. Our organising encompasses a wide variety of community work — one aspect of this is the workshops we give about psychiatric abolition across Britain to both the public, comrades and radical organisations, because we see education about mad liberation, crisis care and peer support as essential life and organising skills. This is not about ‘awareness’, but about survival. It is about knowing how to be there for our comrades and loved ones without calling the cops or the docs.

Our work also includes serving our communities in material ways, such as delivering care packages to our incarcerated friends in psych wards and providing them with the support and resources they need, whilst working collectively for their freedom. We also work to tackle the root causes of mental distress, like poverty, oppression and homelessness, by carrying out mutual aid and providing a safe space for psych survivors to voice our experiences without feeling dismissed. We believe in the importance of direct action and taking the fight of psychiatric abolition to the streets, and to support this belief, we carry out actions, alongside other psych survivors, to target all these places of abuse and torture.

We also want to take every opportunity to draw attention to the interlinking struggles and experiences of psych ward patients, prisoners and people incarcerated in detention centres — all dehumanised because we are deemed ‘mad’, ‘bad’, ‘illegal’ or all three. We are all transported in the same high security vans to be locked away from our communities, with tortuously limited contact with the outside world. Our possessions and glimpses of humanity — clothes, photos, shoelaces, phone calls, visitations — are taken from us, every last crumb of food and drop of water controlled. In some places they even use straitjackets and bed restraints, and throw patients into freezing or burning baths and showers.

They control every minute detail of our lives and capture, even down to the colour of the walls, which are painted with ‘calm’ colours in an attempt to ‘lure our minds’ — they have thought of absolutely everything to make our existence as torturous as possible. The windows and doors are locked and if we show too many signs of distress, we can be locked in solitary confinement for days at a time. They surveil us with cameras in every corner with staff watching us 24 hours a day, ready to physically or chemically restrain us at any point against our consent. As we are all legally declared insane or ‘criminal’, any appeal we file to court won’t be taken seriously, and once we get out, if we ever do, we only find more barriers with housing, work and reintegrating into the society we were torn from for so long.

In the 21st century, containing mad people and electrocuting our brains is still seen as an acceptable cure to our distress — distress often caused by the forces of oppression and poverty so prevalent under racial capitalism. When we say we are treated like prisoners, it is not to create a divide between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of punishment — it is to say emphatically and without question that the struggles of those society deems ‘insane’ and ‘criminal’ are inextricably

linked – we are one, and we extend endless love and solidarity to all of our siblings incarcerated, in all forms, at this current time. Fuck cages!

We are not calling for an end to mental health care, but are simply begging for it to exist in the first place — we deserve a world where we can actually heal, instead of a system that reproduces trauma. We are fighting for patient-centred, community care, where the violence of poverty, racism, incarceration and colonialism do not drive us to insanity. A world where we are able to truly look after each other, where our needs are centred and madness is not seen as an individual failing but a greater incentive to solidify our communities.

We are fighting for an end to psychiatry's monopoly on mental healthcare because every day, more of our people are suffering and dying, with nowhere to turn without the prospect of being locked up. No one will be free until psychiatry is abolished. Anti-psychiatry is not a dated movement destined to stay in the 60s, it is an active practice that survivors are forging every day. We are anti-psychiatry because we cannot afford not to be. We are anti-psychiatry because, despite it all, we are trying to snatch life from the jaws of death.

One day, the systems that harm us will all be ashes, and our communities will have the space to heal and flourish — we can promise you of that because never have we felt or witnessed more pain, fury and determination than in the eyes of psychiatric survivors. The struggle against psychiatry is a struggle for our collective liberation. Psychiatry will fall, and alongside it, all of us will rise.

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