
Reviewed by Bonnie A. Lucero

*Madhouse* traces the evolving ways Cubans understood, experienced and treated mental illness in the twentieth century. In this vein, it builds on earlier works on the history of science in Cuba, and brings the island into the historiographical turn toward the history of medicine and public health. Much of the book offers an in-depth case study of Mazorra, Cuba’s largest psychiatric hospital. Yet, *Madhouse* is more than an institutional history. Jennifer L. Lambe posits that the history of Mazorra can cast light on the practical impact of political change on one of the most vulnerable populations in Cuba, the mentally ill. She argues that Mazorra not only reflected the Cuban state, but also exposed the ongoing contradictions and persisting marginalisation as Cuban political elites and psychiatrists navigated moments of reform, revolution and stagnation.

The book is organised along a conventional political periodisation. Each of the seven substantive chapters is bounded by a key political turning point at the national level. Although the institution was originally founded at the turn of the nineteenth century, the narrative begins with the first US military occupation (1899–1902), when Lambe claims, the politicisation of Mazorra greatly intensified because the institution was transformed into a national hospital subsidised by the national government. The main narrative ends with a consideration of the psychological effects of the Mariel Boatlift in 1980. A brief epilogue framed around a 2010 scandal afflicting the hospital brings the discussion into the twentieth-first century.

Lambe consistently reaches beyond the walls of the hospital to explore the dynamic relationship between mental illness and the state. The first two chapters, for instance, show how the intermittent US military occupations of Cuba contributed to a seemingly cyclical pattern of reform and neglect in Mazorra.
during the first decade of the republic. During the first US military occupation, US officials and Cuban doctors set out to transform the institution from a penal establishment to one devoted to the treatment of patients from across the island. The Progressive push to nationalise Mazorra put mental health care in Cuba ahead of the United States, where such services remained unevenly administered at the state level. Yet Mazorra’s status as a national hospital also subjected it to the whims of national politics. In Chapter 2, Lambe shows how budgetary constraints during the early republic led to the neglect of Mazorra, followed by another round of US-led reforms during the second US military occupation.

Although these first two chapters do an excellent job of elucidating the political roots of developments in the hospital, the narrative of US-led reform, followed by neglect under Cuban rule begs for a more critical assessment of the US role in reforming Mazorra. Much of the argument relies on US newspapers and military records contained in the US National Archives, sources that warrant a more vigorous discussion of the paternalistic rhetoric and racialised imperialist thought inevitably cloaking them. This narrative also implicitly exculpates US politicians and military officials from their role in post-occupation neglect. The sovereignty-limiting Platt Amendment imposed by the US on Cuba’s 1901 Constitution explicitly prohibited Cuba from accruing excessive foreign debt, which essentially imposed austerity during the first three decades of the republic. Certainly, this must have influenced the budgetary constraints that contributed to Mazorra’s stagnation. Beyond finance, the discussion of the institution’s decline under Cuban rule provokes questions about how Cuban politicians rationalised and justified the different priorities, and how institutional administrators negotiated those decisions. A greater diversity of records from various groups in Cuba might have provided the foundation for a discussion of competing notions of progress, not only between Cubans and Americans, but also among different sectors in Cuba.

In the process of examining the politicisation of Mazorra, Lambe reveals how persisting social hierarchies informed Cuban understandings of mental illness and shaped the kinds of treatment patients received. One of the strongest discussions focuses on the reproduction of class hierarchy within Mazorra. Lambe offers a compelling discussion of psychiatrists’ prescription of labour as a regenerative therapy for poor patients at Mazorra, while also tracing initiatives to provide wealthier patients with a more dignified lifestyle. Another promising discussion centred on the blurred line between criminology and psychiatry, particularly in the handling of the racialised religious practices labelled as Spiritism. Chapter 3’s introduction alludes to the centrality of racial ideas in constituting these disciplinary tensions. However, the remainder of that chapter shifts away from this framework, instead recounting the delusions of several patients
interned at the hospital in the name of elucidating the patients’ ‘experience’ of the so-called Age of Inferno. This narrative tension leaves the reader to wonder about how these experiences fit within the framework discussed at the outset of the chapter, as well as the precise role race played in the diagnosis, internment and treatment of those patients.

*Madhouse* also nods toward the importance of gender and sexuality within mental health care. Nonetheless, the book alludes to gender segregation among patients, as well as the apparent gender tensions among predominantly female nurses and male doctors, topics that merit further study. Future work might also examine how gender informed psychiatric diagnoses and treatment of conditions, such as hysteria. The discussion of homosexuality likewise signals avenues for further investigation. For example, Chapter 5 mentions the imposition of manual labour to ‘correct’ gay men during the 1960s. Yet, this theme falls out of the narrative in the subsequent discussion of Mariel, a crisis in which the perception and performance of homosexuality and gender transgression held the key to Cuban emigration. The reader wonders, particularly in light of recent research by Abel Sierra Madero and Susana Peña, how medicalised ideas about gendered and sexual deviance fit into the cultural and medical ideas of nervousness so well charted in Chapter 7.

In sum, Lambe has contributed a pioneering study of mental illness in Cuba and its Diaspora. *Madhouse* lays a solid foundation for understanding the dynamic interplay between politics and psychiatric practice. It also prompts important questions about the ways race, gender, sexuality and class have informed understandings of mental illness and have influenced its treatment. For these reasons, it will be of wide interest to students and scholars of Latin America and the history of medicine. More than that, Lambe’s placement of social inequality towards the centre of discussions of psychiatry will undoubtedly provide an excellent starting point for further scholarship on these important issues.