The Anti-Asylum Movement in Brazil

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Objectives: There are two objectives of this study. One is to recover the historical trajectory of the anti-asylum movement in Brazil and the other is to analyze some of its successes, difficulties, and challenges.

Methodology: Interpretive and analytical

Results: The article utilizes the theory of social movements as a fundamental tool for the analysis of collective movements. It takes the analytical concepts of Melucci, whose approach tries to break with the reductionist and dichotomist perspectives, including the actors, the context, the resources, and the interactions (objective and subjective) of the collective action. The authors demonstrate the existence of discrimination and cultural and institutional control against “crazy people” and insanity (that has been transformed to “illness” by hegemonic medical knowledge), which carry whoever suffers from this illness into invisibility, exclusion and “social death.” They briefly present the trajectory of the anti-asylum movement that came about during the period of liberalization from the military regime. During this time period, the Medical Reform Movement and the Mental Health Workers Movement appeared. The demands of these movements denounced the practice of torture, abuse, and corruption, like the use of electroshock treatment, and advocated for the humanization of the national system of psychiatric treatment. In addition, they advocated for better working conditions, including the reduction of the work load and an increase in salaries for mental health workers. In the following years, new movements were consolidated and coordinated, like that of the clients and family members of the organization “Crazy for Life” whose main objective is to transform psychiatric policies and practices. After the National Movement for the Fight against Psychiatric Hospitals was consolidated, it initiated a political discussion that went beyond the mental health debate and promoted “a society without asylums.” Among the conquests of the movement, the authors highlight the Psychiatric Reform that fosters significant changes in four dimensions: epistemological, technical-healthcare, political-legal, and sociocultural.

Conclusions: The anti-asylum movement in Brazil articulates the relationship between solidarity and social conflicts by denouncing abuses as an effort to transform the relationships and conceptions that are discriminatory and that are destined to control “the crazy person” and mental illness.