

## **RUSSELL TRIBUNAL ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN PSYCHIATRY & "GEIST GEGEN GENES", 30 JUNE – 2 JULY 2001, BERLIN**

The first Russell Tribunal, which was opened by Bertrand Russell and concluded by Jean-Paul Sartre, was held in 1967. It focussed on the conduct of the United States in the Vietnam War. The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation then conducted further public tribunals on repression in Latin America, freedom of opinion in West Germany and the condition of first nation peoples in the United States. This fifth Tribunal on Human Rights in Psychiatry, then, stands in a tradition of political interrogation that mobilises people to speak out and to act. Over the two days of hearings, witnesses testified to the abuse they had suffered at the hands of the psychiatric system and expert witnesses described how people had been coerced into "treatment", sometimes with horrifying results. This was an international tribunal, with an international remit, which allowed for some unusual and necessary political alliances.

One of the sponsors of this Russell Tribunal was the Israeli Association Against Psychiatric Assault, and this group had also been actively involved in the "Foucault Tribunal" on psychiatry held in Berlin three years earlier. The verdict of the Foucault Tribunal, which was posted in German, English and Hebrew, among other languages, on the Tribunal website, had noted that practices such as involuntary confinement, forced drugging, four point restraints, electroshock and psychosurgery "allowed the psychiatrists during the Nazi era to go to the extreme of systematic mass murder of inmates under the pretext of 'treatment'". This grim political context was also very evident in the testimonies of patients over the weekend, and it is clearly a context that is not confined to Germany of the 1930s. One Jewish witness, for example, described how his family had fled to Israel, and then how he was only able to escape psychiatric confinement there by calling on the German embassy to provide safe passage back to his country of birth.

The Russell Tribunals usually proceed with a prosecution, in this case Thomas Szasz (a Professor of Psychiatry) and George Alexander (a Professor of Law) and a jury of well-known people from different countries, but there is no defendant present. In this case, the organisers took great pains to give the defendant a voice, at their cost. Letters to world bodies of psychiatry went unanswered, and finally a letter was sent to the new Professor of Psychiatry, Isabella Heuser, at the Freie Universität Berlin, where the conference was due to be held. As a result, Heuser demanded of the university authorities that they should refuse to allow the conference to be held in their buildings, and so at a very late stage a new venue had to be found. This scandalous behaviour speaks volumes about the contempt with which psychiatry treats its critics and the force it is willing to employ to get its own way.

A press conference, hosted by one of the Green representatives, was held on the Monday morning in a packed room in the Berlin State Parliament. A tired jury, which had reached a majority verdict and minority verdict at three in the morning, discussed its

conclusions. The Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho and Israeli Law Professor Alon Harel signed the minority verdict that, among other things, called for "public critical examination of the role of psychiatry". The majority verdict was much sharper, concluding that there has been widespread "serious abuse of human rights in psychiatry" and finding psychiatry "guilty of the combination of force and unaccountability".

So far so good, but not good enough for the prosecution, which turned the press conference into another arena to discuss the issues. Thomas Szasz accused the jury of arriving at a verdict that psychiatry would be happy with, and a public disagreement between Szasz and Kate Millett, chair of the jury, broke out when Szasz claimed that the verdict was "essentially a statement of the World Congress of Psychiatry". Although this was an unusual thing to happen in a press conference, sections of the British press found the discussion useful, and the arguments did highlight the provisional and contested nature of the verdict. Two further meetings in New York and Jerusalem will follow these Berlin hearings. Now the question is whether the outcome of this fifth tribunal will be able to connect with the growing political movements that bring together those who use mental health services and are badly used by them.

The Russell Tribunal ran in parallel with an academic conference "*Geist Gegen Genes*" (the Mind challenges Genes). One of the sponsors for this conference was the UK-based grouping Psychology Politics Resistance, and another was the Discourse Unit. The symposium on "Critical Psychology: Psychiatric pathologising as a political question" brought together different perspectives on the way that critical academics and activists in psychology may oppose the oppressive uses of psychology. The speakers were Erica Burman, Eugenie Georgaca, Angel Gordo-Lopez, Ian Hodges, Terence McLaughlin and Ian Parker. The point was made that if we are talking about psychology in this context, in Berlin at this moment, we needed to say something about psychology as a discipline in the context of Germany in the past. The last century is still with us, and lies like a nightmare on the minds of the living. We could say that the question of psychology is a question of history. Psychology was one of the first academic professions in Germany to openly embrace Nazism. This was not only because a biological reductionist account of human activity fitted so well with eugenics. It is also because psychology pretends to be a science of the human spirit. Psychologists in the time of fascism were very interested in the observation of behaviour and the possibilities of developing psychotherapy as a kind of glue that would more tightly bond together the community as a nation. It is important to remember that psychology is not only a biological reductionist discipline. Psychology aims to regulate the mind as well as the genes.

The three other symposia dealt with the human genome project, genetic technology and warfare and "the future of humankind". The discussion of the gene as a discursive carrier of ideological and political material was opened by Ivan Illich, and his colleague Silja Samerski gave a compelling account of how genetic counselling employs the "gene" as a construct which then positions the patient as an agent confronted with life as "risk". The issues raised by Illich and Samerski, which were also discussed in a later panel discussion are crucial for any understanding of what the political stakes are in counterposing "*Geist*" and "*Genes*". Samerski pointed out that, far from indexing a material entity, the "gene" operates much in the manner of "futures" on the stock



market, and Illich then commented that if we want to know what our images of the future are like we could look at the way "genes" are signified. Illich is a theologian, but his current research with the group at Bremen could have been a form of discourse analysis.

Some of the audience for Illich and Samerski on the Sunday afternoon had rushed back to the conference from a demonstration against police repression of the anti-globalisation protests in Gothenburg. A group from the conference had joined the demonstration as a gesture of solidarity with others defending "freedom of thought", and it was also an opportunity to bring debates on mental health politics which had been taking place in the tribunal and the conference out onto the streets. The numbers of people selling the British magazine for democratic psychiatry **Asylum** on the demonstration outnumbered those from the myriad of left groups that were present.

A third parallel event in the same building, the Urania Haus, comprised a film programme which included old favourites like "Shock Corridor", "Family Life" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" as well as more controversial and symptomatic films like Lars von Trier's **The Idiots**. Hundreds of people attended these weekend events and the opening at the Delphi Filmpalast on the Friday evening, where Paulo Coelho (one of the jury for the Tribunal) spoke of his early experiences of mental hospital which prompted him to write his latest bestseller **Veronika decides to die**, and Herbert Fritsch read poems from the Prinzhorn collection, artistic works by mental patients which were paraded as quintessentially "degenerate" by the Nazis. The links between "madness" and creativity appeared as a running theme through the weekend, and expressed, sometimes disturbingly, preoccupations of the main organising group for the events "Irren Offensive".

There were more disturbing things too. Those attending the events were acutely aware that the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Biological Psychiatry was being held in Berlin at the same time, and the press conference announcing the verdict of the Tribunal was also effectively a public protest against the massive resources that are poured into a medical practice that functions mainly as form of social control. The Russell Tribunal lent credibility to a long-standing struggle against psychiatry, and the meetings in Berlin, New York and Jerusalem should be marked now in any serious history of the rise (and fall) of the discipline. The organising group succeeded in persuading the director of the UN representation in Bonn to bring a message of support from Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to the conference and it must now be our task to persuade all those involved in staffing the psychiatric system at least to abide by Article 18 which specifies the right to "freedom of thought". At least.

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