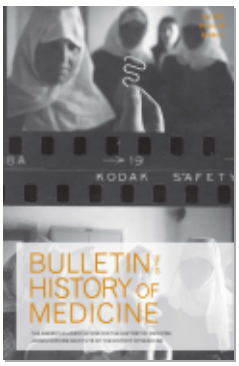
Madness and Enterprise: Psychiatry, Economic Reason, and the Emergence of Pathological Value by Nima Bassiri (review)



Michael N. Healey

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 98, Number 3, Fall 2024, pp. 466-468 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2024.a944550

Beauty and the Brain challenges readers to take phrenology and physiognomy seriously, demonstrating that dismissing them as mere pseudoscience misses their remarkable political, cultural, and social effects in the nineteenth century. Walker shows that marginalized Americans reformulated popular sciences to challenge the status quo, hanging liberatory political hopes on cranial features. But, Walker argues, this engagement ultimately tended to "solidify a broader commitment to . . . the desire to scrutinize people's bodies and scientifically justify existing social distinctions" (p. 198). As detailed in the book's final pages, the persistent appeal of and to physiognomic thinking in popular and scientific discourse suggests that reckoning with this history is worthwhile.

Paul Wolff Mitchell
University of Amsterdam

Nima Bassiri. *Madness and Enterprise: Psychiatry, Economic Reason, and the Emergence of Pathological Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 318 pp. $35.00 (978-0-226-83089-6).

The romanticization of mental illness is nothing new. As the anthropologist Emily Martin has explored, bipolar disorder (or more specifically, its manic manifestations) has often been valued for its creative and productive potential.[1] Similarly, Elizabeth Lunbeck has demonstrated how, in the late twentieth century, Americans began to view narcissism as an economically advantageous trait.[2] As the social theorist Nima Bassiri notes, even Donald Trump (alongside co-author Tony Schwartz) once hailed the virtues of a "controlled neurosis."[3] One need not search long for examples: from the late Steve Job's obsessions to Elon Musk's continued erraticism, our economy seems bound to what Bassiri calls an "entrepreneurial madness" (p. 77). However, in his recent book, *Madness and Enterprise*, he explains how this "pathological value" was discovered much earlier, in the nineteenth-century discourse surrounding eccentrics and other "borderland" figures (p. 29).

While the term is his own, historians of psychiatry should be familiar with these ambiguous individuals: many, including Lunbeck herself, have already demonstrated how the profession expanded its purview by scrutinizing — and ultimately, dissolving — the boundary between insanity and normality.[4] Bassiri adds to this

1. Emily Martin, *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

2. Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of Narcissism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

3. Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 64.

4. Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

discussion, however, by foregrounding the "pivotal hermeneutic crisis" created by this gray area (p. 23). By claiming that psychopathology was often concealed by appropriate behavior, physicians risked exposing their inability to discern mental fitness from their patients' actions. To side-step this issue, Bassiri explains, many began focusing less on the interiority of the mind, and more on the propriety of conduct. Chief among these was the English psychiatrist Charles Mercier, who drew from the neurology of John Hughlings Jackson—and by extension, the evolutionism of Herbert Spencer—to equate mental illness to maladaptation. From this perspective, diagnoses could not be based on the presence of psychiatric symptoms alone. If a person could adjust to their environment—which, then as now, meant a capitalist economy—despite these cognitive divergences, why should they be deemed insane? While conceding that Mercier's views were somewhat radical, Bassiri insists that his "praxiology" was indicative of a broader style of reasoning, one which could construe even the most damaging traits as assets—as long as they were profitable. His account of psychiatry's valorization of enterprise deepens—and challenges—critiques of neoliberalism by Wendy Brown and others, which have placed such trends decades later.[5]

Mercier's functionalism, however, could only imbue some disorders with pathological value, and only in certain contexts. The remainder of *Madness and Enterprise* is devoted to three cases of this economization, each involving a different neuropsychiatric condition. The last of these, that of the "eccentric millionaire" John Chanler, is perhaps the most compelling (p. 188). Epitomizing the entrepreneurial madness described above, this U.S. businessman was institutionalized for claiming prophetic knowledge of the textile industry, only to be praised when his predictions came true. Invoking Trump's political career as a contemporary parallel, Bassiri convincingly demonstrates that pathological value is only afforded to (and indeed, self-consciously accrued by) those already privileged by capitalism—namely, white and affluent men. The same is argued in another chapter, which recounts how neurologists like Jackson explored whether an aphasic could write a will. Bassiri reveals that, despite questioning the testamentary capacities of those with speech disorders, they largely protected the right to preserve family fortunes. It is an intriguing case study, insofar as it explores the mind sciences' complicity in wealth inequality. But it falls short as an example of pathological value: after reading it, I am unconvinced that aphasia itself was economized, at least in the same way that eccentricity was. The chapter on "sinistrosis," a turn-of-the-century diagnosis reserved for workers obsessed with accident insurance, is stronger in this regard: by detailing how this entitlement—and the unemployment it generated—was pathologized, Bassiri effectively explains how "affordances granted to mad enterprisers and propertied aphasics simply did not translate to industrial laborers" (p. 25).

5. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015). See also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-liberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013).

In my view, however, *Madness and Enterprise*'s greatest value lies in its explication of Jackson's thought. Bassiri, of course, is not the first to examine his ideas or their influence; in her 2014 biography of Adolf Meyer, for example, Susan D. Lamb demonstrated how this forerunner of U.S. psychiatry drew from Jackson's neurology (alongside William James and John Dewey's functionalist psychology) to reconceptualize mental illness.[6] Indeed, though he was less reductive than Mercier, Meyer also described psychiatric disorders as maladjustments to the environment—including the economy. And yet, while Bassiri alludes to praxiology's affinity with functionalist psychology, and otherwise gestures toward its wider impact, he does not engage with Lamb's book or related works to examine how the economization of madness contributed to psychiatry's professionalization. There are clear advantages to this approach; by maintaining that this thought style was "not the effect of an institutional impetus, not an explicit program" (p. 13), he is able consider all its "most prominent and palpable iterations," without pinning himself to "specific sites, such as nations, cities, hospitals, schools, and laboratories" (p. 17). Having said that, I cannot help but wonder where a more grounded study could lead. Toward the end of *Madness and Enterprise*, Bassiri concludes that "pathological value is too entrenched a logic in the social body to be simply transformed at the level of institutions or infrastructures" (p. 241). But if we do not analyze the latter, how can we be certain of this? With the clarity his "philosophically inflected history" (p. 227) provides, subsequent research might identify the technologies and infrastructures that have facilitated this economization—and those that have resisted it. By Bassiri's own admission, a functionalism like Mercier's—or Meyer's—need not be limited to a financial calculus; other forms of valuation are possible. It is incumbent upon scholars of the mind sciences, then, to examine how such metrics have been used and abused throughout history, so they can be wielded more intentionally in the present.

Michael N. Healey
University of Rochester

John Keith Henderson. *Arthur Schüller: Founder of Neuroradiology, A Life on Two Continents*. With Michael A. Henderson. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2021. xii + 204 pp. Ill. (978-1-925736-60-1).

Arthur Schüller was born into an affluent Jewish family on December 28, 1874, twenty-one years to the day before Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen published his momentous essay, "On a New Kind of Rays." Schüller attended medical school at the University of Vienna, and in 1902, he began a lifetime of research in neu-

6. Susan D. Lamb, *Pathologist of the Mind: Adolf Meyer and the Origins of American Psychiatry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).