

Asili della Follia: Storie e pratiche di liberazione nei manicomi toscani

edited by Massimo Baioni and Marica Setaro, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2017, 255 pp., €19 (softcover), ISBN: 9788869953651

Mary Gibson

To cite this article: Mary Gibson (2022) Asili della Follia: Storie e pratiche di liberazione nei manicomi toscani, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 27:5, 802-804, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2022.2055365](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2055365)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2055365>



Published online: 21 Apr 2022.



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BOOK REVIEWS

Asili della Follia: Storie e pratiche di liberazione nei manicomi toscani, edited by Massimo Baioni and Marica Setaro, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2017, 255 pp., €19 (softcover), ISBN: 9788869953651

In 1978, Italy became the first nation to pass a law mandating the closure of all civil mental asylums and the re-integration of patients back into their communities. The inspiration for this radical break in mental health policy is historically associated with Franco Basaglia, the asylum director who experimented with removing physical restraints on his patients in Gorizia during the 1960s and subsequently led the national movement for de-institutionalization. Yet Basaglia was not alone in pursuing innovative strategies of treatment in the 1970s according to *Asili della follia: Storie e pratiche di liberazione nei manicomi toscani*, edited by Massimo Baioni and Marica Setaro. The thirteen essays in this volume analyse parallel reform movements in Tuscany, particularly at the asylum in Arezzo, which predated the 'Basaglia Law'.

Several factors contributed to Tuscany's anticipation of what would become a national trend. First, mental hospitals were increasingly staffed by young doctors, many of whom had studied abroad or had been influenced by radical theoretical works of the 1960s such as *Asylums* by Erving Goffman, *Madness and Civilization* by Michel Foucault, and *The Myth of Mental Illness* by Thomas Szasz. The enthusiasm for change from the medical staff was welcomed at the top by several progressive asylum directors such as Domenico Gherarducci at Lucca and Agostino Pirella at Arezzo. Pirella, who had worked with Basaglia in Gorizia, receives particular attention and admiration in this volume centered on the process of de-institutionalization of mental health services in Arezzo. Secondly, Tuscany lay in the 'red belt' of Italy where the Left dominated municipal governments. These Communist and Socialist administrators were particularly receptive to innovative strategies in public health and worked closely with doctors to re-envision mental asylums as open institutions. The public also participated actively in breaking down the barriers between the inside and outside by attending conferences where local political officials, doctors, and even patients discussed proposals for radically transforming psychiatric care.

This book of essays is divided into two parts, the first of which focuses largely on the different types of sources being employed by a working group of scholars offering an interdisciplinary perspective on the history and eventual closing of the mental hospital at Arezzo. In the first article, which functions as an introduction, Valeria Babini offers historical background for the other, more narrowly-focused contributions. The author of *Liberi tutti (Free Everyone)*, the most authoritative history of twentieth-century Italian psychiatry, Babini interprets post-war comparisons of mental asylums to concentration camps as consistent with the principles of the Constitution of 1946, which promised full and equal rights of citizenship to all Italians. In the second essay,

Silvia Calamai and Francesca Biliotti reconstruct the fascinating linguistic story of one important source, the oral histories collected in 1977 by the celebrated historian Anna Maria Bruzzoni at the Arezzo asylum. By comparing the transcripts with the original tapes, which they were the first to locate, the authors pinpoint the importance of hearing the rhythm and inflections of the patients' voices as they describe their lives before and after hospitalization. In the third essay, Marica Setaro singles out the long clinical record of one patient who, admitted as a child in 1913, passed most of her life within the walls of the same mental hospital. Her chart reveals the stereotypical terms – such as idiotic, deficient, and imbecilic – used to describe interned girls, who often remained in asylums for life without benefitting from any specialized treatment.

In a comprehensive analysis of 'art therapy', Sabrina Picchiami, Paolo Torriti, and Gabriele Bartolini place the experience at Arezzo within the international movement to introduce creative expression into mental hospitals as both a diagnostic tool and as a pathway to opening communication with patients. At Arezzo, a school of painting and design flourished from 1958 until the early 1980s in which students, although possessing no formal training, created works clearly influenced by memories of modern art movements. In the following chapter, Laura Occhini singles out death registers as valuable sources for examining the role of chaplains over the life of the Arezzo hospital. Often in a conflictual relationship with the medical staff, chaplains gave the last rites and therefore held the undisputed role of filling out the death registers, which document not only mortality rates but also their often dismissive views of mental patients. With a similar focus on Arezzo, Sebastiano Roberto analyses the pioneering architectural changes initiated by Arnaldo Pieraccini to begin to free patients from lives of restraint. After his appointment as asylum director in 1904, he received national attention for removing doors, allowing patients to work outside in gardens, and, during the 1920s, opening an innovative outpatient clinic for community residents.

The second half of the book compares the experience of Arezzo with that of other Tuscan cities before and after the passage of the Basaglia law. In the first essay, Chiara Fantozzi traces the evolution of the large asylum in Volterra, which constituted a type of 'village' attracting patients from all over Italy. The prime movers of reform were the workers who, after striking in 1967, collaborated with union officials, administrators, and young doctors to initiate a school for psychiatric nurses and to begin decentralizing mental services. In the case of Lucca – which hosted another large asylum, the 'Maggiano' – Renzo Sabbatini and Marco Natalizi pinpoint the beginning of change to the hiring of Domenico Gheraducci as director in 1958. Under his leadership, but in tandem with doctors and nurses, the Maggiano initiated innovative programs in musical therapy and began to prepare patients for returning to life on the outside. Daniele Pulino explicates the leading role of Florence and Arezzo in restoring civil rights to their patients even before the Basaglia law abolished 'dangerousness' (*pericolosità*) as a basis for forceable admission. Such progressive thinking arose from the establishment in 1974 of 'social-health consortiums' in 'red' Tuscany as well as the strength of the Movement for Democratic Psychiatry among doctors. Carlo Orefice also stresses the rethinking of democracy in his essay on the importance of former asylums as

'learning cities' to citizens today. Once places of segregation and separation, these abandoned buildings can now be restored to teach Tuscans about their past.

Returning our attention to Arezzo, Francesca Bianchi uses clinical dossiers to document how admissions were traditionally based on requests from family and neighbors rather than on the medical needs of patients themselves. The stigmatization of impoverished patients, particularly women during persistent questioning about their sexual history, began to change only in the 1970s as patients were increasingly involved in decisions about their treatment. Caterina Pesce focuses on the significant role of Arezzo's provincial administrators in hiring Pirella, who encouraged nurses to 'be together' with patients by replacing observation with listening. As early as 1972, barriers between the hospital and the municipal community were broken down by the establishment of out-patient clinics for local youth and workers. In the final essay, Andrea Ottanelli reconstructs the history of 'le ville Sbertoli', the psychiatric asylum in Pistoia that was founded in the nineteenth century as a private institution for the rich before becoming a state hospital in 1950. Its changing architecture, documented in the essay by an appendix of photographs, correlated with new developments in therapeutic methods and has inspired recent interest in preserving its abandoned buildings.

Because of the diversity of sources used in this collection of articles, Baioni and Setaro's volume will be of interest to not only historians but also scholars in fields as diverse as art, architecture, sociology, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. It makes a persuasive case that the movement to liberate asylum patients predated the more famous Basaglia law in many Tuscan cities. Reforms were achieved by a coalition of groups that included not only doctors but also psychiatric nurses, local political administrators, unions, and civil society outside of hospital walls. The book would have benefitted from a more detailed introduction by the editors explaining the scope of the collaborative research project on the asylum at Arezzo, which is clearly ongoing and accounts for the provisional conclusions of several articles. There is also no mention of the judicial psychiatric hospital (O.P.G.) at Montelupo Fiorentino which, like the other institutions for the criminally insane, was not affected by the Basaglia law and remained open until 2015. Finally, how successful was the Basaglia law in bringing better mental care to Tuscan citizens? The last question, however, is understandably beyond the scope of a book that sets an excellent model for similar research on other provinces.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Mary Gibson

John Jay College and the Graduate Center

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2055365>

