Psychiatry in history
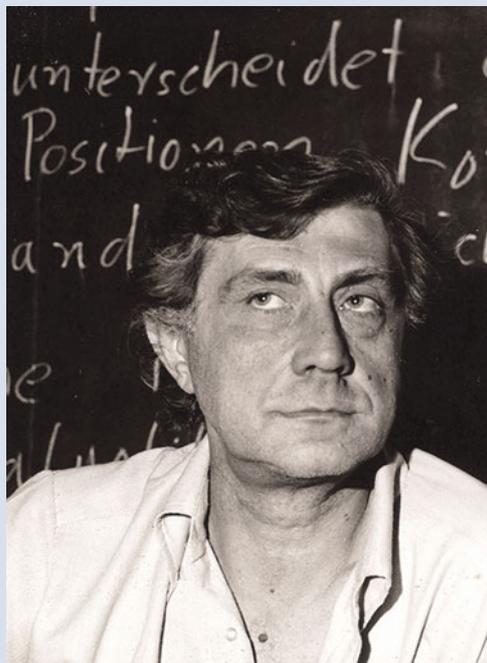
Franco Basaglia (1924–1980): the reformer of the Italian psychiatric system

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Franco Basaglia, Munich 1979. Photograph by Harald Bischoff, reproduced under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en).

This year marks the 100th birthday of the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, born in Venice on 11 March 1924. Basaglia believed that the traditional psychiatric hospitals were anti-therapeutic institutions that threatened the identity of patients. Together with his wife, Franca Ongaro Basaglia (1928–2005), he campaigned for the abolition of the Italian institutional system and the promotion of out-patient psychiatric treatment.

Franco Basaglia studied human medicine at the University of Padua from 1943 to1949. He then specialised in the treatment of nervous and mental illnesses at the same institution. During this time, he focused on psychopathology and phenomenology and studied the writings of Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966), Eugène Minkowski (1885–1972), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). In 1961 Basaglia was appointed as the director of the traditional psychiatric hospital in Gorizia (Friuli-Venezia Giulia). Appalled by the conditions there, he advocated for a fundamental reform of Italian psychiatry. His reform efforts met with resistance from the hospital administration so Basaglia left Gorizia in 1968. He then managed the psychiatric hospital in Colorno (Parma) until 1971, when he took over the management of the psychiatric hospital in Trieste. There he initiated a general deinstitutionalisation of the psychiatric hospital and closed more and more departments. Discharged patients were offered accommodation in newly established mental health centres and residential homes.

In 1974, Basaglia founded Psichiatria Democratica (Democratic Psychiatry). The association's influence led to the passing of Law No. 180 in 1978, which was a milestone in the anti-psychiatry movement for Basaglia. This law granted basic rights to mentally ill people. They were no longer objects that could be treated against their will but were given the status of independent people. Furthermore, Law No. 180 highlighted the benefits of alternative psychiatric care structures that would facilitate the gradual phasing out of traditional psychiatric hospitals. Responsibility for in-patient treatment was assigned to public hospitals, and separate psychiatric wards with a maximum of 15 beds were established for acute patients in municipal and district hospitals. Additionally, community psychiatric services were established to replace the previous predominantly hospital-based care.

The call for change, which was decisively determined by Basaglia's Psichiatria Democratica, was also heard outside Italy. The anti-psychiatry movement reached its peak, particularly in the UK with Ronald D. Laing (1927–1989) and in the USA with Thomas Szasz (1920–2012) and Erving Goffman (1922–1982). In response to the growing voice of this movement, which Basaglia preferred to call 'non-psychiatry', the World Health Organization (WHO) finally intervened in the reform processes. Although supporting the reform movement, the WHO called for the establishment of adequate care alternatives before closing traditional psychiatric hospitals. Basaglia worked in the Lazio region until his death, advocating for alternative psychiatric care until the end. He died on 29 August 1980, in Venice.