

Miracle cures for modern-day woes: The rise of prescription drug use and psychiatric diagnoses

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The novel 'Mary Barton' depicts a 'depressed' working class opium addict and the desperate social environment that fostered his condition. This social analysis contrasts with the current mantra that psychological suffering is a brain disease, characterised by a chemical imbalance, which can be rectified with drugs. The profit-driven proliferation of disorder concepts is described.

MET MARK RAPLEY in 2007, at the conference he organised to mark the retirement of Mary Boyle, and in the few short years I knew him he became an intellectual ally and a good friend. Mark was utterly uncompromising in his criticism of the psy professions, including his own, clinical psychology, and he never spared them from his unflinching turn of phrase. When asked what he thought about the proposals for DSM-5 by an interviewer for the *British Medical Journal*, he said that the man on the Clapham omnibus could do a better job! But deconstructing what he saw as the intellectual morass that modern psychology and psychiatry had sunk into was not his only motivation.

Mark believed deeply in the innate ability of human beings to understand the nature of psychological suffering, and to help both themselves and each other. The gaze of the expert confused and enfeebled people. By imposing technical-sounding vocabulary onto ordinary and familiar experiences, it drove ever increasing areas of human life out of the grasp of the people at large and into the realm of the technical and the esoteric. It alienated people from their own emotions, it deprived them of a sense of ownership over their actions and it destroyed people's inherent, socially-derived knowledge of how to understand and respond to life's tribulations. To use Mark's words, since I cannot better them, the 'mythic language' of 'linguistic contor-

tions' evolved by the mental health industry to delineate its territory has almost destroyed our capacity to talk 'in everyday terms about madness, grief, misery, distress, confusion, hopelessness, craziness, despair and so on through the rich and perfectly well-fitted lexicon of human suffering that the English language provides' (Rapley, Moncrieff & Dillon, 2011, p.5). Mark lived as he thought – he was open, friendly and welcoming to all, he enjoyed a drink or two (or even three!), good food and good conversation; he believed that life was to be enjoyed, and that everyone could and should be entitled to its satisfactions. He is greatly missed.

People have used psychoactive substances to dull and deaden pain, misery and suffering since time immemorial, but only recently, in the last few decades, have people been persuaded that what they are doing in this situation is rightly thought of as taking a remedy for an underlying disease. The spread of the use of prescription drugs has gone hand in hand with the increasing medicalisation of everyday life, and a corresponding loss of the previous relationship that people had with psychoactive substances. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* was originally to be named after Mary's father John Barton, a working class factory hand addicted to opium (Gaskell, 1848). The novel depicts the unimaginable poverty and exploitation of industrial Manchester that made opium-induced oblivion an appealing

