mind, modernity, madness

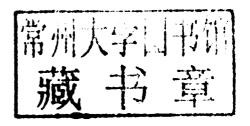
ON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

LIAH GREENFELD

# MIND, MODERNITY, MADNESS

The Impact of Culture on Human Experience

#### **LIAH GREENFELD**



#### HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greenfeld, Liah.

Mind, modernity, madness: the impact of culture on human experience / Liah Greenfeld. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-07276-3

- 1. Mental illness—Social aspects—History. 2. Cultural psychiatry—History.
- 3. Nationalism—Psychological aspects. I. Title.

RC455.G726 2013

616.89—dc23 2012035113

## MIND, MODERNITY, MADNESS

To Gil and Natan Press and to Dr. Victoria Kirshenblatt

## **Acknowledgments**

This book is dedicated to my son, my mother, and my husband.

My son accompanied me on the exploration of medical libraries—spending hours at the copying machine in the freezing lower floor of Boston Countway Library while I read, and making sure I didn't expire in the heat of Bethesda in August as I walked between the National Library of Medicine and the motel in which we bivouacked for the purpose of researching the rarest gems of literature on madness. He also served as my guide to the confused world of American young adulthood, ravaged by this modern disease. In many ways he inspired this project and helped me think through it. In particular, he helped me to arrive at the definition of love.

My mother, a person of most powerful intelligence and iron will, a questioner and a doubter, has been a lifelong example for me of truly independent mind. She dreamt of becoming a physicist, but was forced by the circumstances to become a physician, wanted to be a psychiatrist, but was forced by the circumstances to spend the first two decades of her medical career as a tuberculosis specialist and the last three as a pediatrician. She shared with me her exceptionally broad knowledge of medicine and of Russian and world literature, specifically attracting my attention to the depictions of mental disease. Working on this book, I felt that I was in some way going in the direction in which she might have wished to go, were her circumstances different, and it has been of tremendous importance for me to finish this work while she is still here to know that.

Without my husband this book could not be written simply because I would not be, which says it all.

In the twenty years that passed between the publication of the first book in this trilogy and the third, this, one, I have been fortunate to meet and acquire the friendship of colleagues and students—increasingly students who became colleagues—from many countries and a wide range of disciplines. Together, they now form a vibrant intellectual community (a sort of "invisible college"), truly sustaining for me. In the time that it took this book to gestate, they patiently listened to my first attempts to formulate its argument, read drafts of chapters, asked probing questions, offered critical comments. They include, in alphabetical order, Mike Aronson (my caring Harvard University Press editor), Peter Baehr, Darius Barron, Oliver Benoit, Harold Bursztajn, Katrina Demulling, Francesco Duina, Jonathan Eastwood, Edward Gormbley, George Liber, Charles Lindholm, Eric Malczewski, Dmitri Panchenko, David Phillippi, Nikolas Prevelakis, Nathalie Richard, Chandler Rosenberger, Mark Simes, James Stergios, John Stone, and Chikako Takeishi. I thank them all. I am in particular obliged to Nikolas Prevelakis for the help with the annotation of the first chapter, and to David Phillippi, who read the entire book several times and started a blog to popularize its ideas, and Mark Simes, my official and most excellent assistant, who followed their development from day one, kept me abreast of every piece of news in neuroscience, and helped me to prepare the text for publication. I cannot stress enough how important the belief of all these people in my work has been for me.

## MIND, MODERNITY, MADNESS

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Acknowledgments

The purpose of this book is to make evident that culture is an empirical reality of the first order in human life—that it, in the most profound sense of the word makes us human and defines human experience. Its empirical focus, the area of experience chosen to drive this point home, is the phenomenon for a long time called simply "madness," but today regarded either as three mental diseases—"the big three of contemporary psychiatry":1 schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression—or as the two varieties of psychotic disorder with unknown organic basis: schizophrenia and manic-depressive affective illness (which includes major depression). There are very good reasons for this choice. Schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness are the most severe mental diseases whose biological reality and life-threatening effects are undeniable. Schizophrenia is referred to as "the cancer of the mind," and suicide in the Western world in the vast majority of cases is believed to result from depression. Proving that these biologically real diseases are culturally caused, that they are products of culture which is what the book argues—would demonstrate the impact of culture on human experience in the seemingly most unlikely case and make selfevident its influence in other spheres of life, such as economics and politics, for instance, in which, though largely disputed, it has been arguable.

Being, generally speaking, a book about the impact of culture on the human mind, it is, more specifically, one about the ways *modern* culture shapes the mind. Even more specifically, it is a book about the role of

national consciousness—which forms the framework of modern culture—in causing psychiatry's "big three." Thus, though it stands on its own, it forms the concluding volume of the trilogy on nationalism, the first two volumes of which are *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* and *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth.*<sup>2</sup>

In addition to extending the discussion of the effects of nationalism from the public sphere, in which political and economic activities take place, into the most personal corners of existential experience, this concluding volume spells out the philosophical and theoretical principles underlying the argument of the entire trilogy and, in particular, explains what makes historical evidence empirical in precisely the sense in which evidence drawn upon in biology and physics is empirical, allowing one to place historical and sociological accounts of human affairs in the same epistemic category: i.e., within science. It explains, in other words, why historical phenomena, while being different in kind, lend themselves no less than biological and physical phenomena (which are also different in kind from each other) to empirical and logical analysis, which, like such analysis in other areas of study, can lead to the accumulation of objective knowledge.

### The Argument and Its Provenance

The central argument of this book connects in a causal relationship the cultural phenomenon of nationalism and psychiatric diseases of unknown etiology: schizophrenia, manic depression, and major unipolar depression. These diseases are the *explanans*, the effect, and nationalism is the *explanandum*, the cause. Nationalism is understood in the terms developed in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* and applied in *The Spirit of Capitalism*. It is a form of consciousness, an essentially secular view of reality, whose socio-political component rests on the principles of fundamental equality of membership in a community and popular sovereignty. As I hope I have demonstrated in *Nationalism* and *The Spirit of Capitalism*, this consciousness forms the cultural framework of modern society: the vision of reality it implies represents the very core of modern culture and is reflected in all the characteristic institutions of modernity, including the open system of stratification, the impersonal—state—form of govern-

ment, and the economy oriented to sustained growth. Indeed, it is called "nationalism" because the ideal of society it presupposes was named by the sixteenth-century Englishmen, who first conceived of it, "nation." The essence of this ideal is the demand for the embodiment of two principles: the principles of fundamental equality of membership and of popular sovereignty; the nation, in other words, is defined as a community of equals and as sovereign. Equality in shared sovereignty may be interpreted as individual liberty, and was so interpreted in England as well as in societies that closely modeled their nationalism on its example later. But equality could also be interpreted as collective independence from foreign domination. In either case, equality changes the nature of the individual identity, specifically endowing identity with dignity irrespective of personal circumstances, changes, therefore, the nature of social hierarchy, and at least to some extent makes one's position in it a matter of individual choice. At the same time, popular sovereignty, which makes an earthly community the source of all law, drastically diminishes the importance of transcendental forces—of God, above all—in human life. The importance of human life grows proportionately, and before long the transcendental sphere fades from view and man (and eventually woman too) emerges as one's own maker. It is in this broad and historically accurate sense that the term "nationalism" is used in this book, not in the popular connotation of a variety of xenophobia, which is but an aspect of certain nationalisms. Please keep this in mind.

It is obvious that this dramatic transformation in the image of reality, i.e., in how one thinks about it, must significantly affect the nature of existential experience—the very way life is lived and felt. This is what happened in fact. Already in its early days, nationalism contributed greatly to the human emotional repertoire, adding to it such heretofore—unknown emotions as ambition, aspiration, and, remarkably, happiness and romantic love. With this it changed both the reasons for and the experience of suffering.<sup>3</sup> Of course, its effects, positive and negative, were at first limited to England. There a new malaise emerged in the early sixteenth century. It was recognized as a mental disease, but appeared so different from all the known mental diseases that none of the terms of the extensive existing vocabulary (medical or general) were judged adequate to capture it. By the 1530s new words were invented, the strange ailment was named

"madness" or "lunacy"; four centuries later German psychiatrists would divide it into two separate diseases, naming them "schizophrenia" and "manic-depressive illness."

In England madness was spreading quickly throughout the sixteenth century, by the end of it being considered—as we learn from Hamlet—a special mark of English society. In the seventeenth century madness was observed in the rest of Great Britain and in the English colonies overseas, but was as yet completely unknown in Continental Europe. Visitors from foreign parts considered it an object of great curiosity and called it "the English malady." However, when nationalism developed in France by the end of the eighteenth century, madness arrived there too, and later—with nationalism—spread to the German principalities and to Russia. At first in all these countries it affected almost exclusively the elites—people who actually enjoyed the dignity, the liberty, and choice implied in the national consciousness. As the values of nationalism penetrated deeper into the masses of the population, insanity (the word is another early synonym for "madness"), too, became proportionately far-reaching. In the nineteenth century the rates of insanity increased as the national society became more inclusive, as new groups gained membership in the community of equals, and as more choices became available to more people.

Why do the secular focus of nationalism and the two principles embodied in the society constructed on its basis lead to madness—or schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness? All three of these features place the individual in control of his or her destiny, eliminating the expectation of putting things right in the afterlife, making one the ultimate authority in deciding on one's priorities, encouraging one to strive for a higher social status (since one is presumed to be equal to everyone, but one wants to be equal only to those who are superior), and giving one the right to choose one's social position (since the presumption of fundamental equality makes everyone interchangeable) and therefore identity. But this very liberty, implied in nationalism, both empowering and encouraging the individual to choose what to be—in contrast to all the religious pre-national societies in which no one was asked "what do you want to be when you grow up?" since one was whatever one was born-makes the formation of the individual identity problematic, and the more so the more choices for the definition of one's identity a society offers and the more insistent it is on

equality. A clear sense of identity being a condition sine qua non for adequate mental functioning, malformation of identity leads to mental disease, but modern culture cannot help the individual to acquire such clear sense, it is inherently confusing. This cultural insufficiency—the inability of a culture to provide individuals within it with consistent guidance—was named *anomie* by Durkheim.

Though realized in vastly different ways (depending on the manner in which this form of consciousness developed in a particular society), the three principles of nationalism—secularism, egalitarianism, and popular sovereignty—affect the formation of the individual identity in nations necessarily. A member of a nation can no longer learn who or what she or he is from the environment, as would an individual growing up in an essentially religious and rigidly stratified, nonegalitarian order, where everyone's position and behavior are defined by birth and divine providence. Beyond the very general category of nationality, a modern individual must decide what s/he is and should do, and thus construct one's identity oneself. Schizophrenia and depressive (bipolar and unipolar) illnesses, I argue, are caused specifically by the values of equality and selfrealization, which make every individual one's own maker—and the rates of such mental diseases increase in accordance with the extent to which a particular society is devoted to these values, inherent in the nationalist image of reality, i.e., in the national consciousness, and the scope allowed to the freedom of choice in it. This turns the prevailing view of the mental diseases in question upside down.

The argument implies, above all, that, while there may be biological predispositions, genetic or other, which influence who succumbs to this disease and who does not, the disease itself is not a disease of the body (the brain), but of thinking—it is truly a disease of the mind. The agent of the disease—the functional equivalent of AIDS's HIV, or malaria's mosquito—is not physical, but cultural, in other words. Though opposition to the prevailing biological view is not unheard of and the voices against it at times even combine in a small choir—the week I am writing this an extended comment on recent books by three reputable authors experienced in dealing with mental illness appears in the *New York Review of Books*; each of them, despite differences in emphasis, "subscribes to the popular theory that mental illness is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain"—

nobody has yet offered an alternative explanation that could stand scientific scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> The undisputed authority of the biological paradigm in general may make the present argument appear quite controversial. Of course, the claims advanced by the two previous books on which it builds, too, appeared controversial at the times of their publication and came to be regarded as far less controversial since then. I therefore expect that the same will happen to this third, admittedly even more unusual, argument in the natural course of things. But I am getting older and feel that the natural course of things often takes too long, and I also think that it is incumbent on me—in this concluding articulation of the interpretation of nationalism and modernity, developed over two decades of research on modern experience—to locate the entire project amid existing traditions and areas of study with which the reader may be familiar and thereby save some unnecessary discomfort.

The subject of this book—culture—places it within general, theoretical anthropology and sociology, as well as within theory or philosophy of culture, if these can be separated. Its specific preoccupation with nationalism and modern culture makes it a book in historical sociology, which is but a form of history, while the focus on psychiatric illness necessarily connects it to the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and even neuroscience. It is relevant to all these areas of research and belongs within none of them exclusively, just as The Spirit of Capitalism was relevant to economics, intellectual history, economic history, political economy, and sociological theory, but belonged exclusively within none of these specializations; and Nationalism was relevant to comparative politics, history, sociological theory, and history and sociology of science, literature, and religion, among other fields of expertise, without falling exclusively within any of them. Like the previous two books, this book seeks to connect all these areas of human experience, contributing to the study of all of them and the construction of a unified science of humanity. My position on this matter is well summarized by a pioneering French psychiatrist, Jules Baillarger, who will figure in one of the chapters below: "Man is one, despite the distinct elements of which he is formed. In a marvelous manner combine in him the . . . forces, which can be conceived in isolation only outside him." Thus it is, inevitably, also a book in philosophy.

Its methodology, which, in general, is guided by the rules of the scientific method of conjectures and refutations,6 namely, of logical formulations of hypotheses then methodically tested against empirical evidence (i.e., tested against all the available relevant evidence), follows the lead of three giants of the human sciences, who were also philosophers among other things: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Marc Bloch, alternately claimed by anthropology and sociology; sociology, cultural history and economic history; and history and sociology. Specifically, it adopts Durkheim's "rules" of treating every social fact as a thing and of careful, unprejudiced definitions as the first step in attempting any explanation, and combines these with Weber's "methodological individualism." From Bloch it takes the distinction between "intentional" and "unintentional" evidence, and the preference for the latter (sources not intentionally related to the phenomenon one seeks to explain, and serving, as it were, as "witnesses in spite of themselves"); the tactic of cross-examining the evidence—or juxtaposing it at every point with evidence derived from elsewhere; and the reliance on language as both evidence and an instrument of analysis.8 Durkheim, Weber, and Bloch (I list them chronologically) are unassailable authorities in the social sciences. But, quite apart from the fact that their major theories, all of which treated social—namely, cultural, economic, political phenomena of great importance, though proposed a very long time ago if measured in life spans of theories in science, have not been superseded, but retain a canonical status for anyone wishing to work in the areas to which they pertain, I rely on them because all three also thought of a unified science of man (or human sciences), and defined it, whether they referred to it as "sociology," as did Durkheim, "history," as did Bloch, or sometimes "history" and sometimes "sociology," as did Weber, as the mental science. This may be lost in translation when Durkheim's use of the word "mental" in French is rendered "social" in English, or glossed over in the case of Weber's insistence on subjective meaning as the defining feature of social action. But in Bloch's explicit formulation it cannot be missed. "In the last analysis," he says, "it is human consciousness which is the subject-matter of history. The interrelations, confusions, and infections of human consciousness are, for history, reality itself." I consider myself belonging to the same "mentalist" tradition in the human sciences. 10

Of the three classics, Durkheim, it will be easily seen, is most prominently present in these pages. This is not only because, not wishing to discriminate between the two founding fathers of my official discipline and eager to pay filial homage to both, I had to privilege him, having done so for Weber in my previous book. It can even be argued that this project continues the project of Durkheim begun in Suicide. Durkheim chose to focus on suicide, of all acts the most personal, most individual, and seemingly independent from social influences, to demonstrate the empirical, and yet not material, reality of society (reality consisting mostly of mental "collective representations") and its priority over the psychology of the individual, embedded in human biological reality. Similarly, focusing on the admittedly biologically real diseases of schizophrenia and manic depression and offering a cultural, historical explanation of a significant health problem, I sought to demonstrate in a most dramatic manner the reality of the symbolic, nonmaterial factors and their profound, allpervading effect on human life.

Of course, intellectual filiation is not as simple as that. One does not begin with selecting an authority to follow (at least, I don't) and then model one's project on the example of that authority. The project, rather, forms in one's mind, inspired by whatever else is going on there (for instance, one's other projects, or thinking about other, non- work-related events in one's life), and then spontaneously connects to the examples of similar projects stored in one's memory, which, from that moment on, become an important point of reference. But, in my case, Durkheim's presence, nevertheless, may be said to be over-determined, because it is from him that I have borrowed—some twenty-five years ago already—my central explanatory concept: anomie. A condition of structural inconsistency, that is, a systemic inconsistency among collective representations, anomie directly affects individual experience, creating profound psychological discomfort. This discomfort motivates participants in a given social situation to resolve the bothersome inconsistency. Therefore, the concept encompasses the most generally applicable theory of social change, a theory, moreover, which is the only one to lend itself easily to the probe by empirical evidence, because it points to the (psychological) mechanisms that connect the cause and effect in any particular case. Anomie was central in my explanation of the emergence of nationalism in Nationalism, and it was the