Anthony Comegna (00:19):

Welcome back everybody to another week of Ideas in Progress, where we are continuing my conversation with Murray State's professor of psychology, Sean rife. This week, we'll dive more into the readings, including the great Erving Goffman's book, Asylums, which details and critiques, what he calls total institutions. I bring this up in the intro mainly because I fear that total institutions may be making a serious comeback in the current set of crises that have made up calendar year 2020. Just think, for example, about the somewhat panopticonic nature of the Twitterverse or the now infamous NBA Bubble village over at Disney world.

Anthony Comegna (01:01):

And shifting to our other main subject, Thomas Szasz, consider the medicalization of our entire lives over the past half year now. As I said last week, and it remains a bittersweet fact, there was probably no better timing possible for us to host this kind of event. That's how significant the topic is in combination with present circumstances. And with that in mind, let's jump straight to part two of my interview with discussion leader, Sean Rife.

Anthony Comegna (01:42):

So, after our last episode, you brought up Thomas Szasz and Saz, Zaz, Sas, it's a hard one for me.

Sean Rife (01:50):

Szasz is how I normally pronounce it. I've heard it other ways too, but it's one of those things that you read much more often than you say. So, I'm just going to go with [crosstalk 00:02:02].

Anthony Comegna (02:00):

He's Hungarian, right? Isn't that his-

Sean Rife (02:01):

Yeah, I believe so. Yes. I believe Czech or Polish. Hang on a second. [inaudible 00:02:11]. Yeah.

Anthony Comegna (02:08):

Something like that. So, I really want to focus then on the... Like we were saying before, when you and I were kind of brainstorming what material to put in the reader, you mentioned Erving Goffman and Thomas Szasz. And I had heard of Szasz, of course, Saz, but I'd never read any of his work. I was slightly familiar with his argument, but not fully. So, it was great to read up on that and actually wrestle with it. I thought it was very, very challenging material, but yet totally in line with a lot of my own training as a historian, after that sort of new left turn in the 1960s and postmodernism. It strikes me as a very kind of postmodernist reading list and a lot of ways. So, I want to focus in on those two figures, Goffman and Szasz. So first, tell us about Erving Goffman, who was this guy? He was a sociologist, I believe. Right? And what about this book, Asylums, that we read essays from, how did that book come to be?

Sean Rife (03:12):

Yeah, so it's a collection of essays. Goffman was a sociologist. He was an early, what we now call a social psychologist, but within sociology. So, social psychologists within the field of psychology like me, we focus very much sort of on experimentation, the scientific method, manipulation of variables. Within sociology there's a subfield called social psychology that's a lot more sort of theoretical. It's much more

about sort of the interactions between individuals. There's a whole set of theories called symbolic interaction, which is just about how we make meaning out of our interactions. And Goffman is of that trend in sociology.

Sean Rife (03:57):

Basically, what he's doing is he's defining this thing that he calls a total institution. And a total institution is an institution wherein every aspect of your life is sort of dictated to you by others. So the the classical examples would be prisoners and mental patients who are in a psychiatric facility of some kind. And he makes a lot of observations about the lives of these individuals and how they interact with their environment and how that is used in different ways to sort of recharacterize their illness, sort of criticizing this idea more broadly, that these institutions are therapeutic for the people who reside in them. And I think that leads naturally, it's not direct, but it leads naturally to a question about the validity of the state being able to involuntarily commit someone. So, I think that's a really good sort of lead in to the Szaszian critique. And in fact, he cites Szasz a number of times. So I think of those readings as really going together really well.

Anthony Comegna (05:10):

How influential is he still?

Sean Rife (05:14):

Goffman within sociology is certainly widely read. And certainly, along the way, I picked up a second master's degree in sociology and we read a fair amount of Goffman. And I took some elective classes where we read Goffman. I think he's certainly less influential in my mind in terms of early theorists or classical theorists, obviously Carl Marx and Max Weber are the, I think, probably two of the favorites. But in terms of people coming along in the mid-twentieth century, I think he is definitely one of the top figures in the field.

Anthony Comegna (05:53):

I'd really like to hear more about how... I mean, he kind of tells the story in the book, so I'm personally more familiar with it, but it'd be great to hear about how this project of Asylums, which is a collection of essays came together and specifically, how his practice as a sociologist translated into this sort of a book.

Sean Rife (06:15):

Yeah. So... I'm sorry, you're talking about just how the project, the collection of essays itself came together? Is that-

Anthony Comegna (06:25):

Yeah. The methods that he used to get at the knowledge that he did.

Sean Rife (06:30):

Yeah. So, Goffman is doing some work with the NIMH, the National Institute of Mental Health. And this is in the mid-fifties. And he becomes really interested in questions about, he uses this term "inmates", persons who are under psychiatric care. And he begins doing some field work at a hospital, I believe St. Elizabeth's and employees some degree of what we might call an ethnography, sort of just observing

persons in the environment of interest. And he makes a point, actually, that he comes to it with no real use for the discipline of psychiatry or agencies. He comes, I think, as a pretty skeptical person to this set of observations. But he actually notes that the people that he works with as part of this collaboration, he seems to be fairly clear that they exerted no censorship over his work. And it seems to have been a very useful collaboration, I think, for all involved.

Anthony Comegna ([07:43](#)):

And tell us a little more about this term, total institutions. What exactly does that mean? And what kinds of examples does he discuss?

Sean Rife ([07:53](#)):

Yeah, so a total institution is an institution in which... In fact, I'll read right here because I pulled up the book while we were talking. "A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." And the examples that he cites, the clearest example would be a prison. But of course, you can make arguments about, well, is serving in the military, is the military a total institution? In our discussion at the colloquium, a number of people suggested that marriage was a total institution, which seems a bit cynical even for me. I'm relatively happily married so I wouldn't imagine thinking of my marriage as a total institution, but I suppose you can make the argument.

Anthony Comegna ([08:50](#)):

Real quick. That's particularly interesting to me because William Godwin and his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, the notorious feminist author, they maintained separate domiciles. So, they did actually-

Sean Rife ([09:04](#)):

I did not know that.

Anthony Comegna ([09:06](#)):

Yeah, yeah. They definitely did not have a total marriage in that sense.

Sean Rife ([09:10](#)):

Oh, very interesting. Very interesting. Yeah. I think that one of the key elements of a total institution is your ability to leave said institution. I think that we sometimes forget that's a key component. It's not just about controlling all of your life, but it's your ability to exit that arrangement when you wish to do so.

Anthony Comegna ([09:35](#)):

And also during the discussion monasteries came up.

Sean Rife ([09:40](#)):

Yeah, yeah, sure.

Anthony Comegna ([09:41](#)):

Some folks had trouble with that. What's your assessment of whether monasteries count?

Sean Rife (09:46):

So again, for me, it comes back to this question of whether or not you can voluntarily exit the arrangement. So if you are in a commitment to a monastery that does not allow you to leave, then I suppose that would very easily, in my mind, that would count. But then, I'm not sufficiently well versed in the various arrangement of monasteries, from my understanding is you can leave at any time you wish, at least in the Catholic tradition. So, that to me is sort of where you draw that dividing line. People will debate whether or not that's an appropriate understanding of a total institution. And I think that the key things that at least Goffman is concerned with really don't make sense if you can just voluntarily exit the arrangement.

Anthony Comegna (10:43):

I guess this is a little bit of pushback here because to... I mean, I take your point about the freedom to exit. I think that, absolutely, is a crucial component here. But then there also seems to be considerations for just how much of your life and your selfhood you give over either forcibly or voluntarily to this institution.

Sean Rife (11:05):

Yeah, no. I mean, you can certainly look at the internal arrangements of any total institution and in a coherent way say, well, because all of the elements of a person's life are dictated to them by those circumstances that that counts. And there's definitely something to be said there. I guess, for me, the reason that I locate that ability to exit as being so important is because that ability to opt-out makes those controls, in some sense, less than total. Because you always do have the option, right. And honestly, this is something I'm just sort of thinking through, this is something that up during the colloquium and we talked about a little bit. And I think that opinion from the members of the discussion was pretty mixed. Some people were on board with that, some people weren't.

Anthony Comegna (12:06):

It also sort of strikes me as maybe of a potential problem here. Well, see, I'm curious as to what influence Goffman might've had across other disciplines. So, a lot of this rings to me like Foucault, talking about the history of mental health and power and punishment and how all these categories change over time. Of course, that's taken us up forward to Szasz too. A paradigm case of a total institution might be say plantation slavery. And yet, as historians discovered in the 1970s, people like Eugene Genovese, slaves were constantly carving out room for themselves to do what they wanted whenever the master or the overseer wasn't around. So, I'm not quite sure how total even some of these total institutions really are.

Sean Rife (13:03):

Yeah. So, I guess, two things on that, I think part of it just speaks to the inability to exert complete control over any person or any group of people. You see this, I mean, informal arrangements of governance. And carving out of spaces to engage in relatively private or separate behavior, that occurs all the time in prisons. So, the idea that you can completely control any person or group of people I think is fantasy. This is just sort of talking about the total institution maybe as sort of a platonic ideal rather than the actual thing.

Sean Rife (13:47):

In terms of the impact that Goffman and you mentioned Foucault, I think that's a great intersection. There's a whole series of people who basically, starting in the sixties, are starting to question the large scale institutionalization of the mentally ill. This is at the peak in the United States, sort of at the peak of institutionalization. When it was most commonly practiced, you had large numbers of people who were often locked up for their entire lives. And Goffman is one of a number of people who are starting to push back on the idea that that is not just not a bad practice and certainly not therapeutic, but actually has a lot of negative impacts for the people who are being institutionalized as well as for society as a whole.

Anthony Comegna (14:38):

Let's spend the rest of our time here talking about the Szasz because, like I said, I found his contributions to this reading list really, really fascinating. Walk us through the argument that mental illness is a myth.

Sean Rife (14:55):

Right. So, this is the first of what I think of as Szasz's two lines of thought. What he's arguing is that mental illness is different than other types of what we normally think of as physical illness because it locates problems within the mind, and here we come back to dualism again, rather than in the body. For Szasz, he wants to see what he calls a lesion, he wants to see some sort of abnormal, organic development on the effected person. He wants to be able to dissect the effected corpse and point to a thing and say, "That's where the problem was. That's the tumor. That's the location of the infarction. That's the person's heart. They had a heart attack, where is that problem located?" "Well, it's in the heart."

Sean Rife (15:50):

We don't do any of that in psychiatry or psychology. People try to do it in neuroscience. And for a while there, there was the assumption that once we know enough about the human genome and once we know enough about the brain, we'll be able to map neural structures and neural networks and levels of neurotransmitters, we'll be able to map those directly on to identified mental disorders. And I have a colleague who likes to say, "That check's been in the mail for a really long time." It just has not happened and I don't think that anyone really today or in the past, since maybe 10 years ago, has really thought that was a serious hypothesis or a serious possibility for anything in the near future.

Sean Rife (16:43):

So, for Szasz the main critique here is that we're talking about clusters of behaviors or clusters of cognitions, not something that we can point to and say, "There, physically, is the organ that has gone wrong." And for him, that makes mental illness ontologically suspect, we'll say, to say the least. I think he would use much stronger language, but for me I'm sort of a weak Szaszian and so I say it's at least ontologically suspect.

Anthony Comegna (17:17):

Yeah. It seemed like he was saying more that, it's a problem of labeling, right? We just want to label aberrant behavior, things that go against the norm as some sort of illness. And this is sort of where I see him as part of postmodernism in a way, at least. I don't know if he or you would locate him there, but it really struck me that way, that there's a lot of deconstruction going on in his thoughts.

Sean Rife (17:44):

Yeah. I don't know that I've read any sort of self-identification in Szasz where he identifies himself as a postmodernist. I think the pushback that I would have to that is the fact that he has no problem... He's not interested, necessarily, in deconstructing physical illness, he's interested in constructing mental illness. And that makes a lot of sense, mental illness is right for deconstruction because it is... And I'm sorry to say this... but it is very poorly defined.

Sean Rife (18:17):

I mean, you see this in the history of the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases and Disorders. Today, it's a very large book that's put out by the American Psychiatric Association that lists all of the diagnostic codes and criteria for all of these different disorders. And it gives a very sort of scientific patina to something that is, at its heart, very not scientific. So, it is definitely ripe for deconstruction. And I think that the attempts to make mental illness just like any other medical disorder are probably probably wrongheaded, they're always going to bump up against this really strong deconstruction that you point out from people like Szasz and people who follow in that tradition.

Anthony Comegna (19:11):

Do we know anything, by the way, about the politics of these two men, Goffman and Szasz? Because I was here, Szasz listed as a libertarian or at least libertarian-ish, but I actually don't know anything about his personal biography in this regard.

Sean Rife (19:30):

Yeah, no, Szasz definitely did self-identify as a libertarian and Goffman it's a bit more ambiguous. But Szasz was very self-aware and very much promoting the ideals of individual liberty. And you saw that, I mean, he brings that in a really strong way to his discussions of mental illness, because he talks about how the interactions... Because he didn't believe that psychiatry didn't have a function, I mean, he was himself a psychiatrist and he did actually treat people. But he was of the opinion that those interactions should be entered into freely. For him, the major issue is with the state's ability to mandate treatment or to force people into these institutions. That's his major problem. Like I said, with Goffman, I think it's a little more ambiguous, he was an old school liberal, I think is probably my best description of him.

Anthony Comegna (20:27):

It still definitely strikes me that Goffman would be an individualist too.

Sean Rife (20:32):

Yeah and actually when I think about his contribution to the field of sociology, that is probably the aspect... This is one of the reasons why sort of symbolic interactionism, which is one of the theoretical constructs within sociology, probably gets less attention because as a whole, it is a much more collectivistic field.

Anthony Comegna (20:57):

Now, given that even you call yourself a weak Szaszian, Saszian, so I am at least a little bit aware that there's a lot of scorn and hatred thrown around for Szasz in the field as a whole. But nonetheless, it seems like he has a pretty outsized influence in generating discussion and certainly controversy among psychologists. Could you tell us a little bit about that dynamic?

Sean Rife ([21:29](#)):

Yeah. So, I mean, Szasz among clinical psychologists and psychiatrists is not well-liked, but you can see his impact. So, relatively recently, in the past decade, have seen a new edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, that DSM edition, the fifth edition, has come out. And it was a very controversial process. And on multiple occasions, you saw people who were developing the manual accuse their critics of being Szaszian or invoking Szasz's arguments in their work. So in that sense, I kind of feel like, well, they "doth protest too much" to say that he's just not worth dealing with.

Sean Rife ([22:23](#)):

I think that people who are more aware or more willing to be intellectually honest about it will say that the diagnoses that we have come up with are probably best thought of as useful fictions, they're linguistic devices that we use to communicate with other practitioners and to talk about different disorders, but they're not the same as cancer, say, they are something else. And I think that that recognition, we get the sort of best version of that sort of full throated recognition in Szasz.

Sean Rife ([23:08](#)):

He goes too far. And this is... I often say Szasz's worst enemy is Szasz. He goes too far when he starts talking about... One thing that was brought up routinely in our conversation about him on Friday was that, well, he said that mental illness didn't exist before unemployment was recognized. And that's just not a thing that any reasonable person would argue. So, he gets himself into a lot of trouble as result. But that doesn't mean... A person can be right and wrong at the same time about different issues. And then, that's what we have to do with him, we have to unpack that and accept the good and ditch the bad

Anthony Comegna ([23:49](#)):

To wrap us up here, I'm wondering, what were some of the main... Because again, the discussion leader doesn't necessarily take a large part in the actual flow of discussion. So, I'm wondering, for you as a practicing social psychologists here, what were some of the main intellectual takeaways from the shape of the discussion that you're going to go out and continue thinking about and maybe researching more?

Sean Rife ([24:15](#)):

Yeah, so definitely. I mean, the thing that I've been thinking about most, I guess, over the weekend, since the colloquium, has been the role of dualism in shaping how we think about these questions. And like I said, you can draw that line all the way through Goffman and Szasz making that connection and questioning whether or not... Again, if it's not sort of empirically the case, but if it is, again, sort of a useful way of thinking about the human experience, I think that's definitely an interesting question. And then, how that relates to our willingness to surrender our rights to the state.

Sean Rife ([25:02](#)):

So, does it make sense or is it appropriate to physically constrain or imprison the body for things that are wrong with the mind? And I think that's not a question that a lot... Or people haven't thought about that question very vocally, because it's a very abstract sort of philosophical notion. But that brings us to a lot of questions about, well, how suspect is that power? I mean, Szasz does make this point, he says, as long as involuntary commitment exists, voluntary commitment will be an illusion. Because of course, if you don't voluntarily commit yourself, the state will do it for you, was kind of his argument. And I think that

that question of how we think about dualism and how that connects to state power is really one of the most important takeaways that I got from the conversation, mostly because it was something that I think was in some way mentioned in every single session.

Anthony Comegna (26:09):

All right. I want to give the very greatest thanks possible, from this show and on the part of IHS as a whole, to professor Sean Rife for taking part in this program, for helping me to construct the reading list and for doing really such a bang-up job at leading the discussion and letting our graduate students benefit from his expertise and insights. The program was a fantastic success and I got the distinct feeling that everyone involved benefited from it tremendously. Not just in academic terms either, but as real individuals who need precisely these kinds of events to connect together and find greater meaning and purpose in their lives. Academia can already be isolating and even depressing for some of us, perhaps, especially for classical liberals who often occupy that black sheep role in their departments we heard about from Crispin Sartwell a few weeks ago.

Anthony Comegna (27:07):

And in many ways, these are the very worst times to be in graduate school. We all have to take responsibility for caring for ourselves and each other. And in my mind at least, there's no question that better mental health means greater liberty for all of us. So take care of one another out there and attend more IHS events, even if they're online. Be sure to check out the ihs.org for more information about our upcoming programs and applications for whatever might strike you. You can always reach out to me on Twitter @DrLocoFoco or by email acomegna@ihs.gmu.edu or anyone else here at IHS, for that matter. If you ever have questions, concerns, suggestions, or if you simply want to express your wishes to attend more programs, we would love to have you there. And while you're at it, why not drop us a rate and review on your podcatcher app. Thanks so much for listening and keep the progress coming.