

The Socialist Patients' Collective Heidelberg (SPK) - an episode in the history of antipsychiatry and the 1960ies student rebellion in Germany

Background

In early 1970 a politicized group of patients emerged at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Heidelberg calling themselves "Socialist Patients' Collective Heidelberg" (SPK). They originated from a therapy group led by a resident who was fired after an escalating conflict with his colleagues and superiors following disagreements over therapeutic approaches. The SPK developed their own theory of disease according to which the only consequent way to fight mental illness is the "abolition of the pathogenic capitalist patriarchal society". According to the guiding principle of the SPK "turn illness into a weapon" the patient should convert his "unconscious unhappiness" into an "unhappy consciousness" by which he realizes the causes of his misery. The doctor-patient relationship as an expression of the "object role" of the patient should be repealed and instead "every patient become a therapist of himself and other patients."

After the SPK occupied the administration headquarters of the university clinic demanding the re-employment of the resident the liberal president of the University negotiated a compromise with the SPK allowing them to continue their therapy groups in university premises outside the psychiatric clinic. However after a process of extreme polarisation and radicalization between the SPK and the medical faculty backed by the State Minister of Education the compromise failed and in July 1971 the SPK dissolved. Dr. Huber and some of his patients were subsequently sentenced for the "formation of a criminal organization" and others joined the Red Army Faction (RAF), a left wing terrorist group comparable to the weathermen in the U.S.

Aim of the study

There are only a few fragmentary and superficial publications on the SPK by historians. In the internet one finds various legends about the SPK with misleading and false data.¹ Hardly anything is known about the therapeutic practice of the SPK and there are no eyewitness reports from the inner life of the group. Some authors consider the SPK the first patient self-organization in psychiatry, an emancipatory project as part of the mental health reform. Others however consider them a cult or a subgroup of the Red Army Faction. The study is supposed to investigate these questions by reconstructing the course of events at the time in detail. This will be done by means of archival research, evaluating the SPK's pamphlets and publications, by interviewing eyewitnesses such as former patients, doctors, psychologists, students and policy makers. The data will be analysed within the historical context of the anti-psychiatry movement, the mental health reform and the student protest movement in Germany in the late 1960ies and early 1970ies.

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¹ for example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Patients%27_Collective

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