

# CULTURE AND PSYCHIATRIC PARADIGMS DURING THE COLD WAR



**Workshop**  
June 18-19, 2025



Charité University, Berlin



At the same time when culture became part of discussions in the medical and psy fields from the 1950s onwards, there was a questioning of the psychosurgeries and the exclusion and confinement of psychiatric patients. There was also a wider openness and debate about diagnoses, the limits of “madness”, and the cultural forms in which psychic suffering appeared in different societies. During the Cold War, these discussions became global agendas, crossing East and West Europe, as well as the Global South.

From recent research on the Brazilian psychiatrist Nise da Silveira (1905-1999) and her relationship with Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), art therapy, and the anti-asylum movement, we have verified a change in psychiatric strategy at that time. When the confinement of psychiatric patients and psychosurgery began to be questioned, as early as the 1940s in Silveira's case, psychiatry changed its strategy of appeasing the subject using psychotropic drugs. From the 1950s onwards, part of psychiatry was unable to support psychosurgery to keep the “mad” calm and within acceptable social standards. One of the hypotheses is that there was a change in technique, but not necessarily in the psychiatric paradigm: Did drugs still aim to control subjectivity towards an acceptable social “normality”?

One of the core questions to be explored is whether there has been a paradigm shift with the introduction of psychotropic drugs and how the cultural perspective and treatments have become (or not) an alternative to both techniques (psychosurgery and drugs). In this sense, another relevant debate is how culture was used to criticize the notions of “madness” at that time, especially among psychotic patients, broadening the debate regarding what was considered normal and abnormal for society and medicine. This workshop aims to identify these debates through different case studies, considering especially Eastern and Western Europe, and the Global South.

We invite participants who can contribute to the debates listed above, focusing on, but not limited to, the following topics during the Cold War:

1. Historical studies of clinical cases in which culture was an important vector in the treatment of psychiatric patients
2. Theoretical-clinical discussions by psychiatrists, anthropologists, or other health professionals on the use of psychotropic drugs as an alternative to psychosurgery, analyzing how culture played or not an important role in these discussions
3. Art therapy and other forms of socio-cultural treatments as alternatives to compulsory hospitalization, medication and psychosurgery

The workshop will be organized in cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences-BAS) and the Institute for the History and Ethics of Medicine, Charité Berlin, as part of the ERC Synergy Project “Leviathan.” In-person attendance is mandatory. Further information about the project can be found here: <https://leviathan-europe.eu/>.

The workshop is intended for an initial exchange and intense discussion. The prepared contributions will be circulated in advance and only briefly presented at the workshop so that there is sufficient time for discussion. Pre-circulated texts (approx. 2,000 words) should be submitted one month in advance, by May 18, 2025.

Applications will be accepted until February 28, 2025, via e-mail with an abstract (max. 350 words) and a short CV. The program will be announced at the beginning of March. Funding is available for accommodation and travel expenses. For any further questions, please contact the responsible organizer, Tiago Pires (IEFEM-BAS).



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