Abstract:
“Autism a Social and Medical History” by Mitzi Waltz

Review: Autism a Social and Medical History.

By Larry Arnold

I have to declare an interest in this book, Mitzi Waltz was formerly my PhD supervisor and I was interviewed for this book, therefore being aware of her perspectives on autism, I eagerly anticipated the publication of this book. On first glance I was surprised at the slimness of the volume for a subject with so great a breadth. However I feel it makes a good companion to Feinstein’s(2010) recent essay over the same territory.

Where this book scores over Feinstein is that as well as taking up the theme of the social construction of autism, everything that surrounds autism being as important as the condition itself in terms of reaction to it, it acknowledges perhaps for the first time the role of autistic people in this and how we are seeking to change the boundaries of what essentially is our country.

The map metaphor does not come till the end of the book but it is an old one, however I still feel that Mitzi, waltzes her Matilda over a country to which she is still an outsider, at least so far as the cultural debates and politics goes. She is more of a foreign correspondent than an actor.

I also feel some of the territory has been explored before, notably the “prehistory of autism” if I can call it that, which was first covered in Uta Frith’s (1992) “Autism explaining the enigma”.

I would have liked to have seen more exploration of the origin of the ideas, for it is no accident that Kanner and Asperger both use Bleuler’s term, and autism inhabits an interesting intersection of Freudianism and Neurology. The cutting edge papers of the nascent study of psychiatry were written in German at the turn of the last century which was the then lingua franca (if that is not a contradiction) of medicine and
science, in the way that English is today. Waltz misses the fact that Asperger openly acknowledges where he derived the term from and why he changes it, whereas Feinstein certainly goes deeper into the connection between the two eminent Austrians.

History is always contingent, contingent upon what is known at the time, and credit has to be done to for introducing a little of our world. We have been much patronised and colonised in the past by such writers as Nadesan (2005) and Murray (2008) who do little more than regard our utterances as a mine for quotations. This book has gone some way to redressing that injustice by interviewing key members of this emerging counterculture to the predominant discourses of the parent and medical cultures and certainly this is a better book than others in that respect. However for what it is it is still incomplete, the history of the phenomenon continues apace and this journal is evidence of that. We are still a long way off from seeing anything like a comprehensive and historically reflective account of how autism has come to mean what it does today and how that impacts the people who have come to be associated with the term.

Works Cited


