Radical Urban Lab
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Why you should know Basaglia's revolution

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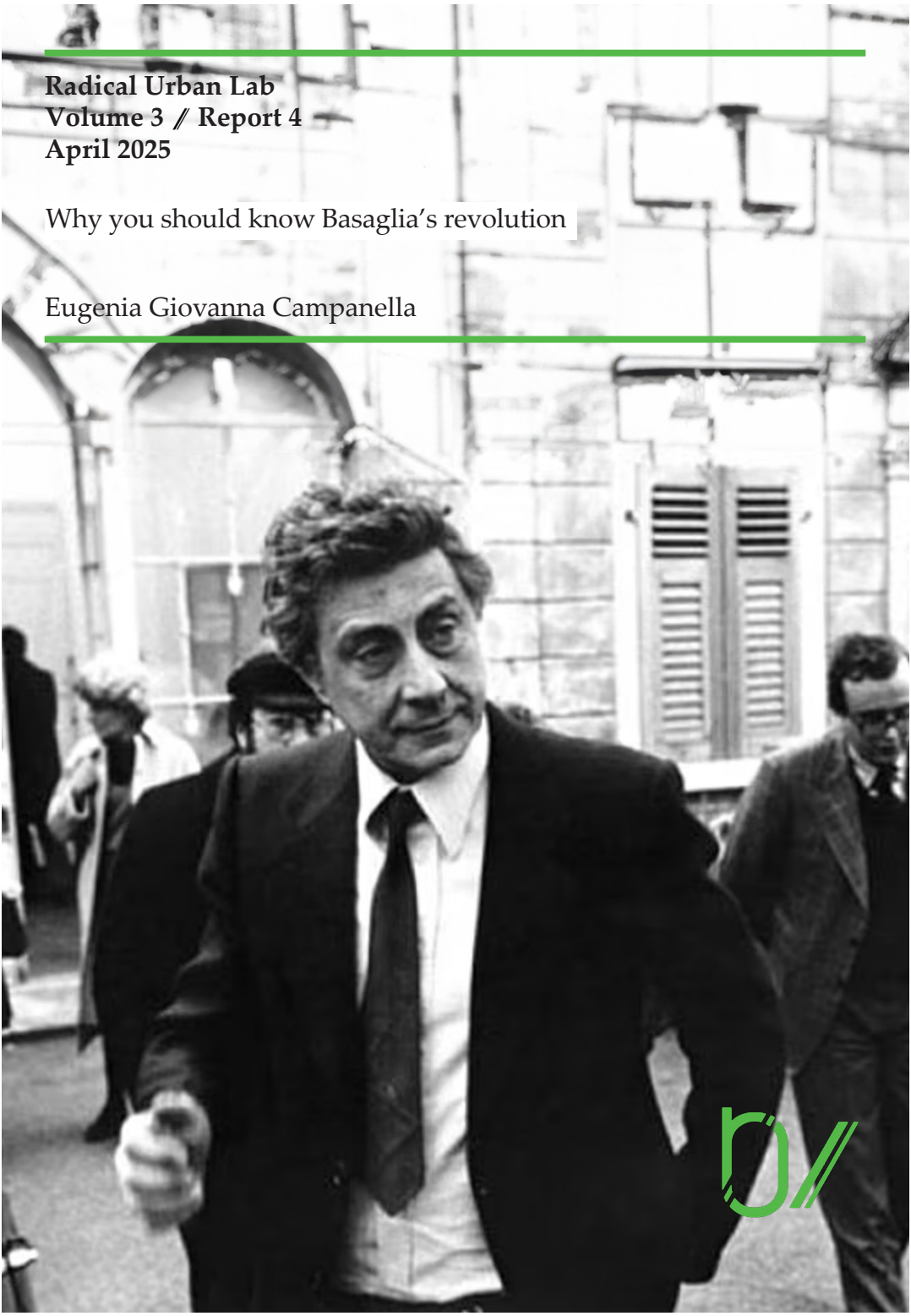

Radical Urban Lab

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Cover: Franco Basaglia, year unknown, photographer unkwown - Courtesy: Franca and Franco Basaglia Foundation

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(i) Why you should know Franco Basaglia

Italy is famous for one of the most important revolutions in the field of mental health. In 1978, a law was passed by the Italian Government that resulted in the closure of all mental health asylums. The powerful experience of activism started from a mental health asylum in Gorizia was instrumental in the passing of this law.The action was led by Franco Basaglia, an Italian psychiatrist, and his group. Basaglia was supported by a large grass-root movement consisting of mental health workers, intellectuals, patients and families, leftist activists and regular citizens.

Franco Basaglia was one of the most important intellectuals of the country in which I was born and grew up, and his experience as a psychiatrist shaped my thoughts and ideals on the meaning of being a mental health professional. Despite its importance, I became familiar with his work only after graduation. There is a clear blind spot in Italian academia on the fundamental role that Franco Basaglia played in the development of contemporary psychiatry. There are many explanations for the oblivion of this relevant political experience: Franco Basaglia was a radical critic of the institutions. He brought a radical vision of psychiatry as a discipline into the academic discourse, highlighting its political dimension, and criticizing the abuse of power and control by medical institutions. Despite widespread support from grassroots movements and civil society Franco Basaglia faced strong opposition from institutional psychiatry and Academia and, which prevented Basaglia's group from fully achieving their goals.

This is one of the reasons why it is impossible to find Basaglia's work and books translated in English. Despite a large body of literature, many books written by Franco Basaglia and his collaborators are unavailable even in Italy. In the last few years, some long-forgotten texts have been re-discovered, but the interest towards Basaglian psychiatry seems to be relegated to a small group of people: elderly psychiatrist and psychologist who had worked with Basaglia for years, historians specialized in Italian contemporary history[1], and young mental health

[1] https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/persons/john-m-foot

professionals interested in deconstructing the western approach to mental health. The fact that the Basaglian heritage remains partially hidden has made, doing research on its influence on contemporary critical psychiatry more challenging, even if many collectives and groups in Italy -and outside Italy- are inspired by some of the principles blossomed from that historical and political moment. For this reason, I will briefly introduce you to Franco Basaglia and explain why I decided to dedicate part of my research activity to him, his group and their clinical approach, which I consider still relevant inside the clinical discourse nowadays.

Franco Basaglia was born from a middle-class family in Venice in 1924 -during the early years of the rise of fascism- and studied medicine at the University of Padua, where he joined an anti-fascist group. He was prosecuted for his activism and spent several months in prison. This experience had a strong impact on him, and many years later -while entering a *manicomio* ("madhouse"- as they were called at the time) for the first time as a director- he saw lots of parallelisms between the abuses coming from institutional justice and ones perpetrated by the psychiatric system. After graduation, he decided to become a psychiatrist and he started working as a research assistant at the University of Padua. During the years of the residency, he developed an interest in philosophy, especially phenomenology, but the complexity of his ideas was frowned upon in academia at the time. Because of the conflicts with his colleagues at the University of Padua, he decided to go to Gorizia -a small city on the border between Italy and Slovenia, a conflict-ridden area and a crossroad of cultures- as the psychiatrist director of the local *manicomio*. He arrived in Gorizia with his wife, Franca Ongaro -Basaglia, who, being from a working-class family, was a fundamental in the development of Franco's theoretical reflections on the relation between psychiatric sufferance and class struggles.

Inspired by the experience of the therapeutic community of Maxwell Jones in the UK, he tried to transform the institutions of the *manicomio*, transitioning from a total institution to a more "human" medical authority. He started eliminating violent practices that were masqueraded as health treatments, such as shock therapy or physical restraint. However, he realized very soon that the idea of reforming the *manicomio* was impossible: *manicomio* was a total institution which

had incorporated violence and abuse as an integral part of its aims and practices. The only option was the closure of the *manicomio* and the acknowledgment of impracticability of a mental health system based on confinement and exclusion.

The road to abolition of the *manicomio* as an institution had been long and torturous. It was especially hard to accept for the community of the city of Gorizia, and the psychiatrists and nurses working inside of the *manicomio* were also doubtful. At the same time, many intellectuals from Italy and outside Italy started getting interested in the Basaglian experiment, and so politicians.

Franco Basaglia and his groups focused on practices, systematising the idea of mental health care as a community and territorial system. The only way to close the *manicomio* as a total institution lies in creating a community care system which gives people with psychiatric sufferance the opportunity to live inside the community and, at the same time, makes the community aware of the importance of mental health sufferance as a societal issue. All of the clinical work done by the Basaglian group, including practises and clinical experiences, were supported by a solid theoretical reflection exploring the relations between politics and mental health, especially how the socio-economic inequalities had influenced the treatment of people manifesting psychiatric symptoms. It is very important to underline how *manicomio* was a place in which many people were locked up because of their political ideals or because of their sexual orientation or identity (many women were forcibly locked up at their husbands' choice). The work of Franca Ongaro was fundamental in this matter: she edited a photographic book with the title "Morire di Classe" ("Death by social class") to show that working-class and poor people had an increased risk of being hospitalized at the *manicomio*.

> *"The psychiatric establishment defines our work as lacking of seriousness and scientific respectability. The judgment can only flatter us, since it finally make us treat with the same lack of seriousness and respectability that has always been accorded to the mentally ill and all the excluded."*

Franco Basaglia moved to Trieste and, in 1978, the law 180 – in Italy informally known as "Legge Basaglia"- was approved: it established the abolition of the *manicomio* in Italy. The closing process of all of the *manicomi* on the Italian

territory lasted more than 20 years. Unfortunately, Franco Basaglia never saw the fulfilment of his work: he died after a few months from terminal brain cancer.

After the untimely death of his husband, Franca Ongaro inherited his legacy and spent her life divulging the Basaglian experience and fighting for the enforcement of law 180, inside and outside politics (she went into politics and became a senator). The "legge 180/78" is still a law in force, but it's under attack both politically and methodologically: some places in Italy (especially Friuli Venezia Giulia, the region of Gorizia e Trieste) keep up the fight and so do we.

> *"The important thing is that we proved that the impossible can become possible. Ten, fifteen, twenty years ago it was unthinkable that a mental asylum could be destroyed. Maybe the manicomio will go back to being a close and total institution, maybe more then ever before, I don't know, but in any case, we have shown that you can`assist people with psychiatric sufferance in another way, and the testimony is crucial. I do not think that the fact that an action (= the abolition of the manicomio) became universal (=a law) means that we definitely won. The important thing is another one, is that we now know what we can do."*
>
> *Brazilian Conferences*

(ii) Social clinics are place of resistance

Historically, mental health has been a topic of interest for social movements, especially from a political perspective. Several collectives and groups around the world have highlighted the relations between mental health and socio-political issues such as marginalization, class struggles, housing crisis, unemployment rates, and discrimination based on gender, race and class. For these reasons, within the social movements and within the context of the Psychology of Liberation, social clinics and mutual aid groups arose, not only to respond to the needs of marginalized populations, but also to lay the foundation for a critique of current economic and social health policies.
It's quite difficult to find a definition of social clinic: even if there are many

experiences of medical and psychological support coming from social movements around the world, this topic is still relatively unexplored in academic research. This happens for many reasons. First of all, there are cultural and political dimensions involved in the development of experiences of medical and psychological support. Despite similar political backgrounds, social clinics from different territories often need to find a common understanding of political activism, mutual aid and health support, in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

A first definition of the term social clinic comes from the *Manifesto of* T**he International Network of Social Clinics** *(INOSC)*, a network born nearly three years ago with the aim of connecting collectives which recognize themselves in the following definition[2] :

> *Social Clinics are autonomous community-based healthcare collectives that provide primary healthcare services. We believe that healthcare inequities are intertwined with other forms of social and economic marginalization and exclusion. As such, they need to be confronted politically. Social Clinics operate autonomously and are self-managed. Our goal is to challenge conventional organizational structures through innovative practices encompassing everyday interactions, processes, and medical procedures. We firmly believe in people's capacity to organize, self-govern, and collectively make fair and egalitarian decisions concerning their work, health, and lives. Social clinics serve as a radical political model, offering a vision of a more equitable, just, consistent, and anti-authoritarian societal structure that can extend beyond healthcare. If it can be successfully implemented in healthcare, it can be applied anywhere.*

In the manifesto, social clinics which are part of the Network explain why they chose this name:

> *The name "Social clinics" was chosen collectively to encompass a diverse array of experiences striving for a different concept of health and healthcare.*

[2] https://inosc.net/manifesto/what-is-a-social-clinic/

The manifesto underlines the complexity and the variety of experiences (of the social clinics), trying to create a common ground for discussion and collaboration through their political and cultural differences. The non-negotiable point of contact concerns their basic shared values: anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, anti-racism and transfeminism.

At the moment, the social clinic part of the Network are: Solidarisches Gesundheitszentrum, Ambulatori Popolari, Centres de Sante Communautaire Autogérés, Κοινωνικό Ιατρείο Αλληλεγγύης, Brigata Basaglia[3] . The Network is open to every collective around the world interested in joining.

Another interesting experience is the **FreePsy Project** (*Free Clinics and Psychoanalysis for the People*) project[4] , which focuses on mental health support, especially psychoanalysis. The FreePsy Project is connected to the University of Essex, but it involves seven main sites, Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, London, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires. One of their goals is to reflect on the relation between the experience of psychoanalysis and social inequalities as expressed in their webpage:

> *Free psychoanalytic clinics have existed since Sigmund Freud's time. They have been laboratories of political experimentation, expanding the scope of what psychoanalysis has to offer to the mental health field and to collective life. We trace the metamorphoses of Freud's couch, which happen when psychoanalysis becomes entangled with emancipatory movements and liberation struggles of various kinds, and engages with the realities of social inequalities based on race, class, gender, poverty, and other forms of marginalization.*

They aim to support a critical discourse on psychoanalysis, working on relations and practices:

> *This project engages collectives that open psychoanalytic spaces to excluded or marginal individuals or groups. Free psychoanalytic clinics have rich political and*

[3] https://inosc.net/about-inosc/map-of-our-social-clinics/
[4] https://freepsyproject.com/

clinical 'lives', but these often remain invisible. We ask how collectives of clinicians invested in the social mission of psychoanalysis innovate, by putting time, space, money, and suffering in new relations. (…)
We aim to produce a new global figuration of psychoanalysis as a critical and progressive discourse and practice, starting from free clinics, and exploring their profound influence on mental health, inequality, and the social bond.

Red Clinic is another UK based collective working on mental health, that developed several reflections on the radical and political psychotherapy, highlighting the importance of having an accessible psychotherapy and re-building the theoretical basis of psychotherapy with a critical and intersectional approach, as expressed in their *Mission Statement*[5] :

The Red Clinic is a collective of communist mental health workers united for a radical psychotherapy, for the care of the oppressed, and for uniting the two in the service of communist politics. We aim to develop truly accessible and sustainable provision of psychotherapy for the working-class and the oppressed in the broadest senses of the terms, attentive to the interrelations between axes of oppression, and transcending national borders. This practice will work in tandem with our efforts to develop a novel theoretical basis for psychotherapy today, informed by Marxist, anti-racist, queer feminist, indigenous, decolonial and radical disability theories, learning from our collective experiences in theoretical application, and honing psychotherapy into a better tool of the communist movement.

The majority of the social clinics involved in these projects are based in Europe, and a limit of this work is to be more focused on Europe than the rest of the world. However, it is fundamental to create connection with other collectives, taking an internationalist approach, sharing practices, and integrating anti-racist, decolonial theories.

A preliminary experience of connection and discussion on mental health practices involving several collectives around the world was put in place by Brigata

[5] https://www.redclinic.org/statement

Basaglia -a collective based in Italy- in March 2024. They designed the online-based conference "Taking care of the world, through the catastrophe: Mental health practices in areas of conflict, crisis, and political violence" inviting friends and collectives from all over the world to discuss practices of resistance for mental health. Several collectives and activists joined the conference to create a space for reflection on the political role of collectives working in the mental health field during the complex times we are going through. All of the speeches were simultaneously translated in four languages (Italian, English, Spanish and Turkish) and later transcribed, edited and published on the Brigata Basaglia website[6].

Figure 1: The flyer of the event "Taking care of the world, through the catastrophe", English version

There is still much to do.

(iii) A social clinic in Italy: Brigata Basaglia's story

My interest in social clinics comes from my experience as a psychologist in Brigata Basaglia, the collective I have been part of since its foundation in 2020. Brigata Basaglia has never defined itself as a social clinic even if it is part of the INOSC

[6] https://www.brigatabasaglia.org/2024/12/24/tavolo-internazionalista-i-testi-dellincontro-prendersi-cura-del-mondo-attraversare-la-catastrofe-del-24-3-2024/

and it signed its manifesto[7] (at the time of writing, Brigata Basaglia does not have its own manifesto). Despite the complexity of finding a definition of the complex clinical and political experience that Brigata Basaglia is, the activities of the collective are partially comparable to the typical activities of a social clinic working on mental health.

Brigata Basaglia was founded to offer free psychological and social support to people during COVID-19 and it was formed by psychologists, social workers but also people who want to give their time and competences for their community. The awareness that "*non è solo la clinica che cura*" ("you can't care about people only with clinical psychology") have accompanied the Brigata since the beginning. Mental health is a communitarian issue that involves everyone, not only professionals and institutions, and it was especially during a tough historical moment as COVID-19 was. It is not a coincidence that Brigata Basaglia was born in Milan. Milan was at the centre of the pandemic and many people died for COVID. At the same time, the problematic situations experienced by the residents became more apparent and acute during this period, including: housing problems, low salaries, lack of space for socialization, the systematic defunding of public institutions, etc.

Almost immediately, we realized that mental health suffering was partially related to COVID-19 but profoundly connected to the political and economic context in which we are immersed as a society. Milan was the clear example of something that was about to happen in other Italian cities and, for this reason, new territorial units were born in the last 5 years in Pavia, Florence, Turin and Perugia. From a switchboard created to give support to people isolated for COVID, to the principles of emergency psychology, Brigata Basaglia's activities grew. The switchboard still exists and it's the core of the Brigata's work, but there are several activities offered:

- psychological or psychiatric support;
- re-connecting people to the institutional healthcare system if needed or to

[7] https://inosc.net/manifesto/

other groups and collectives;
- political activism in the field of mental health;
- organizing national and international meetings to discuss and share mental health and political practices from a critical perspective;
- independent research[8] ;
- supporting other collectives' fights and needs through mutualism.

Figure 2: The logo of Brigata Basaglia. The colors of Brigata are black and fuxia. The English translation of the written part is "Brigata Basaglia: psychological support network" followed by the national number of the switchboard

Today, Brigata Basaglia brings together 50 people with different backgrounds: psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, students, educators, and many other field. The youngest member is 20 years old and the oldest is 75. The majority are female, but it is a mixed group – which is very important as care is universally considered a feminine matter and it is of fundamental importance to deconstruct this bias. Brigata Basaglia is not an association, it is an informal group by choice: one of the aims of the Brigata is to carry on a political and critical perspective on mental health as independently as possible. Occasionally and when strictly necessary, the collective collaborates with professionals and institutions, but it considers itself non-formal and independent. The only way Brigata has to fund itself is through donations and community support.

[8] https://argumentos.xoc.uam.mx/index.php/argumentos/article/view/1427

Once a year, Brigata Basaglia organizes a festival called "*Contatto*", an Italian word which has two different meanings: "Contatto" means "Contact", "Connection", "Touch", but "Con – Tatto" means "tactfully", "delicately".

Contatto takes place every year between the end of May and the beginning of June, and it usually lasts a weekend. The first and the second editions took place in Milan, the third one in Firenze, and the next one (24-25 of May 2025) will be in Pavia.

The aim of the festival is, firstly, to bring together collectives and groups working on themes connected to a wide range of topics (including: critical health, political activism, anti-capitalism, anti-racism, queer and decolonial theories) by organizing round tables and debates on specific topics considered politically relevant in the contemporary debate (such as: detention system, migration policies, education policies, abuses inside total institutions etc). The *fil rouge* connecting these topics is mental health, because mental health (as a complex construct) is affected in every situation characterized by violence, abuse, inequalities. For this reason, the subtitle of "*Contatto*" is "*Practice of resistance and liberation for mental health (and beyond)*": to meet people is the key to developing strategies and practices for care and liberation, by questioning the deeper meaning of the word "mental health".

Secondly, *Contatto* aims to encourage communities to learn more about both political and critical mental health and several forms of activism and mutual aid existing in Italy, but also outside. Part of Brigata Basaglia's mission is to increase people's awareness of spaces in which they can get support, discuss politics, and enjoy themselves. During *Contatto*, there aren't only moments of discussion, but also moments dedicated to entertainment with live-music, dance music, stand-up comedy, and laboratories. As we said before "*Non è solo la clinica che cura*" ("you can't care about people only with clinical psychology2) : we take care of ourselves, of our communities, also spending time together, enjoying ourselves.

Fighting for a life worth living, for everyone, everywhere.

Figure 3 and 4 : The flyers of the first edition of Contatto (top left) and the second edition (top right), both held in Milanrd
Figure 5 (bottom right) and 6 (bottom left): The flyers of the third edition of Contatto, held in Florence (artwork by: faida.acquifera) and this year edition (artowrk by maddi_artpilot).

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