

Survivors' Panel marks a milestone at 2019 International Congress on Law and Mental Health

Thanks to the generous sponsorship of [PsychRights](#), I was able to attend the [XXXVI International Congress on Law and Mental Health \(IALMH\)](#) in July.

The “survivors’ panel” I organized along with Tina Minkowitz, Oh-yong Kweon, and Mari Yamamoto from the [Absolute Prohibition](#) campaign received a very good response. To the best of my knowledge, it was the only panel at this congress or its precedents organized by psychiatric survivors – no small feat, considering the overwhelmingly academic/professional contingent of conference participants and the perceptibly conventional leaning of most. The most important aspect of our participation, then, was precisely our participation and presence – and the visibility and voice, however minor, this gave to our mobilizing cause. Notably, conference organizers refused our request to waive the congress’s registration fee, which proved prohibitively high for most of us – exclusion from “the conversation,” as it were, takes many forms – and it was the sponsorship of PsychRights that made it possible for me to attend.

The panel we organized, “*Shifting Power: Human Rights Law Confronts State and Psychiatry*,” featured four papers: “Where is the camp? Psychiatry and the state of exception” ([Leah M. Ashe](#)); “Positive policy to replace forced psychiatry, based on the CRPD” ([Tina Minkowitz](#)); “Human rights without integrity of the society could be impossible to realize” ([Oh-yong Kweon](#)); and “Why Japan has the highest number of beds per population in psychiatric hospitals – and why the government wants to keep them” ([Mari Yamamoto](#)). Mari could not attend, and [Yvette Maker](#) from the University of Melbourne kindly presented her paper. Anyone interested in *my* paper, a challenging essay exploring [Giorgio Agamben’s](#) notions of the state of exception, the homo sacer, and “the camp” in relation to forced psychiatry, is welcome to access it in text or video/audio formats (and I warmly invite any responses to it):

Ashe, Leah M. 2019. “*Where is the camp? Psychiatry and the State of Exception.*” Presentation at the *International Congress on Law and Mental Health*, Panel “*Shifting Power: Human Rights Law Confronts State and Psychiatry.*” Rome, Italy, 21-27 June 2019. Text version available at <https://nd.academia.edu/LeahAshe> and audio/video version available at <http://www.youtube.com/lashend>.

The congress was very large: the [program listed nearly 1000 presenters](#) and presentations delivered in 265 different thematic panels over six days. It turned out to be very good to have attended for two reasons that surprised me. First, there was a small but substantial collection of critical actors ranging from the “somewhat” (psychiatrists with a few reservations about, say, drugs, or philosophers who tenuously raised moral challenge points) to the “radical” (social workers vocally opposed to forced treatment, or CRPD activists), and I was able to have very many good, sincere, perhaps even hopeful hallway conversations with them. Second, and more cynically, I do a lot of critical discourse analysis as a researcher-thinker, and the conventional-psychiatry stance that dominated among congress attendees was loud and clear. From a research perspective, this was a “discourse playground” – and I even had a few opportunities to amicably pose questions and challenges to figures holding distant positions from my own (and probably yours, too).

Highlights for me included a promising panel on movements toward real models of non-coercive treatment,

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with presentations by [Martin Zinkler](#), a German psychiatrist [running a hospital without coercion](#); [Matthe Scholten](#), a philosopher from the Ruhr University Institute of Medical Ethics whose works explores the ethics of coercion with a rigorous, empirical-philosophical methodology; and [Olav Nyttningnes](#), who shared a long lunchtime conversation with me about his research on [patients' experiences of coercion](#) and on the use of [Open Dialogue method in Finland](#).

I am sincerely grateful to PsychRights for the opportunity to have participated in the congress. I also believe our panel to mark an important milestone for the survivors' movement – one I hope will only pick up momentum from here in its quest for a rights-based future.