

ENCONTRE INTERDISCIPLINARI  
MALALTIA I CULTURA / DISEASE AND CULTURE

VALÈNCIA, JUNE 17-18TH, 1994

The Seminari d'Estudios sobre la Ciència was founded in 1993 as an initiative of a group of professors and researchers from different realms of the social sciences linked mainly to the universities of Alacant and València. It was conceived as an open space which aimed to surpass closed disciplinary discourses. Since its creation, two initiatives have been developed: the first is a series of publications under the title of *Scientia Veterum*; the second deals with the organisation of yearly multidisciplinary meetings focused on specific topics. The first of these conferences was held in València on the 17-18th June 1994 taking as a subject of discussion the relations between *Disease and Culture*. A selected group of fourteen specialists in the fields of anthropology, social history, demography, paleopathology and history of science and medicine from the universities of Oxford, Bologna, Pavia, Venezia, València, Alacant, Autònoma de Barcelona, Granada and Tarragona joined in the Palau de Pineda, site of the Universidad Internacional Menéndez y Pelayo. The meeting was coordinated by Josep Lluís Barona with the collaboration of the Department of History of Science (Universitat de València), Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, The British Council and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura. Thirty postgraduate students and professors from eight Spanish universities attended the conference.

The scientific sessions embraced three different fields: 1) «The conceptualization of disease», 2) «Disease and cultural patterns» and 3) «Attitudes in front of disease». The papers will be published in their original languages (English, Italian, Spanish and Catalan) in a new series promoted by the Seminari under the title of *Trobades*.

The first session began with an opening paper by Alistair C. Crombie (Trinity College, Oxford University) on *A General Reflexion about Boundaries of Normality*. Taking as a point of departure the idea that normality is a taxonomic concept and what is considered normal is based on theoretical expectations within a particular science or in a whole intellectual and moral culture, Professor Crombie focused on moral and medical dilemmas risen by the diversification of the conceptions of the healthy and the pathological. He took as an example the historical case of deaf mutes and the conceptions of space found by the congenitally blind. These were some of the questions what he claimed to be new historical and philosophical research.

Next, Joan Llinares (Universitat de València) devoted a paper to *The Concept of Disease During the Establishment of Cultural Anthropology*. He evaluated the importance of the interpretation of some aspects of primitive culture – as myths – as pathological in the work of some of the fathers of cultural anthropology, such as Max Müller and E.B. Tylor, amongst others.

Domènec Campillo (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), offered *A Paleopathological Approach to the Boundaries Between the Skeletal Variability and Pathology*. He stated and exemplified five complementary ways to the problem: 1) the morphological and metric perspective; 2) the consideration of the nosological importance or significance of variability; 3) the influence of external post mortem factors, 4) aetiology and 5) the osteopathological inherent aspects.

Then, Sabina Cremonini (Università di Venezia) discussed *Women's Hysteria During the Transition from 19th to 20th Centuries*. She focused on the fact that madness is a social and historical product trying to individualize the cultural variants which influenced that social and historical construction of the concept of hysteria. Among the materials used, a diary of a woman treated as hysterical in an Italian institution at the end of the 19th century was analysed.

At the end of the first session, Josep Lluís Barona (Universitat de València) presented a paper on *Possession and Disease: Boundaries of Pathology in the 16th Century*. He analyzed the argument given by theologians, judges, inquisitors and physicians in the explanation given to witchcraft and demonic possession. Theologians considered it a consequence of sin; judges and inquisitors a criminal activity, while physicians were in favor of considering it a specific type of disease. A social and cultural negotiation took place which finally carried this type of transgression to the field of medicine.

The second session was devoted to *Disease and Cultural Patterns*. Silvia Carrasco (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) connected *Feeding Practices and Cultural Differences in the Perception of Disease*. On the same subject, but with materials from the Italian society (*Disease and Eating Habits. A Historical and Anthropological Analysis of Italian Reality Between 19th and 20th Centuries*), Paolo Sorcinelli (Università degli Studi di Bologna) showed how scarcity and bad quality food conditioned the Ancien Régime societies not only in medical, but also in psychological and morphological aspects.

Next, Antonia Pasi (Università di Pavia) discussed *Infant Mortality and Medical Culture in 19th Century Italy*. Taking as a point of analysis the III Congress of the Italian Medical Association (1866) in which awareness was taken of the necessity for reducing infant mortality rates, she focused on the campaigns vulgarization and on the preventive activities promoted by physicians in relation to new breast feeding patterns and use of wet nurses. The conclusion was that their influence was minimal and that just a small percentage of the population had changed their habits.

Then, Josep Bernabeu (Universitat d'Alacant) presented an interesting paper on the topic *Disease, Culture and Population: Cultural Factors in Demographic and*

*Epidemiologic Analysis*. He analysed the methodological background of the so-called Risk Model and evaluated the role played by some cultural factors (particularly the practical application of cultural traditions related to breeding and child health care) like a determinant factor of the potential levels of exposure and resistance to infection that characterized the Spanish population during the period qualified by demographers as «pretransitional».

The third session focused on *Attitudes towards Disease* and offered a wide range of orientations. José Luis Fresquet (Universidad de València) tried to justify the interest of popular therapeutics as a matter of interest for teaching medical students and for research. He offered some detailed information about what is being done on this subject at the Universitat de València.

Next, Josep María Comelles (Universitat Rovira Virgili, Tarragona) discussed *The Sacralization of Hospital Practice: from Technological Display to the Institutionalisation of the Miracle*. He offered an anthropological perspective of the doctor and patient attitudes in the hospital practice, and the use and manipulation of some ideas like sanitation, death and miracle in the everyday life at the health services.

In his paper on *Medicine and Epidemics. From the Rationalization of the Myth to the Myth of the Rationalization*, Esteban Rodríguez Ocaña (Universidad de Granada) proposed a study of the changes in medical explanations and practices in front of epidemics along the Modern Age. In order to explain social and political strategies to challenge the epidemic diseases, he focused on two main topics: the transformation of medical causal thinking and the problem of the identification of disease.

*The Popularisation of Hygiene in the Handbooks of Domestic Economy (1870-1920)* was the contribution by Enrique Perdiguero (Universidad d'Alacant). He presented an interesting paper on the influence of this type of literature on nutritional patterns as well as its relevance for the social diffusion of bacteriological ideas.

The last paper was that of Guillermo Olagüe (Universidad de Granada) discussing the social and scientific conditions that surrounded the introduction of Jennerian vaccination in Spain (1800-1805). He pointed out that vaccination succeeded as a result of the enthusiastic initiatives of a wide group of individuals from different social and intellectual positions.

After each session, a discussion (sometimes characterized obviously by some methodological or content disagreements) took place in which the different points of view were reviewed. After two days of hard work, a final lunch at the Hotel Inglés was a fine reward.

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# PHYSIS

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