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News and Notes

A project, a mental hospital and study prospects

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‘Alla ricerca delle menti perdute: viaggi nell’istituzione manicomiale’ (In search of lost minds: a review of mental hospitals) is the title of a research project on the history of psychiatric science and mental healthcare promoted by the Museo storico in Trento in co-operation with Trento University. The project, which was started in 1999, involves many public and private bodies.¹ In 2003, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the passing of the so-called ‘Basaglia law’ (Italian Law No. 180 of 13 May 1978), a whole series of initiatives – including film projections, public meetings, publications² and exhibitions – were arranged.

The project focuses on the events that have contributed over the centuries to the diverse world of the mental hospital and, in our study area (i.e., the Trentino and Tyrolean area), the institution in Pergine Valsugana, near Trento. Tens of thousands of people passed through this institution, which was opened in 1882 and not closed until 2002. They certainly differed in terms of personal development but were similar in the everyday life imposed on them in the institution, and their contact with other patients and with the medical and paramedical staff; similar also in terms of the relational dynamics established with the hosting community – and this is still evident today in the debate on reclaiming and re-utilizing the disused facilities.³

The reading of the history of the mental hospital in Pergine Valsugana suggests several key themes, ranging from the architectonic development of the institutions for mental patients to their social identity, from the interpretation and image of mental disease to the various therapeutic treatments adopted. These themes, closely linked to the history of mental hospitals in general, are associated with specific factors that have left their

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mark in the history of Pergine, such as the relationship between psychiatry and Nazism (as seen in the vicissitudes of the patients transferred to Germany in 1940 and then killed; see Hinterhuber, 1995/2003); or the meaning of transcultural psychiatry (shown by the fact that in Pergine patients of different cultures and languages – Italian, Ladin and German – started living together after World War I); and last but not least, due to its cultural implications: the re-use in Italy of former mental hospitals and the management of these large facilities.

All these issues are being dealt with in the project *Alla ricerca delle menti perdute*. Its more immediate objectives are to investigate new and interesting topics which have long been labelled ‘uncomfortable’ and therefore repressed. Yet it is precisely because of the tragic nature of some of these events that they demand further study, with a re-evaluation of their historical development so that what has happened will not happen again.

In addition, by limiting ourselves to the Italian scenario, we aim to contribute to a stream of research on which scholars have focused their attention only in the past two decades, and in particular after law No. 180/1978 was passed. Since then the history of the individual institutions which had to be closed as a result of this law has become essential for reconstructing past events and also for protecting the historically significant documents deposited there.⁴

This is an entirely new movement. If we consider the history of psychiatry in Italy and its practices, we are disconcerted by the absence – almost until the end of the 1970s – of studies and interest in this area of research. This was commented on by Patrizia Guarnieri in her bibliographic essay entitled *La storia della psichiatria: un secolo di studi in Italia* (1991). This analysis can be easily linked to the more general lack of interest the historical-social perspective that the history of medicine in Italy has always shown in relation to its past.

The history of psychiatry in Italy has not evolved differently from that of medicine in general, i.e., a separate history, interpreted and dealt with only in relation to the most internal aspects of the discipline, and the evolution of knowledge, techniques and discoveries. A significant turning point was reached with the development of a specific interest in the social history of medicine, which became important in Italy in the late 1970s through the CISO conference on the themes and methods of research into the history of the health sector (CISO, 1978). In fact, the history of psychiatry seems to have managed – more than other historical-medical areas – to grasp the importance of a certain, more general historiographic perspective for opening up new horizons. So, for example, scholars such as Guglielmo Lützenkirchen, in addition to proposing critical analyses through psychiatric- and neurological-historical topics (Lützenkirchen, 1975), go so far as to include the issue of ethnopsychiatry. An example is his study on epilepsy, prepared with other authors and with an exemplary foreword by anthropologist Alfonso Maria Di Nola; the investigation on this specific illness, considered a prerogative of

psychiatric science, is used to understand its social values and cultural meanings, thus taking it well beyond the limited medical-scientific sector (*Mal di luna . . .*, 1981). This was indeed a different type of approach, which was also encouraged by the new climate resulting from demands, from the early 1970s, to rethink mental hospitals. In Italy this led to the so-called Basaglia reform in 1978.

Among the various topics that opened up for the new history of the health system, the history of psychiatric knowledge and of its institutions not only aroused the interest of historians but also, and especially, that of psychiatrists; because of the great changes in their profession, they started to reconstruct the social, political and scientific processes that had defined it historically.

The project *Alla ricerca delle menti perdute* follows this line and offers its special contribution to understanding the history of mental hospitals. Due to the topics it deals with, the target of this project is a larger public than academia, in order to avoid the same marginalization suffered by the protagonists of the stories narrated.

Notes

1. The following bodies have joined, and contributed to, the project: Councillorship for Culture of the Municipality of Trento; Associazione Amici della storia, Pergine Valsugana; Cassa rurale di Pergine Valsugana; Centro servizi culturali Santa Chiara, Trento; Pergine Municipality; Direction of Psychiatry Unit No. 3 of the Trento Provincial Health Trust; Gesellschaft für Psychische Gesundheit-Psychohygiene Tirol; Civic Museum in Riva del Garda; the newspaper *l'Adige*; Soprintendenza per i beni librari e archivistici, Provincia autonoma of Trento; Trentino-Alto Adige section of the Associazione nazionale archivistica italiana; Società di studi trentini di scienze storiche; Univ.-Klinik für Psychiatrie Innsbruck; Universitätsinstitut für Suchtforschung Frastanz/Vorarlberg.
2. In particular the following, published by the Museo storico in Trento: Antonelli and Ficco, 2003; Grandi and Taiani, 2002; Hinterhuber, 1995/2003; Taiani, 2003. Six essays on the project themes were published in 2003 in the six-monthly magazine of the Museo storico in Trento, *Archivio trentino*, No. 2 (authors: Roberta Arcaini, Ermanno Arreghini, Francesca Barbato, Catia Civettini, Andrea Scartabellati, Leslie Topp). The Centro Multimediale of Trento University made a documentary film on the exhibition held in November 2003. Also, the inventory of the archive of the former psychiatric hospital of Pergine Valsugana has been published (Pasini and Pinamonti, 2003).
3. The Fondazione Benetton studi e ricerche in Treviso has worked on these topics for some years, and in 1999 published the interesting *Per un atlante degli ospedali psichiatrici pubblici in Italia* (Frigo, Palestino and Rossi, 1999). The proceedings of a seminar held in Trento on 30 November 2001 have also been published (Grandi and Taiani, 2002).
4. Many studies have offered a reconstruction of the history of individual mental hospitals; for a recent example, see Moraglio, 2002.

References

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- Friego, Ida, Palestino, Federica and Rossi, Francesco (eds) (1999) *Per un atlante degli ospedali psichiatrici pubblici in Italia: censimento geografico, cronologico e tipologico al 31 dicembre 1996 (con aggiornamento al 31 ottobre 1998)* (Treviso: Fondazione Benetton studi e ricerche).
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- Mal di luna: folli, indemoniati, lupi mannari: malattie nervose e mentali nella tradizione popolare*, with contributions by Guglielmo Lützenkirchen, Gabriele Chiari, Fabio Troncarelli, Maria Paola Saci and Lucilla Albano (Roma: Newton Compton, 1981).
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