STS.003 The Rise of Modern Science
Spring 2008

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Week 8: Psychiatry and Society

Readings:


In the late 19th century doctors paid increasing attention to two disorders of the nervous system: hysteria and neurasthenia. Both became increasingly common between 1870 and 1900, but both had disappeared by 1920. Each was characterized by an odd and variable assortment of symptoms (depression, anxiety, fatigue, fainting, dizziness, odd movements and facial expressions, etc.). Doctors struggled to understand and treat these new diseases. To do so, they had to try and understand how the nervous system works. Even though the theories will sound odd to you, read them sympathetically: these were doctors and scientists struggling with an extremely difficult problem. The key issues are: 1) how and why do psychiatric diagnoses come and go, and 2) how do you evaluate the efficacy of a treatment.

Sicherman discusses the disease of neurasthenia (greek, for “nervous exhaustion”), which thrived from 1880 to 1910, largely as a result of the work of neurologist George Beard. The first part of the article (pp. 33-35) provides background on neurasthenia: connections to thermodynamics, analogies to overloaded circuits, how the new stresses of civilization created disease, etc. The next part (pp. 36-40) is a little more abstract. The article becomes more concrete, and more accessible, on p. 40, when Sicherman starts describing cases of neurasthenia, treatments, and the possible functions of the diagnosis (e.g. a way of legitimating psychological distress that previously was quite stigmatized). Looking back at this history: does neurasthenia exist? How can a disease existence in one decade, then be gone in another? What does it mean to say that a disease served specific social functions? Can patients benefit from having a disease (or, more precisely, from receiving a diagnosis)?

Sigmund Freud is a towering figure in 20th century medical and cultural history. This short book, based on a series of lectures he gave at Clark University in Worcester in 1909 (given in German!), provides the best introduction to the development of his theories (his theories continued to evolve, and looked quite different by his death in 1939). Just as Beard studied neurasthenia, Freud focused on hysteria and used it as a launching pad for proposing a comprehensive theory of the mind. Try to follow the development of his ideas: the cause of hysteria and neurotic problems, his move from hypnosis to talk therapy, his theory of dream interpretation, his interest in infantile sexuality, and the mechanisms by which psychoanalysis works. Pay particular interest to Freud’s invocations of the physical sciences: deterministic processes, precipitates, discharges, flow, force, resistance, dynamics, sublimation, inefficient machines and thermodynamics. Why does Freud use this language? People have long debated whether psychoanalysis is a science, an art, or a fraud. What do you think? What cultural biases do you see in Freud’s work?

Finally, can you think of anyone with symptoms of neurasthenia or hysteria? Would a diagnosis of neurasthenia or hysteria be appropriate? Why or why not? Drawing on what you have learned from the readings on neurasthenia and hysteria, how would you define disease? How can history help us answer this question?