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Autism and institutionalization

A report from a research on the archive of Venice's ex-asylum
in the island of St. Servolo

Introduction

In a recent book, by Gil Eyal and colleagues, *The Autism Matrix*, the deinstitutionalization of mental retardation in the sixties is seen as the auroral moment of its emergence. While we were working on autism, we posed ourselves the same questions. Where does the discourse about "autism" come from? What was autism before being "autism", that is, before its naming by Kanner and Asperger? We also had the perception that the absence of "autism" in the public discourse during the previous decades, had something to do with the institutionalization as a psychiatric problem of what now stays under the name of autism. Therefore, we started a research on the clinical files of the archive of the ex-asylum of Venice, on the island of St. Servolo, to verify that assumption. This research was published in 2013 with the title *A sé e agli altri: Storia della manicomializzazione dell'autismo e delle altre disabilità relazionali nelle cartelle cliniche di S. Servolo, To him/her/itself and to others: History of the institutionalization of Autism and other relational disabilities from the clinical files of St. Servolo.*

Looking in front of you at St. Marco's square, from Palazzo Ducale, you can see a small island surrounded by a high wall of bricks: that is St. Servolo's island, and from the end of 18th century until 1980 it was Venice asylum. After Basaglia's law in

Italy, a museum of the asylum and an archive has been created there.

Hypothesis

The archive of the former psychiatric hospital of San Servolo in Venice was probed by a multidisciplinary team: psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists. A hypothesis of the multidisciplinary team was the idea that a certain number of autistic or Asperger people ended up institutionalized before the diagnosis was created.

The first investigation into the archive of San Servolo dates back to June 2009. It was decided to take into account the period from 1874 to 1940. Just few years before the creation of the diagnosis of “autism”. Some clinical files were paltry, witnessing just the inscription of the psychiatric gaze, while others were rich in annotations and with epistles and diary pages attached. That allowed us to reconstruct some lives of the patients on a double level: the institutional account and the one in their first person. The former was from the professional point of view of the psychiatry, objectifying lives and reducing them to occurrences of diagnostic categories, whereas the latter was from patients, their parents or relatives.

That was one of the more interesting aspects of this work: studying history of psychiatry in all its institutional, socio and cultural aspects, while facing the inscription of such a device on real people life, makes a different perspective. Quoting Goethe, “all theory, dear friend, is grey, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green”, and part of our research was dedicated

exactly to reconstructing the life of people whose existence, was at a point, segregated at St. Servolo's asylum.

Metodology

Each researcher identified a specific set of clinical files to study. Some of us choose to approach a defined condition, such as children with relational or cognitive impairment, some focusing on reconstructing lives.

The methodology of investigation consisted in a libertarian approach. Each researcher involved within the investigation, could choose one or more clinical cases; reconstructing the story of the transition from home to asylum, where possible, and tried to re-write such a story giving back dignity to the patient, highlighting the oppressive and insulting system of the asylum. To this goal, each researcher analysed the lexicon, the logic and the oppressive statements written into the clinical files. We also analysed the correspondence within the family members, particularly the letters from relatives to patients and also some letters from patients or family members to MD, many of them remaining unread or with no answer.

Not having time for an articulated overview of our findings, we would like to linger briefly on some images from the clinical files, some of them are of children that today would be treated for their problems focusing on their strengths, and at the time were thrown in a place with syphilitics, criminals, schizophrenics and any other problematic marginality. No wonder that most of them died after a few months of internment.

And we do know whether it was not the worst fate, since someone spent decades of his life in such a condition.

Analysis

The analysis of the clinical files has also provided cues and ideas to try to analyze and eventually reconstruct the genealogy of some terms/diagnoses, such as *imbecility* and *idiocy*, that throughout the nineteenth century have identified and marked people with severe relational and cognitive disabilities and that later remained in common language as insults. We have to consider that the differential diagnostic criterium for distinguishing “idiocy” from “autism” was introduced by Kanner in 1942. Kanner found the difference in the presence of swinging movements, that considered typical of autistic children and absent in “idiots”. So, before 1942, “idiocy” was usually indistinguishable from “autism”, and the term “autism” was only used to define a particular symptom of ebephrenia, a disorder attributed to young schizophrenic people.

The real surprise was that also other categories that, in some way, point at what is now called the spectrum of autism, were present in the clinical files of San Servolo hospital. Some “partial follies”, such as “mania without *delirium*”, “mania without fury”, “monomania”, “lypemania”, seemed even “reasonable” at times. In other words, in these kind of madness, psychiatry would lay its gaze not on the intellect, which would

be intact, but on the perversions and the weakness of will of the sick person. Another path of research has been focused on the relation between internment and the government of the *self*, to quote Foucault, what in some files was called moral insanity. Nowadays the bearer of such a condition would be put somewhere close both to the autistic spectrum and to the borderline disease.

Sources of inspiration

Three are the sources we approached in order to elaborate an analysis of the relation between institution and what now goes under the name of autism spectrum. First the psychiatric literature of the XIXth century, and we discovered a huge amount of texts, in French psychiatry, from Pinel (that included “idiocy” in his four faced nosology, the others being melancholy, dementia and mania) to Esquirol and his disciples, and in many other authors till the end of the century, and in UK in the work of Haslam, Ireland, Maudsley, and Down, among others.

The second source is a collection of many contemporary works dealing with history of cultural framing of mental challenges, such as C. F. Goodey’s *History of intelligence and “intellectual disability”*, McDonagh’s *Idiocy: A cultural history* and Trent’s *Inventing the feeble mind*, and many others.

The third fundamental source has been the huge amount of academic research about the history of psychiatry and institutionalization started from the fundamental research by

Michel Foucault, from *History of madness* to *Psychiatric power*. This work, by Robert Castel, Marcel Gauchet, Gladys Swain, Roy Porter, Andrew Scull, Jan Goldstein, Georges Lantéri-Laura and Laure Murat among others, has been fundamental in order to frame institutionalization, its places, its subjects and its practices.

What we have found lacking was exactly an intersection between these planes. The only text dealing with both institutionalization and relational disabilities we found, was one by Gladys Swain, but was mainly about sensorial, instead of relational impairments.

The central idea in the work of Gladys Swain and Marcel Gauchet is that psychiatry was founded at the beginning of the 19th century with the emergence of the idea that madness can be cured, a concept concretized in the Pinelian notion of *partial madness*. Swain sees this passage from total to partial madness concrete in the different idea of madness in Kant and Hegel. Following this, psychiatric understanding tried to elaborate ways to appeal to the residual cognitive resources of the mad man. The moral method was gradually elaborated, from Pinel to Esquirol to Leuret.

The moral method is structurally dialogical, in psychiatric manuals we find hundreds of pages dealing on how to interact with the mad, to get the truth of his mental state, to unmask him if he simulates madness or dissimulates it, as well as to bring him back to sanity by making appeal to his residual rationality. So we wondered what was the fate of those whose problems inhibit a dialogue, what about relational disabilities, that is

autism before “autism”, in the psychiatric institutions using the moral method?

In order to frame relational disabilities in the psychiatric discourse of the 19th century, it is useful to recall a specific lesson (January 16th, 1974) by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France, now published in *Psychiatric Power*, which analyzes the psychiatrization of the child as a determining factor in the affirmation of psychiatric power. Foucault captures the enactment of two opposing processes. The first is the progressive distinction of idiocy from *delirium*, through a peculiar characterization of the notions of idiocy and imbecility. The second is the cooptation to the protection of psychiatry and asylum of those identified as suffering from a developmental disorder, and, not by reason of insanity: the taking over of “abnormal” by the mental device.

During the 19th century, the theoretical production of psychiatry dealing with idiocy and imbecility categories is extraordinarily wide: from Pinel, to Esquirol and his students, Ferrus, Belhomme, Voisin and above all Eduard Séguin, who emigrated to North America, and inaugurated the educational care for children with relational problems, thereby receiving the title of “idiots apostle”. His method is astonishingly close to actual reparative behavioral methodologies elaborated for autism like ABA. Later, at the end of the century, *Psychologie de l'idiot et de l'imbécile*, by Paul Sollier (psychiatrist known today mostly for assisting Marcel Proust), undertakes a synthesis of all previous research. In England as previously noted, idiocy was studied by Maudsley, Haslam, Ireland and Down. This bears witness to the fury, underlined by Foucault, for the mapping out

of relational differences. With Binet, at the turn of the century, all of this theoretical production was dismissed and a focus on the qualitative dimension of the relational is replaced by the cognitive attitude, measured using tools to evaluate a quantification of IQ (the *Stanford-Binet* test).