

PANEL 17 "THE HISTORY OF DISEASE"

Organiser: José Luis Peset

It will be my intention to underline how current approaches to the concept of disease derive from man's historical struggle with disease, the struggle of human groups with pathogenous agents. I want to underline with Marx Wartofsky the complexity of the modern human "ontology". Disease is neither the pathology of an organ, nor the pathology of an individual organism. The modern explanation of human disease, focuses on the complex adaptation of the human species to its cultural, social, and ecological context. It is in this framework that the problem of the concept of disease get its true meaning.

The clasical concept of disease is based in the general concept of physis, or Nature, the divine principle of life. According to the Greek philosophers Nature is the principle of order, beauty and justice. This natural harmony is structured on three levels, individual, social and cosmic. Health for the ancient physician consists of the balance of order, individual, social and cosmic, while disease is lack of this harmony. Disease is a disorder of Nature, a disorder of divine justice, and so the knowledge of disease is the knowledge of the divine, that is sophía, or philosophy.

The modern concept of disease derives from the new philosophy of Locke, and especially from Hume's empirical criticism to Aristotelian thought. Today, neither simple identifications between syndromes and their causes, nor deterministic explanations of signs and symptoms are acceptable. Explanations of disease attempt to relate signs and symptoms with multiple causal factors and with theoretic explanations on a physiological level. And the models of explanation must

take into account a holistic approach to human life, including psychological and somatic, cultural and social issues. The cultural construction of the concepts of doctor and disease, of illness and health are the basis of modern constructivism.

Disease is a mechanism of adaptation -that is, of attack, equilibrium and defence- of living beings to their habitat. Human development and evolution, in its cultural, social and ecological setting, give rise to alterations in the human organism, both mind and body, against which medicine and society must struggle. The history of disease includes very serious theoretical questions. One of the main concerns is the concept of disease, this concept includes explanatory and normative issues and has changed from the aristotelian to the modern paradigm. The incommensurability between old and modern diagnosis is a major problem for the historian of medicine.

The history of different labels of disease is not always necessary for general history. The demographic studies are very useful in the indications of the trends of population, and are highly appreciated by social and economic historians. The reaction to diseases of the groups and individuals are characteristic, focusing on anthropological and social studies. Disease and the reaction against disease are socio-cultural constructions. The various interpretations of the ethiology of

disease and the complex conduct with which human beings confront disease contain beliefs, interests, and feelings.