

Public health in historical perspective

Abstract

It is commonplace to consider the time of the Industrial Revolution as the time of the beginning of the first measures concerning the current concept of Public Health, understood both from the point of view of hygiene measures in the cities to which large quantities of workers from the agricultural world, as well as from the adoption of measures for the prevention, diagnosis and cure of diseases. Before that time, there remains the testimony of authors such as Michel Foucault, who in his study of the History of Madness in the Classical Era described the spaces of exclusion outside the walls of towns or cities, whether leprosy or madness to mention just a few examples, true incarnations of evil, who were feared and isolated outside the community. Our aforementioned author remembers how until the end of the Middle Ages, when Hansen's disease or Leprosy was eradicated in Europe, there were thousands of leper colonies throughout Christendom. In this article we will therefore go back to the times of the last decades of the 17th century in which a new relationship began to be articulated between the concepts of life and power, through the emergence of a new rationality anchored in the Reason of State, and mercantilism. As a dominant doctrine in different European countries understood as a zero-sum economic game, giving rise to the birth of what is called Biopolitics.¹ In this way, life, which becomes the criterion and end of the exercise of power, is the object of a political value judgment, a process that will last until the 20th century with the establishment of the Welfare State, and the measures that were adopted in 1942 according to the guidelines given by Lord Beveridge.

Volume 12 Issue 3 - 2023

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Received: October 10, 2023 | **Published:** November 30, 2023

Materials and methods

Since our story is based on a diachronic perspective, our work must be based on an anamnesis of the different ways in which States have approached population management, both from the point of view of improving living conditions and from the perspective of the strategic objectives of the State. In this context, the concept of biopolitics of populations emerged, introduced by Rudolf Kjellén in 1920, and later significantly taken up by Michel Foucault, to name just a few examples. We will also use, although briefly, the conceptual contributions that Louis Henry has made from historical demography, and for the processes of structural change produced by the Industrial Revolution we will base ourselves on the studies of Phyllis Deane² on this Historical process.

Results

The societies prior to the industrial revolution were agriculturally based, with high birth and mortality rates, cyclically plagued by hunger due to poor harvests caused by adverse weather, especially droughts, and epidemics such as leprosy and plague.^{3,4} Louis Henry, from the methodology of Historical Demography, has schematized through Crisis Diamonds the concurrent phenomena of the increase in mortality and the fall in birth and marriage rates. On the other hand, the piles of garbage that were not systematically collected became breeding grounds for rats, whose fleas were the cause of massive infections. We remember the Atlantic Plague in the Kingdom of Castile at the end of the 16th century or the Black Death in medieval times. Before its arrival, it was still often the municipalities that took measures to prevent the contagion and spread of the disease, and this in as much as possible since the population fled out of the cities.^{5,6}

Phyllis Deane² describes to us how the use of new construction materials such as brick instead of mortar, the channeling of water, whose previous non-existence had given rise to professions of another time such as Aguadeiros, on the other hand, the decrease in malaria and the achievement of good harvests caused a revolutionary change

of trend. But what really happened was the coexistence of a galaxy of revolutions, whether in transportation, commerce, agriculture, and finally a true demographic revolution.⁷

Discussion

The conditions for the emergence of the first public health policies, the transition from agricultural societies to others of an industrial and urban nature, based on the textile and steel industries, and production in general, have been established in the previous comments of greater quantities of goods and services.⁸

Conclusion

We have seen that the true moment of awareness of the need to adopt systematic public health measures takes place at the same time as the great revolutions, whether the political revolution in France or the industrial revolution in England, the emergence of the concept of the Citizen citizen that civil and political rights are recognized prior to the existence of the State itself and based on a contractual theory of power, in accordance with the liberal demand for minimal intervention by the State in society and the economy, a minimal State, far from the mercantilist theories of the absolute State.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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