Mental Disorder in Time and Place

Madness in Society. Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness. GEORGE ROSEN. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968. x + 337 pp. $5.95.

Since the death of Henry Sigerist in 1957, George Rosen has been our most prominent and determined practitioner of a medical history based on the assumption that medicine is a social function, part of a complex social system, and must be seen in this context. In this latest book, Rosen has departed explicitly from most traditional models for writing the history of psychiatry. The present work is, as Rosen puts it, "concerned with the historical sociology of mental illness, not with the history of psychiatry. [Its] central focus is not the thought and practices of medical men in dealing with phenomena of mental disorder as a medical problem, but rather the place of the mentally ill, however defined, in societies at different historical periods and the factors (social, psychological, cultural) that have determined it."

Within this broadly inclusive framework, Rosen discusses, among other topics, the status and treatment of the mentally ill in the ancient world, mass psychic phenomena such as the dancing manias and witchcraft persecutions, the influence of rationalism in the 17th and 18th centuries, 20th-century trends in regard to public health and mental health, the "psycho-pathology of aging," and attitudes toward the role of civilization and urbanization in the causation of mental illness. These are an impressively disparate group of subjects, and in most areas Rosen has been necessarily a synthesizer, yet a synthesizer of scope and imagination. He demonstrates an extraordinary mastery of the secondary literature in at least half a dozen fields; only an experienced and humane scholar could have written this book. That it is as much an exposition of needs and opportunities for inquiry as a definitive treatment of its subject is essentially a reflection on the state of the art and not an indictment of the author. As Rosen suggests in his preface, these studies are intended simply as "examples of a method and a point of view which have not hitherto received the attention they deserve."

Rosen nowhere constructs a formal model ordering the cultural variables that should be considered in understanding the situation of the mentally ill at any particular place or time. He succeeds, however, through dozens of examples, in illustrating his interpretative framework with unmistakable clarity. Rosen's primary assumption is that mental illness is (at least on one level) defined culturally, that the mentally ill find forms and content for their delusional systems within prevailing values and assumptions. He assumes as well that any factor broad enough to change the general direction or intellectual configuration of a culture—acculturation phenomena, for example, or the growth of such trends as rationalism—can cause mass psychic phenomena and possibly contribute to the etiology of individual psychopathology. From the point of view of the health professions, Rosen argues, one must understand explicit ideas of causation and therapeutics not as a part of some internally logical intellectual development but as very much dependent upon social values and attitudes generally. (The growing assumption in the 19th century that urbanization and civilization could cause mental illness, for example, thus becomes a means of criticizing, understanding, and controlling an increasingly unpalatable environment.) These assumptions will, I think, find few critics; they are, I believe and hope, becoming more and more accepted among workers in mental health.

Though one can only applaud the author's social commitment and the breadth of his interpretative vision, it must be confessed that the book itself has problems. The most important stems from the fact that these are essays—eight of the ten having appeared previously—and simply do not have the architectonic strength of a more tightly organized and argued book. Unity stems from the author's point of view and his ability to assimilate a large number of events and disparate materials to it, not from the concerted structuring of an argument. After the first two lengthy chapters on the ancient world (the only two sections previously unpublished, which do read as though they were the beginning of a book describing changing historical attitudes toward and manifestations of mental illness) the essays become somewhat random in their interrelationship and marshaling of data.

It is difficult to sustain a categorical argument against the collection of essays into book form; and I do feel gratitude to the author and to the University of Chicago Press for having brought these imaginative articles together and made them available to a wider public. I was, however, left with a residual feeling of disappointment after reading the collection. Though agreeing wholeheartedly with the author's general view that mental illness should be seen as a cultural phenomenon, I nevertheless found it frustrating to read chapter after chapter serving, as almost all of them do, principally as suggestive programmatic statements for this same view. This reviewer, at least, is left with the feeling that so broad a statement can be only a first step and that the historian should proceed to the task of working out the texture of these relationships in particular cultures and at particular moments in time. A limited number of case studies would, I think, have been the appropriate way to deepen and strengthen the argument so urbanely presented by Rosen. Indeed it is the only way, for without such "vertical" development statements of program become stylized and unproductive.

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How Men Move

Walking and Limping. A Study of Normal and Pathological Walking. ROBERT DUCROQUET, JEAN DUCROQUET, and PIERRE DUCROQUET, with the collaboration of Marcel Saussez. Illustrated by Marcel Dudouet. Translated from the French edition (Paris, 1965) by William S. Hunter and Jep Hunter. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1968. x + 284 pp. $15.

This French handbook is a family project following the early-20th-century cinematographic work of Charles Ducroquet *père* and of E. J. Marey in the 1870's and later. The authors outline their technique for motion-picture photography of gait (pp. 8–17), in which they use a "glass cage" 15 to 18 feet long, so designed that back, front, top, and bottom views are reflected by mirrors to coincide with profile photographs of walking; they make original use of oscillating gravity goniometers attached to subjects (pp. 16–17); they use Saussez' films of paths traced by lights attached to head, shoulders, wrists, hips, knee, "tip" of foot (exact points not specified); and they give detailed analysis of muscle function and malfunction, apparently as seen in the films, since electromyography for all