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Travel, Observation, and Technological Transfers The Models of Psychiatric Institutionalization in Nineteenth-Century Hungary

Discussions about establishing state-funded asylums for individuals afflicted with mental illnesses emerged in the Hungarian medical community as early as the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite frequent coverage in journals, academic literature, and popular medical books, institutionalization remained unrealized due to various factors, and it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that tangible progress was made, culminating in the opening of the Royal National Asylum at Lipótmező in 1868.

Beyond the dissemination of theoretical knowledge through publications, scientific and technological travel played a crucial role in Hungary's institutionalization process. Travel provided an important means of empirical learning and observation, shaping the country's approach to psychiatric care. This presentation examines the possibilities and limitations of psychiatric institutionalization and mental health reform in Hungary from two key perspectives. Firstly, it explores the social, political, and professional factors – such as the medical community's lack of engagement – that hindered the process. Secondly, it analyzes the travel journals of three physicians and their practices of observation, registration, and interpretation, as well as the presentation of new ideas and technologies from architectural and therapeutical approaches to bureaucratic technologies.

Hungary's first mad-doctors or “alienists” – Ferenc Schwartz, Emil Schnirch, and Károly Bolyó – were instrumental in the professionalization of psychiatry and left detailed travel journals reflecting on their experiences in foreign asylums. Each visited German, French, Belgian, and English institutions in 1848, 1861–1862, and 1863–1865, respectively, with the explicit goal of transferring knowledge on the good practices of asylum management. Their efforts significantly influenced the development of both private and state-run asylums and helped expand discussions on mental health reform on the necessity of establishing a central institution and, as a subsequent step, the decentralization of mental health care.

Keywords: psychiatry; nineteenth century; technological travel; institutionalization; professionalization; reform

Paralysis, the „Hungarian insanity”.
Masculinity and the degeneration of the nation in the Hungarian medical discourse

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In my presentation, I aim to explore the ways in which the international scientific terms related to mental illnesses influenced the discourse on the perceived decline and degeneration of the Hungarian nation during the 19th century.

The medical discussions surrounding diseases, particularly mental illnesses, often served as a metaphorical lens through which to view the condition of a nation. These medical analyses mostly reflected the heroic struggles of the nation. George Cheyne posited in “The English Malady” in 1733 that civilization was linked to the proliferation of diseases, such as melancholy, hypochondria, hysteria. Over a century later, his American counterpart, George Beard repeated this argument by declaring nervousness to be an American disease (it was called “Americanitis”). Beard attributed this phenomenon to the expansion and development of political, economic or religious freedom, intellectual life and technology. Beard introduced a new diagnostic term, neurasthenia to depict the struggle of the Yankee men, who were viewed as the vanguards of civilization. Both physicians “blamed” modern civilization for mental diseases while they also highlighted their nation's apotheosis.

In contrast, the concept of “national insanity” took on a distinct character in Hungary. Physicians observed that the civilization also affected Hungary, causing a rapid increase in desires and needs. However due to historical reasons the accumulated wealth was insufficient to meet these escalating demands. The gap between the aspiration and reality forced Hungarians to work harder, which was responsible for the high proportion of the paralysis, the “national insanity”. In Hungary, the notion of civilization was inseparably intertwined with the experience of backwardness. Furthermore, the decline of the nation was closely linked to the degeneration of the population, especially the decadence of the masculinity.

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Venereal Diseases and Prostitution in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: Official Data in the Light of British Reports

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy placed prostitution under state regulation to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Prostitutes working in brothels were subjected to regular medical examinations, whereas independent and clandestine prostitutes were less closely monitored. The primary goal of public health policy was to prevent infections; however, in practice, these measures often proved discriminatory and degrading for the women involved.

British consular reports and other contemporary accounts frequently painted a different picture of the Monarchy's anti-prostitution policies. While official Austro-Hungarian data emphasised the effectiveness of the system, British sources highlighted issues such as police corruption, abuses within brothels, and the inadequacies of medical inspections. In international discourse, particular attention was given to the phenomenon of "white slavery," that is, human trafficking, which was especially prevalent in the eastern regions of the Monarchy, such as Galicia and Bukovina.

By comparing the prostitution control measures of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Great Britain, we can observe that both countries prioritized public health and moral concerns, albeit with differing approaches. While the British model leaned towards abolitionism, the Monarchy opted for strict regulation.

In my presentation, I will examine the situation regarding prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases in both the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Great Britain, with a special focus on the discrepancies between official data and external British sources. Through the analysis of various historical documents—consular reports, statistical records, and other contemporary accounts—I will explore how British observers assessed the Monarchy's regulatory system and to what extent their depiction diverged from the official narrative put forth by the Viennese government. The aim of this comparison is to shed light on international debates of the era, the differing approaches to prostitution and disease control, and the alternative perspective that British reports offer on the Monarchy's public health policies.