

## Tuberculosis and cretinism in the Lombrosian school, an open question

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Today, Italy is considered a low-incidence country (<20 / 100,000) about the spread of tuberculosis. A different situation from those of the mid-1800s and the early 1900s, when TBC was widespread throughout the peninsula (1). The problems connected with this pathology are many. Among these, most insidious, also in the evaluation of their etiology, are the neurological problems caused by the narrowing of the medullary canal in the presence of Pott's disease, considered pathognomonic.

For the Lombrosian School, tuberculosis was a fruitful field of study. For instance, we can consider the letter sent by Pio Foà (1848-1923) to Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), preserved in the Museum of Criminal Anthropology "Cesare Lombroso", in which the scholar asks to be allowed to go to Alessandria to keep a lesson about the disease. For the Lombrosian School, tuberculosis was due to the degeneration of an atavistic trait (2). This disease, for them, was inherited and ruled by the atavistic theory. According to this theory, underprivileged classes were induced to crime, to alcoholism and to be easy victims of tuberculosis. This concept had already been theorized in the English school, from the psychiatrist Maudsley (1835-1918) and the penitentiary doctor James Bruce Thomson (1810-1873).

The Lombrosian School believed that the charity of the philanthropists, the medical progress and the public health system had interfered in the process of natural selection in favour of weaker people and so to the spread of this disease. Within the framework of

Lombrosian atavistic theories, regarding tuberculosis, cretinism is read and explained as the final stage of the disease. The same Lombroso wrote: "As in syphilis the first symptom and true pathognomonic character is ulcer, and the last outcome is tertiary syphilis; as in scrofulous dyscrasia the first symptom is an enlargement of the abdominal glands, and the last outcome is tuberculosis, so in this dyscrasia the first symptom is goitre and the last outcome is cretinism" (3).

These projects took hold even though in Europe in 1882 Robert Koch was able to identify the etiological agent of the white plague, while in Italy still for a long time people thought it was caused by deficiencies or due to "bad humour" according to the humoral theory.

The result of the concrete realization of this theory in Italy at that time was dramatic.

In this way, the tuberculosis sufferers were considered psychiatric patients and admitted to the psychiatric hospital. The consequence of this choice was to spread tuberculosis in the psychiatric hospital especially in Lombardia, where there were a lot of these structures.

It would be interesting to suggest an anthropological analysis focussed on understanding the incidence of tuberculosis in psychiatric hospitals due to the atavistic theory in the last decades of the '800. The research should be based on the multidisciplinary specific methods used recently for this work as anthropology, paleopathological analyses strictly connected to the analysis of historical documents (4).

## References

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