Corinna Wagner, *Pathological bodies. Medicine and Political Culture*

Jean Andris
Is it possible to make comparisons between the human body and the social body? That is the question asked by Corinna Wagner in her book, about the 18th century. In an attempt to provide an answer, she begins by examining three texts written by three different anatomists who used such comparisons, allegories or metaphors. John Hunter, in 1744, considered that disease attacks the body the same way that revolutions attack a nation’s constitution. In 1790, Edmund Burke expressed his philosophical and political ideas in nearly medical language. Thirdly, in 1792 Charles Pigott wrote a collection of anecdotes about the great and the good of British Society in which he linked the ravaged bodies of morally debauched aristocrats with what he saw as the equally ravaged British constitution. This way of writing corresponds to the way in which private and public spheres were becoming mingled in British society. In France also, the Revolution transformed privacy into a matter of state interest. The fact that new ideas in medicine began to change ideas in politics has however been largely overlooked in historical studies.

Queen Marie-Antoinette is a prime example of the bridge between medicine and politics. She was portrayed by French revolutionaries as a morally and physically degenerate person beyond the law and morality. According to her enemies she and her sister-in-law Elizabeth (the King’s sister) also displayed deviant behaviour towards her own son, the Dauphin. Such behaviour could not be tolerated and marked the beginning of the distinction between men and women and the exclusion of the latter from politics, both in France and in England. Women were obliged to stay at home and devote themselves to domestic activities. At the same time, King Louis was depicted as an unwilling, impotent man, unable to nurture his children (British loyalists, on the other hand, portrayed him as a sympathetic father). Medicine explains such deviances by physiological disorders and proposes treatments, from diet to surgery (ovariectomy for example). Pornography, largely used as a means of depicting aristocrats and the royal family as monsters, also contributed to delineating new frontiers in sexual behaviour and to informing lay people.
on the ‘depravity’ of the ruling class, thus taking on a political dimension. Similarly, the bad image given to Marie-Antoinette came to be applied to every political woman. English memoirists adopted the same opinion. French revolutionary mothers were not spared by the British and were described as teaching violence to their children.

3 The same idea of transmission of (bad) habits from mother to child existed for breast feeding as for intra-uterine life. But the French revolutionaries changed this idea by making breast feeding the ideal link between individuals, and so a good way to build their new society. On both sides of the Channel breastfeeding became a back to nature movement, but in the intended meaning by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: nature dominated rather than untamed. Thus nature was thought of as a tool with which to fight and prevent disease and to promote health, particularly that of mother and child. As a result, women were confined to the home, while the father had to control the way his children were nourished … and educated. As the authority figure he was free to engage himself in political life. However, some propagandists considered the French breast to be a source of blood and violence while the English one was a picture of patriotism. Another image depicted by propagandists, that of Amazons, those women who, contrary to their own nature, cut off one of their breasts to become better warriors, just as some French women do by entering the political sphere. Moreover, they ‘tend to turn some weak men into women’. There is another figure: the sodomite. He is the ‘republican’ man – in fact several – in the National Assembly who negotiate with the king rather than working directly for the Republic. His willingness to compromise is equated with feminine subservience and homosexuality. This was also the time when medicine began campaigns against homosexuality as a risk factor in the spread of (venereal) diseases, and as a source of disruption of the frontiers between health and disease, between normal and pathological, between morality and depravation.

4 Caricaturing politicians, with their bad sides (French or British characteristics), their exaggerations or failures in sexual life, was another way of evoking the body. Not only were some public men ‘dissected’ in the papers, with images showing their defaults, but some also self-dissected themselves in their writings by explaining to laymen details about their private events, feelings, experiences and so on. Corinna Wagner reports these facts as a ‘true autopsy’. The man who behaved in this way was in complete agreement with his own political philosophy: he was a man without any feeling. Such a transparent and public description of private life was contemporary with the advent of a new anatomy, i.e. a new way of seeing and showing the human body. The crude reality of the body, i.e. the genitals, was clearly represented and detailed for laypeople as for scientists. As a result, the bodies of women – particularly pregnant women – were dissected, sometimes in public, without any respect, and criminals were known to steal bodies from tombs.

5 Dissection tended to depict human bodies as mere machines. And dissection of the human brain made thinking a purely mechanical function. Tears were considered by some ‘scientists’ as ‘nothing more than secretions … and common salt’. Obviously not everyone agreed with this vision and many reactions were aroused among the public and intellectuals, with the result that there was much discussion in British society at this time. One of the emerging questions was likely to be: is the dissection of a person, particularly his (her) genitals, a sadistic crime? Another point of debate following all those inquiries about the physical and mental nature of women turned again on their political capacity or incapacity. Such debate – with partisans and opponents of the so
called weakness of women, what we see today as the gender question – remains current in our society.

6 This question of the capacities and weaknesses of women also concerned the study of botany, because plants also have sexual organs. This could shock the sensitivity of women and hysteria could result from such a shock. At this time indeed, the origin of nervous disease was sought in the body, no longer in external, moral or cultural causes. And such troubles were considered to be mainly women’s diseases. As of this time, the nervous system became a battlefield: the debate was public and aimed to moralise the people. Misconduct and corruption were frequent and concerned the body as well as society.

7 On the individual level, disease was linked with moral deviance with the result that it was necessary to give people good rules of bodily and moral hygiene. Therefore, nature was a good model. On the political level as well, society was threatened by gangrene, in the form of republicanism for example. Individual cleanliness and social order went together with contagion existing at both the moral and the individual level. The main cause of this was the density of the population, higher in towns than in the country. In each case, moral and physical monsters bear the stigmas on their bodies. The after effects of smallpox are an example of such marks. They are also proofs of ‘political insanity’. And Jenner’s inoculation could only lead to disease and horror.

8 Drinking is another plea. Brandy, in particular, reflects the rejection of societal conventions. Paine, an English revolutionary pamphleteer, was hated by the political establishment of his own country, according to whom his intemperance grew with the French revolutionary fever. This was an illustration of the association of insane behaviour and political corruption. A contrario such considerations had to lead people to an individual and politically ‘healthy’ behaviour.

9 Gout is a particular case of disease, a ‘high-life disorder in the age of pleasure’ as two famous historians of medicine, Roy Porter and George Rousseau, put it. According to Sydenham, it was a disease of rich people who lived in comfort enjoying banquets and drinking wine. In fact, there were two interpretations of the disease: one considered it to be a sign of civilization and refinement; the other saw it as affecting people living without wisdom or moral considerations. The Prince Regent’s (George) gout provided material evidence of his personal failings: his excessiveness, poor taste, unreasonableness, and debauchery. George’s gout was a measure of the (non)health of the nation. Fighting against gout became a question of lifestyle, at the individual level as well as at the national (political) level. Aristocrats who were unable to control their life habits would not be able to properly manage public affairs. The porphyria of George III, with its consequent mental disorder, added force to the argument. Also, the Prince of Wales, who lived in luxury, could not deal with poor people. Gout, the disease of over-eaters, was also a symptom of incapacity to understand lay people and thus to conduct public affairs. However, in opposition to such people, another type of character emerged: the food-lover, who ate with taste and lived healthily and morally. This also meant that such a man was more thoughtful about his choices: he was acting rationally. Several medical treatises describe this way of living as a good way of preserving health and morality.

10 Eating is also a part of what people are, including their nationality. Therefore, it is important not to eat the same foods as your enemy. American revolutionaries didn’t want to eat what English people ate. Thus, diet demarcated the differences between nations. Likewise, the man with an exaggerated appetite also had abnormal and immoral sexual behaviour, as with King George IV and the Turkish tyrants some decades previously.
George IV’s interest in the East led him to build the Brighton Pavilion, for example, a building which was also seen as a reaction against the negative French revolutionary culture. George IV was not greatly appreciated, however, and was compared in caricatures to the Grand Mogul, a Chinese emperor, and to the Hottentot Venus, the latter being seen as not only as a true symbol of wildness and animal sexuality, but also as the polluted carrier of contagious matter. According to some physicians there was a link between foreign diseases and foreign places, so nations had to defend their own boundaries. This was a good reason for mapping populations and their diseases and for fearing colonies and overseas travels.

The worst kind of foreigner was the cannibal. But not only could foreigners be cannibals: revolutionaries who kill a lot of people and monarchs who live in luxury while their populations are starving are also cannibals. And when the latter consume a lot of food coming from countries where diseases devastate populations, they could constitute a danger for their own populations. This was the case, for example, with sugar, banned for this reason by some physicians and dieticians. Sugar, moreover, was produced through the exploitation of black slaves. And slavery was a question of political and economic debate. So taste was never far away from disease and corruption.

In conclusion, according to the terms of the author, medical progress has not been isolated from public health and therefore, from politics. But the in-depth study of Corinna Wagner goes much farther than we can summarise in these lines. It is also an exploration of the movements of a society’s turbulence and of a new way of thinking about men and women. Moreover, it shows us how medical science worked at that time and what its ‘truths’ were. From this point of view, it is also an invitation to modesty on the part of today’s scientists, showing us how our current beliefs could turn out to be false tomorrow.

AUTEUR

JEAN ANDRIS

Medical doctor, former researcher at the faculty of medicine of the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL, Belgium) and former lecturer in gross anatomy and physiology at the Haute école Léonard de Vinci (Academy of Louvain, Belgium). Master in history (end of studies dissertation on forensic medicine in the 19th Century). 2013 Laureate of the Société française d’histoire de la médecine