Economy and mortality in social science: From the Renaissance to ideas on demographic transition

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Objectives: To present the history of ideas about the influence of economy on mortality from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.

Methodology: Interpretative analytical.

Results: The author claims that prior to the late twentieth century, academic economists paid little attention to topics related to health and health care. These areas remained in the hands of the emerging fields of the era; epidemiology and demography. Both epidemiology and public health and its theoretical bases developed up to a certain point, in comparison with economy. The author reviews the contributions of the founders of occupational health—from Petty’s political arithmetic methods, Malthus’s ideas on population growth and mortality, the demographic and epidemiological contributions of Engels and Marks, the founding of social medicine and public health in the late nineteenth century—to McKeown’s modern ideas on demographic transition. The author then presents the positions of different factions, showing how the fields of sociology have grown apart and come to concern themselves with different phenomena, such that the divided currents and schools not only disagree, but in some instances become irreconcilable.

Conclusions: To the author, one of the most important challenges facing the social sciences is understanding the relationships and reasons underlying the phenomena of economy and mortality.