Mens sana in corpore sano: José M. Ramos Mejía and the Medicalization of Argentine Society

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Objectives: To present an analysis of the health situation in Argentina during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, where “the medical gaze” played a decisive role through the influence of prominent hygienists of the period.

Methodology: Analytical and Interpretive

Results: This article discusses the historical period in which Argentina experienced a period of “sanitization” centered on the prevention of epidemics and the construction of social-work networks. The author begins by describing several events and problems rooted in the mass migrations from Europe and the health problems that confronted Argentine society as immigrants were incorporated into large urban centers. The creation of specific institutions like the National Department of Hygiene and Public Assistance of Buenos Aires gave shape to the medical-hygienist institutionalization which had an enormous influence on state policies and asserted harsh control over the lives of city dwellers. This medical-hygienist ideology was supported by the newest discoveries in bacteriology during this period and by the rise of the use of statistics. Subsequently, the author centers his analysis on the work of José M. Ramos Mejía, who is considered a medical reformist concerned with institutional modernization by educative processes, and by the reform of hospital structures and public health policies. Ramos Mejía conducted a historical-sociological analysis of Argentine society from a positivist medical point of view.

Conclusions: For the author, the medical discourse of “sanitization” achieved influence over public elites in order to construct legitimate control behind public health. This changed the social order by the medicalization of the society and generating tensions with liberal intellectuals of the period.