

CHANGES IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS: THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON THE ITALIAN PRESS

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Abstract: The specific role played by mass communications as mediators between science and common sense here comes under focus. We would like to single out the relevance of mass communications not only because of their information they give about scientific point of view, and of their circulation of social representations, but chiefly because of the contribution they make to the production of social representations. Regarding mental illness in particular, these use some more general representational frameworks of a political and ideological nature, which are both internal and external to the mass communication system, and which are expressed with a rhetorical and pseudodialogical type of discourse. Our arguments are based on data from longitudinal research carried out in Italy. We have examined how different newspaper headings have presented mental illness and the laws regarding mental illness over the last twenty-five years. The years selected for closer examination correspond to some of the more significant stages of psychiatric reform in Italy. Historically, these stages consist of: a) the opening up of the 'psychiatry question' (1969); b) the birth of 'Psichiatria Democratica' (1973); c) the approval of the law now in force, with the abolition of mental hospitals (1978); d) the application at a local level (1983); and e) the crises about and urgency for a newsolution to mental illness. Data analyses confirm the rhetorical style of mass-media communication, showing the contemporary presence of certain contradictory 'themata' concerning mental illness.

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MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Hitherto only limited investigation has been made into the role played by mass communications in mental illness. The research data I shall present show the importance of this type of communication - which is most diversified for the type of media, and for its cultural, ideological and political orientations -, as mediator between scientific and social representations. The basic idea that has inspired this research project is that of the existence of an interdependence between mass-communication processes and those of the construction and transmission of social representations, following in the wake of what has been suggested by S. Moscovici (1961) with regard to psychoanalysis, and more recently by other scholars (Markova & Wilkie, 1987) concerning AIDS.

The relevance given by S. Moscovici to the role played by the various types of mass media in the genesis and development of social representations has been particularly fruitful in the development of psychosocial theory and research¹. Indeed, thanks to his initial contribution, a new theory centred on the construct of social representation, together with a new field of study in health psychology, and a new approach to mass communications are now underway. Even the latest developments in psychosocial research, inspired by the sociocognitive- (van Dijk, 1988) and constructivist (Edwards and Potter, 1992) approach stress how mass communications play a significant role not only in the circulation and transmission of scientific knowledge (Schiele and Boucher, 1992), but also in the very construction of common knowledge.

According to various scholars it is mainly owing to mass communications that AIDS has now become a social phenomenon (Herzlich & Pierret, 1989, 1990; Lupton, 1994, Petrillo, 1993, Petrillo & Lionetto, in print). Our hypothesis is that the mass media have played multiple roles with regard to mental illness. The long-standing existence of this question has allowed us to adopt a longitudinal approach for analysing the changes which have taken place in the process of the construction of mental illness as a social question, which may be considered as changes in sense produced by mass-media through the activation of discourse processes of a pseudodialogic type (Petrillo, 1995). Such a dialogism consists both in the co-presentation of voices of individuals and social groups not only arguing differently, but often also in a conflictual manner (Billig, 1987, 1991), and, in a virtual sense, in the dialogic potentialities of the texts produced by the various media, at the moment in which they activate the 'inner dialogue' or are rendered into discourse in face-to-face communication exchanges (Mininni, 1992).

The very way in which the media, in adopting the ideological and political forms of interpretation, have presented both contents and participants in the debate on the 'psychiatry question', has undoubtedly influenced both the social perception of the possible margins of negotiation, the outcomes at an institutional level, and the quality and quantity of consensus, as well as the very representation of such consensus (D'Atena, 1983; De Martis, Rampazzi, Sommi, Vender, 1987). Our research is not directly concerned with the processes of social influence of mass media. Rather we have asked ourselves about the way the press in particular has represented mental illness and the

¹ With particular reference to the area of social representations of mental illness, see Ayestaran, 1984, Bellelli, 1987, 1994, Jodelet, 1989, Markova & Farr, 1994, Schurmans, 1990.

mentally-ill, and the anti-psychiatric movement - which was initially a minority one (Petrillo, 1989, 1994 b, 1996) -, together with changes in the law.

RESEARCH METHODS AND MAIN FINDINGS

Our textual data are a collection of headlines taken from two newspapers (including headline summaries and sub-headings) selected according to the single criterion of their pertinence to the problems of mental illness. The two newspapers are widely-read dailies. 'Il Mattino', which is still going strong, is a local daily newspaper with a nation-wide circulation, more especially in Campania, a region of Southern Italy, and historically represents the position of the political parties of the centre, particularly the Christian Democracy which, prior to the last elections had been the main government party. 'Paese Sera' was active until 1989: with a nationwide readership it represented the position of the reformist left, being particularly closely attached to the Italian Communist Party. Both newspapers may be considered most significant within the spectrum of the Italian press, though by no means exhaustive in the wide range of the present political and party positions. Furthermore, though both are very closely attached to political parties, they are not party newspapers in the strict sense of the word.²

The time span considered in this research is that of the last twenty five years or so. Fixed five-year time intervals have been chosen for this presentation, in keeping with a selection criterion based on the rationale that the years selected coincide with the main stages of the evolution of the 'psychiatry question' in Italy. Historically, the time span that has led to the present normative balance - and which cannot but be taken into account for a complete understanding of the main questions that are nowadays asked with regard to illness and to the mentally-ill - may be summarised as follows:

a) 1968-69 are the years of the beginning of the 'psychiatry question' through the efforts of Basaglia, with his attempt to launch in Gorizia the transformation of the asylum into communities, by associating his action with the growing worker and student protests and by seeking support from the progressive political forces.

b) 1973 marks the year of the birth of Democratic Psychiatry as an organised movement and, at national level, as a landmark for all those, especially workers in psychiatric hospitals, who strove for the total abolition of asylum and for a change in the role of therapists and therapeutic treatment itself. During the Seventies the Gorizia model spread further afield, especially throughout the centre-north, but encountered greater difficulties in the south.

c) 1978 is the year in which the so-called 'Basaglia Law', also commonly referred to as 'Law 180', was passed, with the consensus of the centre- and left-political forces. Asylums were abolished, together with compulsory internment. It was established that the mentally ill should be hospitalised for a very limited period, subsequently renewable only once, inside psychiatric departments in civil hospitals. The Regions were appointed as local state bodies entrusted with the task of drawing up a plan of transition from the old to the new system, together with the increasingly decentralised and local suburban

² Only for 1993 have we included the headlines of 'L'Unità', which is the organ of the 'Partito Democratico della Sinistra' (ex Italian Communist Party: P.C.I.), with the aim of abreast of the newspaper's data comparison as much as possible.

management of mental illness through the implementation of Mental Health Centres in the U.S.L. (Unità Sanitarie Locali: Local Health-Service Departments).

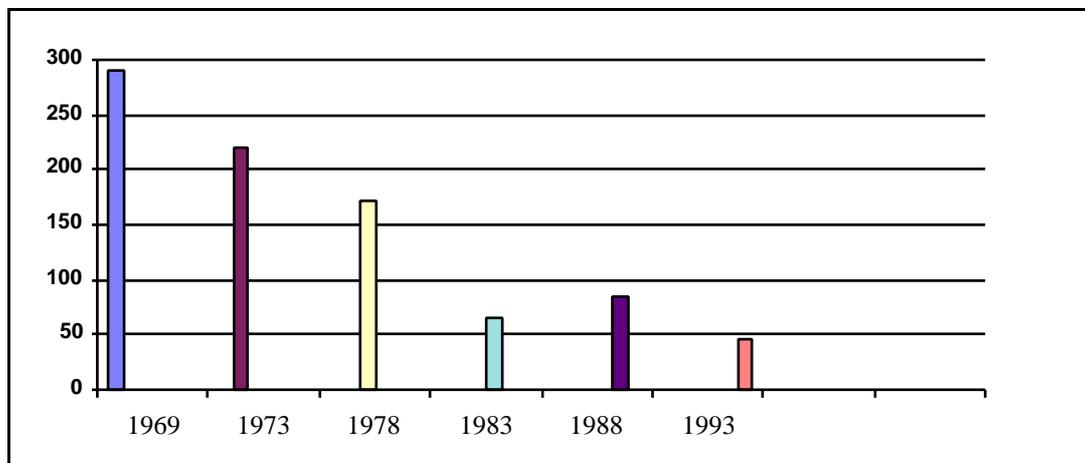
d) 1983 marks the year of the approval of a regional plan for the implementation of Law 180 for Campania. This was brought about with considerable delay, thereby prolonging the stay of patients, especially the chronic ones, on the premises of the asylums which, in fact, were still kept open.

e) 1988 represents a moment of reflection on the state of things for the psychiatrists gathered together at the national meeting. In the late Eighties family associations also began to appear, often left to their own devices for managing the mentally-ill patient, through absence of the new services - such as therapy centres and home help - though provision for these had been made by the law. Party intervention representing nearly all the political tendencies also steadily grew, all directed towards modifying the law.

Repeated government crises and priority given to other questions on the national scene, especially those concerning employment, public debt and Mafia-associated activity, led to the continued postponement of Law 180, which still appeared ever more pressing and urgent. Mass media intervention appears most relevant in this regard.

The body of data which the present analysis is based on (876 articles) represents some 22.000 words, only 18% of which one distinct.³ It must be added that the entire body of the textual data is heterogeneously distributed by newspaper (Il Mattino = 568; Paese Sera = 308) and by year (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Articles per year (N = 876)



The Correspondence Analysis (Benzécri, 1980; Lebart and Morineau, 1984; Doise, Clémence, and Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1992) was carried out by using the date and the type of

³ A more restricted dictionary of about 15.000 words was first compiled with a frequency threshold of 4, of which only about 4% were distinct. Finally, by reducing the frequency threshold to 10, by proceeding to the elimination of words of scarce significance in themselves (e.g. articles, prepositions, etc.), and by creating grammatical or semantic equivalents (e.g. 'mad' which includes silly, crazy, mad, etc.), a dictionary was compiled of 156 different words used for subsequent data-treatment phases.

newspaper as active variables.⁴ Four factors have emerged, only the first three of which have proved interpretable.⁵

The first factor emerges mainly thanks to the contribution made by a cluster of words that makes reference to the public management of mental illness through the political and administrative bodies, which are drawn from the new psychiatry (psychiatrists, law, 180, management, Piro, Basaglia, council, Region, councillor, committee, trial, document, province, etc.); these are contrasted with a group of words that shows public order intervention and which indicates deviant forms of behaviour (crime, murder, to shoot, mad, dramatic, freezing, drama, tragic, suffering, affected, to throw, prison, police, carabinieri, etc.). This factor may be stated to contrast two representational models of mental illness, namely criminilisation and anthropologisation, the first of which brings about an institutionalisation of a 'closed' and punitive type, and the second leads to an 'open'- and therapeutic- type of institutionalisation. In the first case, the mentally-ill patients behaviour is highly personalised and characterised by 'dangerousness', so as to justify intervention by the public order exercising a defensive function. In the other case the mentally-ill appear in their turn as victims of a coercive and violent asylum-system, such as to justify intervention with an assistance function, the main promoters of which are the psychiatrists. Indeed this factor may be said to contrast mental illness as a public order question against mental illness as an institutional and assistance question. Clearly, this factor does not show the whole range of conceptual and operational models that exist, but is to be understood as a maximisation of the differences typically represented by two precise models that may be set into a historical framework and socially and mass-medially produced, as we shall soon appreciate more fully (Figure 2).

The second factor emerges mainly through the contributions made by the words which pivot round the mentalisation of mental illness, which thus requires a reassessment of the places and methods of therapy, and more generally new forms of social integration (ill, patients, mental, reform, man, law, structures, etc.); these contrast with words showing the limits of medicalisation, when within a more general outcasting orientation (society, pity, mental hospital, Salerno, Materdomini, requisitioning, places, bed, judicial, etc.). This factor, in brief, contrasts with the mentalisation of mental illness as a point of no return, also in view of a revision of the law, against the denunciation of social outcasting and abuse operated by the mental hospital institution.

⁴ Other variables, such as main theme in the article, location of article in the newspaper, attitude of article towards the law, and type of article, have been considered only as illustrative. New services - reform, news, asylum, family, P.D.- Law 'Basaglia' and trade unions controversies are the modalities of the theme variable; front page, 2nd-3rd page, regional page, national page, science-cultural page and other page are the modalities of the location variable; favourable, contrary and neutral-absent are the modalities of the attitude variable; news item, service, inquest, article, report and note are the modalities of the typology variable.

⁵ Altogether, these three factors explain only 4.85 percent of the total variance: this very low percentage is comprehensible in this kind of textual analysis, which consider the lexical elements as unities for the analysis of. The autovalues and the percentages of the explained variance for each factor are as follows: 0.45; 2.01% for the 1st factor; 0.33; 1.47 for the 2nd factor; 0.30; 1.36 for the 3rd factor

Figure 2
Projection of the variables on the factorial plane (1st factor: horizontal axis; 2nd factor: vertical axis)

The third factor may be also interpreted, although statistically less strong. It appears to suggest a contradiction within the same scientific representations, between mental illness as an illness of nerves, or as an illness of the mind (congress, trial, Local Health Department, psychiatrist, mad, madness, affected, nerves, exhaustion, mind, patients, etc.), contradiction which is still operative and visible in the scientific debate on psychiatry. An organic conception of mental illness appears to predominate, which would manifest at a somewhat precocious age, accompanied by particularly aggressive forms of behaviour, which require social control, and the cure of which would be entrusted to psychiatrists. This to the detriment of a psychologised conception thereof, that brings the mentally-ill as a social category towards society, both inducing new forms of aggregation and social conflict, and requiring an assistance-type intervention (as also upheld by the law), whose care would be entrusted to psychotherapists in particular (hospital, psychiatric, in-patients, employees, agitation, psychoanalysis, denunciation, assistance, ill, etc.). This factor therefore contrasts the socio-political denunciation of an anti-therapeutical character of the psychiatric hospitals, at the expense of the patients and the psychiatric nurses, with scientific reflection, where the psychiatrists are seen as the leading actors. Although these two poles may be historically determined, this factor reveals a more fundamental-type contrast between the basic and the scientific action, between movement and academy, and between social representations expressed by non-professionals and scientific representations expressed by experts (Figure 3).

The projection of the active variables and of their relative modalities on the factorial space helps to confirm the interpretation of these factors, by enhancing it with other elements of information.

With regard to the years, 1969 contrasts with all the other dates, especially 1978, on the first factor; the years 1988 and 1993 contrast chiefly with 1973 on the 2nd factor, with 1978 in an intermediary position. 1969 is characterised as the year which more than any other has expressed the criminalisation of the mentally-ill, while 1978 and the subsequent years have expressed its anthropomorphisation, sealed by a new setting of norms and institutions. The first years, on the other hand, are also characterised as the years of denunciation and social conflict, that is as the years of social minority influence, while the latter are characterised as the years of institutionalisation and freezing. The latter prelude a further change in the near future, in the direction of a reform of the law (see Figure 2).

Finally, on the third factor, 1969 and 1973 again contrast with the subsequent years, and especially with 1988, marking once more the transformation of mental illness, which occurred during a period of little more than twenty years, from a 'political-social question' into a 'psychiatry question' tout court, as one aspect of the health question (see Figure 3).

With regard to the differences between the two newspapers, which are less marked than originally hypothesised, they prove to contrast slightly on all three factors. *Il Mattino* sides with assistance and institutionalisation systems, whereas *Paese Sera* supports criminalisation (1st factor). While the former tended to side with the new psychiatry movement, the latter gave more weight to the reform of the law (2nd factor) (see Figure 2). Moreover, *Il Mattino* sides with social denunciation, whereas *Paese Sera* favours scientific reflection (3rd factor) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Projection of the variables on the factorial plane (2nd factor: horizontal axis; 3rd factor: vertical axis)

These newspaper findings are in contrast with the positions generally adopted by the political parties which tend more to express their policies through these two newspapers; paradoxically, it is the pro-government party that has given more support to the anti-asylum position and which has become more mobilised in the denunciation phase, whereas the newspaper of the left which remains anchored to a somewhat primitive, albeit still existing, view of mental illness, expresses itself more critically on the problems posed by the law, and gives a hearing to psychiatrists and to family members. This is probably to be explained by considering the target that these two newspapers want to reach, to maintain and eventually increase their own political consensus. The first newspaper aims at appealing to strata of enlightened intellectuals, so as to give itself a veneer of modernity, whereas the second newspaper sets out to sensitize a fascia of non-expert popular classes to a campaign of reform, which may safeguard the rights of individuals and society alike. Yet since their differences taken together are not great, both newspapers may be said to have participated in launching Law 180 and thus in the anti-asylum option, even if not always linearly and without contradictions, making of the abolition of asylums a sort of 'buttonhole flower' on the political and cultural intervention front.

Also the illustrative variables are set in coherence with what has hitherto been said on the factorial space. It is not by mere chance that the news items and services are the only types of articles which are set on the side of criminalisation, together with the neutral or absent attitudes toward the law, and the presentation of news, preferentially on the newspapers' front pages. Inquests, articles and reports, on the contrary, have given voice to the new institutionalisation of mental illness, expressing a favourable attitude towards the law, by focusing more especially on themes of asylum horror and on the need for reform and new services, and by making use of the science/culture page (1st factor).

On the 2nd factor, the articles with a negative attitude towards the law are opposed above all to inquests, which are on the side of social denunciation. Understandably, the themes of Democratic Psychiatry and the asylum are on the side of social denunciation, and are expressed on the other pages, being above all opposed to those of reform, and of the new services and families of hospitalised patients, which more generally find space on the science/culture page, and on the 2nd-3rd page, or on the regional page (see Figure 2).

For the 3rd factor, the problems that are posed for the relatives of the mentally-ill, and the theme of the reform of the law and of the new health services are presented above all on the science/culture page, in the form of notes and reports, while the trade union controversies and social conflicts dealing with the abolition of the asylum are presented more especially by inquests and news items.

ANALYSIS OF THE TYPICAL WORDS AND PHRASES

Further findings come from the quantitative-qualitative analysis of the more (and less) typical words and phrases.⁶

⁶ These typical elements have been selected according to year and newspaper with the criterion of the word-frequency and of the measurement of the distance between the distribution of the words over the year (or the newspaper) considered and total frequency.

1969 sketches out an identikit of the mentally-ill: first young men then women of the middle/working class, suffering from nervous breakdown; their criminal action is typically homicide, carried out in a gory fashion, which justifies the intervention of the police and carabinieri. There is no mention of the sick or patients, nor of the places of therapy or asylums. The mentally-ill are possessed by their illness, which in a certain sense rules over them, forcing them to perform some undesirable actions or to believe in non existing things, which cause them to

suffer, sometimes to commit suicide. The illness has a long course, as in the case of the nervous breakdown, and often manifests itself at its climax with a nervous fit, which strikes the subject himself, and which induces him in turn to strike the others. The illness is called 'madness': it is incomprehensible (an impulse, an absurd gesture) not only for the persons affected, but also for witnesses or victims. The victim is almost always a relative, often a parent or a wife: the crime is generally committed within the home.⁷

1973 is totally focused on the management of the psychiatric hospital 'Materdomini' of Nocera Superiore (in the South of Italy), which will be transformed from a private into a public hospital, after much contention between the Province and the Region, and between different towns (Salerno and Avellino): the action called for is firstly its requisition, together with the prison for the hospital managers. We find no discussion about madness or assistance or patients, but about a relationship among institutions which is characterised by the bureaucratization on the part of the local bodies, by a strong interest on the part of the parties (especially the local Christian Democrats) and the trade unions, and by a strong basic social conflict.⁸

1978 is characterised by the debate on the law and on the abolition of the asylum (prototypically represented by the one at Aversa). It is in this year that insane officially and definitively gain the status of mentally-ill people, thanks to the support of psychiatrists, who express in completely new terms the issues of psychiatric assistance. There is no further discussion about madness and deviant forms of behaviour, but rather about the way in which the patients might be accepted within the new structures. 'Psychiatric Law 180' is the main instrument for 'beating the asylum', even if from this moment on it doesn't appear clear which problems will be posed by the hitherto interned patients. The prison is again called for, now no longer for the insane, but rather for the directors of the psychiatric hospitals, guilty of abusing their power and of using the asylum as an instrument of torture. Here the unarmed patients massed-together are the victims.⁹

⁷ The more typical words selected for 1969 are: young, police, agitation, crime, breakdown, shots, to hurt, men, homicide, carabinieri, nerves, women, given; those less typical are: denunciation, councillor, patients, province, U.S.L., requisitioning, ill-people, Aversa, Region, 180, Salerno, lager, Psychiatrists, law, asylum.

⁸ The more typical words selected for 1973 are: Salerno, province, requisitioning, management, Nocera, Avellino, council, fire, children, privat, Superiore, councillor, prison; those less typical are: suicide, madness, clinic, women, reform, Piro, U.S.L., assistance, psychiatric, psychiatrists, mind, 180, ill-people, law.

⁹ The more typical words selected for 1978 are: asylum, Aversa, law, psychiatric, ill-people, director, trial, patients, new, meeting, assistance, psychiatrists, mind, structures, bed; those less typical are: examination, crime, child, carabinieri, to shot, men, children, nerves, madness, to hurt, homicide, wife, Materdomini.

Yet the spectre of madness and the discussion on its biological roots once more appear very soon: by 1983, when the South of Italy is already quite late in enforcing the law, the debate intensifies at scientific meetings, and a conflict develops between the psychiatric and psychological component, this latter in fact referring to the psychoanalysis one. The newspapers talk about 'biological psychiatry' and especially about 'non-political psychiatry', even if it seems very difficult at this time to make a clear prediction about psychiatry, which in the past had been called 'democratic'. While several exponents of *Psichiatria Democratica* fight for enforcing the law, and for 'unchaining the insane' for ever, certain madness 'dramas' come about, in which some children are either victims or ring leaders: the relationships within the family and the first years of life seem to be the main point in which madness appears and may originate. Mad-people are neither inside asylums, nor victims of it: there is a double and parallel register, in that only those patients who have to suffer forced internment in the non-demobilised asylums are still considered victims.¹⁰

In 1988, ten years after its approval, 'Law 180' is frequently called 'unenforced', having been aborted before its implementation, through the responsibilities of the local political and administrative bodies. The denunciation concerns at this moment its non-application by the Local Health Departments and by the Regions, which brings about the breakdown of the family, as the place where madness may not necessarily be born, but where it certainly thrives. The case of the 'mentally-ill woman' that 'dies on being evicted', presents the emblematic image of a weak defenceless social subject, in that she is repeatedly left to her own devices. At the same time the case of the 'infirm patient' who tortures and murders, again presents some very violent forms of behaviour, which are consistent with the void that the nominal abolition of the asylum has created.¹¹

More recently, in 1993, the reasons which led to the present law have been re-presented: asylums are called 'lagers' again, but the same theme of the search for structures for the mentally-ill - already heatedly discussed during the year of the approval of the law - is faced afresh. Although the debates are polemic and the arguments confused, the final outcome hoped for by many parties appears quite clear, namely a 'reform of Law 180'. The statute for the mentally-ill is as contradictory as ever: on the one hand, there are 'abandoned patients', countless victims of 'abuse and abandonment', traumatised and lonely 'ill-people', and civil subjects who have every right to their 'Bill of Rights'. On the other hand, there are the incurably insane, children or parent assassins.¹²

¹⁰ The more typical words selected for 1983 are: psychiatrists, psychoanalysis, brother, 180, madness, book, reform, drama, assistance, Naples, mind, places; those less typical are: Nocera, wife, Morvillo, life, victim, days, hospitals, homicide, asylum, arrest, province, children, Materdomini.

¹¹ The more typical words selected for 1988 are: law, U.S.L., psychiatrists, ill-people, 180, Rome, mind, Region, Piro, years, denunciation, children, family, drama; those less typical are: Salerno, stabs, director, Nocera, conditions, Morvillo, asylum, hospitals, young, arrest, province, Materdomini.

¹² The more typical words for 1993 are: U.S.L., Bianchi, reform, denunciation, lager, 180, ill-people, Basaglia, Rome, children, structures, centre, against, without; those less typical are: assistance, Salerno, nerves, Nocera, Aversa, Morvillo, asylum, province, young, Materdomini. According to the newspapers, the more typical words selected over the last twenty-five years are as follows: Materdomini, Salerno, province, Nocera, management, Avellino, Morvillo, judicial, hospitals, to

FINAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is from analysing the structure of social representations, underlying the press's lexical repertoire, that the main 'themata' of mental illness have emerged (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994, Schurmans, 1996). Substantially, mental illness is conceived: a) as a form of deviance or illness; b) as an individual or a societal phenomenon; c) as a mental or organic illness.

The results of factor analysis permit us to make some predictions on the progress of the 'psychiatry question', which is still far from being resolved for good. In these last few years generalized discontent has grown even further with regard to public health management, and for the problems posed by Law 180. There are numerous elements that make a revision of the Law appear most imminent, which is now desired not only by all its former opponents, but also by its staunchest supporters.

Its possible outlets run in two directions, which will have certain repercussions at both the institutional and social level, and also as a result of a political variable, which certainly is not of any secondary importance (such as that concerning changes in the composition of the governing bodies). On the one side the problem of the privatization of the health service is reposed, while on the other is reposed its reorganisation in terms of the centralisation of its functions within provincial health-service units, which could be articulated into districts and with centre performing specific competencies, and which could have autonomously-managed hospitals.

Apart from the counter positions adopted by the various political groupings, the very way of conceiving mental illness is once more questioned, together with the social statute of the mentally-ill, and the way of defining the role of the institutions and of the society to them. In the years following the passing of the law, we have seen the emergence of a variety of views resulting from the weighty contribution from medical science and psychiatrists, which has acted as a prelude to an organic-type restoration, through having recourse to medicalised management of mental illness. Agreement between the two different newspapers, both of which share the contradictory presentation of a criminalised mentally-ill patient in the front headlines, and a medicalized one in the science-page headlines, suggests having recourse to science and psychiatry as a rhetorical expedient which aims at presenting a façade of objectivity to certain ideological and prejudicial choices.

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