

A POSSIBLE (IF NOT PROBABLE) DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION OF KUHN'S PROFILE OF HENRY DUNANT (1828-1910), THE REAL FOUNDER OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS

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ABSTRACT

In 1985, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, Roland Kuhn (1912-2005), explained his psychiatric reading of Henry Dunant (1828-1910), the real founder of the International Red Cross, in a specific paper. Our historical analysis about his article shows at least five criticism that can be made against Kuhn's interpretation of Dunant profile. All reasons of our historical criticism are described and discussed.

Keywords: International Red Cross, Henry Dunant, Roland Kuhn, historical psychiatric reading.

DOI: 10.19193/0393-6384_2018_5_206

Received January 30, 2017; Accepted March 20, 2018

Introduction

In 1985, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, Roland Kuhn (1912-2005), the discoverer of imipramine (the first tricyclic anti-depressive), presented a paper entitled “Henry Dunant vu par le psychiatre”⁽¹⁾, at the International Conference of the “Société Henry Dunant”, “De l’Utopie à la Réalité” (3-5 May, 1985) in Geneva. The same article appears in Italian in 1993 in the Italian Journal “Psichiatria e Territorio”⁽²⁾.

Since the year 2,000, we have been working on Henry Dunant and the origins of the history of the International Red Cross^(3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12), (see also the website www.prof.ducciovanni.it). We are part of the research group of Professor Paolo Vanni, who rediscovered, studied and re-evaluated the figure of Henry Dunant both in Italy and at an international level (see website www.profpaolovanni.it). Paolo Vanni published the integral version of the 11 manuscript volumes of the Memoires of Henry Dunant⁽¹³⁾. On the basis of this work, we have reached the conclusions which we briefly present in this article.

In his article, Roland Kuhn explains his psychiatric reading of Dunant in four-parts which are summarized hereafter, followed by our critical commentary. There are at least five criticisms that can be made against Kuhn. The first brief initial observation concerns the undeniable fact that Kuhn's article has no bibliography, and this is not usually the case in scientific articles! The remaining four criticisms are set out in the context of the four parts of Kuhn's article.

Part I Description of the Physic illness of Henry Dunant

This includes the only real clinical evaluations with regard to H. Dunant left by Dr. Hermann Altherr, physician at Heiden Hospital from 1898 to 1910. In the period 1904 - 1907, Dunant suffered only from “abdominal catarrh”, that is intestinal disorders or diarrhea. In the health records for the other years, “mélancolie levis” appears several times, and twice the “idea of persecution” and also the term “mania” occurs. Kuhn's thesis is that Dunant's ideas of persecution in the last years of his

life exceeded all reasonable limits, and that Dunant's financial catastrophe in 1867 together with the traumatic way in which he was 'expelled' from the Geneva 'entourage' as well as from the Red Cross, all these events together were transformed into poisonous delirium: Dunant required the hospital cook to bring him his meals personally and taste them in front of him before he would touch the food⁽¹⁾.

Another example: the breakdown in his professional relationship with the tutor Sonderegger (who in the past had been his supporter with the International Red Cross), who had been engaged to make a new German translation of *Un Souvenir de Solferino* (A Memory of Solferino), the text which made Dunant famous in the world. One day Dunant said that a page from the manuscript was missing, and accused Sonderegger of stealing it and of conspiring with his enemies. Moreover, towards the end of his life, Dunant became more and more recluse; he would close the shutters when the sun was at its height, and he refused to see visitors even if they had come from afar.

In Kuhn's opinion, all this cannot be read simply as a reaction to more than 40 years of sufferings, deprivations and negative events of all kinds, added to an institutionalized senile decline, which instead is how we see it. According to Kuhn, Dunant's "psychic illness" (manic-depressive and delirious psychosis) has probable if not certain, scientifically proven psychopathological roots, even if they were not evident when he became an adult. But as we shall see later, Kuhn offers no proof in support of his statement.

Part II: A tentative psychiatric methodology

Kuhn explains that he wants to demonstrate his hypothesis based on the approach of French and German existential phenomenological psychopathology as well as on psychoanalysis in all its main strands: Freud, Jung and Adler together with their most recent successors. This statement gives rise to our second criticism. We cannot consider a historical study that mixes different clinical approaches and objectives which also draw on different theories of the normal and the pathological to be scientifically objective, since it, essentially, proceeds as follows: adopt the stance or parts of the most opportune or suitable theories on the basis of what is found or not found in a given situation, trying to make the most of the transversal link to the

sole concept of familiarity (which, moreover, is very much deformed and generic). The inevitable result is to fall into composite eclecticism, which by definition is contradictory.

Part III: General psychopathology of the illness of Henry Dunant

Henry Dunant's genealogy is reconstructed to as far back as his paternal great-grandfather. With the aim of demonstrating that psychopathological stigmas were even present in his ancestors, including his own parents.

From the sources at Kuhn's disposal (which for the most part are indirect), Kuhn classifies Dunant's great-grandfather - Jean-Louis - and his great-uncle - Daniel - as "abnormal personalities". Kuhn's reasons for doing so are that Dunant's great-grandfather was a protester⁽¹⁾ whom the Geneva government once sentenced to several days in prison, while great-uncle Daniel imprisoned Dunant's grandfather - Bernard - for almost a year, for reasons of financial debts. Dunant's paternal aunt - Anne Jeanne - and uncle - David - as well as their father - Jean Jacques - and mother - Anne-Antoniette Colladon - are defined as being "probably or evidently" mentally ill patients⁽¹⁾ based on the following:

- The aunt's correspondence, which are never cited in a precise manner by Kuhn (this is our third observation), are reported to clearly show manic-depressive constitution. The example given to support this statement is her 'inexplicable' marriage at the age of 54 years to a gardener (whose social position is inferior to hers)!

- Uncle David - who kept a diary from the age of 14⁽¹⁾ - is said, in adolescence, to have suffered from a depressive psychopathological phase, and for this reason he did not finish his studies. He earned his living as a bookseller and at the age of 30 he married a Catholic House-of-Savoy supporter of "modest condition", and ran the risk of being converted to Catholicism! He often experienced "depressive worries" of a religious nature.

At school, his father - Jean Jacques - is defined as a "weak pupil of modest intellectual abilities". Despite this, Jean Jacques managed to finish his studies and set up a "partially successful" business company. He was frequently absent for business reasons, and left his wife to look after the education of their children and the worries of family life, often without money.

Her mother Anne-Antoniette, who is described as “sweet and graceful”, suffered from her husband's long absences and was also very worried about the children. In the space of a year, she called the family doctor 136 times. She spoke of herself as an ‘ever sick woman’ for the visit of, speaking of herself as a “woman always sick” with very painful worrying irritations which had very negative repercussions on the children's initial education. These disturbances forced her to stay home, often they kept her in her room or at least they obliged her to take a carriage when she went out'. When she felt at her worst, she accused her husband of ingratitude and used to, ironically, write to him to “enjoy his freedom very much”. Kuhn diagnoses her as being in a depressive state that is tending to become chronic.

The ‘family condition’ narrated in this way leads Kuhn to get closer to Dunant's personality through “comparison”⁽¹⁾, labeling also him as “probably or evidently mentally ill”. Indeed, the influences he had during his childhood and adolescence “coincided with an out-going character”, that is, “hypomaniacal”, in other words, with a manic-depressive (or cyclothimic) character. From this perspective, Kuhn explains Dunant's religious commitments such as the founding of the Christian Youth Union, the planning and management of his business affairs and his attention towards Napoleon III until and after Solferino. Against this backdrop, Kuhn tries to give a medical reading also to Dunant's experiences following his tragic impact with the dramatic consequences of the Battle of Solferino and the subsequent inspiration for the idea of the Red Cross referred to in the personal Memory: “I was as if elevated beyond myself, dominated by a higher power and inspired by the breath of God (...) I was convinced that my task was an instrument of His will, to accomplish a Holy Work, destined, in the future, to have infinite developments for humanity”.

Kuhn⁽¹⁾ recognizes this as a phenomenon that can be found in religious experience. He specifies that often psychiatric patients tell of similar experiences, but usually without religious aspects. Here, Kuhn clearly begins to contradict himself (4th observation), given that, despite his reconstruction of the Dunant genealogy, there is no solid evidence of actual diagnosis or treatment of a psychiatric nature except for his mother, and any treatment is always at home. Furthermore, Kuhn is never able to provide a written source of real pathographic signif-

icance, for example, to prove that Dunant's mother or any other contemporary or previous family member had been admitted to an asylum or that there had been suicide attempts.

With reference to the 1867 financial disaster and its consequences for Dunant, Kuhn, shortly afterwards⁽¹⁾ admits: “It was not without reason that he established connections between the hostility of the people to whom he owed money and the decisions of the Red Cross officials, which resulted in the constant cancellation of his name”. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that “for two or three years he lived in shocking misery, endured hunger and had not the means to buy clothes and find decent lodgings”. If, indeed, he had been a truly psychotic or abnormal subject, not even his religious belief could have easily prevented him from performing extreme gestures, such as attempting suicide or perhaps attempting a violent act of revenge against his detractors.

Part IV: A tentative individual psychiatric profile of Henry Dunant

Despite the fact that Kuhn specifies that the data at his disposal are not sufficient to provide definitive results as regards “such a complex individual” (1, p.128), by mixing a phenomenological and psychoanalytical approach, Kuhn tries to build a psychiatric profile of Dunant trying to demonstrate that the origin of the idea of the Red Cross was mostly unaware/subconscious, therefore involuntary, thus, in some way “ill” in a depressive sense. He tries to do this by fitting the “unconscious” meaning into the four tableaux⁽¹⁾ by Dunant painted between 1880 - 1890 about the Solferino experience. These were paintings that Dunant used for his conferences in Heiden about these topics. After many tentative readings about the meaning of the tableaux, Kuhn concludes that behind the “inner conflict” which emerges on an initial interpretation of the canvases, the deeper underlying meaning is linked to Biblical (i.e. religious) themes. A similar result emerges from the comparison that Kuhn proposes between Dunant's writings about Solferino and those of his other contemporaries, witnesses of the event, such as Suchard or Appia.

In point of fact, by accepting the interpretation given by the historian Roger Durand in the text “Aux Sources de l'idée Croix Rouge”⁽¹⁴⁾: the basic idea of the Red Cross, which came into being at Castiglione delle Stiviere, imposes itself on a man

who is given to charity⁽¹⁾, in so far as he is a member of the Evangelical Society (formerly founder of the Union of Young Christians etc.), and not in the shoes of an alleged psychotic manic-depressive individual.

Hence, Kuhn's contradictory conclusions (our fifth criticism) compared to his primary assumptions. Dunant's life and his idea of the Red Cross are not so much characterized by psychopathological aspects as they are by extraordinary ones. The events of Solferino are always in his mind (as with many others), but the perceived ever-present suffering stirs his spirit and gives him the extraordinary strength to always and on all occasions commit himself to the spread, dissemination and realization of his philanthropic ideas⁽¹⁾.

On the other hand, Dunant's considerations on the destiny of the world in "Avenir Sanglant" or the Bloody Future⁽¹⁾ written in 1891 in which he foresees, among other things, the First World War, are extraordinarily prophetic (and not psychotic)^(15, 16).

With great respect to the Swiss psychiatrist, we want to conclude our simple observations with the final lines of Kuhn's report with which we whole-heartedly agree, and which offer no definitive answer to the question of Henry Dunant's madness⁽¹⁾:

We are still far from being able to answer all the questions posed by the extraordinary life of Henry Dunant. His biography still needs to be better clarified, his differences of opinion need to be analyzed in depth, especially his religious beliefs. It is the deep destiny of the Human Being which illustrates in its most authentic sense, the tragic dimension of human existence.

One final comment is necessary. After having received the Nobel Prize, if, legally speaking, Dunant were mentally-ill, it would be extremely difficult to explain how his will was drawn up in such detail and executed with great precision. No notary would have accepted the responsibility. Moreover, no member of his family ever raised the slightest objection against his last will and testament.

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