

Counting lepers: Creating a medico-political apparatus

By the end of the 1850s, Norwegian doctors and authorities had established what I have named a "leprosy apparatus". It consisted mainly of a research hospital, several isolation units, public health commissions in all affected municipalities, a national chief physician and a permanent registrar of all lepers. This state-funded apparatus was put together to find a cure, monitor the spread of the disease, and manage the sick.

This extensive and controversial apparatus was the combined outcome of three clearly distinguishable and competing medico-political campaigns in the period 1836-1856: 1) A campaign arguing for the possibility of a cure, 2) a campaign arguing for the isolation of lepers due to the supposed hereditary nature and incurability of the disease, 3) a campaign challenging the heritability of leprosy and calling for a broader social approach in the work against the disease.

These campaigns differed in their views on the cause of the disease, its communicability, and therefore on which measures the state should employ to eradicate it. All of the initiatives were partly successful in bringing about state involvement, and the leprosy apparatus was thus a patchwork based on vastly different understandings of the etiology of the disease.

The key ingredient in all of these campaigns was the production of numbers. National censuses of lepers made up the basis of the medical and political arguments employed. This was a novel mode of medical knowledge production and a novel tool for state policies. My paper will demonstrate and analyze how the new technology of numbers were taken in use by medical doctors and local authorities in combined efforts to trigger specific political measures in the fight against leprosy.

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