

OPINION ARTICLE

The Social Structure of Dermatology: Between the Medieval and the Early Modern

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The vigor of a society is proportional to the number of uncomfortable individuals who form part of it.

This quotation is attributed to Jean-Paul Marat, the Swiss doctor whose dermatitis (perhaps herpetiform dermatitis) obliged him, in order to alleviate the pruritus, to spend a great deal of time in the bath, where he was eventually assassinated. During the French Revolution, Marat became a leader and spokesperson for the poor and weak. As the disenfranchised advanced politically more rapidly than Marat, he was obliged to coin a great number of memorable phrases in order to keep up with them.

Although creative in many spheres, humans tend to be repetitive in the ways they relate socially. In fact, we seem to repeat the same schemas in space, time, and in groups of successively diminishing size, as if the predominant pattern were a fractal (Figure 1). In this brief contribution, we invite readers to reflect on the social structure of dermatology, and we suggest that while reading this essay they should reflect on parallels with their own surroundings.

Models of Social Structure

The Medieval Model

The model of social organization in the Middle Ages was the feudal system.¹ The power of the feudal lord was based on ties of fealty or vassalage, and his main concerns were the ownership and defense of land. Society was composed of the nobles and clergy, their respective vassals, and a few free citizens who lived principally in the cities. It was a static society in which individuals remained in their social class and did not normally move outside of a geographic area. In medieval times, the individual's social role and personal identity were inseparable, and acceptance of the status quo was valued over originality. Political power was a permanent attribute, vested in the individual.

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In small groups, this model would take the form of an authoritarian chief who centralizes power and leads the group. The authority and benefits pertaining to this leader's position would depend on his or her ability to maintain the status quo. It is easier for chiefs to defend their position when conflicts arise because they are surrounded by a group of peers who are essentially powerless. In such a situation, an expert like Machiavelli would advise fomenting intrigues among the peers to keep them from conspiring against the leader while fostering their social and economic dependence. This is a social structure consistent with the need to defend one's own position and it is frequently associated with a territorial concession.

The Modern World-Contemporary Society

The transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern World was driven by the development of commerce and the rise of the bourgeoisie, among other factors. First, absolute monarchs emerged who circumscribed the power of the nobles and, in the process, suppressed hostilities between them. This development led to a marked increase in social and economic development. It also obliged the nobles to

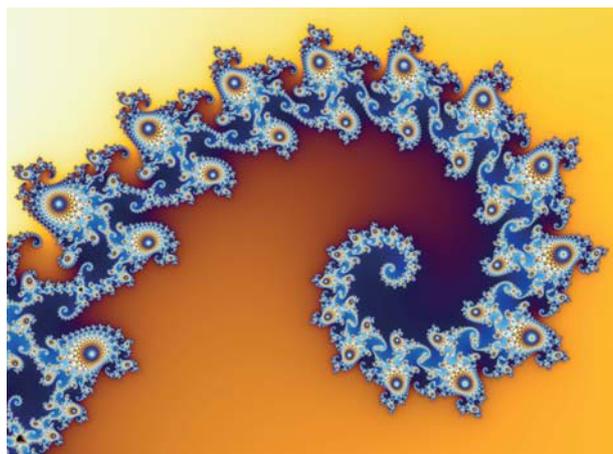


Figure 1. Fractal: a geometric object whose basic structure is repeated on different scales. Public domain image obtained from Wikipedia. Available from : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Mandelpart2.jpg>

join the royal court and forced them to adopt more civilized codes of behavior in which negotiation and an appreciation of the intentions and desires of other parties were fundamental to progress.

At a later stage, these courts gradually evolved towards more parliamentary forms. Through more or less violent means, the power of kings was either abolished or reduced to a merely symbolic and moderating role, and democracies emerged in France, England, and the United States of America. This was the beginning of the modern era, a period during which the privileges of the social estates have disappeared and the social base of political decision making has been broadened. The political power of the individual is no longer something intrinsic to the person, but rather a result of the delegation of power by others.

In small groups, the counterpart of this process of distribution of power would be groups of peers with a more widely distributed hierarchical structure in which functions are delegated to a number of deputies. This organizational model makes it more difficult for the chief to maintain his or her position in situations of instability, whether the destabilizing influence is internal or external to the group. This type of group structure favors collaboration and openness towards other groups with similar aims.

In the Mediterranean region, and in Spain in particular, the transition to the structures typical of the Modern World occurred later than in other places. This may be one of the reasons for the more fervent adoption in this area of the model of behavior of the nobility as a social ideal. Consequently an indifference to work and a rejection of punctuality as a sign of both individual freedom and a carefree attitude took on positive connotations.

The Social Structure of Dermatology

We can all find examples in our own context of both types of organization and have some fun identifying historical parallels. All forms of organization have their advantages and disadvantages. Which serves best to defend us against the intentions of our employers? Which would you prefer if you were the boss? And if you were an underling? Nevertheless, the ease with which we can find similarities between the structures we observe in our own world and those of medieval society is surprising.

The Social Structure of Other Specialties

Not all medical specialties have the same social structure, and a variety of factors have probably contributed to the

differences that exist. The structure of the university has its roots in the Middle Ages, and to a certain degree it reflects this history. For this reason, it seems to us quite probable that specialties such as dermatology, which developed in a university context, tend to have a more hierarchical organization than specialties that developed in the context of the national health system.

Conflicts Within the World of Dermatology Seen From This Perspective

On the broader scale, disputes are generally the result of struggles for territory or power. In such contexts, the feudal model is more likely to lead to conflict because territorial disputes are more intense and it is more difficult to gain power through consensus.

On the smaller scale, the reasons for instability are similar. In practice, group leaders generally face 2 problems in their jobs. The first of these is deciding whether to recruit brilliant members to their group and stimulate their professional development or whether to favor loyalty and submission. The other dilemma is whether to encourage group members to actively express their opinions or to silence discordant voices. The way the leader deals with these dilemmas usually depends on the type of social model adopted.²

All of us play roles that fit into some kind of model depending on the circumstances. But the model applied in modern contemporary society has been more productive and has brought about greater social progress. The forces that drove the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern World are also present in our environment: the rise of the dermatological bourgeoisie and business interests, the increase in the number of free agents (emigrants, independent agents, a loosening of the ties of fealty), and the greater availability of work. There are also signs in our time that mimic the changes that characterized that earlier transition: local chiefs have been losing power, which has shifted away from them to inaccessible higher echelons or political structures, leaving them only a minimal role in the affairs of court.

But the most important change is still pending, to wit, the abolition of the privileges attached to position and the broadening of the social base of power. There are several drawbacks associated with the persistence of medieval forms of organization. Firstly, it is a system that gives rise to sterile territorial disputes and power struggles. Furthermore, if we bear in mind the historical parallels, the real struggle in today's world is between the absolute monarchs (the new powers that exercise control over dermatologists and their superiors) and the emerging bourgeoisie (the great mass of dermatologists). In this

situation, the “privileged classes” act as a defensive bulwark that supports the absolute monarchy. As a result of the position enjoyed by the members of this privileged subgroup, confrontation with the absolute monarchs is viewed with displeasure and skepticism by a part of the group. It is difficult to tell whether the goal of the confrontation with the powers that be is a desirable increase in the political weight of the bourgeoisie or merely the defense of the interests of certain privileged elements. The historical parallel is so striking that it is our view that the changes described above are inevitable. We hope that these reflections will enable all of us to adopt a less skeptical attitude towards the conflicts and will favor the inevitable transition towards a dermatology profession with a contemporary social model based on peer relationships.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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