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Lombroso, Cesare: The Criminal Man

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Cesare Lombroso, who lived from 1835 to 1909, was an Italian physician best known for his studies **[p. 561 ↓]** in the field of criminal anthropology and his theories of the "criminal type"—an individual whose physical structure and psychological characteristics possessed the atavistic and degenerative traits that differentiated him from the civilized, socially well-adjusted human. Lombroso is also remembered for shifting the focus of legal thinking from crime to the criminal, and his theory on the constitutional and hereditary roots of criminal conduct. His theories have heavily influenced developments in criminology throughout both Europe and the United States, although they have been challenged and often discredited.

His most famous work, *L'uomo delinquente* (*The Criminal Man*), considered by many historians the founding text of modern criminology, went through five editions between 1876 and 1897, and during Lombroso's lifetime was translated into French, German, Russian, and Spanish. Each edition contained additional data, observations, and illustrations: the first edition was a reasonably short volume of 255 pages; the last edition consisted of four volumes and was 1,902 pages long.

Short Biography

Lombroso, born Ezechia Marco, came from a Jewish family in Verona that had lived in North Italy for generations. Lombroso was educated as a physician in Pavia, Padua, and Vienna, and obtained his degree in 1858. He was drawn to German materialism, French and Italian positivism, and different European evolutionist theories. In 1859, he entered in the national army as a volunteer doctor. In 1862, Lombroso's battalion was sent to Calabria, in the South of Italy, to fight bandits. Lombroso, while in Calabria, began to conduct anthropometrical research in order to investigate racial variations within Italy.

Similar to many young intellectuals of the period, Lombroso valued science. In the context of Italian history, Lombroso was committed, as were many other physicians, to the ideals of *Risorgimento* (resurgence), the political and social movement that sought to free Italy from foreign domination and to unify the different states of the peninsula, which was finally achieved in 1861. Driven by the political enthusiasm of *Risorgimento*, physicians such as Lombroso were committed to putting an end to the great curses of the nation: poverty, illiteracy, and endemic illness. They promoted “scientific” solutions to these problems through ambitious social hygiene and sanitary programs and through the moral education of the population. In this way, they reflected a well-established Italian tradition that linked scientific and, above all, medical practice with progressive political thinking and activism. This tradition involved a concept of science as a crucial instrument for civil progress and emancipation, an idea that, even before deriving from the Italian *Risorgimento*, had its roots in the Enlightenment.

In 1863, Lombroso began working at Pavia University, lecturing in clinical mental disorders and anthropology. In 1866, he was appointed professor of Clinical Mental Pathology at Pavia University. In 1870, though still active in academia, he was appointed director of the asylum at Pesaro, and at the same time he began using both asylums and prisons to study the phenomenon of human deviancy. In 1874, he obtained the Chair of Legal Medicine, along with that of psychiatry, at Pavia University. In 1876, Lombroso moved to Turin where he was appointed professor of Legal Medicine and Public Hygiene; subsequently, in 1896, he obtained the Chair of Psychiatry, and finally in 1905, that of criminal anthropology. In the meantime, he joined the Socialist Party in 1893 and served as a socialist representative on the city council of Turin from 1899 to 1905.

After the first publication of *L'uomo delinquente* in 1876, Lombroso was successfully able to establish himself as the founder of the new discipline of criminal anthropology and the leader of the so-called Italian School. This was due to, among the other things, his vast number of publications in the field and his ability to mobilize people through his journal and international congresses. In 1880, with Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo, he founded *Archivio di psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali* (*Archive of Psychiatry, Criminal Anthropology and Penal Sciences*), a journal that became an influential tool of the Italian positivist movement and served to link quite distinct institutions, including asylums, prisons, universities, and the law courts. Lombroso's ideas circulated quickly in international professional circles thanks to a series of international congresses on criminal anthropology that were held regularly in various European cities from **[p. 562 ↓]** 1885 until World War I. The first of these congresses was organized by Lombroso's Italian followers in Rome.

By the turn of the century, Lombroso's inconsistent empirical methods were being increasingly criticized by European scientists, who soon described his writings as anecdotal and his theories as conceptually flawed. Nevertheless, Lombroso had enthusiastic followers within scientific circles in Europe and the United States, and his accounts of the criminal captured the imagination of a broader audience. An example of Lombroso's cultural impact outside criminology is provided by Bram Stoker's image of Dracula, which was influenced by the work of the Italian criminologist. Lombroso's appeal to late-19th-century society must be considered in historical context. At the end of the 19th century, industrialized countries faced new problems such as the urbanization of large proportions of the population, proletarization of the lower classes, increased unemployment, prostitution, and vagrancy. Through journalism, public opinion came to hold the belief that crime was not only escalating but also changing its methods to adapt to the cities. Lombroso's criminal anthropology offered a rational answer to the question about the dangerous elements in civilized society.

The Study of the Criminal Rather than Crime

From the beginning of his medical career, Lombroso was concerned with social problems, as is evident from his medical interest in public hygiene. Before becoming renowned for his *L'uomo delinquente*, Lombroso worked on pellagra and cretinism, which were endemic diseases in certain parts of Italy in the second half of the 19th century. A second concern, according to the historian Renzo Villa, was madness and the level to which the insane could be responsible for their actions. Lombroso conceived the study of mental illness as a contribution to the understanding of how society could most effectively defend itself from the insane. In these terms, establishing to what extent the mentally ill were responsible for their actions was a crucial study.

Lombroso's interest in the criminal arose alongside his interest in madness. He held that psychological aberrations corresponded to and depended on physical anomalies. In the same way, he believed that most criminals did not act out of free will, but rather they were urged to commit crimes because of their innate organic nature. Thus, aiming to understand criminal minds and therefore prevent crime, it was important to study, measure, and classify criminals as physicians did with the ill—through a bodily examination. This physical survey was especially important in the case of criminality because Lombroso believed that physical anomalies were a sign of social danger.

Moving away from the so-called Classical School of Penology, which had its roots in the Enlightenment and in particular in the work of Cesare Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (*On Crime and Punishments*), Lombroso focused on the criminal rather than crime. While Beccaria emphasized the free will of criminals and the necessity to consider all criminals equal regardless of their social status, and therefore the necessity to punish proportionally to the crime committed, Lombroso advocated that the punishment should be proportional to the dangerousness of the criminal, and not to the crime committed as such. For instance, if one committed a crime because a momentary overwhelming passion, but had never shown any social dangerousness, that individual had to be punished more mercilessly than another individual who had displayed criminal tendencies from a young age or who was a habitual offender. Therefore, according to Lombroso, the threat the criminal posed and the need to defend society were the critical factors that should be considered when individuals were being sentenced.

The Criminal Man

Lombroso was not the first to advance the medico-biological explanation of crime. Richard Wetzell notes that Franz Joseph Gall's phrenology, Etienne-Jean Georget's study of “homicidal monomania,” and James Prichard's investigation of “moral insanity” might be seen as predecessors of Lombroso's modern criminology. Yet before Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente*, the study of the criminal was rather fragmented. Since the first edition of his work, Lombroso had argued that crime was rooted in multiple causes, ranging from the biological and psychological organization of the individual to social factors such as urbanization or **[p. 563 ↓]** education. He accumulated a wide range of data analyzing skulls and the physical anomalies of criminals using both cadavers and living subjects. In the latter case, Lombroso reported every single detail from the height, weight, and strength to the shape of noses, ears, foreheads, and even feet. Along with detailed measurements of the body, Lombroso used criminals’ tattoos, poetry, and jargon to provide a portrait of the criminal. Psychologically, male offenders were described by Lombroso as vain, vindictive, lazy, dominated by a thirst for blood, and delighting in orgies. Lombroso also searched for relationships between criminality and age, marital status, sex, profession, diet, and environment. Within this analysis, he concluded that while a small part of criminality was caused by social conditions, most of the criminals were constitutionally so. Thus, Lombroso emphasized the influence of biological factors over environmental explanations.

Key concepts in the various editions of *L'uomo delinquente* were atavism, degeneration, and the idea of the born criminal. The notion of atavism to explain deviant behavior was introduced in the first edition of *L'uomo delinquente* and remained central in Lombroso's theories. Atavism was thought to be the tendency to reproduce ancestral types in plants and animals and, where humanity was concerned, to resemble one's grandparents or great-grandparents more than one's parents. The notion of atavism used by biological writers certainly referred to Charles Darwin, but its origin came from botanical studies. Villa has warned that Darwinian influence on Lombroso should not be emphasized. Instead, he has observed that Lombroso's theory of atavism owed more to pre-Darwinian comparative anatomy, medicine and linguistics, than to the work of Darwin himself.

The atavistic criminal man represented an earlier stage of human evolution. Lombroso identified this ancestral type through several stigmatized physical characteristics, including the length of ear lobes and fingers and the bone structure of the head. This supposed physical atavism was associated with moral corruption and thus more frequently produced deviant behaviors. Atavism, according to Lombroso, became manifest in the criminal, in the insane person, and in other human deviations, but the white civilized “normal” man was at-risk of reverting to the ancestral type because it was the earliest stage of individual and human evolution.

While atavism formed the main theoretical aspect of the first two editions of *L'uomo delinquente*, from the third edition, which was published in 1884, Lombroso increasingly drew on the concept of degeneration and introduced the term *born criminal*. Developed by the French physician Bénédict Augustin Morel in *Traité des dégénérescences physiques*, *intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine* (*Treatise on Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Species*), by the 1880s the notion of degeneration had become the dominant framework for the understanding of mental disorders. Degeneration was understood to be a pathological state of the organism, which was constitutionally weakened both physically and psychologically. Such weakening was hereditary and progressive from one generation to another, and it was believed to ultimately result in the extinction of the species. Degeneration was believed to be a process of pathological decay affecting not only in the individual but also society at large. While Morel interpreted degeneration as a reverse process of evolution, Lombroso interpreted degeneration as an arrest of development in the individual. Lombroso, like many physicians in the second half of the 19th century, adopted the theory of degeneration and used it to explain not only physical and psychological pathology but also criminality.

While the first edition of *L'uomo delinquente* already contained an underlying idea of criminality as an inborn condition, it was only in the third edition that the term *born criminal* appeared. This term was originally coined by the criminologist Ferri in 1880. According to Lombroso, the born criminal was constitutionally morally insane, had psychological characteristics that belonged to the primitive stage of humankind, and lacked any moral sense. At the time “moral insanity” was widely used by European psychiatrists to explain those forms of mental derangements in which most of the intellectual faculties were unaffected, but the moral principles of the individuals were “depraved” or “perverted” so that the person's free will was unimpaired. Lombroso also maintained that the born criminal could be identified by the possession of certain visible “stigmata,” such as asymmetry of the face. Lombroso believed that despite the fact that the punishment of the born criminal was **[p. 564 ↓]** useless to repress criminality, society had the right to punish criminals in order to defend itself.

Criminal Woman

As early as the first edition of *L'uomo delinquente* published in 1876, Lombroso included observations on the specificity of female criminality, pointing out that prostitution represented the typical form of female crime. In 1893, Lombroso extended his analyses and, with his son-in-law Guglielmo Ferrero, published *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (*The Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*). In *La donna delinquente*, those parts regarding the evolution of the two sexes, women's psychology and women's intelligence, were written mainly by Ferrero; Lombroso wrote those parts dealing with criminal anthropology.

Lombroso and Ferrero systematized widely held notions on women within medical science. The two authors portrayed the normal woman as strongly associated with motherhood, which many physicians of the late 19th century thought was women's biological goal. Lombroso and Ferrero represented the normal woman as a good bourgeois mother, sexually passive, without any autonomy, dependent on the father of her children, and naturally and organically monogamous and frigid. Similar to many of his contemporaries, Lombroso thought that women were inferior to men. He used biological data, such as the smaller size of the average female brain and body, to allegedly demonstrate the intellectual inferiority of women. Supported by evolution theories of the time, Lombroso described women as “undeveloped” men. While participating in the struggle for existence, men had acquired more skills and so were in a superior evolutionary stage compared to women.

Female deviancy for Lombroso was rooted in sexuality; therefore, prostitution represented the most typical female crime. Lombroso pointed out that female delinquency was a less common phenomenon than male criminality, a fact that was at odds with women's supposed inferiority. However, he explained that if one viewed female prostitution as the typical female crime, male and female criminality could be seen as similarly widespread in society. According to Lombroso, a woman became a prostitute more through a special tendency of her organism than because of her poverty or any other social explanation. His studies showed limited cranial capacity in prostitutes, as well as narrow or receding foreheads, prominent cheekbones, short stature, short arms, excessive weight, left-handedness, and prehensile feet. He also noted that prostitutes shared a lack of modesty, a brazen attitude to vice, an irregular lifestyle, a love of idleness, vanity, and a fondness for amusements and for having orgies and alcohol.

Conclusion

From the beginning of his medical career, Lombroso examined the social implications of diseases such as insanity. These investigations were the starting point for later contributions to the study of the phenomenon of criminality. Throughout his study, Lombroso maintained a medical gaze on criminals as his research on the physical characteristics of the criminal show. The novelty of Lombroso's approach was that it focused not only on the criminal and his or her physical and psychological characteristics rather than on crime, but also on deviant individuals. Lombroso's interest in the criminal man and woman stemmed from a more general concern with deviancy.

Lombroso did not go unchallenged for his theories, and legislators were especially unwilling to abandon a discourse of legal responsibility. However, his work had been crucial for the developments of criminology. At the beginning of the 20th century, Salvatore Ottolenghi, one of Lombroso's disciples, founded the *Polizia scientifica* (Scientific police) that used Lombroso's criminal anthropology tools to detect criminals. In this way, the methods of criminal anthropology were incorporated into the government apparatus. While in Italy criminology entered the medical curriculum and Lombroso's influence remained strong, throughout Europe and the U.S. criminological journals, such as the French *Archives de l'anthropologie criminelle et de sciences pénales* (*Archives of Criminal Anthropology and Penal Sciences*), which were founded at the end of the 19th century. Along with the editorial activity within the field starting from the end of the 19th century, criminal anthropology entered academia and became an established discipline in the following century.

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See also

- Beccaria, Cesare: Classical School
- Ferri, Enrico: Positivist School
- Garofalo, Raffaele: Positivist School
- Lombroso, Cesare: The Female Offender
- Phrenology

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