Cesare Lombroso: an anthropologist between evolution and degeneration

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Summary

Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was a prominent Italian medical doctor and intellectual in the second half of the nineteenth century. He became world famous for his theory that criminality, madness and genius were all sides of the same psychobiological condition: an expression of degeneration, a sort of regression along the phylogenetic scale, and an arrest at an early stage of evolution. Degeneration affected criminals especially, in particular the “born delinquent” whose development had stopped at an early stage, making them the most “atavistic” types of human being.

Lombroso also advocated the theory that genius was closely linked with madness. A man of genius was a degenerate, an example of retrograde evolution in whom madness was a form of “biological compensation” for excessive intellectual development. To confirm this theory, in August 1897, Lombroso, while attending the Twelfth International Medical Congress in Moscow, decided to meet the great Russian writer Lev Tolstoy in order to directly verify, in him, his theory of degeneration in the genius.

Lombroso’s anthropological ideas fuelled a heated debate on the biological determinism of human behaviour.

KEY WORDS: criminology, criminal anthropology, degeneration, evolution, Lombroso, Tolstoy

Evolution and degeneration

The evolution theory reached Italy in 1860, only eight months after the publication of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species and at the height of the process of Italy’s political unification. Strangely, the first to notice Darwin’s book were not naturalists, but the Jesuits of the periodical Civiltà Cattolica and the book reviewer of the journal Il Politecnico, devoted to applied studies. However, the pious fathers failed to grasp immediately the explosive content of Darwin’s book, which was quoted in the context of a series of articles on the recent cosmogonic theories that were challenging Catholic doctrine on the origin of the world.

Darwin’s book was translated into German in 1860 and French in 1862. The French edition was soon being sold in a bookshop in Pavia, where it did not escape the attention of a young medical doctor, Cesare Lombroso. A man of great originality, Lombroso began to stand out while still a medical student, publishing, in 1855, his essay On the madness of Cardano, in which there already appear some of the ideas (such as the relationship between madness and genius) that, within a few years, would make him internationally famous. Lombroso was born in Verona and enrolled at the University of Pavia Medical School in 1852, but he also studied at the University of Padua and the University of Vienna. After graduating in 1858 from the University of Pavia, he pursued scholarly studies in psychiatry, hygiene, anthropology, criminology and forensic medicine. He began his teaching career (psychiatry, nervous pathology and anthropology) at the University of Pavia in 1863. From 1871 to 1873 he directed the insane asylum of Pesaro, after which, following another appointment at the University of Pavia, he moved as full professor of forensic medicine to the University of Turin.

Lombroso, like other scientists in Pavia, was impressed by the very idea of evolution even though he did not really understand the mechanisms (variation and natural selection) proposed by Darwin to explain the tree of life. However, the British scientist captured the mind of Lombroso, who immediately tried to apply the variation of species idea to anthropology.

Figure 1 - Cesare Lombroso in military uniform (1860).
A key incident in this story took place in Pavia one cold December day in 1870, when Cesare Lombroso was struck by an extraordinary observation: while examining the cranium of a brigand called Giuseppe Villella, he noticed a median occipital depression at the spot where there should have been a projection due to the insertion of the cerebral falk. On seeing this depression he was at once astonished; he wrote subsequently that this abnormality opened his mind:

“[…] like a large plain beneath an infinite horizon, the problem of the nature of the delinquent was illuminated which reproduced in our time the characteristics of primitive man right down to the carnivores.”

The wax impression of the cranium, at the site corresponding to the posterior cranial fossa, clearly demonstrated “a perfectly regular tri-lobed cerebellum, as found in a 5 month foetus” that is to say to a highly developed cerebellar vermis. This characteristic, typical of lemurs, one family of prosimians, and some species of rodent, indicated, according to Lombroso, the persistence of ancestral “atavistic” characteristics in Villella’s cranium. The criminal was biologically linked to inferior animals. His deviance was thus the consequence of his constitution (of which the median occipital depression was nothing other than a morphological trait), which in turn amounted to an evolutionary throwback. To Lombroso, the phenomenon of criminality, possibly the product of arrested development at a more primitive mental stage (atavism) or of a regression to a previous “atavistic” phase of evolution, a process of degeneration, seemed ripe for investigation.

Thus, Lombroso was heavily influenced by a misunderstood Darwin: criminals were “throwbacks” in the phylogenetic tree to early phases of evolution. If a criminal man is an ancestral form of human being, obviously his anthropological features and physiological reactions would be different from those of the “normal nineteenth century man”. For this reason Lombroso quickly applied anthropology to the criminal man and woman and tried to discriminate their sensitivity to pain with a Ruhmkorf coil. He published these ideas in 1876, in his most influential book The Criminal Man.

Starting from this anatomical observation Lombroso quickly extended the theory of deviance as a form of evolutionary blockage to insanity and even to genius in his famous book Genius and Insanity (1872) in which he expanded on an earlier lecture, given in 1864.

Lombroso considered insanity a milder form of regression in the evolutionary tree, less dramatic than criminality, and genius a sort of mental mosaic in which the evolution of positive qualities was mixed with degeneration of some somatic organs. Lombroso wrote that “giants of intellect pay the penalty for their intellectual power with degeneration and madness; and in them signs of degeneration are perhaps more frequent than they are in the insane.” As Goethe said: “Nature has a fixed budget, and when it spends too much on one organ, it has to economise on the others.”

Thus, according to Lombroso, a regressive characteristic united the genius, the madman and the delinquent; they differed in the intensity of this characteristic and, naturally in the degree of development of the positive qualities. But all of them emerged from the depths of time, and showed characteristic signs of that. The most atavistic, that is the closest anthropologically to the savage, to primitive man and to the most rudimentary forms of organic life, was the criminal; in this category, Lombroso described a whole range of ancestral characteristics, both physical and ethical, including large and protruding zygomatica, bulky jaw bones, small cranial capacity, prominent superciliary arches, large orbits, great visual acuity, darker skin, pot handle or voluminous ears as in the monkey, and insensitivity to pain; and, further, obscene tattoos, complete moral insensitivity, total lack of remorse, lack of foresight which sometimes seemed like courage, and courage which alternated with cowardice, excessive idleness, “love of orgies”, need to do evil for its own sake, to kill, and “not only that, but cruelty to the victim, to tear the flesh and drink the blood”. Thus, the mythological ethology of the wild animal meets the anthropological mythology of the primitive man current at the end of the 19th century. Lombroso’s savage was the polar opposite of Rousseau’s “noble savage”, being an ancestral form of man whose low level of humanity explained the poverty of his morality and the primitiveness of his somatic characteristics. The criminal was close to this form, in that his behaviour was the opposite of that of his contemporaries, but in harmony with those of past epochs which he exemplified like a splinter projected into the midst of civilisation. In accordance with Ernst Haeckel’s theory “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (i.e., the development of a individual parallels the stages in the evolution, biological as well as mental, of mankind), Lombroso identified childhood as the period of the development of mankind, the child corresponding to primitive man and, in the figurative sense, to the criminal. Youth is capable of various intrinsically criminal manifestations, wrote Lombroso, not considered as such only because of their scale. A man who did not overcome his infantile period during his psycho-physical development was a man who remained “fixed” in an ancestral phase of phylogeny, basically a “born delinquent”.

Important consequences for the law and criminal justice ensued from Lombroso’s theoretical assumptions. The natural genesis of crime implied that the criminal personality should be regarded as a particular form of psychiatric disease. It was no longer free will that produced a deviant event, but the uncontrollable propulsive force emanating from the deepest instincts of a being arrested in an early stage of his biological evolution. Psychobiological immaturity was the determining factor. The most important consequence was that punishment became a form of defence, and also took on the function of social care. In Lombroso’s view, there existed criminals without hope of reform. These were the “born criminals”, the most atavistic form of human being. Society had the right to defend itself from them, even with the death penalty, just as man defends himself from wild animals without “thinking that they are to blame for not having been born lambs”. Furthermore, there were delinquents who, being a potential danger to society, should be kept in prisons or in asylums for life regardless of the gravity of the crime they had committed. Others, on the other hand, with a generic predisposition and in whom a chance factor in the environment had triggered a criminal event, could be started on rehabilitation in, for example, a farming or industrial training...
Lombroso saw these as *criminaloids* – subjects presenting a degree of physical abnormalities (in the teeth, the ears, the nose etc.) that is higher than that found in a normal subject, but much lower than that of the born criminal. In this category he placed receivers, smugglers, journalists who blackmail private citizens, businessmen who corrupt legislators, legislators who scheme with businessmen, etc.

Lombroso did not study delinquents only in those “anthropological zoos”, the prisons and penal institutions, where their behaviour was false and unnatural. Sometimes, with the aid of a servant, he would unearth these human types in dubious haunts, and, by paying them, would get them to take him to their friends and “colleagues” who were at large; then, he would listen, exultantly, to their tales full of blood-curdling boasting, take note of their anthropometric measurements (particularly craniometric), weigh them and show them to his students in class.

The importance attributed by Lombrosian pathological taxonomy to the somatic deviance of genius, of delinquents and of “wild men” had made the institutes he directed, first the psychiatric clinic of Pavia and then the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Turin, which Lombroso directed from 1876, centres for the gathering of reports of anatomical “abnormalities” garnered from all over the world. Lamberto Loria, explorer of New Guinea and of Eritrea, sent him skulls from the southern hemisphere; the English governor of Bombay sent skulls of normal Indians and of criminals. Other reports arrived from Russia, while in Italy, pupils and friends plundered abandoned cemeteries, seeking “interesting” bones to send to Turin. Lombroso himself, at the edge of the law, was once surprised by Piedmont valley dwellers while carrying a sack full of old skulls. By good fortune, these peasants thought it was a load of pumpkins, sparing the eccentric scientist an explanation which they would have found difficult to understand.

Sometimes this excessive and injudicious zeal for collecting documents, references and evidence to support his own diagnostic and pathological categories laid Lomboso open to scientific ridicule. It is said that one day Lombroso wrote to the head of public security in Paris in order to obtain from him material which he needed to illustrate one of his books. He was sent a collection of photographs of delinquent women. Lombroso, guided by his criminological intuition, identified in one face the typical features of an impassioned delinquent, in another the typical signs of the alcoholic delinquent and so on. When the book was published, he sent a complimentary copy to the police officer, who was struck dumb by what he saw. These faces, so precisely catalogued, were not those of the delinquent women whose pictures he thought he had sent, but those of businesswomen who had “applied to the police for vending licences and who had presented the relevant documents together with photographs which had been sent by mistake”.

**Lombroso and Tolstoy**

Among all the curious episodes which filled Lombroso’s life, one, in particular, is worth recounting here. As we have seen, Lombroso believed that genius and mad-
Like a naturalist embarking on a tour of South America to test his evolutionary theories, Lombroso decided to take himself to Tolstoy’s home, at Yasnaya Polyana, about 200 kilometres south of Moscow near the town of Tula. Before going, Lombroso had had written in his book Man of Genius that the Russian writer represented the “true disguised genius of alienation... in whom, one might say, the sicker the body, the more sublime the [intellectual] products”. On the basis of the photograph and portraits published at the time, he imagined that Tolstoy would be “cretinous and degenerate looking”.

On arriving at Tolstoy’s house, Lombroso found himself face to face with a soldierly-looking old man, whose penetrating eyes and severe bony face seemed more like those of a good, solid peasant who had served in the army than those of a thinker. In particular, the pair argued about the criminological question that was closest to Lombroso’s heart, the theory of the born delinquent (according to which there existed special types of criminals: arrested in an early stage of their biological evolution, these were the most “atavistic” forms of human being without hope of reform). From such delinquents, argued Lombroso, society has the right to defend itself, even with the death penalty, just as a man defends himself from wild animals. But Tolstoy remained deaf to all these arguments, “he knit his terrible eyebrows” and hurled against Lombroso menacing flashes of his deep-set and penetrating eyes; finally he erupted exclaiming “All this is nonsense! All punishment is criminal!”

“An awful stupid” replies the latter. “It seem to me that he goes too far.” “He is an ingenuous and limited old man”. And in January, 1900 he remarked, again in his diary, on the science of Lombroso: “All this is an absolute misery of thought, of concept and of sensitivity”.

Some months after this visit, Tolstoy rewrote his last great novel Resurrection, previously drafted under the title Koni’s Story. In the definitive text of Resurrection, Tolstoy added, among other things, a detailed description of the legal processes and punishments current in Russia at the end of the century and the anthropological theories of Lombroso were discussed and roundly rejected as immoral. According to Tolstoy delinquency was not “evidence of degeneration of a delinquent type of monstrosity, as certain obtuse scientists explained them to the government’s advantage”. When Prince Nechljudov (alias Tolstoy), the novel’s main character, considers the problem of criminal deviance and seeks an answer in “the books of Lombroso (…), reading them with attention, the more he pursued his reading, the more disappointed he felt”. During a trial, the public prosecutor quotes Lombroso and the latest scientific theory on heredity, evolution and the born delinquent to support his case against a prostitute falsely charged with murder. The judge, bending towards a member of the court, exclaims: “It seem to me that he goes too far.”

“An awful stupid” replies the latter. Lombroso’s visit to Tolstoy was a failure on an intellectual level. The genius and madness of these two men failed to make contact because they belonged to species too different to allow them to find a point of mutual understanding. However this “scientific” episode produced a lasting mark on Resurrection, Tolstoy’s last great novel.

What remains of Lombroso and his theories today?

Probably nothing if we look at the details. Ultimately, his theories were completely undermined by methodological weaknesses (poor sampling technique, bias in gathering data, poor statistics) and by his idea that physical stigmata of criminality were intrinsically biological rather than, often, the consequence of malnutrition and poverty. However, considered more broadly, Lombroso left many things. First, he was an authentic worldwide cultural phenomenon of the end of the nineteenth century, continuously studied and published ever since. Second, as a strong advocate of biological determinism in behaviour, he had a direct influence on the evolution of anthropological thought. He placed great store by facts, observations and measurements as the basis on which to build theories on behaviour. He saw, in the structure and function of the brain and in the characteristics of the body, the basis for understanding psychopathology. In his view, psychopathology was, basically, neuropathology and more generally “somatopathology”. He was among the first to consider criminality, in men and women, as a phenomenon worthy of scientific study.

For this reason, Lombroso is often considered the father (or one of the fathers) of criminology and criminal anthropology. While this is perhaps going too far, he was nevertheless a great cultural phenomenon and one of the most influential figures of biological and medical positivism.
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