

The Biological Factor in Criminal Conduct.

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THE theory that criminals differ from the ordinary law-abiding population of their race and epoch by the possession of special biological characteristics, though frequently adumbrated by earlier students of the problem of crime, did not find its full development and formal expression until the appearance, in 1870, of Lombroso's famous work, "L'Uomo Delinquente." According to the Italian criminologist, the true criminal constituted a distinct species marked off from normal man by a group of anatomical and physiological traits indicating an innate incapacity of adaptation to the conditions of social life. So distinctive, indeed, were these traits that differences in their degree of development were held to characterise even special forms of criminal disposition, so that not only were there congenital criminals, there were predestined thieves, predestined homicides and predestined prostitutes. The presence, for example, of an unusually deep inferior occipital groove was one of the stigmata of the born homicide; it was supposed to be traceable in the crania of the Italian murderers examined by Lombroso, and its alleged existence in the skull of Charlotte Corday was sufficient to explain her assassination of Marat, and to justify her inclusion in the group of instinctive homicides. The views of the Italian School as to the origin of this special type of the race, and as to its relation to normal man, were somewhat vague and variable. Sometimes the criminal was regarded as a product of atavism, a throw-back to primitive man, who, for the purposes of this theory, was credited, on rather slender grounds, with all the most undesirable qualities conceivable in debased humanity. Sometimes, again, he was represented to be pathological rather than abnormal, and his presumed anti-social instincts were set down to morbid conditions of various sorts, and most frequently to epilepsy. Or again, as more or less intermediate between these two conceptions, he was brought into the nebulous and convenient category of the "degenerate."

It is desirable to recall these exaggerations of theory, because, though they have long been discredited and abandoned, they have exercised a lasting influence on popular thought regarding the criminal, and have in this way contributed to the over ready acceptance of doctrines which, while more plausible in appearance, rest upon fallacies of essentially the same order. It is right, however, to recognise that these extravagances disfigure only a part of Lombroso's work; they do not detract from his conspicuous merits as a pioneer in advocating and, according to his lights, applying the scientific spirit and scientific method to the study of criminals.

The capital error of Lombroso's doctrine, apart from his uncritical attitude towards his own anthropological observations, was his over-emphasis of the biological factors of conduct, and his comparative neglect of the sociological factors. This weak point exposed his whole work to attack, and it was, in fact, very promptly demolished by the masterly criticism of Manouvrier, one of the foremost anthropologists of Europe. But, oddly enough, it is the very same fallacy which Manouvrier so effectively exploded—the fallacy of ignoring the influence of the environment—that has been the foundation of the more plausible doctrine put forward in recent years by a school of criminologists who are themselves almost extravagantly clamorous in professing their contempt for the ideas and the methods of Lombroso.

According to the exponents of this new theory, there is still a specific biolog-

ical factor in criminal conduct, and that essential factor is mental deficiency; it replaces, in fact, the atavism, the epilepsy, the degeneracy, to which Lombroso attributed the same role. The main evidence in support of this doctrine is the fact that the proportion of mentally defective persons is much higher amongst convicted prisoners than in the general population. No one, of course, disputes this fact, and least of all will its importance be questioned by those who have had practical experience of criminals. But what is eminently disputable and indeed clearly unsound is the inference drawn from the fact. When we are told that abstruse mathematical manipulation of statistical data proves that "the one vital mental constitutional factor in the etiology of crime is defective intelligence" we are presumably meant to understand that all criminals are in some degree weak-minded, and that they have become criminals by reason of their mental deficiency. Otherwise the formula would appear to be nothing more than a re-statement, in cumbrous language, of the familiar fact that the percentage of mental defectives is relatively higher in the prison population than in the free population; and such a restatement adds nothing to our knowledge, but must, on the contrary, tend to confuse such knowledge as we already have. It is very likely to suggest to the unsophisticated reader that weak-mindedness plays the same sort of part in criminality that copper plays in brass, that as the presence of some amount of copper is necessary to constitute brass, so the existence of some degree of mental defect is necessary to constitute a criminal. And in much that is written and spoken about crime and criminals, it is easy to see that some such interpretation is, in fact, very commonly put on this dictum of the school of criminology to which I refer. The attitude of that school is thus fundamentally the same as the attitude of Lombroso in his less responsible moments; like Lombroso, these criminologists assume that criminals form a specific biological category, that phenomena of social conduct can be directly referred to conditions of biological organisation. To challenge that assumption is not, of course, to dispute the importance of constitutional factors in criminal as in all conduct; it is merely to insist on the very commonplace truth that conduct is the outcome of the interaction of biological and sociological factors, of organic disposition and of environment, and that these factors are far too numerous, too complex, too variable at different times and in different individuals, to be susceptible of analysis by methods applicable to criminals in the mass.

We have here a conflict between two radically opposed attitudes of mind, a conflict which implies a fundamental difference in methods of investigating the problems of criminology. For those who recognise that criminals are a sociological and not a biological category, the only reliable mode of investigating the biological factors of crime must be the slow and tedious way of clinical observation; it does not lead to the broad and sweeping generalisations that can be so readily furnished by the application of a priori principles to the interpretation of mass statistics, but the results which it yields, if more modest in appearance, have the advantage of being more firmly founded in fact.

Further, in their bearing on treatment, these results have a practical value which cannot be imputed to the conclusions arrived at by the opposed methods. Confronted with a case of larceny we get no help in this respect from the mathematical formulae showing the correlation of crimes of acquisitiveness with "general intelligence," or, with this or that somatic or psychological character. But we get definite and valuable guidance from the results of a careful clinical examination of the individual offender; we may learn that he presents the signs and symptoms of general paralysis and is a subject for treatment in an Asylum, or that he is an imbecile whose proper place is in an institution for defectives, or again that he is an ordinary sort of person who has acted under the force of exceptional cir-

cumstances. And from the accumulated results of many such individual observations—supplemented and controlled by the broad facts of criminal statistics, which are here in their proper place—we may hope eventually to build up more or less tentative conclusions of limited scope regarding the biological factors in criminal conduct.

Until the clinical material for this purpose is available in much larger quantity than at present, it would be unprofitable to attempt any larger generalisations; and premature efforts in this direction can only be mischievous, as tending to create a false impression of knowledge.

The immediate task of criminology is to collect and classify its data; and for the effective promotion of that task, it is of the first necessity to clear our minds of doctrinal preconceptions.

The “Jean Jacques Rousseau” Institute and the Training of Teachers of Sub-normal Children.

The following account of the way in which the Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute in Geneva is dealing with the problem of the training of teachers of defective children, is a translation of an article written by M. Pierre Bovet, and published in pamphlet form. He expressly states that his object in drawing attention to the subject is that it may induce others to make still further efforts, so great is the need for experimental work. We therefore feel no justification is needed for bringing his pamphlet to the notice of our readers.—EDITOR.

When the Institute was founded in 1912 “dans le but d’orienter les personnes se destinant aux carrières pédagogiques sur l’ensemble des disciplines touchant a l’éducation” we deliberately avoided an exact definition as to what we meant by “les carrières pédagogiques.” It is the students themselves, now numbering over two hundred, passing in a continual stream through our lecture rooms, who have helped us to fill in the details of our scheme—or “plans d’études.”

It was only in October 1917 that students first began to come to us with the definite intention of taking up this specialised career of teaching sub-normal children. Since then their numbers have so increased that we have had to work out a course of study, which although not as clear-cut as others which have been longer established (such as the one for teachers of young children, for instance), follows, in the main, quite well defined lines.

But before giving details as to this special course it will be well for me to indicate the guiding principles underlying all our courses of which, at the present moment, there are four, viz.: the education of young children, school method, child welfare and theory of education.

The Institute Jean Jacques Rousseau makes a practical knowledge of the child the foundation of all training for the teaching profession. M. Claparede, Professor of Psychology at Geneva University, has always been most emphatic about this point. The reform of our schools must begin “from the child itself.” The age of fruitless academic discussion on educational matters should and must be ended, now that child psychology has come into being; it is to experience that we must appeal to cut short these endless discussions which threaten to recur again and again in the same form. We therefore make certain lectures compulsory for all our students, no matter what particular course they may be taking, and amongst these we have, since 1912, given first place to lectures on the subject of subnormal children in its medical, and—most important of all—its psychological and educational aspects.