Anti-sociality Materialized: Biology, mental disorder & immorality, Germany 1900

Historical Perspectives on ‘Antisocial Personality Disorder’ and Moral Insanity
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Felix Schirmann
f.schirmann@rug.nl
Patient E. – “moral idiocy”

Ueber moralische Idiotie.

Von

Dr. E. Bleuler, Director in Rheinau.

- “moral defect caused by defective organisation of the brain” (Forel)

- “There are special functions of the cortex, which in their totality determine the character and the morality of an individual and these functions can be defective in isolation due to inborn or acquired inferiority” (Bleuler, 1896)

- Bodily signs of degeneration
Patient H. – “inborn moral defect”
Biology, mental disorder & immorality, Germany 1900

• Biological explanations for immorality
  – Bad heredity, degeneration, evolutionary reversion/atavism, inborn or acquired brain damage, venereal diseases, alcoholism, etc.

• Mental disorder
  – Medicalization of immorality/criminality
  – Moral insanity, moral imbecility, moral idiocy…

• Immorality
  – Heterogeneous/context-dependent

➔ Contexts, Concomitants, Consequences, Criticisms
Context: 19th century Germany
Biology, Psychiatry, Politics, Immorality

• German Darwinism
  – political agenda (Krupp’s essay prize)
  – Biological theories of social change
• 1880s: “Scientification” of criminality
• Rise of (bio-)psychiatric experts

→ Fear of societal demise, belief in societal progress through science, authority of bio-medicine, Darwinism
Example 1: anti-sociality materialized

Benedikt, 1880s
“non-coverage of the cerebellum”
“[...] it must be possible, to found ethics on physiology, [...] in order to possibly base legislation on it - hence current medical psychology is doubtlessly on the way to achieve this goal.” (Flechsig, 1896)
Example 3: Penal reform debates

“It is a very remarkable fact, that the major transitions, which were brought about by the progress of natural scientific research in most of the fields of knowledge, has passed by the subject area of jurisprudence almost without influence.” (Kraepelin 1880)

“Der Zweckgedanke im Strafrecht” (Von Liszt 1882)

- “scientification” & “individualization” of penal system
If immoral persons are a the mercy of their bad biology…

• shift in justification for imprisonment
  – Guilt/punishment $\rightarrow$ dangerousness/prevention

• Therapeutic pessimism
  – Therapy will be futile until “the art of putting a new normally functioning brain in place of a weakened or damaged one has been invented” (Trueper 1893)

• Therapy/punishment
  – Bar from marriage, sterilization, eugenics

⇒ Modes of interpretation
  = modes of argumentation/action
Criticism

• Opposition from criminologists, anatomists, psychiatrists, jurists, educators…
• Heredity & environment
• Lombroso criticized
• Meynert vs Benedikt
• “at the moment we are still miles away from the possibility to diagnose moral imbecility from physical features” (Kraepelin, 1896)
• “Biological punishments”: marginal and controversial

➔ Biological explanations were contested
The facets of biological explanations for immorality

- explanatory resource
- demarcation between criminality and mental disorder
- mitigating/aggravating factor
- foundation for political and legal reform
- justification/legitimization
- target for intervention/means of control
Conclusion

• Biological explanations for immorality
  – Multifarious
  – Appealed given the socio-historical context
  – Entanglement of science, society, and politics
  – Contested/Not dominant
  – Scientific substantiation failed

• Discourse on immorality changed at the end of the 19th century
  – Biological narrative emerged as line of argument
  – Foundation for bio-criminology in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich