

Chapter 3

The Misfortunes of “Criminology” in France: A Specific History (1880–2009)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state of a discipline—or, more simply, the state of a discourse field and the related academic practices—cannot be understood outside the historical framework of its national genesis. According to Mucchielli (2004), this ‘broad picture’ view of France suggests a three-period split: (1) paradigmatic assertions and the impossible transdisciplinary dialogue typical of the years 1880-1940; (2) the normative context of the years 1945-1975, and the fresh associations it brought about; (3) the renewed dissociation between professional rationales and transdisciplinary dialogue from the mid-1970s onwards, alongside the considerable development of social science research. Finally, the authors question the current situation and the renewed, politically motivated attempt at establishing criminology as a full discipline in France.

BETWEEN THE BIOLOGICAL AND THE SOCIAL: THE SEARCH FOR A CRIME PARADIGM IN FRANCE (1880-1940)

In France, in the 1880s, as crime research was in the process of being institutionalized as a new scholarly discipline—a trend that pervaded the entire Western world—the scientific discourse was dominated by the question of the individual genesis of crime.

This issue was almost exclusively addressed from a biomedical perspective, through various theories purporting to somehow identify in certain individuals the existence of “natural” predispositions for aggression, crime, or even flatly “Evil” (Pick, 1989, p.44; Renneville, 1997, p.452; Mucchielli, 2006). The novel discipline that emerged in France at the time was not called “Criminology” by its proponents yet, but “Criminal Anthropology” (“*Anthropologie criminelle*”). However, some French medical doctors—including Alexandre Lacassagne (1823-1924), Professor of Forensic Medicine at

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-872-7.ch003

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Lyon University School of Medicine and main promoter of the new field—frequently alluded to the “social factors of crime” and did challenge, at least *in part*, Cesare Lombroso’s concept of the born criminal. The “Criminal Anthropology” designation mainly aimed at taking strategic distance from the Italian school, from which they were in fact intellectually – e.g. professionally – very close (Mucchielli, 1994a; Renneville, 1995). Only in the then budding field of social science could proper research on crime as a social phenomenon be seen emerging at the time.

Crime as a Social Phenomenon

During the 1890s, non-medical research endeavours focussing on the social dimension of crime were scarce and did not put forward any sociological methodology. Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), for example, offered in his extensive works a great many thoughts about crime and penalty, through a series of books of which some were internationally acclaimed, in particular *La criminalité comparée* (1886) (*Comparative Criminality*), and *La philosophie pénale* (1890) (translated into English as *Penal Philosophy*, 1968, 2nd ed. 2000). Moreover, despite occupying prominent positions from 1894 onwards (as head of the Judicial Statistics department at the Ministry of Justice, and co-director of Lacassagne’s journal, *Archives d’anthropologie criminelle*), and being elected to Collège de France in 1900, Tarde never trained any scholars or launched any research programme.

Besides Tarde, several intellectuals devoted at least some effort to crime study at the time. For a while, the most active and creative among them was Henri Joly (1839-1925), who taught “criminal and penitentiary science” at Paris University School of Law, starting 1887, and published a string of noted books at the end of the 1880s (Veilt, 1994). The dominant theme running through his criminological works was moral degradation rather than biological lowliness.

To him, the criminal was a “misled man”, not a “survivor of primitive ages”. This degradation itself partook to the rootlessness of modern man, forced to leave his family, his village, his trade, to go and seek a job in the anonymity and isolation of the big city. Joly set up to prove his theory using countless geographical maps, published in his 1889 book *La France criminelle* (*Criminal France*). Joly’s works, however, rather failed to reach a broader audience.

One has to turn to the group founded in 1897 by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) around his journal *L’Année sociologique* to first notice the emergence of a trend towards criminal sociology. This group brought together young philosophers who were convinced that sociology needed to be endowed with a proper scientific agenda based on autonomy from other sciences (Mucchielli, 1998). Among them, Gaston Richard (1860-1935) was picked by Durkheim to head the “Criminal sociology and moral statistics” section of the journal. It fell upon him to lay the foundations for a sociology of crime, in a complete turnaround to the biologization of behaviours that prevailed at the time. The work accomplished around Richard, from a critical point of view (see for example the notion of “criminogenic environment”) as well as through its scholarly contribution proper (historical analysis of shifting value and work systems, and their effect on criminality), constitutes an attempt at gradually building both the object and the agenda of a criminal sociology (Mucchielli, 1994b). As compared to the influence enjoyed by Durkheimians in other scientific spheres at the time, however, their critical work in the field of criminology was a failure. There are at least three reasons for this: first, the considerable strength and autonomy of the psychiatric circles, whose discourse increasingly prevailed once the fad for criminology subsided, and whose alliance with magistrates was already institutionalised. Then, the medical world displayed remarkable cohesion around its mainly hereditarist concept of crime. Finally, sociological research almost vanished

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