The Prevailing Conception of Degeneracy and Degenerate, with a Plea for Introducing the Supplementary Terms Deviation and Deviate

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THE PREVAILING CONCEPTION OF DEGENERACY AND DEGENERATE, WITH A PLEA FOR INTRODUCING THE SUPPLEMENTARY TERMS DEVIATION AND DEVIATE.

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The term "degenerate" is now of interest not only to the anthropologist, but to the medical and general public, and the time has come to question whether it is adequate with no synonym, except for its worst significance, to meet all requirements of scientific classification and discussion, to say nothing of general use. If the word had received a uniform and accurate interpretation, the attempt to present an alternative would be superfluous. Such, however, is far from being the case. Degeneracy has become especially associated with profligacy, perversion, crime, epilepsy, insanity and idiocy. This is not remarkable in view of the nature of the word itself. The term "superior degenerate" has led to confusion, even among special students of the subject. While this term in its academic sense applies only to individuals lacking psychic balance, meaning that the higher qualities are affected, the tendency has crept in to include under it individuals with minor congenital peculiarities, whether physical or mental. But to designate an individual possessing either minor faulty mental tendencies or slight physical defects, a superior degenerate, sounds, except to the special student, something like calling a good egg slightly bad, or a business
man moderately dishonest. And if in justification, not to say apology, for this diagnosis, it is stated that every one is more or less degenerate. The natural deduction is that the expression degenerate is of no special significance, or that we are only juggling with words, as one who would say “Every one is insane” or “Genius is a sign of insanity.”

The works of Nordau 1 and of Lombruso 2 have so far associated degeneracy with decadence and with crime as seriously to hinder the general appreciation of its milder significance, notwithstanding its use in dealing with genius.

Degeneration in its anthropological sense is defined in the Century Dictionary as “reduction to a lower type in the same scale of being; the act of becoming, or the state of having become, inferior, especially with respect to moral qualities.”

The superior degenerate who seeks consolation in Roget’s Thesaurus will be disappointed to find degeneracy marshaled in company with depravity, demoralization, retrogression, deterioration, perversion, prostitution, vitiation, contamination, corruption, blight, rottenness and pollution.

But degeneracy has come to include, medically speaking, every form of constitutional variation, however innocuous, from the average normal.

Dana 3 defines degeneration as “a condition in which there is a marked deviation from the average normal.” Church and Peterson 4 define the stigmata of degeneration as “anatomical or functional deviations from the normal, which in themselves are usually of little importance as regards the existence of an organism, but are characteristic of a marked or latent neuropathic disposition.”

The neurological definitions make no mention of moral qualities, and convey no suggestion that the individual necessarily represents a descent, even in the physical or intellectual, to say nothing of the moral, scale. Nor is it a logical conclusion that each and every deviation is degenerative because undoubted degenerates show many such signs. These stigmata range all the way from flecks on the iris, difference in color of the two eyes, unusual development of frontal lobes, left handedness and astigmatism, to perverted instincts, insanity and idiocy. Whatever they may or may not represent, the question in recording them is, What are they? It seems that they are neither more nor less than deviations from the average normal type. This type is a product of deduction rather than of experience, a composite photograph, so to speak, presenting the intellectual and moral as well as the physical characteristics of the average normal individual, a type not likely to present itself to the material eye, but none the less available for a standard. Goethe calls this standard an “abstract and general image.”

Have we not, then, drifted into the unscientific position of recording facts in such a way as to involve an opinion? If so, is it not reasonable, unless we are dealing with obvious and undoubted degeneracy, to record deviations as deviations? If it is necessary to characterize their possessor, why not call him slightly, moderately or extremely deviate, or, if it seems appropriate, a

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5 Text-book of Nervous Diseases, 5th edition, 1901, p. 34.
6 Church and Peterson: Nervous and Mental Diseases. Saunders & Co.
deviate? And if occasion requires the use of a single word to include all varieties, is not deviation more appropriate than degeneration? Even suppose it can be proved that every deviation means degeneration, will anything have been lost by following a logical plan in establishing that proposition?

We are not limited to the word insanity in describing borderland dwellers, or the eccentric individuals on the safe side of the border (though it is true that the alternatives have not always been freely used in analyzing genius).

Not every physical peculiarity is truly degenerate; for example, while albinism may be justly regarded as degenerative, in that it implies absence of a useful constituent in the organism, a mere difference in color of the eyes is not necessarily degenerate, though it must be, and so is, classified under the present method, as would, in fact, an absence of appendix if some individual should be born so happily constituted.

If the subject had not become a matter of general interest, the present limitation of our vocabulary would be less objectionable, though even if the discussion were confined to anthropological circles it would seem fair to propose an alternative which should allow a statement of facts in dealing with facts. But since the interest in this subject has broadened, and the public is expected to accommodate itself to the scientific nomenclature, is it too much to make the slight concession of introducing a term which not only does not clash with the facts, but which, if the position is well taken, is really demanded for the accurate presentation and classification of these conditions for scientific purposes?

Degeneration is attributed by Nordau to constitutional disease, alcoholism, poor nutrition and allied conditions in the ancestry; but Vaschide and Vurpas attribute the stigmata to toxic infections affecting the developing embryo. Without pausing to discuss either of these opinions, we may fairly use them as illustrating the different interpretations which have been given the term degeneracy.

Why not, then, incorporate into our vocabulary, for use in its appropriate place, a term which shall give an idea of the accepted facts rather than one which presupposes a definite etiology and tendency? Do not the words deviation and deviate fairly accomplish this end?

Some such nomenclature is especially appropriate in view of the fact that the question is sometimes an open one whether the possessor of moderate stigmata represents a lowering even in the intellectual or physical scale. He may, in fact, represent an improvement, at least on his traceable ancestry.

Nor do the stigmata themselves necessarily indicate deterioration. Extreme dolichocephaly is included in the literature as a stigma of degeneration. Lombroso, for example, cites cephalic indices of 69, 73 and 74. But the fact has been established that dolichocephaly is more common in the city than in the country, an observation to which the name Ammon's law has been applied. Certain authorities have even drawn the conclusions that the long-headed type is the one best fitted to meet the exigencies of city life, and that its prevalence in the centers of population represents a "survival of the fittest."\footnote{Ann. Ill. Neuro., Feb. 1, 1903. Abst. in Rev. of Neurology and Psychiatry, June, 1903. Macpherson: Review of Neurology and Psychiatry, February, 1903.}

To cite a more striking instance — Lombroso includes under the physical stigma of degenera-
tion, in men of genius, the usual development and complexity of the third frontal convolution, especially on one side. He quotes the work of Herve on Broca's convolution, in substantiating this observation, and further cites the morphological complexity of Broca's convolution in distinguished men, as described by R. Wagner, and especially remarks the enormous size and numerous superficial folds in this region in the case of a jurist distinguished for oratorical aptitude.

The downward is not, then, the only direction, as the word degeneracy would imply, in which deviation may be found. Even Lombroso does not claim that every genius is, as a whole, necessarily deteriorate. In fact, he warns against the exaggeration of deducing degeneration from single facts, though he has no other name for the most trivial of those facts than signs of degeneration.

If the ideal average normal individual, to whom reference has been made, could be galvanized into existence, his average normal modesty would surely make him hesitate to rank himself above all the geniuses to whom the term degenerate has been applied.

We sometimes meet acuteness of a special sense so remarkable that it suggests reversion even to a sylvan ancestry, rather than family decadence in the sense in which Nordau uses the term. The abnormal responsiveness to stimuli, sometimes seen in the so-called superior degenerate, reminds us of a similar tendency on the part of lower animals, a tendency representing in their case a survival of the fittest in eluding danger, rather than a sign of decadence. Even here, though it is true that the human being possessing these traits is apt to be so ill-balanced as to rank below the average normal, the term deviate would amply fill the requirements.

It would surely answer every purpose to substitute the word deviation in such statistics as those of Lombroso, which state 4% of normal individuals have five or more signs of degeneration, as compared with 27.4% of delinquents.

The words crime and criminal are supplemented by offense and offender, delinquent and delinquency, and nothing is now proposed more radical than similar alternatives for degeneration and degenerate. No one, I fancy, has ever objected to the word delinquent in the statistics just quoted, though this word is there intended to include the most hardened criminal, while degeneration is obliged in the same table to include the most insignificant signs of deviation.

Among the different factors entering into the question of heredity Mercier calls attention to the wide difference between the children born of similar and those born of dissimilar parents. As we approach the greatest possible similarity (namely that of marriage among members of the same immediate family), the tendency becomes greater to produce the lowest type of degeneracy. On the other hand, the greater the dissimilarity between the parents up to a certain point, the greater the tendency to produce an organism more vigorous than, and superior to, either of its parents. In the latter case there is also marked tendency to atavism. As the dissimilarity increases we may apparently look for

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8 Vorstudien, etc., 1st., Memoir, 1889.
10 Lombroso, in Twentieth Century Practice of Medicine, New York, 1897, p. 391.
precocity, rapid and exceptional intellectual development, together with the instability characteristic of the so-called superior degenerate. Great dissimilarity leads to wildness in the offspring, and extreme dissimilarity results in sterility. Mercier illustrates the tendency to atavism in fowls of dissimilar parentage, by Darwin’s experiment of crossing the black Spanish with the silk-white fowl, and producing in the progeny a red plumage not appearing in either branch, excepting in the wild ancestor common to both. Here we have a stigma of far different type and bearing from the mental and physical results of inbreeding on the one hand, and the atavistic criminal tendencies of Lombroso on the other, neither, meantime, being of parallel significance with the evolutionary spurt seen in the remarkable development of Broca’s convolution in the individual with unusual command of language. And a still further type is found in the results of infection in the embryo. If one term must be chosen to include all types with their modifications and gradations, it seems unfortunate that a name should be chosen which has, of necessity, a sinister significance, by no means uniformly appropriate. In the light of such considerations the use of the term deviation may even contribute toward a better understanding of the complex conditions with which we are concerned. And even if the word fails of adoption, the discussion will at least tend to clear the atmosphere and to lessen the resentment inevitably aroused by the word degeneration.

Even certain illustrious sufferers from convulsions, and allied serious signs of constitutional taint, have possessed intellectual qualities so far superior, not only to the average, but to the best, that their careers have made epochs in history. And, to cite one from many possessors of less serious signs, what shall we say of Carlyle, who as a boy was shy, proud and pugnacious, with strong affections and violent antipathies, whose indigestion and whose eyestrain have been in turn deemed the cause of his unfortunate disposition, all, whatever their interaction, being probably only signs of a constitutional make-up which included a psychopathic endowment? In later life he became so highly sensitized as to declare war upon his neighbor’s poultry, and to have constructed a sound-proof room for his labors, labors which were themselves upon the highest intellectual plane. Must we call him a superior degenerate?

The very expression superior degenerate is anomalous, for if we still deem the individual inferior to the normal, superior is an inappropriate qualification to apply, and if we deem him equal or superior to the normal, the term degenerate is unfortunate. Indeed the expression almost suggests the query, if a superior degenerate is less degenerate than an inferior degenerate, what degree would the supreme degenerate represent?

The term deviation may cover all variations from the average normal, whether above or below, or at the same level, in the intellectual, physical, moral or other scale. Nor need it necessarily be limited to the lighter grades of variation, but we may have, if you like, the minor and major deviate, whereas, the more appropriate the term degeneration when applied to stigmata, to individuals, to families, or to races showing unquestioned downward tendency, the more reason there is for keeping the word within its proper limitations, and especially of replacing, as far as practicable, that self-contradictory and unnecessarily opprobrious designation, superior degenerate.