Susan A. Ashley, “Misfits” in *Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy: Anatomies of Difference*

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- 1 What counts as normal? That's the question the author sets out to answer, focusing on France and Italy in the fin-de-siècle period (roughly 1870-1914), where six groups of people seemed to embody the mental and physical toll of modern life. Essentially a history of ideas about difference, the book explores the efforts of specialists and observers to identify, classify, explain and respond to aberrant and transgressive behaviours exhibited by mental misfits (geniuses, lunatics, neurotics) and social misfits (vagabonds, criminals, sexual deviants). Densely written yet richly detailed chapters examine each group in turn, bookended by introductory and concluding chapters evocatively titled: "In Spite of Evolution, Because of Modern Life" (ch 1) and "Singular Analogies" (ch 8). Useful sub-headings help to identify commonalities such as the perceived scope of "the problem" and its "implications", and the statistics provided show just why most of these groups were believed to pose a threat to society. Abnormality, even that of geniuses, indicated a process of dynamic change caused by the biological and social forces associated with modernity. The misfits were those who, "because of their organic makeup, ... fell back, fell short, or surged ahead, while normal people developed properly" (p. 24).
- 2 Essentially, the book studies biological explanations of deviance, relying on the published works of a range of "experts": jurists, politicians, doctors (including forensic

specialists and psychiatrists), social scientists (criminology, sociology), neurologists, and educators — many of whom shared overlapping professional territories. Standardised ways of collecting and communicating information were fostered by a shared commitment to empiricism and reflected in a reliance on case studies, graphs, photos, statistics and testing used to create, defend and refine typologies. Socio-political realities affected what the experts wanted to know; and what they discovered was shaped by their common assumptions about heredity, degeneration, will power, the brain and nervous system, bodily energy, and the ability of social conditions (poor diet or alcoholism, for example) to cause biological defects. What emerged, therefore, was a series of binaries: talent /genius; partial/full insanity; accidental / inveterate vagrants; occasional/habitual criminals and sexual deviants. The range of internal and external influences left space for a third causal factor, perverse character, thought to be most likely to respond to deterrents or correction.

- 3 The word "misfits" is Susan Ashley's own, employed to cover all the terms in use at the time — and there were many, especially in relation to categorizing deviants. Epilepsy, hysteria and neurasthenia were the most common diseases of modernity, and epilepsy became a particularly potent biological factor in all sorts of pathological activities. Since the eccentric behavioural characteristics associated with it could appear in vagrants, criminals and mental patients, "experts often suspected that epilepsy drove their actions" (p. 99) while, as the "quintessential degenerative disorder" (p. 204), it was also believed to be capable of producing sexual abnormalities. Every type of deviance was linked to the effects of degeneration, the central explanatory concept so flexible that it could encompass numerous interchangeable organic problems (p. 204). Experts tended to focus their research on criminality, vagrancy, sexual perversions, neuroses and psychoses, wishing to determine which group merited what type of treatment (prison, hospital, asylum, workhouse) and suggest policies for reducing the number of deviants. Social reform, social defence and a clear notion of a sliding scale of dangerousness were all present by the end of the nineteenth century.
- 4 Who were these experts and who were they writing for, apart from each other? Readers of this journal will be most familiar with the internationally renowned figures of Cesare Lombroso and Alexandre Lacassagne, but the book cites the work of numerous French and Italian doctors, scientists, lawyers and criminologists, offering an introduction to English speakers of an apparently extensive literature. Some care is taken to demonstrate how their views changed over time, but as the first chapter does not really introduce the sources that the book relies on or the author's methodology, it is difficult to know whether this literature is the most representative or how much more of it there might be. Whilst acknowledging that it is difficult to determine how much these debates affected public attitudes, it is clear that the public did gain access to the experts' ideas via criminal trials and popular writings. The analysis of the case of Giuseppe Musolino, a defiant prison escapee and revenge killer (p. 159-164), offers an especially revealing indication of public interest in the application of expert theories, as well as the debates about criminality that could arise from competing classifications. The experts themselves were avowedly keen to influence government policy, a key period of success coming in the 1880s with regard to repeat offenders: in France, the Relegation Law of 1885 extended the punishment of exile to overseas penal colonies to petty recidivists; in Italy, the Criminal Code of 1889 permitted judges to assign punishments on the basis of a criminal's risk to society (p. 211).

- 5 The theoretical edifice constructed over a period of decades collapsed after World War One, as the notion of will as an explanatory concept changed along with definitions of social adjustment (p. 79), the symptoms of nervous diseases were reassigned to modern psychiatric disorders, and the equation of happiness with work lost its legitimacy (p. 226). The lasting importance of this empirical focus on deviance and normality remains in the current emphasis on explaining deviants by looking to developmental, family, mental health and personal circumstances (p. 227).
 - 6 The volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of *dégénérescence*, identifying fascinating links between groups of so-called deviants who have long been of interest to historians of crime and criminology, medicine and forensic medicine. It also offers useful insights on the development of criminology as a discipline, as well as into the possibilities that flexible professional boundaries permitted late nineteenth-century academics. Readers unfamiliar with the existing historiography on degeneration might consider starting with the last chapter, which brings the various strands of argument and evidence together to explain how and why fin-de-siècle medical and scientific investigators, in using the abnormal to establish the normal, both reflected and influenced contemporary concerns about modernity, crime and deviancy.
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