

The Sociological Dimension of Crime in the Light of Lombrosian Theory

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Abstract

This study presents the main content of Lombrosian theory and examines it from a sociological perspective. It aims to identify the limits of a purely biological explanation of crime. It also highlights the importance of the social dimension in understanding and explaining criminal behavior. The theory marked a shift from philosophical interpretation to scientific and empirical explanation.

Despite its historical importance in establishing criminology as an independent field of knowledge, Lombrosian theory soon faced broad scientific and methodological criticism. Some of this criticism came from within the positivist school itself. The main objection concerned its tendency to reduce the criminal phenomenon to biological determinants.

Keywords: crime, Lombrosian theory, criminal sociology, social control, social relations, social structure.

Introduction

Crime is one of the oldest phenomena associated with human life since the emergence of societies. The social sciences have continuously tried to understand its causes and motives. As a result, theoretical approaches have varied between biological, psychological, and purely social explanations.

Lombrosian theory, named after the Italian physician Cesare Lombroso, represented an important turning point in the history of research on crime. It attempted to move beyond the philosophical and moral explanations that had dominated the classical school. Instead, it proposed a scientific and empirical explanation that linked criminal behavior to organic and biological characteristics of the offender. Despite its historical importance in the establishment of criminology as an independent field, the theory soon became the subject of broad scientific and methodological criticism, especially from within the positivist school itself.

From this perspective, the present study seeks to present the content of Lombrosian theory and to question it sociologically. Its purpose is to show the limits of a purely biological explanation of crime and to clarify the importance of the social dimension in understanding and explaining it.

1. The Concept of Crime in Sociology

From a sociological perspective, crime is not a fixed reality or a natural fact. It is a relative phenomenon shaped by society through its values and norms at a particular historical moment. An act becomes a crime when it violates the collective standards accepted by society. Supporters of this approach argue that criminalization is essentially a value judgment made by the group about certain actions of its members. Crime, in this sense, is primarily a social phenomenon. It is linked more

closely to social structure than to the individual viewed in isolation from the surrounding environment (Al-Samri, 2011, p. 34).

From this perspective, a sociological study of crime must connect it to the network of social, economic, and cultural relations surrounding the individual. Relevant factors include socialization, family disintegration, poverty, class inequality, and weak social control. This differs from approaches that explain crime only through individual biological or psychological characteristics (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 67). A sociological analysis of crime therefore requires several levels of analysis. It links the actor to the structure, the subjective to the objective, and the local to the global. Sociology does not deny the existence of individual factors. It places them within their social, economic, and cultural context. From this standpoint, crime cannot be addressed only through punishment or psychological treatment. Broader social policies are also needed. These include strengthening the family, supporting education and employment, reducing class inequality, promoting social integration, developing marginalized neighborhoods, and reforming the justice system. The explanation of crime thus shifts away from the search for an "evil criminal" or a "sick person." It becomes an attempt to understand a complex social process in which structure, culture, interaction, and power are intertwined.

2. Introducing Cesare Lombroso

Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was an Italian physician who worked in the military and in prisons. He is considered the actual founder of what is known as the positivist or constitutional school of criminology. This school broke with the classical school, which explained crime in terms of free will and the individual's rational choice. Lombroso built his theory on field observation and the anatomical examination of a large number of offenders' corpses and skulls. He also studied samples of living offenders. In doing so, he adopted a method that he described as empirical.

Lombroso studied medicine at the universities of Pavia, Padua, and Vienna. After qualifying as a physician, he served as a military doctor in the Italian army. During his contact with soldiers, he observed that some of them had tattoos that he associated with deviant behavior. This observation remained present in his later research (Ali Abdel Qader, 2024, p. 39). He later worked in psychiatric hospitals and prisons. He also taught at the University of Turin in forensic medicine, psychiatry, and criminal anthropology.

3. Foundations and Content of Lombrosian Theory

Lombrosian theory is based on a central assumption. It holds that the criminal differs from ordinary individuals through specific organic, physical, and psychological characteristics. According to Lombroso, these characteristics make the criminal closer in constitution to primitive human beings, or even to certain lower animals. He described this idea through the concept of "atavism." By this he meant the reappearance of ancient hereditary traits that had remained latent across generations. On the basis of this assumption, Lombroso argued that crime was not the result of free and rational choice. He considered it the inevitable outcome of an innate biological constitution carried by some individuals from birth. This view was expressed in his concepts of the "born criminal" and the "criminal by nature."

On this basis, Lombroso developed a classification of criminals in which the degree of influence attributed to organic factors varied. The main categories included the born criminal, the insane criminal, the habitual criminal, the criminal of passion, and the occasional criminal. He regarded the

first category as the clearest expression of his theory because it supposedly displayed the "atavistic" organic and psychological traits most clearly (Boukhrissa, p. 54).

4. The Sociological Dimension of Crime and Critique of the Lombrosian Approach

A purely Lombrosian position did not remain dominant for long, even within the positivist school itself. One of Lombroso's students, the sociologist Enrico Ferri, soon widened the scope of explanation. He included social factors alongside organic ones. This move can be regarded as an early foundation of criminal sociology as an independent field concerned with the effect of social conditions on crime and offenders. It also marked the beginning of a shift from viewing crime as an unavoidable organic destiny to viewing it as the product of a complex interaction between the individual and the social environment (Al-Saati, 1983, p. 38).

A sociological examination of Lombrosian theory reveals its methodological and theoretical limits. The theory assumes that crime is a fixed natural fact, whereas in reality it is a social and legal construction that changes across societies, cultures, and power relations. It also reduces the social actor to biological characteristics. In doing so, it overlooks poverty, inequality, unemployment, marginalization, family disintegration, weak social ties, unplanned urbanization, marginalized neighborhood environments, patterns of socialization, peer groups, and opportunities for access to resources. All of these are important factors in explaining the criminal phenomenon.

Sociological approaches have shown that crime does not arise only from an individual defect. Durkheim's theory of anomie, Merton's strain theory, Sutherland's social learning approach, and Becker's labeling theory all point to the complex interaction between social structure, interactional processes, laws, and norms.

5. Sociological and Methodological Criticisms of the Theory

Lombrosian theory has been criticized from both sociological and methodological perspectives. Methodologically, Lombroso was criticized because his study sample was limited to offenders confined in prisons and treatment institutions, without a control group of non-offenders for comparison. Most of his studies also focused on men rather than women, which limits the generalizability of his findings. In addition, the theory lacked conclusive scientific evidence proving the existence of the "atavistic traits" described by Lombroso or demonstrating a direct causal relationship between those traits and criminal behavior (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 25).

From a sociological perspective, the Lombrosian approach was criticized for reducing a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon to an individual biological fact. It neglected the role of the social, economic, and cultural environment in producing deviant behavior. Such factors include poverty, family disintegration, class inequality, and weak institutions of socialization and social control. Behavior, including criminal behavior, does not develop independently of the norms and values established by society. An act considered a crime in one society or historical period may not be considered a crime in another. This variability is inconsistent with the fixed and universal character of the idea of the "born criminal" (Al-Samri, 2011, p. 76).

Biological determinism also creates another problem from a sociological perspective. It leads to the removal of both individual and social responsibility for the criminal act because it presents crime as an unavoidable organic destiny. Criminal sociology, by contrast, regards crime as learned behavior acquired through social interaction and socialization. It can therefore be reduced or modified by changing the surrounding social conditions (Al-Hadithi, p. 57).

6. From Biological Determinism to Sociological Theories of Crime

Sociology did more than offer a negative critique of Lombrosian theory. It gradually developed an alternative theoretical framework that explains crime through social structure rather than through the organic constitution of the individual. The following approaches are among the most important. They can be understood as a natural continuation of the sociological critique of Lombroso.

a. Functionalist Theory and Durkheim's Concept of Anomie

Emile Durkheim was among the first scholars to establish a sociological approach to crime. He regarded crime as a normal and natural social phenomenon found in every society. He even considered it functional in a certain sense because punishment of offenders can reaffirm collective feelings of solidarity and cohesion. However, Durkheim linked rising levels of crime and deviance to a condition of "anomie," or normlessness. In this condition, social norms lose their ability to regulate individual behavior and guide desires. This may occur during rapid social and economic change that disrupts the system of social values. In this sense, crime for Durkheim is not a departure from a fixed organic nature, as Lombroso suggested. It reflects a disturbance in the relationship between individuals and the norms of their group (Jalabi, 1999, p. 89).

b. Differential Association and Social Learning Theory

This approach is associated with the work of sociologist Edwin Sutherland. It argues that criminal behavior is learned in the same way as any other social behavior. Learning occurs through interaction with groups and environments in which law-breaking is positively defined or justified. From this perspective, the individual is not born a criminal because of organic constitution, as Lombroso assumed. Criminal attitudes, values, and skills are acquired through particular reference groups, such as delinquent peers, the neighborhood environment, or the family. This approach provides a social explanation for differences in crime rates across social environments (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 43).

d. Social Labeling Theory

Labeling theory begins from an assumption that is very different from Lombroso's logic. It does not treat crime as a trait inherent in the individual. Instead, it views crime as the result of social interaction through which society assigns the label of "criminal" or "deviant" to some of its members. The stigmatized label may then become a social identity. This identity can push the individual toward further involvement in deviant behavior in line with social expectations. This approach reverses the Lombrosian model. It treats society's reaction, rather than the individual's organic constitution, as a decisive variable in the production of a "criminal identity" (Al-Samri, 2011, p. 61).

c. Social Control Theory and the Urban Environment

This approach focuses on the effect of weak social bonds and weakened institutions of behavioral control, such as the family, school, neighborhood, and religion. It uses these factors to explain higher rates of crime. As these bonds weaken, the likelihood that an individual will depart from prevailing social norms may increase. In the same context, studies associated with the school of urban ecology have shown that crime is concentrated in particular urban areas marked by social disorganization, poverty, and rapid urban change. This concentration appears regardless of the organic characteristics of the people living in those areas. The finding offers another criticism of the idea of the "born criminal," which does not explain the clear spatial and social concentration of criminal phenomena (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 54).

7. A Sociological Analysis of the Relationship Between Social Structure and Crime

On the basis of the preceding approaches, the sociological analysis of crime can be deepened by examining a group of structural variables. These variables suggest that criminal action is shaped, to a large extent, by the individual's position within the social structure rather than by biological constitution.

First, sociological studies reveal a close relationship between poverty, class inequality, and certain forms of crime. Poverty is not treated as an automatic or direct cause of deviance. Rather, it is a factor that weakens an individual's opportunities to achieve legitimate goals through legitimate means. In the absence of alternatives, some individuals may turn to illegitimate means to achieve those goals. This idea was later developed by theorists of the "gap between goals and means," as an extension of Durkheim's account of anomie.

Second, sociological analysis highlights the effect of family disintegration and weak socialization in the production of deviant behavior. The family is the first institution through which individuals acquire the values and norms that regulate behavior. If the family does not perform this role effectively because of economic, social, or educational difficulties, its capacity for internal control may weaken. The individual may then turn toward alternative groups that can provide a setting for criminal behavior. This again suggests that crime is the outcome of a cumulative social process rather than an innate organic predisposition.

Third, the effect of urban transformation and rapid modernization on traditional systems of social control cannot be ignored. Rapid urbanization is often accompanied by weaker local community ties, increased internal migration, and greater spatial inequality. These conditions may create urban environments in which crime becomes more concentrated, regardless of the individual characteristics of residents.

Finally, sociological analysis indicates that crime is historically and socially relative. It is also connected to those who possess the power to define and criminalize conduct within society. In other words, crime is linked to the actors who determine what is considered criminal and what is not. This dimension of power and value is absent from the Lombrosian approach. Lombroso treated crime as a fixed organic fact without considering the social and political balances of power that shape law and norms in each society.

8. The Scientific Value of the Theory in Contemporary Criminal Sociology

Despite the scientific and methodological criticism directed at Lombrosian theory, which undermined much of its detailed content, especially its claims concerning the physical traits of the criminal, its historical pioneering role is difficult to deny. It helped move the study of crime from the field of philosophical and moral reflection to the field of observation and scientific experimentation. This shift paved the way for the emergence of criminology and criminal sociology as independent scientific disciplines (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 43).

Lombroso's central idea that certain constitutional factors may be associated with criminal behavior has not disappeared completely from contemporary scientific thought. However, it has lost its absolute deterministic character. It later developed into integrative approaches that combine biological, psychological, and social factors in explaining crime rather than relying on only one dimension. The main sociological lesson drawn from the critique of Lombrosian theory is that crime,

regardless of its individual background factors, cannot be understood apart from the social context in which it is produced and defined (Al-Saati, 1983, p. 89).

Lombroso represented the most pronounced form of the deterministic biological model of crime. He proposed the existence of a "born criminal" who carried anatomical, physiological, and psychological traits that supposedly made the person closer to "primitive types" (Hilal, p. 45). He believed that such an individual could be identified in advance from the shape of the skull, face, teeth, and other features. The underlying logic was therefore that constitutional factors produced criminal behavior in an almost deterministic way. This approach soon lost scientific and methodological support. Lombroso often confused correlation with causation, relied on unrepresentative survey samples, and neglected social and economic influences.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion shows that Lombrosian theory represented a pioneering step in the history of criminological thought because it moved from philosophical explanation toward scientific and empirical explanation. At the same time, it remained governed by a reductionist biological view that treated crime as an unavoidable individual destiny. This view neglected the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of crime. Sociological criticism redirected attention toward the social factor. This began within the positivist school itself through Enrico Ferri and continued through Durkheim's work on anomie, Sutherland's theory of differential association, and the theories of labeling and social control. These contributions restored society to a central role in both the production and definition of crime.

A deeper sociological analysis shows that criminal behavior is closely related to the individual's position within the social structure. Relevant dimensions include class position, family cohesion, the degree of integration into institutions of social control, the nature of the urban environment, and the balances of power that determine what is considered a crime in the first place. These factors confirm that deviance is relative and is defined by prevailing social norms. It cannot be reduced to fixed organic characteristics, as Lombroso assumed. In this sense, the sociological dimension is a necessary and complementary approach to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of crime. It does not necessarily deny the possible contribution of individual factors. It rejects, however, the reduction of crime to the extreme biological determinism on which Lombrosian theory was based.

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