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LACASSAGNE Alexandre (1843-1924)

Between 1885 and 1914, Lyon was the capital of French criminology. Dr. Alexandre Lacassagne (1843-1924), professor and holder of the Chair of Legal Medicine at the University of Lyon, became the dominant figure of the time, both through his own publications and as Director of the Criminal Anthropology Records (archives d'anthropologie criminelle) from 1886 to 1914.

Lacassagne believed that crime is not the expression of an innate faculty, but is the result of an interaction between the individual and his social environment : the criminal is the “ microbe ” and the social environment is the “ nutrient broth ”. Society is a collection of individuals whose nervous systems have not all evolved in the same way. Just as there are three levels to every brain, so every society contains three “ social layers ” : the frontal, the parietal and the occipital. These three socio-phrenological layers produce three main categories of criminal : “ thought-based criminals ”(frontal), “ action-based criminals ”(parietal) and “ criminals acting by feeling or instinct ”(occipital). “ Insane criminals ” are frequently in the first category. Criminals governed by impulse or by events are found above all in the second category and it is here that chastisement and penalties can be effective. The third, occipital-dominated category contains the “ true criminals ”, the “unsociables ”. Lacassagne held that penal philosophy should derive from criminal anthropology data. The repression of crime runs into difficulty when it is too soft and society can no longer be defended against incorrigible criminals. To be effective, the fight against crime should incorporate the necessary security measures and adopt a penal code whose penalties have a dissuasive effect. In the most extreme cases, penalties can also be used to eliminate asocial people.

The theory was inspired by Gall's phrenology, but it met with little response at the time. However, Lacassagne was a very important expert witness in many of the big cases of the era and above all coordinated the opposition to Lombroso's theory of the "born criminal". The annual publication of the Criminal Anthropology Records and responsibility for a large number of medical students allowed him to create a "social environment" school which came to dominate the field of criminal anthropology in France. His reading of criminality placed him at the interface between two radically different interpretations of the subject. The first of these, which had its roots in early nineteenth century legal medicine, psychiatry and anthropology, was the basis for what we now know as the "bio-psychological" approach. In essence this seeks to establish the differences between the honest population and law-breakers. The second, created by Durkheim in the 1890s, makes a clear separation between criminology and any biological influence. Lacassagne's socio-phrenological theory lies halfway between medicine and sociology and was one of the last expressions of the naturalistic human sciences movement. As such, it deserves a place in the history of both disciplines and Lacassagne can be confirmed as the co-founder, with Lombroso, of criminal anthropology.

Marc Renneville