

01/2014

Emilia Musumeci, expert in the figure of Cesare Lombroso



"There is some biological determinism in neurocriminology"

As part of the colloquia series of the Catalan Society for the History of Science and Technology (SCHCT) for the 2013-2014 course, and in collaboration with the Center for the History of Science (UAB - CEHIC), Dr Emilia Musumeci (Università di Catania) gave a talk entitled "*Cesare Lombroso and Villella's Skull: from Museum of Criminal Anthropology to courtrooms*". Musumeci is expert in Lombroso, a figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who is famous in the history of science and medicine for his ideas about the biological determination of criminals. In this interview, Musumeci discusses the theories of Lombroso, his detractors, museum, the controversy generated by the

study and exhibit of the Calabrian bandit Villella's skull and Lombroso's legacy today.

Emilia Musumeci is temporary lecturer in Criminal Justice at the University of Catania, Italy. She earned a degree in Law (2003), with a thesis in criminology on the concept of "monstrosity" in the works of Michel Foucault and Cesare Lombroso, and went on to complete a master in Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure (2004); a postgraduate degree in Legal Studies(2006); and a PhD specialising in profiles of citizenship in the construction of Europe (2012) with a thesis on the current neuroscience and criminal law debate and the concepts of free will, health/disease, mental capacity and criminal responsibility.

Among her publications are the book *Cesare Lombroso e le neuroscienze: un parricidio mancato. Devianza, libero arbitrio, imputabilità tra antiche chimere ed inediti scenari* (2012) and the essays "New Natural Born Killers? The Legacy of Lombroso in Neuroscience and Law" (2012) and "The Positivist School of Criminology and The Italian Fascist Criminal Law. A Squandered Legacy?", soon to be published.

Who was Cesare Lombroso?

Lombroso was a doctor and a criminologist. He was born in Verona in 1835, but spent much of his life in Turin, where he founded criminal anthropology. This discipline, according to a quite widespread opinion, is the basis of today's criminology and criminal profiling techniques still used by the FBI.

What were Lombroso's theories based on?

Lombroso sought to discover the biological origins of crime, ie, his explanations were focused almost exclusively on biology and therefore on everything related to the figure of the criminal and which could biologically distinguish criminals from those called "normal". Initially, his theories were mainly based on atavism, a type of ancestral people returned to modern civilization. Therefore, criminality was associated with primitivity. Eventually he reformulated his thesis, adding other factors such as moral insanity, epilepsy and other anthropological factors such as the use of tattoos, the language of criminals and how they shaped their own image. That is, from a strict biological origin, his theories became something more structured and complex.

What tools did Lombroso use?

He was a psychiatrist, a coroner, and thus he used all the tools that were then in vogue in psychiatry. So obviously the biggest discovery was the small cavity of the Villella skull, made during an autopsy.

What features did this skull have?

The feature found was a cavity in the occipital zone, where there should have been a ridge. This was the great discovery, but it was later refuted by modern scientists.

What influence have Lombroso's theories played in practice and at police level?

Lombroso's theories had many followers. First, security measures were introduced together with the concept of legal accountability; security measures were planned for code 1930 during the Fascist era and were applied if the offender was not held accountable or even in some cases had to be applied in the absence of crime. They were, therefore, parallel measures to the penalties applied for crimes and both formed the so-called *doppio binario* system in Italy: on the one hand there were ordinary sentences, and on the other hand, there were these security measures which could be, for example, forced labour in an agricultural colony, and which were applied to offenders who were declared "socially dangerous" by judges. This is when the famous concept of social danger appears.

Another very strong mark left by Lombroso was in the study of criminal identification, because many of his followers, such as Salvatore Ottolenghi (1861-1934) in Italy, continued his work from the point of view of police science to recognise criminals immediately after their arrest. Therefore, anthropometric measurements were made to identify criminals, and completed with fingerprints, police photographs and now DNA, etc. Much progress has been made regarding these applications by the police.

Another important aspect were the asylums, because Lombroso always studied crime and madness, which for him went hand in hand. The concept of moral insanity was determining in the construction of his theory of a born criminal, precisely as a way of explaining how it was possible to solve crimes or cases in which the boundary between madness and crime was very subtle. In this sense, many of his followers were directors of asylums.

In short, all forms of deviant behavior were studied by Lombroso and his followers.

Lombroso had opponents, both in Italy and in other European countries?

He had many opponents and enemies. In Italy, from the criminal point of view, there was Francesco Carrara (1805-1888), a great penologist and the leading exponent of the classical school. Criminal law was against the positivist school created by Lombroso and his disciples. Carrara was a follower of penal illustration and therefore he held that free will was precisely the basis of criminal law. There was a bitter controversy between the Lombrosian school and Carrara's classical school.

At European level, in France, Lombroso had several controversies with Alexandre Lacassagne (1843-1924) and Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). There was also much debate about degeneration, because there were those who thought this concept was taken from Lombroso's theories.

In a Catholic country like Italy in the late nineteenth century, what was the position of the Catholic Church?

Well, first of all, Lombroso was Jewish, but for him religion did not matter, because he was an ardent positivist and therefore only had faith in science. Indeed, he said that he professed a religion of facts. So he had much opposition from the Catholic Church, especially because his theories, which led to a sort of criminal law determinism, denying the concept of free will, shook the main points on which the doctrine of the Church is strictly based, which says that man is free to choose between good and evil. In particular, a major opponent was Friar Agostino Gemelli (1878-1959), who wrote the famous book *I funerali di un uomo e di una dottrina* (Funeral of a Man and of a Doctrine) immediately after the death of Lombroso, arguing that his theories were to be forgotten because they were a pseudoscience and lacked foundation. I think this was the beginning of a great battle for Catholics.

What was the political ideology of Lombroso?

He was strangely socialist, a somewhat anomalous socialist, because in some cases he supported the death penalty, but only for incorrigible criminals. But, in fact, he wanted to improve prison conditions and was concerned with some social groups at risk, such as prostitutes. He had a very ambiguous political idea.

What is the story behind the Lombroso Museum of Anthropology? Why does it generate so much controversy?

The museum began with the private collection of Lombroso. He had begun collecting skulls and other body parts that came from hospitals, asylums, etc., when he was still a medical student. He lived in a rental apartment and the owner of the house was scared to go in because of all the skulls and skeletons Lombroso had. Then when he became famous, the museum became public; it was acquired by University of Turin and became academic. It then had its ups and downs, was closed and reopened many times, always surrounded by controversy. The last time was in 2009, the centenary of the death of Lombroso. A great amount of public funding went into restructuring and rethinking all the documentation present in the museum. It was a great success, but has been discussed a lot because some believe it was an attempt to put in style once again the theories of Lombroso and especially to want to criminalise the southern population, because Villella's skull is still preserved there, and he was Calabrese. Many southern parties have seen in this fact a desire to justify antimeridional prejudice. Actually, Lombroso had not made the racial element a cornerstone of his theories, but he has been somewhat politically manipulated during this controversy. And this has added to the controversy against the unification of Italy, revived during the celebrations of Italy's one hundred fiftieth anniversary, in which people protested against the supremacy of the Savoys and Piedmonts, who colonised the south. That is to say, Lombroso also played his part, given these protests which still last and demand the return of the skull.

Today, does the figure of Lombroso raise controversy in Italy?

Yes, Lombroso is a controversial figure, almost a cursed one. "Lombrosiano" is a very negative adjective, and it is used in a pejorative sense to say that an offender should be identified by his face.

Is there any political party that gives support to the name of Lombroso and his theories?

No, in fact there are "non- Lombroso" parties, opposing parties.

Do you believe that Lombroso's theories, the biological determinist line, are still valid?

Well, nobody says today, as Lombroso did, that there is a cavity in the skull that can determine a crime. But there is some biological determinism in neuroscience and molecular genetics today, on which neurocriminology is defined. In my opinion, they are just more sophisticated tools than those used by Lombroso, but the research into the origins, firstly in the skull, today in DNA, certainly lives on and is very strong.

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