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GALL François-Joseph (1858-1828)

The doctor and anatomist François-Joseph Gall was the founder of phrenology, a science of the mind which is now considered outdated, but which was of considerable importance in the Western world in the first half of the XIX century. Phrenology puts forward a concept of the perpetration of crime, the passing of judgement and the application of penalties which was really “ criminology ” before the term was invented

François-Joseph Gall applied his doctrine in Austria, in the Germanic States and in France, where he finally settled in 1808. Phrenology combines three ideas. The first is that the brain houses all of man’s fundamental faculties. The second is that the various functions of the brain correspond to the same number of different organs. The third is that the skull is an exact representation of the shape of the brain and that one can build a phrenological portrait of an individual by tracing the contours of the skull (cranioscopy). Gall used comparative anatomy and empirical observation to locate the positions of physical love, a talent for mathematics, the instinct for ownership, the carnivorous instinct, etc. on the human brain. Phrenologists carried out autopsies and a large number of brain mouldings in asylums, prisons and penal colonies and often studied the physiognomy of their subjects at the same time.

Phrenology holds that man has a healthy mind and is capable of free choice when the development of his brain is harmonious. If an organ is hypertrophied or underdeveloped, the individual will be unbalanced. For Gall, therefore, genius and madness, crime and virtue are the products of a subject’s physiology, not just of his intention. Gall believed that phrenology should bring about a scientific reform of the penal system. Some phrenologists claimed that, during a criminal investigation, any doubt about a suspect could be removed by a properly conducted cranioscopy. Gall thought that the penal process should judge the person rather than

the act. If the most horrific and motiveless crimes could, in fact, be explained by physiological determination, should the authors of these acts be executed ? Curiously, Gall allied this modern approach to the question of responsibility, which was to be at the heart of positivist penal philosophy, to a traditional position on the death penalty, which he thought was capable of supplying a sufficiently strong exterior motive to compensate for an individual's murderous instincts. On the other hand, Gall was sceptical about the ability of the prisons of his day to reform detainees. From the penal point of view, phrenologists adopted nearly every possible position. Philanthropists in France maintained that phrenology would lead to a general acceptance of attenuating circumstances, whereas later disciples took positions which gave priority to measures of security and public order, such as transportation and open-ended sentencing.

Phrenology has no direct descendant in the field of criminology. However, it has played an important role as a paradigm. Its main ideas are apparent in the the second half of the XIX century in criminal anthropology, a scientific movement which, in effect, sought to distinguish the criminal from the honest individual by his anatomical, physiological, psychological and social characteristics and which maintained, as did phrenology, that sanctions should be applied to an individual according to the degree of danger he represents rather than to his actions.

Marc Renneville