

The Italian School of Criminology

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ABSTRACT

The Italian School of Criminology, emerging in the late 19th century, represents a foundational movement in the development of modern criminological thought. Rooted in the work of pioneering scholars, such as Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Raffaele Garofalo, the school introduced revolutionary ideas that sought to explain criminal behavior through biological and sociological lenses. This article explores the historical context of the Italian School, its core theories including the concept of the “born criminal” and criminal anthropology and its methodological approaches. While groundbreaking at the time, many of its theories have been subject to significant criticism and reevaluation in light of contemporary scientific understanding. Nevertheless, the Italian School’s influence on criminological research, forensic science, and penal policy remains profound. This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Italian School’s legacy, highlighting both its contributions and limitations within the broader field of criminology.

Keywords: Italian School of Criminology, Cesare Lombroso, Criminal Anthropology, Positivist Criminology, Criminological Theories.

INTRODUCTION

Criminology, as an interdisciplinary field, seeks to understand the causes, nature, and societal impact of crime and criminal behavior. It integrates perspectives from sociology, psychology, biology, and law to analyze criminal actions and to inform effective crime prevention and justice policies [1]. The significance of criminology lies in its ability to explain why crime occurs and to guide the development of legal and social responses aimed at reducing criminal behavior.

Throughout its history, criminology has been shaped by various schools of thought, each offering unique explanations of crime. The Classical School, with thinkers like Cesare Beccaria, focused on free will and rational choice, emphasizing deterrence through proportionate punishment [2]. In contrast, the Positivist School advocated for empirical and scientific analysis of crime, emphasizing determinism and the influence of biological and social factors. Other perspectives, such as the Chicago School highlighted environmental and sociological factors influencing criminal behavior [3], while Critical Criminology questioned societal power structures underlying crime and justice [4].

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The Italian School of Criminology emerged during the late 19th century as a significant movement within the positivist tradition. Its founders, including Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Raffaele Garofalo, sought to apply scientific methods to the study of crime, integrating biological, anthropological, and sociological approaches [5-7]. Lombroso's theory of the "born criminal" and the concept of atavism represented pioneering attempts to link physical and biological traits with criminal propensity [5]. Though controversial, the Italian School profoundly influenced criminological thought and penal policy, sparking debates that persist in modern criminology.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Italian School of Criminology, examining its historical context, major theorists, core concepts, methodologies, and influence on criminal justice. Furthermore, it explores the school's contemporary relevance, including scientific critiques and ethical concerns, to assess its lasting contribution to the discipline.

Historical Context

The Italian School of Criminology emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period marked by significant social and political transformation in Italy. Following the unification of Italy in 1861, the nation was grappling with rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the challenges of integrating diverse regional populations into a cohesive state [8]. These changes brought about increased attention to social issues, such as poverty, crime, and public order, providing fertile ground for new approaches to understanding criminal behavior.

Intellectually, this era coincided with the rise of positivism, a philosophical and scientific movement emphasizing empirical observation and the application of scientific methods to social phenomena [9]. Italian criminologists were influenced by this intellectual climate, striving to transform criminology from a speculative discipline into a rigorous science based on measurable data. The prevailing belief was that crime, like other human behaviors, could be studied scientifically to uncover its causes and thus improve social control and legal responses [6].

Within this context, the Italian School was founded by key figures whose work would shape the trajectory of criminological thought. Cesare Lombroso, often considered the father of modern criminology, introduced the idea that criminals could be identified by biological and physical traits, positing that criminality was inherited and manifested

through "atavistic" features—traits resembling earlier stages of human evolution [5]. Enrico Ferri, a student and collaborator of Lombroso, expanded on these ideas by incorporating sociological factors, such as poverty and education, advocating for a multifaceted understanding of crime [6]. Raffaele Garofalo, another prominent theorist, emphasized the concept of "natural crime," arguing that crime violates the fundamental sentiments of altruism and probity present in all societies [7].

Together, these thinkers laid the groundwork for the Italian School, blending biological determinism with emerging sociological insights and establishing criminology as a distinct scientific discipline that challenged traditional legal and moralistic views of crime.

FOUNDERS AND KEY THEORISTS

Cesare Lombroso

Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) is widely regarded as the founder of the Italian School of Criminology and one of the pioneers of modern criminology. Initially trained as a physician and psychiatrist, Lombroso shifted his focus to criminal anthropology, seeking to understand crime through a biological lens [10]. His seminal work, *L'uomo delinquente* (The Criminal Man) published in 1876, argued that criminality was innate and identifiable through physical characteristics, such as asymmetrical faces, skull shape, and other "atavistic" features that signaled a regression to earlier evolutionary forms [5]. Lombroso's theory of the "born criminal" was groundbreaking but controversial, laying the foundation for the study of biological determinism in criminology. Though many of his conclusions have since been discredited, his emphasis on empirical research and scientific methods influenced future criminological inquiry.

Enrico Ferri

Enrico Ferri (1856–1929) was a student and collaborator of Lombroso who extended the Italian School's framework by incorporating sociological and environmental factors alongside biological explanations. Ferri rejected the idea that biology alone determined criminal behavior, arguing instead that crime resulted from a combination of factors including economic conditions, education, and social environment [6]. He emphasized the importance of social prevention and penal reform, advocating for tailored interventions based on the causes of criminal behavior. Ferri's integration of social factors broadened the scope of criminology and helped establish it as a multidisciplinary field.

Raffaele Garofalo

Raffaele Garofalo (1851–1934) was another key figure in the Italian School, known for his concept of “natural crime.” Garofalo argued that crime violated universal moral sentiments, such as altruism and probity, which he considered essential for societal cohesion [7]. Unlike Lombroso, who focused on the biological traits of criminals, Garofalo emphasized the moral and social dimensions of crime, advocating for a legal system that reflected natural laws. His work contributed to the development of the modern understanding of criminology as a balance between legal principles and social morality.

Other Notable Contributors

In addition to these primary founders, several other scholars contributed to the Italian School’s development. Giuseppe Ferri, Enrico’s brother, worked on refining criminological statistics, while Paolo Orano critiqued and expanded on Lombroso’s theories by incorporating psychological perspectives [11]. Their combined efforts helped diversify the school’s approaches and solidify its influence in both Italian and international criminology.

CORE THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

Biological Determinism and the “Born Criminal” Theory

At the heart of the Italian School’s theoretical framework lies biological determinism, which posits that criminal behavior is largely inherited and biologically predetermined. Cesare Lombroso’s theory of the “born criminal” asserts that certain individuals possess innate biological traits that predispose them to criminality [5]. According to Lombroso, these individuals exhibit physical anomalies, such as asymmetrical facial features, abnormal skull shapes, and other signs of atavism, or evolutionary throwbacks, which distinguish them from law-abiding citizens. This theory challenged earlier classical notions of crime as purely a rational choice and introduced the idea that biology plays a fundamental role in shaping criminal tendencies.

Criminal Anthropology and Typologies

Building on his biological determinism, Lombroso developed criminal anthropology, which classified criminals into distinct typologies based on physical and psychological characteristics [10]. These typologies included the born criminal, the insane criminal, and the occasional criminal, each representing different causes and manifestations of criminal behavior. Lombroso’s typologies sought to provide a scientific basis for understanding and predicting criminality, emphasizing the importance of empirical observation and measurement.

The Concept of “Atavism”

Central to Lombroso’s theory was the concept of “atavism,” which refers to the idea that criminals are evolutionary throwbacks who display primitive traits lost in modern humans [5]. Atavistic features were believed to signal a biological regression, indicating a lack of moral development and socialization. This concept was used to explain why certain individuals might inherently fail to conform to societal norms and laws.

Sociological Elements Introduced by Ferri and Garofalo

While Lombroso focused primarily on biological explanations, Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo introduced important sociological dimensions to the Italian School’s theories. Ferri argued that crime results from a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors, including poverty, education, and environmental conditions [6]. He advocated for social prevention measures targeting the root causes of crime rather than solely punishing offenders. Similarly, Garofalo emphasized the moral sentiments shared by society, defining crime as acts that offend these universal feelings of altruism and probity [7]. Their contributions broadened the understanding of crime beyond biological determinism, integrating social context as a key factor.

Relationship Between Crime, Nature, and Social Factors

The Italian School thus proposed a nuanced relationship between crime, nature, and social environment. While biological traits were seen as important, they were not deterministic in isolation. Ferri’s concept of the “social defense” highlighted the need to protect society by addressing social conditions conducive to crime, reflecting an early recognition of the interaction between individual predispositions and external influences [6]. This multifaceted perspective laid the groundwork for later criminological theories that balance individual and societal factors in explaining criminal behavior.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACHES

Anthropometric Measurements and Scientific Methods

The Italian School of Criminology pioneered the use of anthropometric measurements as a scientific approach to studying crime. Cesare Lombroso and his followers systematically collected physical data from criminals, including measurements of the skull, facial features, body proportions, and other physiological characteristics [5]. This empirical method aimed to identify specific biological markers associated with criminality, grounding criminology

in observable, measurable data. The use of early forensic techniques, such as phrenology and physiognomy, was integral to their research, reflecting the broader 19th-century scientific trend of categorizing human traits to explain behavior.

Strengths and Limitations of These Methodological Approaches

The Italian School's emphasis on scientific observation represented a significant advancement from prior speculative or purely philosophical approaches to crime. By applying empirical methods, the school laid the foundation for criminology as a science, encouraging systematic data collection and analysis [10]. However, their methodologies also had notable limitations. Anthropometric techniques often lacked standardization, and many of the biological correlations drawn were anecdotal or based on biased samples predominantly from prison populations [12]. Moreover, the deterministic focus on biology neglected the complex social and psychological dimensions of criminal behavior, leading to reductionist conclusions. Ethical concerns have also been raised regarding the stigmatization and potential discrimination fostered by associating physical traits with criminality.

Influence on Later Criminological Research Methods

Despite its flaws, the Italian School's methodological innovations had a lasting impact on criminology and forensic science. Their use of measurement and classification influenced the development of later research methods, including modern forensic anthropology and criminal profiling [13]. The insistence on empirical data collection helped steer criminology towards multidisciplinary approaches, combining biology, sociology, and psychology. Furthermore, critiques of their methodology prompted more rigorous standards in research design and ethical considerations in studying criminal behavior.

IMPACT ON CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Influence on Penal Policy and Law Enforcement

The Italian School of Criminology profoundly influenced penal policy and law enforcement practices both in Italy and internationally. Lombroso's biological determinism and typologies contributed to the development of individualized sentencing and the concept of tailored rehabilitation, shifting away from purely retributive justice [6]. Italy, in particular, integrated these ideas into its criminal codes and penal reforms during the early 20th century, emphasizing prevention and treatment over mere punishment [7]. The

school's focus on scientific methods also inspired law enforcement agencies worldwide to incorporate forensic techniques and criminal profiling into their investigations.

Critiques and Controversies

Despite its pioneering contributions, the Italian School attracted substantial criticism. Its biological determinism was criticized for oversimplifying the complex causes of crime and promoting a reductionist view that neglected social and psychological factors [14]. Ethical concerns were raised about the stigmatization and discrimination of individuals based on physical traits, with some accusing the school of providing pseudo-scientific justification for racial and social prejudice [15]. Additionally, many of Lombroso's empirical findings were later challenged due to methodological flaws, such as biased sampling and lack of rigorous controls.

Legacy and Modern Relevance

The legacy of the Italian School remains mixed but significant. While many of its original theories have been discredited or revised, its pioneering use of scientific inquiry laid important groundwork for modern criminology and forensic science [10]. Contemporary criminologists recognize the school's role in moving the study of crime toward empirical research and interdisciplinary perspectives. Moreover, its focus on prevention and social factors anticipates modern approaches that balance biological, psychological, and sociological explanations.

Comparison with Other Criminological Theories

Compared to the Classical School, which emphasizes free will and rational choice, the Italian School introduced determinism and empirical study of offenders [2]. Unlike the Chicago School, which centers on environmental and social disorganization theories [3], the Italian School prioritized biological and anthropological explanations, though Ferri and Garofalo integrated sociological factors. The Italian School shares positivist roots with other early scientific criminologies but remains distinctive for its combination of biological determinism and the concept of natural crime.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND CRITICISM

Modern Scientific Perspectives on Lombroso's Theories

Cesare Lombroso's theories, especially the concept of the "born criminal" and biological determinism, have been subjected to extensive scrutiny and critique in light of modern scientific advancements. Contemporary research in genetics, neurobiology, and psychology emphasizes the complexity of criminal behavior, which cannot be reduced

to simple inherited physical traits or anatomical anomalies [16]. Modern studies show that criminality arises from multifaceted interactions among genetic predispositions, brain function, personality traits, and environmental influences, such as family background, socioeconomic status, and education [17]. While Lombroso's focus on atavism is now viewed as scientifically untenable, his work nonetheless marked an important turning point by challenging purely philosophical or moral explanations of crime and advocating for empirical study [10].

The Italian School's biological determinism contrasts sharply with current biopsychosocial models that integrate biological, psychological, and sociological factors. The overemphasis on physical characteristics as causal has been replaced with a recognition of the dynamic interplay between nature and nurture. For example, advances in neuroimaging and behavioral genetics have identified potential biological markers related to impulsivity or aggression, but these do not determine criminality on their own [16]. This nuanced understanding rejects Lombroso's simplistic typologies while appreciating the value of interdisciplinary research introduced by the Italian School.

Ethical and Scientific Criticisms

From an ethical standpoint, Lombroso's and the Italian School's theories have generated significant controversy. Their association of criminality with physical features inadvertently reinforced harmful stereotypes, contributing to stigmatization and social discrimination, especially toward marginalized groups [15]. In some cases, their ideas were co-opted to justify eugenic policies and racial profiling, which have had profoundly negative social consequences [14]. The deterministic implications of their work risked dehumanizing individuals by suggesting that their behavior was biologically fixed and immutable, raising important questions about free will, responsibility, and justice.

Scientifically, the Italian School's methodology has been widely criticized for lacking rigor. The anthropometric measurements, while innovative, suffered from non-representative samples, often focusing on incarcerated populations without adequate control groups [12]. This sampling bias skewed results and led to overgeneralizations about criminal types. Moreover, the absence of standardized measurement protocols and failure to account for social and environmental variables compromised the reliability of their findings. Critics also highlight that their approach often conflated correlation with causation, resulting in pseudo-scientific conclusions that do not withstand modern

empirical scrutiny.

These ethical and scientific failings serve as cautionary tales in contemporary criminology, emphasizing the need for methodological rigor, representative sampling, and careful consideration of social justice in research design. Modern criminological ethics strongly reject any form of determinism that could lead to discrimination or marginalization based on inherent traits.

Influence on Modern Criminology and Forensic Science

Despite the significant criticisms, the Italian School's influence on modern criminology and forensic science is undeniable. The school was among the first to promote criminology as a scientific discipline grounded in empirical observation and interdisciplinary analysis [10]. This legacy paved the way for more sophisticated biological and sociological theories that inform contemporary understanding of criminal behavior.

In forensic science, Lombroso's early use of physical measurements and typologies foreshadowed modern forensic anthropology and criminal profiling. While today's methods are far more accurate, technologically advanced, and ethically grounded, the foundational idea that the body can provide clues about identity and behavior remains central [13]. Modern forensic science employs DNA analysis, fingerprinting, and behavioral profiling to aid criminal investigations, all building upon the spirit of scientific inquiry championed by the Italian School.

The Italian School's emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation, particularly through Ferri's and Garofalo's sociological contributions, resonates with current approaches in criminal justice that prioritize social interventions alongside punishment. The recognition that social environment, moral norms, and individual predispositions collectively influence crime informs many policies and treatment programs today [6].

Finally, the Italian School's multidisciplinary approach has inspired ongoing efforts to combine insights from genetics, psychology, sociology, and neuroscience to develop comprehensive models of criminal behavior. This integrative perspective acknowledges the complexity and diversity of factors that contribute to offending, moving beyond the deterministic frameworks of the past [17].

CONCLUSION

The Italian School of Criminology, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, represents a foundational chapter in the development of criminology as a scientific discipline.

This school's key figures—Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Raffaele Garofalo—introduced groundbreaking ideas that linked biology, anthropology, and sociology to the study of criminal behavior. Their core theories, particularly Lombroso's biological determinism and the concept of the "born criminal," challenged earlier classical views centered on free will and rational choice, pushing criminology toward empirical research and interdisciplinary inquiry.

Although many of the Italian School's theories, such as atavism and anthropometric determinism, have been discredited by modern science due to methodological flaws and ethical concerns, their legacy endures. The school's emphasis on scientific methods paved the way for contemporary criminological research, which integrates biological, psychological, and social factors to provide a more nuanced understanding of crime. Furthermore, the Italian School influenced penal policy and forensic science, promoting individualized treatment and advancing investigative techniques.

Future research should build upon this integrative framework by continuing to explore the complex interactions between genetics, environment, and social structures in shaping criminal behavior. Advances in neuroscience and behavioral genetics offer promising avenues for further inquiry, but these must be pursued with ethical rigor to avoid the pitfalls of biological determinism. Additionally, cross-cultural studies can deepen understanding of how social context influences crime and inform more equitable criminal justice policies. Ultimately, the Italian School's contributions underscore the importance of a multidisciplinary and scientifically grounded approach in the ongoing effort to understand and prevent criminal behavior.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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