

The Lombrosian Criminal

POSTED ON MARCH 27, 2018 BY MATTHEW



Cesare Lombroso was an Italian criminologist, considered by many to be the father of criminology. His theory was that criminals could be differentiated from "normal" people due to specific physical features and personality traits. He considered criminals to be less evolved than the common human and believed they shared many features with less evolved animals.

Some physical features include:

- Enormous jaws
- High cheek-bones
- Prominent superciliary arches
- Solitary lines in the palms
- Extreme size of the orbits
- Handle-shaped or sessile ears
- Tattoos
- Scars

Some of the character traits include:

- An insensibility to pain
- An extremely acute sight
- Excessive idleness
- A love of orgies
- An irresistible craving for evil for its own sake

(p. 272)

Popular Eugenics : National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s, edited by Susan Currell, and Christina Cogdell, Ohio University Press, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-jac.orc.scoolaid.net/lib/johnabbott-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3026918>.

The Use of Criminal Imagery

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These stereotypes on criminals were used by many groups in the early 1900s.

One of these were the Anglo natavists who used these images as a way to reinforce their anti-immigrant policies, claiming that allowing these people into the country would “taint the American gene pool.”

They thought that every immigrant group was more prone to committing certain crimes than others.

Some examples of these that the author gives are:

- Sloth and intoxication for the Irish
- Pickpocketing for Jews
- Violence and illicit sexuality for Italians and Slavs

Cartoonists also took inspiration from these images. They would often exaggerate certain physical traits that were believed to be common for all people from a given population or would demonize entire immigrant groups. These “ethnic caricatures” grew increasingly popular as time went on as the general population began to see these cartoons as a truthful representation of ethnic groups in their simplest form. They were reduced to only a few given physical and psychological traits, something that came from a highly constructed and racist ideology (p. 273-275)

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The Cartoons of Earnest A. Hooton

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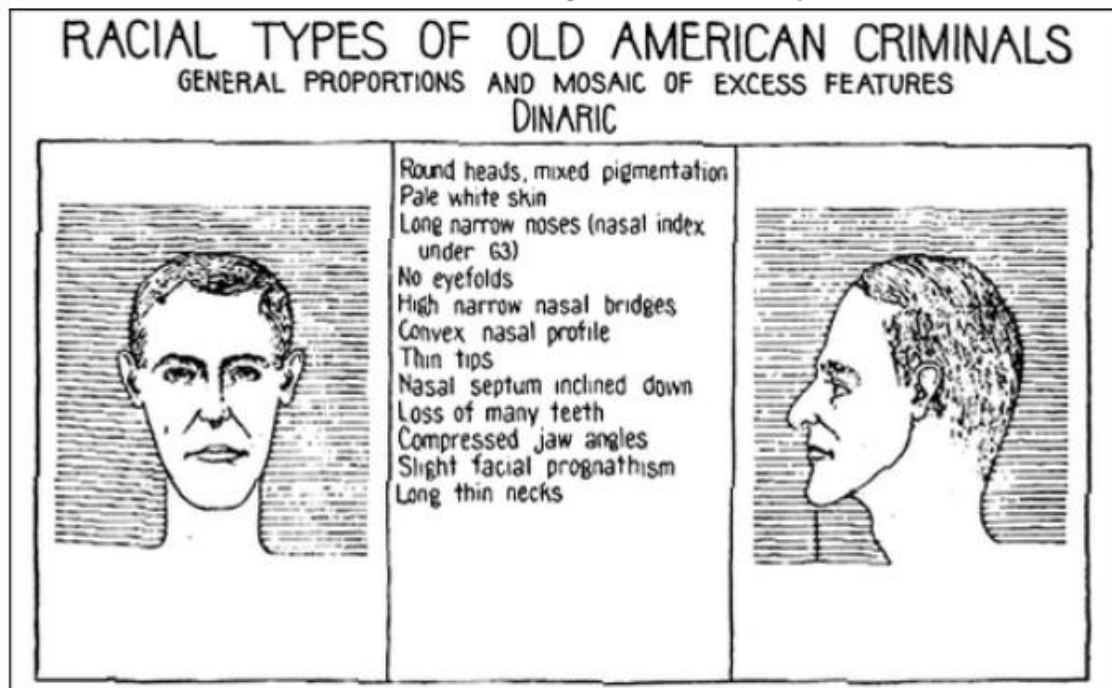
Earnest A. Hooton was a strong believer in eugenics. These beliefs translated themselves into his comics. Even though they were caricatures, many underlying eugenics ideologies could be seen very clearly. His popularity hit a high in the 1930s.

But first in order to get a better idea of who this is, here are some of the things Earnest was in favor of:

- He publicly declared that the educated American man was “selling his biological birthright for a mess of morons” and urged the nation to engage in some “biological housecleaning” or a “biological purge.”
- He called for voluntary participation in a broad-scale campaign of negative eugenics, urging “a sit-down reproductive strike of the busy breeders among the morons, criminals and social ineffectuals of our population
- He decried the way that other medical sciences were actually damaging the collective national health by prolonging the lives of inferior or defective individuals.

(p. 278)

In his book “Crime and the man”, Hooton tried to be more objective in his description of a criminal.



This drawing by Elmer Rising depicting the criminal type was already much more general compared to the Lombrosian criminal model. (p. 279)

However, that was not the only thing that he touched on in the book. He also decided to include “all of the ugliest ethnic stereotypes from the previous fifty years.” To do so, he included his own highly racist charts.

Here is an example.



This image describes the rate of sexual offenses by different ethnic groups. (p. 280)

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Chester Gould's Cartoons

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Chester Gould was the author and artist of the 1930s cartoon Dick Tracy. The comic involved a vigilante, Dick Tracy, punishing criminals for their wrongdoings. While not the original intentions of the author, these comics had an underlying eugenics ideology. Chester never openly affiliated himself with eugenics however.

Gould was very interested in criminology. He eventually went on to take a course on criminology at Northwestern University. During the first few years of the comic, Chester worked closely with the police. At that time, the police force was slow to accept societal explanations of crime for a few reasons:

- They made the detection of criminal types ambiguous and complex
- They were influenced by procedural manuals, by the institutional memory of their departments, and by their own engagement with popular crime fiction which tended to reinforce physiognomic representations of criminality
- Eugenic conceptions of the deviant nature of southern and eastern Europeans provided a ready-made storehouse of assumptions, stereotypes, and remedies for dealing with these criminals.

(p. 291)

Given that, at the time, criminality was highly influenced by eugenics, it is no surprise to see these same stereotypes present in Chester's earlier work. These factors are what many believe are what inspired him in the creation of his story lines and characters for the most part.

Here are some examples of criminals that could be found in Gould's comics:



These characters often had physical features typically found in the eugenic idea of criminals, such as scars.

Dick Tracy and his love interest Tess, however, were pictured completely differently. They were basically the “ideal white body”, something also prevalent at the Chicago World Fair and Tracy is constantly praised within the comic as being an American hero. (p. 293)

Chester was also known to compare criminals to pests such as rats. He was for the “quick extermination” of criminals. This ideology translated itself directly into the comics. It is not uncommon for the criminals in his comics to face a quick death, often by being shot. These deaths were accompanied by, at the time, detailed imagery of their death. Here is an example of these images:



(p. 299)

Finally, his depiction of criminals changed in the 1940s. They became more complex and Chester relied more on psychological and societal factors such as childhood dysfunction as a replacement for his use of criminal eugenic features. This led to people becoming very attached to these villains as their backstories were more relatable by the general public. (p. 302)

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Fairs and Eugenics

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Starting from the 1910s, fairs, world expositions and museums were arguably the most important ways in which eugenics theories spread. Some examples of things you could find in these museum exhibits were genetic charts or plaster casts of fetuses from different races. (p. 281-282)

At fairs, “fitter families” were a very common thing. They involved judging multiple families on their “genetic excellence”. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, these fairs also featured freak shows.

One particular fair in which eugenic imagery was quite prevalent was the Chicago 1933 World Fair. Originally, the eugenics movement were not able to acquire a booth at the fair because some fair organizers considered the movement to be racist. In the end, they managed to not only get a booth but also be located right next to the genetics exhibit. The promotional art that was used for this fair heavily featured classical Greek-styled bodies. These displays aren't inherently racist if alone. However, because of the context in which they were used, one can fairly easily see a link between this “idealized white body” presented by the ancient Greeks and its appropriation by modern-day social Darwinists and eugenicists. (p. 282-283)

“Moving into the first decades of the twentieth century, eugenicists, like their social Darwinist forebears, appropriated classical ideals and imagery for their own purposes.” (p. 284)

Here is an example of this promotional art:



This poster is an obvious promoter of eugenics. Claiming to have made a century of progress, the poster makes suggests that native American are inferior to the "ideal white body".

The Chicago World Fair also had an attraction by the name of the “Thrill House of Crime”. Here is a photograph said attraction:



The attraction itself wasn't necessarily bad. The problem lies in the way which the attraction was presented to the general public. The main thing that the fair-goer see is the quite grotesque caricatures of supposed "criminal types" and what they look like.



This set of drawings could be seen as a public warning to be weary about these criminal types, which could also be considered as negative eugenics.

(p. 268-289)

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