

# Degeneration theory

“Degeneration” redirects here. For other uses, see [Degeneration \(disambiguation\)](#).

This article is about the social-evolutionary meaning of degeneration. For other uses, see [Degeneracy \(disambiguation\)](#).

**Degeneration theory** was a widely influential concept in the borderlands of social and biological science in the 19th century.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> Degenerationists feared that civilization might be in decline and that the causes of decline lay in biological change. These ideas derived from pre-scientific concepts of [heredity](#) with Lamarckian emphasis on biological development through purpose and habit. Degeneration concepts were often associated with authoritarian political attitudes, including nationalism, militarism, and racial science. The theory originated in racial concepts of ethnicity, as recorded in the writings of such medical scientists as Johann Blumenbach and Robert Knox. From the 1850s, it became influential in psychiatry through the writings of [Bénédict Morel](#), and in criminology with [Cesare Lombroso](#). By the 1890s, in the work of [Max Nordau](#) and others, degeneration became a more general concept in social commentary.

The meaning of *degeneration* was poorly defined, but can be described as an organism’s change from a more complex to a simpler, less differentiated form, and in this respect it is associated with 19th century conceptions of biological devolution. Although rejected by [Charles Darwin](#), the theory’s application to the social sciences was supported by some evolutionary biologists, most notably [Ernst Haeckel](#) and [Ray Lankester](#). As the 19th century wore on, the increasing emphasis on degeneration reflected an anxious pessimism about the resilience of Western civilization and its possible decline and collapse.

## 1 History

The concept of degeneration arose during the European enlightenment and the industrial revolution. Several influences were involved.

The first related to the extreme demographic upheavals, including urbanization, in the early years of the 19th century. The disturbing experience of social change and urban crowds, largely unknown in the agrarian 18th century, was recorded in the novels of [Charles Dickens](#) and by early writers on social psychology, including [Gustav Le Bon](#) and [Georg Simmel](#). Victorian social sci-

entists including [Edwin Chadwick](#), [Henry Mayhew](#) and [Charles Booth](#) voiced realistic concerns about the decline of public health in the urban life of the British working class. The everyday experience of contact with the working classes gave rise to a kind of horrified fascination with their perceived reproductive energies, which appeared to threaten middle-class culture.

Secondly, the proto-evolutionary biology and transformationist speculations of [Jean-Baptiste Lamarck](#) and other natural historians—taken together with the [Baron von Cuvier](#)'s theory of extinctions—played an important role in establishing a sense of the unsettled nature of human society. The polygenic theories of racial origins, influenced by [Robert Knox](#) in his *The Races of Men* (1850), were firmly rejected by [Charles Darwin](#) who, along with [James Cowles Prichard](#), generally supported a single African origin for the entire human species.

Thirdly, the development of world trade and colonialism, the early European experience of globalization, resulted in an awareness of the unusual fragility of western civilization.

Finally, the growth of historical scholarship in the 18th century, exemplified by [Edward Gibbon](#)'s *The History of the Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* (1776–1789), excited a renewed interest in the narratives of historical decline.

Degeneration theory achieved a detailed articulation in [Bénédict Morel](#)'s *Treatise on Degeneration* (1857), a complicated work of clinical commentary from an asylum in Normandy which, in the popular imagination at least, coalesced with [de Gobineau](#)'s *Essay on The Inequality of the Human Races* (1855). [Arthur de Gobineau](#) was the failed author of historical romances whose wife was widely rumored to be a [Créole](#) from [Martinique](#), but who nevertheless argued that the course of history and of civilization was largely determined by ethnic factors, and that interracial marriage ("miscegenation") resulted in social chaos. His work was well received in German translation—not least by the composer [Richard Wagner](#)—and the leading German psychiatrist [Emil Kraepelin](#) later wrote extensively on the dangers posed by degeneration to the German people. Morel’s concept of “hereditary degeneracy” was taken up and advocated by his friend [Philippe Buchez](#), and through his political influence became an official doctrine in French legal medicine. Quite different historical factors inspired the Italian [Cesare Lombroso](#) in his work on criminal anthropology and the notion of “atavistic retrogression”, proba-

bly shaped by his experiences as a young army doctor in Calabria during the *risorgimento*.

In England, degeneration received a scientific formulation from Ray Lankester whose detailed discussions of the biology of parasitism were hugely influential; and the poor physical condition of many recruits for the South African war (1899-1902) caused alarm in government circles. The psychiatrist Henry Maudsley initially argued that degenerate family lines would die out of their own accord, but later became more pessimistic about the effects of degeneration on the British population.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the *fin-de-siècle* period, Max Nordau scored an unexpected success with his bestselling *Degeneration* (1892). Sigmund Freud met Nordau while studying in Paris and was notably unimpressed by him and hostile to the degeneration concept. Degeneration fell from popular and fashionable favor around the time of the First World War, although many of its preoccupations persisted in the writings of the eugenicists and social Darwinists. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1919) captured something of the degenerationist spirit in the aftermath of the war.

## 2 Selected quotes

“The word *degenerate*, when applied to a people, means that the people no longer has the same intrinsic value as it had before, because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of that blood....in fact, the man of a decadent time, the *degenerate man* properly so-called, is a different being from the racial point of view, from the heroes of the great ages....I think I am right in concluding that the human race in all its branches has a secret repulsion from the crossing of blood....” Arthur de Gobineau (1855) *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*.

“When under any kind of noxious influence an organism becomes debilitated, its successors will not resemble the healthy, normal type of the species, with capacities for development, but will form a new sub-species, which, like all others, possesses the capacity of transmitting to its offspring, in a continuously increasing degree, its peculiarities, these being morbid deviations from the normal form - gaps in development, malformations and infirmities...” Bénédic Morel (1857) *Treatise on Degeneration*.

“...Any new set of conditions which render

a species' food and safety very easily obtained, seems to lead to degeneration....” Ray Lankester (1880) *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*.

“The ego-maniac neither knows nor grasps the phenomenon of the universe. The effect of this is a want of interest and sympathy, and an incapacity to adapt himself....the *absence of feeling*, and the incapacity of adaptation, frequently accompanied by perversion of the instincts and impulses, make the ego-maniac an anti-social being. He is a moral lunatic, a criminal, a pessimist, an anarchist....” Max Nordau (1892) *Degeneration*, page 266.

“It has become the fashion to regard any symptom which is not obviously due to trauma or infection as a sign of degeneracy....this being so, it may well be asked whether an attribution of “degeneracy” is of any value, or adds anything to our knowledge...” Sigmund Freud (1905) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

## 3 Development of the Degeneration Concept

The earliest uses of the term *degeneration* are to be found in the writings of Blumenbach and Buffon at the end of the 18th century, when these early writers on natural history considered scientific approaches to the human species. With the taxonomic mind-set of natural historians, they drew attention to the different ethnic groupings of mankind, and raised general enquiries about their relationships, with the idea that racial groupings could be explained by environmental effects on a common ancestral stock. This pre-Darwinian belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics does not accord with modern genetics. An alternative view of the multiple origins of different racial groups, called “polygenic theories”, was also rejected by Charles Darwin, who favored explanations in terms of differential geographic migrations from a single, probably African, population.

The theory of degeneration found its first detailed articulation in the writings of Bénédic Morel (1809–1873), especially in his *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine* (1857). This book was published two years before Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Morel was a highly regarded psychiatrist, the very successful superintendent of the Rouen asylum for almost twenty years and a fastidious recorder of the family histories of his variously disabled patients. Through the details of these family histories, Morel discerned an

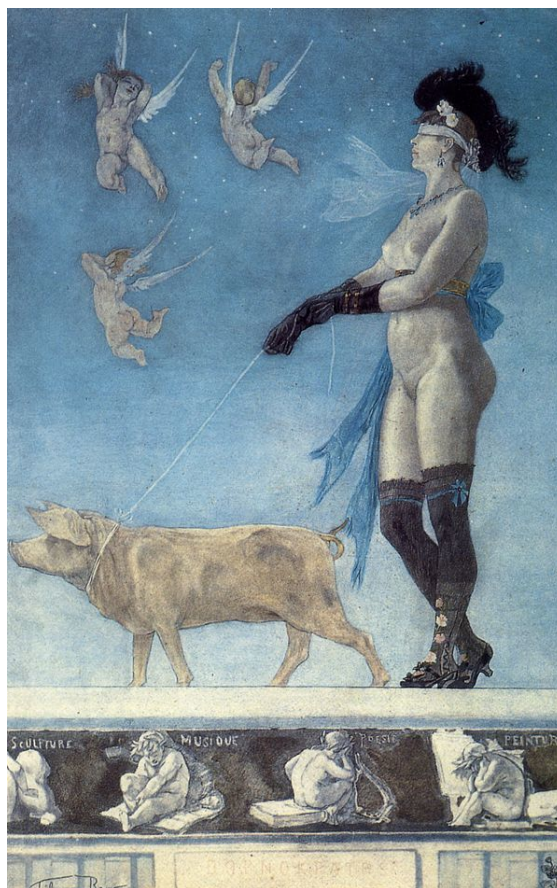
hereditary line of defective parents infected by pollutants and stimulants; a second generation liable to epilepsy, neurasthenia and hysteria; a third generation prone to insanity; and a final generation doomed to congenital idiocy and sterility. In 1857, Morel proposed a theory of *hereditary degeneracy*, bringing together environmental and hereditary elements in an uncompromisingly pre-Darwinian mix. Morel's contribution was further developed by Valentin Magnan (1835–1916), who stressed the role of alcohol—particularly *absinthe*—in the generation of psychiatric disorders.

Morel's work was greatly extended by the Italian medical scientist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) whose work was defended and translated into English by Havelock Ellis. In his *L'uomo delinquente* (1876), the truths of which were revealed to him in a moment of inspiration, Lombroso outlined a comprehensive natural history of the socially deviant person and detailed the *stigmata* of the person who was born to be *criminally insane*. These included a low, sloping forehead, hard and shifty eyes, large, handle-shaped ears, a flattened or upturned nose, a forward projection of the jaw, irregular teeth, prehensile toes and feet, long simian arms and a scanty beard and baldness. Lombroso also listed the features of the degenerate mentality, supposedly released by the disinhibition of the primitive neurological centres. These included apathy, the loss of moral sense, a tendency to impulsiveness or self-doubt, an unevenness of mental qualities such as unusual memory or aesthetic abilities, a tendency to mutism or to verbosity, excessive originality, preoccupation with the self, mystical interpretations placed on simple facts or perceptions, the abuse of symbolic meanings and the magical use of words, or “mantras”. Lombroso, with his concept of *atavistic retrogression*, suggested an evolutionary reversion, complementing *hereditary degeneracy*, and his work in the medical examination of criminals in Turin resulted in his theory of *criminal anthropology*—a constitutional notion of abnormal personality that was not supported by his own scientific investigations.

In 1892, Max Nordau, an expatriate Hungarian living in Paris, published his extraordinary bestseller *Degeneration*, which greatly extended the concepts of Benedict Morel and Cesare Lombroso (to whom he dedicated the book) to the entire civilization of western Europe, and transformed the medical connotations of degeneration to a generalized *cultural criticism*. Adopting some of Charcot's neurological jargon, Nordau identified a number of weaknesses in contemporary western culture which he characterized in terms of *ego-mania*, i.e., narcissism and hysteria. He also emphasized the importance of *fatigue*, *enervation* and *ennui*. Degeneration theory fell from favour around the time of the First World War because of the improved understanding of the mechanisms of genetics as well as the increasing vogue for psychoanalytic thinking. However, some of its preoccupations lived on in the world of *eugenics* and *social Darwinism*. It is notable that the Nazi attack on western liberal society was

largely couched in terms of *degenerate art* with its associations of racial *miscegenation*, and included almost all modernist cultural experiment.

## 4 Degenerationist devices



*Pornocrates* by Félicien Rops. Etching and aquatint

Towards the close of the 19th century, in the fin-de-siècle period, something of an obsession with decline, descent and degeneration invaded the European creative imagination, partly fueled by a widespread miscomprehension of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Among the main examples are the symbolist literary work of Charles Baudelaire, the Rougon-Macquart novels of Emile Zola, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*—published in the same year (1886) as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*—and, subsequently, Oscar Wilde's only novel (containing his aesthetic manifesto) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1890/1894), with its emphasis on the horrors of psychosurgery, is frequently cited as an essay on degeneration. A scientific twist was added by H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) in which Wells prophesied the splitting of the human race into differently degenerate forms, and again, a little later, in his *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

In her influential study *The Gothic Body*,<sup>[5]</sup> Kelly Hurley draws attention to the literary device of the *abhuman*, and to lesser-known authors in the field, including Richard Marsh (1857-1915), author of *The Beetle* (1897), and William Hope Hodgson (1877–1918), author of *The Boats of the Glen Carrig*, *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*. In 1897, Bram Stoker published *Dracula*, an enormously influential Gothic novel featuring the parasitic vampire Count Dracula. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories included a host of degenerationist tropes, perhaps best illustrated in *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*.

## 5 See also

- Devolution
- Dysgenics
- Societal collapse
- Ultimate fate of mankind

## 6 References

- [1] Herman, Arthur (1997) *The Idea of Decline in Western History* New York, London etc.: The Free Press
- [2] Pick, Daniel (1989) *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848 - c.1918* Cambridge, London etc.: Cambridge University Press
- [3] Dowbiggin, Ian (1985) Degeneration and hereditarianism in French mental medicine 1840-1890: psychiatric theory as ideological adaptation (in) *The Anatomy of Madness, Vol. One: People and Ideas* edited by Bynum William F., Porter, Roy and Shepherd, Michael, London and New York: Tavistock Publications, pp 188-232
- [4] Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in the United States and Canada, 1880-1940 Pg 81
- [5] Hurley, Kelly (1996) *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin-de-siècle* Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press

## 7 External links

- Lawrence, Christopher (2010). “Degeneration”. *The Lancet*. Retrieved 4 August 2014.
- Degeneration, Nordau and Nietzsche

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