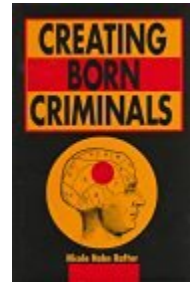


H-Net Reviews

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Nicole Hahn Rafter. *Creating Born Criminals*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xi + 284 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02237-1.

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An extensive history of the genesis of what Nicole H. Rafter calls “eugenic criminology,” this study tracks the institutionalization in the later nineteenth century of a set of—not necessarily always compatible—biologistic conceptions of the “criminal type.” Rafter focuses her discussion on the vicissitudes of those who were institutionally identified as “feeble-minded,” an aggregation of persons identified in the Progressive period as “defective delinquents.”

Rafter begins by moving through a period prior to the impact of eugenicist theories, a period within which institution administrations were driven by a pastiche of derivationist Lombrosian criminological models and both popular and expert fears of degeneration. Rafter discusses the early care for the feeble-minded as part of a “the new humanitarian cause of idiot education” that was largely anti-custodial (p. 180). This “humanitarian” phase was exemplified by the work of Hervey Backus Wilbur at his idiot asylum established in Syracuse in 1854. But humanitarianism was eclipsed by a progressively more disciplinary set of institutions concerned less with education than with permanent seclusion of the nation’s “deteriorated” or potentially contaminating stock. While Wilbur had “conceived of intelligence as elastic and capable of expansion” (p. 23), the later covertly or overtly eugenicist heads of custodial institutions tended toward a much more deterministic view, both hereditarian and unforgiving of the chances of individual reform.

Criminal anthropology and “scientific” penology gave birth to the concept of the “born criminal.” Rafter introduces the reader to representative heads of the new eugenic criminology. There was Josephine Shaw Lowell—with her explicitly gendered concerns about working class women’s sexual “profligacy” and its neg-

ative hereditary impact. Zebulon Brockway—the notorious yet greatly respected Head of the New York State Reformatory—claimed to be able to differentiate between the regenerate and the unregenerate among his prison population. In doing so systematically, he created, with the latter category, an enduring identification of an institutional sub-class—whether “moral imbeciles,” “defective delinquents,” or “psychopathic” personalities. Administrators like Brockway and Lowell established a working institutionalization of the categories of depravity and idiocy they believed they had found. When performed within the institutional setting, standard measurement systems like intelligence testing seemed to shore up the already seductive idea that recidivists and “incurables” were a defective class apart.

The bequest of eugenic criminology, even after the demise of its popularity in the 1920s, has been enormous. Although Rafter’s dense and thorough history concentrates on the period just prior to— as well as during and just after—the heyday of eugenic criminology (together being, say, 1850-1925), she provides a good deal of thought-provoking analysis toward continuing assessment of the current resurgence of biologistic theories of criminality—whether wrapped up in the language of trauma (generations of abusers), genetics (predisposing factors) or brain chemistry (my Amygdala did it!). Acknowledging that other representatives of the scholarship have done the work of tracing the persistence of eugenics, Rafter turns her attention in this work to documenting a little-studied historical development, that of the concept of the “feble-minded criminal”. *Creating Born Criminals* does this job effectively, although it does tend often toward the dry detail of bureaucratic or institutional history.

This is a worthy contribution to critical criminological scholarship, as well as to the history of the professionalization of psychology, psychiatry, penology, and, of course, criminology itself. It should certainly (ideally?) be read as a cautionary text by politicians, policymakers, and penologists alike.

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