

CORPUS LOQUENS: THE SPEAKING BODY AND ABELE DE BLASIO (1858-1945)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the work of Abele De Blasio (1858-1945), a polyhedral and eclectic figure of physician who cultivated a wide range of interests, from cultural anthropology and ethnology to botanics, chemistry and dentistry. In particular, De Blasio is recognized as one of the founders and one of the most important representatives of Italian criminal anthropology, thanks to his thorough knowledge and historical culture. He challenged the strict bio-medical paradigm of the period and combined a scientific and rigorous approach with a humanistic Weltanschauung, conjugating disciplines, such as archeology and psychopathology with biology, in such a way to give birth to a unique, innovative interdisciplinary approach. He applied this method, for example, when investigating deviant behaviors or when analyzing populations' customs and habits. He also studied trepanation and he considered analyzing the skull as the best way to investigate the different aspects of human life.

Keywords: Abele De Blasio, criminal anthropology, cultural anthropology, social pathology

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Biographical notes

Abele De Blasio represents a polyhedral and eclectic medical figure, with an abundant scientific production with more than 200 works (including articles, essays, chapters, books), and with interests ranging from ethnography, sociology and anthropology to botanics, chemistry, dentistry and even linguistics. This is reflected by his background and training, not only confined to a strict bio-medical paradigm but also including a humanistic formation and Weltanschauung, in the broad meaning of this term. He was born on the 5th September 1858 in Guardia Sanframondi, a small village near Benevento, and he died on the 5th April 1945. He attended the higher school at Cerreto Sannita

(another small village near Benevento) and graduated in Medicine at the University of Naples; then he obtained a degree in Pharmaceutical Chemistry and finally he achieved the title of Doctor of Natural Sciences. Initially as assistant of Professor Giustiniano Nicolucci, he contributed to the intellectual growth of the first chair of anthropology of the University of Naples, and contributed as well to the Anthropological Museum, established in 1881. In the meantime, he worked at the Botanical Laboratory and published an important work in 1889. In 1891 he released a handbook of qualitative analytical chemistry (Prontuario di Chimica Analitica Qualitativa) for medical doctors. From 1891 he began to focus more on cultural anthropology and archeology, publishing seminal works such

as “I crani dei Sanniti” (The skulls of Sannites, 1891), “Intorno ai crani di Nubiani antichi” (About the skulls of Old Nubians, 1893, published in the “Bollettino della Società tra Naturalisti”), “Società Umane nell’Egitto Antico” (Human Societies in Old Egypt, 1894) “I crani dei Lucani” (The skulls of Lucanians, 1895, published in the “Rivista Italiana di Scienze Naturali” of Siena). He coordinated an archeological campaign at Grotta delle Felci, Capri and released the report of this expedition in 1893 in the “Bollettino di paletnologia” (Bulletin of paleo-ethnology).

He taught also ethnography for two years at the “Istituto Orientale di Napoli”, working on history and proto-history and elaborating a theory which linked psycho-social characteristics of population to skull morphology and anthropometric features. This academic interest had practical implications when, in 1892, in Naples, he set up an office for scientific anthropometric studies to help police investigations, namely the “Ufficio Antropometrico della Regia Questura di Napoli”, with the permission of the Ministry of Interior, Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928). For his profound knowledge of ethnography, he was called by the anthropologist Lamberto Loria (1855-1913) to direct the “Museo di Etnografia Italiana” (Museum of Italian Ethnography), founded in 1906 in Florence.

De Blasio wrote different books about local history and geography, investigating rituals such as the “riti settennali di penitenza in onore dell’Assunta” (septennial penance rituals devoted to Holy Mary). He published also memories dedicated to the painter Michele Foschini and to the mathematicians Filippo Maria and Sebastiano Guidi. Later, De Blasio also taught Pedagogical anthropology and Orthophreny at the University of Naples. For his work, De Blasio is recognized as one of the most important representatives of the Sannite Medical School (*Scuola medica sannita*)⁽¹⁾ and one of the founders of the Italian school of criminal anthropology, together with his supervisor Giustiniano Nicolucci (1819-1904), Angelo Zuccarelli, Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), Luigi Molinaro del Chiaro (1850-1942), Vincenzo Autiero, Antonio Cinque, Michele Gerardo Pasquarelli (1868-1924), Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960), Raffaele Garofalo (1851-1934), Enrico Ferri (1856-1929), Emanuele Mirabella, and Marco Ezechia “Cesare” Lombroso (1836-1909). Social anthropology and cultural anthropology are the first main subdivisions of Anthropology.

The basis of this relatively recent Science is considered the book *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (*De generis humani varietate nativa*, 1775) by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840). This work held the first germ of racial morphology, based on craniological research. The enunciation of the theory of natural selection by Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882) opened up new prospects for Anthropology. The birth of the French Society of Anthropology (*Société d’Anthropologie*) in Paris in 1859, on the initiative of Paul Pierre Broca (1824-1880), represented an event of paramount importance, after the development of Paleoanthropology in 1856, when Johann Carl Fuhlrott (1803-1877) discovered the skull of “Neanderthal man”⁽²⁾.

The Italian School of Criminal Anthropology was permeated by the ideas of biological positivism, which dated back to German school of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828; the founder of the “phrenology”) and would have been adopted by the English school of Charles Buckman Goring (1870-1919) and by the French school of Alexandre Lacassagne (1843-1924) and Edmond Locard (1877-1966; the father of Interpol and the “exchange principle”). This approach differs from the classicist approach towards the study of crimes (represented by authors such as Cesare Beccaria, Pellegrino Rossi, Carmignani, Francisco Carrara, Brusa, Tolomei, Pessina, Mittermayer, Berner, Halschner, Birkmeyer, and Ortolan y Tyssot, among others), which tends to interpret deviant behaviors from a religious and spiritual perspective.

Deeply influenced by the darwinism, read from a sociological standpoint, this approach claimed to have moved the study of crimes from an abstract and philosophical paradigm to a more concrete and scientific one. In this background Lombroso founded the “Positivist School of Criminal Law” (“*Scuola positiva di diritto penale*”), representing the main defender of evolutionist criminology. According to Dr. Lombroso, man who committed a crime did express not a criminal will consciously and freely, but his criminal nature or bent, bound to his somatic and psychic structure. It followed that society could not punish criminals because of their wickedness or responsibility, but only because of their “social dangerousness”. Criminal Anthropology was born⁽³⁾.

De Blasio was indeed able to analyze, from the anthropological point of view, subjects who had been defined socially deviant, such as camorristas,

offenders, homosexuals and witches. According to him, these behaviors were all genetically transmissible or caused by a disease. Observing some ancient skulls deformed and trepanned, he studied some ritual and cultural aspects that had characterized the past, since, by investigating skulls malformations, he had uncovered the possible correlation between physical abnormalities and mental illness. Then he also tried to demonstrate that criminals had a specific physical aspect. Studying the Egyptian skulls preserved in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Naples, he argued that a number of macroscopic characters were able to discriminate about races.

For examples, he linked some craniometric features to the presence of foreign populations in a specific area. De Blasio came to formulate this hypothesis by relating actual results with anthropological historical sources, such as, in this case, the hieroglyphic texts and the Greek and Roman historiography. Then, he analyzed hundred eighty and seven skulls belonging to all ages. His conclusion was that the pure element was more present in ancient times than in modern ones.

In fact, Ethiopians and Arabs skulls were found in these regions, but their features not “contaminated” the native ones. In addition, Greek or Roman skulls have not been emerged there, perhaps because these invaders used funeral rites that were different from those practiced by Egyptians. Using the same method, De Blasio also investigated the skull morphology of the Sanniti, studying ninety-five skulls coming from different archaeological sites of Sannio region. Historical sources showed that the Sannites have been in contact with many other peoples. In particular, despite the Lombard presence in this region, the author retraced only few German types in the skull shapes that he studied, such as long face, broad cheeks, almost straight angle of the lower jaw and taller and thicker ascending branch. This confirms the fact that, although Lombards settled there for a long time, they little mixed with local populations, probably because of social factors, such as marriage customs and habits.

De Blasio investigated also skull trepanation and artificial modification, to which he attributed a therapeutic meaning. According to him, hard bone found in some funerary contexts was not a kind of amulets, but prostheses applied during surgery and detached over time. He confuted the hypothesis that skull trepanation was nothing more than a progno-

sis of a nervous system disorder, such as epilepsy and scurvy, as well as the idea that the trepanation was performed for ritual purposes, in order to allow the soul to visit the body after death. Studying the trepanned skulls of ancient 4 Peruvians⁽⁴⁾ and in particular a Peruvian mummy⁽⁵⁾ (fig. 1) that had a semi-lunar opening in the sphenoparietal sinus, De Blasio showed that this could not be the result of a post mortem operation with ritual purposes because, in the cranial area, there were other fractures that the author interpreted as injuries caused by some stroke of stick pulled on the left side of the face⁽⁶⁾.



Fig. 1: Peruvian mummy. De Blasio, Abele, “Mummie e Crani dell’Antico Perù. Conservati in alcuni Musei dell’Università di Napoli”, *Rivista di Psichiatria Forense, Antropologia Criminale e Scienze Affini*, 3 (1900c), 169-189, 183.

Analyzing other mummies, he came to the conclusion that a skull with an elongated shape was the result of pressure exerted by wrapping bandages around the head of a newborn. De Blasio supposed that Peruvians forged the skull shape of those who was considered privileged being. However, this practice did not compromise brain function because these peoples have atrophied their skulls shape for many centuries; in fact, there were many Peruvians deformed skulls displayed at the museum in Paris. In Naples, De Blasio discovered and analyzed a skeleton reporting a kind of artificial deformation. He suggested that these bone remains could belong to a Native American deported to Naples from Spanish fleets. In fact, it was possible to date the burial around 1650 and the skull shape was comparable to that of those populations.

In conclusion, De Blasio claimed that artificial deformations did not cause intelligence defects, while natural deformities were considered a confir-

mation of nerve diseases or abnormal behaviors. In this regard, it is noteworthy a study published in 1901, *Cranio piramoide in una epilettica* [Pyramid skull in a female epileptic]⁽⁷⁾. This skull was very developed in the vertical and transversal direction, like a pyramid trunk. In this case, epilepsy would be considered a consequence of an abnormal development of the skull during the intrauterine life. One or more bone anomalies may have caused a malfunction of the nervous system due to the fact that skull and brain were closely linked.

As Abele De Blasio, other scholars, believed that looking at the physiognomy it was possible to understand the personality. According to this vision, the cephalic box malformations were linked with the psychological characteristics of the subject and a disease or an atypical behavior was provoked by a malformation of the skull. De Blasio tried to demonstrate that existed a relationship between personal features and skull shape. In the article *Anomalie multiple in un cranio di prostituta* [Multiple abnormalities in a skull of a prostitute]⁽⁸⁾ the author put in close connection the skull deformities and the abnormal behavior of the woman. In fact, he described not only the woman's life, but also her skull. According to him, the abnormal shape of the skull was the cause of a nervous system disease and this had to be related to her amoral behavior. De Blasio believed that since her brain was hosted in a little and malformed cranial box, she could not be able to "think straight".

In general, according to him, women were biologically inferior and, for this reason, they were unable to behave in an adequate and responsible way behaviors since their cranial capacity was less than that of men. Further, he perceived the prostitute as a Hottentot or in general as a black woman. In a published cases series of steatopygia, he expressed stereotyped ideas of women and prostitutes. However, he collected also some interesting data: for example, he noticed that in luxurious and expensive brothels, prostitutes serving important clients were used to rotate, whilst in the suburbs and in the poorest quarters prostitutes tended to be older and were considered as experts in healing sexually transmitted diseases, such as the "scarfatura" (blenorrhagy or gonorrhoea), the "scippa" (venereal ulcer), or the "scippa centrelle" (syphilitic ulcer) and the "ceuze" (condylomata). He also found that prostitutes were particularly fond of fast-paced tarantella, a kind of erotic dance.

De Blasio studied also homosexual behaviors, and in "O spusarizio masculino" (The marriage between two men) homosexuals were termed as "femminelle", "ricchioni", or "vasetti" (queers, effeminate males), and distinguished in two different categories. The "pederasta attivo" (active homosexual) was a bisexual criminal while the "pederasta passivo" (passive homosexual) was usually a transgender. The "pederasta passivo" could suffer from endocrinological alterations and derangements, like galactorrhea, as written in an article entitled "Secrezione lattea nei pederasti passivi", published in the "Archivio di Antropologia, Criminologia, Psichiatria e Medicina Legale" (Archive of Anthropology, Criminology, Psychiatry and Legal Medicine). Observing the faces and the bodies of subjects enabled him to discriminate "normal" people from perverts. From collective imagination and knowledge, physiognomy was elevated to the rank of a science. For better understanding homosexuality, De Blasio used also cues and findings from ethnology and animal psychology, disciplines that were born just from a few years, thanks to the pioneering work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Oskar Heinroth (1871-1945), and Wallace Craig (1876-1954). As result of his studies, De Blasio published an essay entitled "Amori anomali in animali domestici" (Deviant loves in pets). De Blasio tried to find a physical correlation between type of criminal and geometric shape of the face⁽⁹⁾, that is to say some anthropometric features that would enable to properly identify offenders. De Blasio came to investigate the criminal type through the physiognomy and he compared faces belonging to two hundred honest men with those of two hundred criminals. He excluded the children because they had not yet reached the skeletal maturity and he also discarded the elderly since they could be subject to face alterations due to the falling out of the teeth. His main objective was to identify the criminal figures since he believed that there was no free will and human behavior were determined by innate factors.

The author, in fact, agreed with the concept of "criminal by birth" of Lombroso and he believed that atypical behaviors of the offenders were conditioned not only by environmental or socio-economic components, but also and above all by factors beyond his control, such as inheritance or nervous system diseases. For example, the ellipsoidal or oval faces characterized honest people, while the square face were peculiar of the Camorra members

(fig. 2); the octagonal faces were typical of the basaiuoli (those who set the stage for thieves) (fig. 3) and the triangular faces were of people who lived of petty theft. According to this study, therefore, the anatomical features of the criminal predicted his behavior. However, such considerations diminished the responsibility of the criminal since the behavior was considered the result of an hereditary factor. Then, according to this theory, a nervous system disease could be already traced in the face shape⁽¹⁰⁾.



Fig. 2: The square face of a Camorra member. De Blasio, Abele, “*Delitto e forma geometrica della faccia tra i delinquenti napoletani*”, *Rivista di Psichiatria Forense, Antropologia Criminale e Scienze Affini*, 4 (1901b), 285-298, 294.

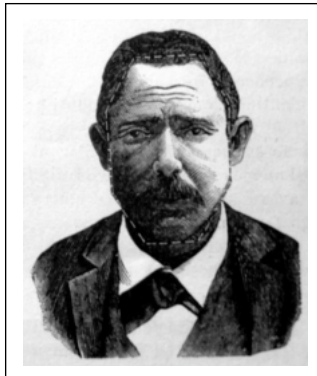


Fig. 3: The octagonal face of a basaiuolo. De Blasio, Abele, “*Delitto e forma geometrica della faccia tra i delinquenti napoletani*”, *Rivista di Psichiatria Forense, Antropologia Criminale e Scienze Affini*, 4 (1901b), 285-298, 288.

Also some small anthropometric features like the ear are able to uncover big differences, as described in the “*L’orecchio dei napoletani normali e criminali*” (The ear of normal and deviant Neapolitans), published in Turin. Further, he systematically studied and divided tattoos in fifteen categories (Il tatuaggio, Napoli, 1905; Ulteriori ricerche intorno al tatuaggio dei camorristi napoletani, Further researches about tattoos in Neapolitan camorristas): religious, erotic/sentimental, nickname, revenge, professional, decorative, atavistic, heredi-

tary, psychological, ethnic, pornographic, symbolic and mystic. This classification was slightly modified by the first statistical analysis about tattooing, carried out by Cesare Lombroso and published in the “*Gazzetta Lombarda*”, and was adopted by Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), working as official in the Paris prefecture of police. Some tattooing practices were peculiar of camorristas, as well as scars and scarifications (“*sfregio*”), and in particular a subgroup of deviants termed as “*combriccola dei taglia-faccia*”. These observations were in line with findings of other scholars, such as the sociologist Marc Monnier (1829-1885) and the anthropologist Dominique Ventra. This approach can be termed as “*social pathology*” and has some parallelism with the concept coined by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) of “*anomie*” as the reflection of moral breakdown at the societal level.

Conclusions

Despite an apparently disparate range of interests, De Blasio had the common vision and the unifying working hypothesis that the body was a living, speaking object, a kind of “*corpus loquens*”, that, if properly investigated, could reveal a hidden universe of meanings. For example, the skull morphology was perceived as an instrument through which it was possible to investigate any aspect of human life. The skull shape could, indeed, uncover historical phenomena, such as migration and population admixture. Its biology was not a static element but reflected, for example, the use of surgery in ancient times. Analyzing the artificial deformations and the malformations caused by diseases and investigating the geometric shape of the face could help in discriminating subjects “*naturally*” predisposed to commit crimes.

According to De Blasio, history and medicine represented two highly inter-related sciences and, in fact, his multidisciplinary researches of physical anthropology have provided the archeologists and the sociologists with an important contribution for understanding the biology and the lifestyle of ancient and modern populations. Comparing and combining different data, such as anthropometric features and the historical/archaeological findings, represents his main innovation and his major heritage.

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