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Susan A. Ashley, *“Misfits” in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy: Anatomies of Difference*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. ix + 300 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$114.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781350013391.

Review by Sarah Horowitz, Washington and Lee University

“Misfits” in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy is, as the title proclaims, a study of those who were deemed abnormal—or, more precisely, an examination of how doctors and social scientists understood the relationships and distinctions among different categories of deviance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ashley includes chapters on extremes of mental ability (genius and intellectual disability), insanity, neuroses, vagrancy, criminality, and sexual deviance, and uncovers the deep anxiety among neurologists, psychiatrists, criminologists, sexologists, and sociologists about the seemingly growing number of misfits. And yet, in many cases, these experts were also deeply sympathetic to their subjects’ plight. Indeed, in some instances they were excited about the evolutionary role those who varied from the norm could play.

Elements of this story—such as the increasing interest in non-normative sexualities or the growing concern with those deemed “habitual” or “innate” criminals at the end of the nineteenth century—are already well known. In some cases, too, historians have mapped the connections between these forms of deviance and how homosexuality, insanity and criminality were often seen as closely linked in this era.^[1] Nevertheless, this work will be valuable to scholars due to the wide range of Ashley’s topics as well as her interest in working cross-culturally. Not only does she bring together French and Italian works on deviance, but she also places them in dialogue with a number of American, British and German authors, such as George Miller Beard, who is often seen as formulating the diagnosis of neurasthenia, and Carl Westphal, who wrote on inversion and same-sex desire. Ashley also includes lesser-studied phenomena, such as vagrancy, in her account, and shows how some forms of abnormality, most notably genius, were considered positive and even understood as an evolutionary path forward for societies. In examining all these forms of deviance side by side, she provides fascinating insight into how experts understood the relationship between the human body and behavior and the political ramifications of abnormality in these two national contexts.

The doctors and social scientists Ashley studies approached questions of deviance in many of the same ways. Typically, they were interested in constructing elaborate taxonomies of abnormality and sought to root their findings in empirical evidence. Some used statistical measures or, in the case of doctors, autopsies, but very often they relied on case studies. Heavily

influenced by Darwinism, they linked abnormality to degeneration and often understood deviance as arising when the independent parts of the body did not function in concert as they should. For instance, many sexologists saw that too much or too little sexual desire was the result of organic problems with the genitals, whereas deviant forms of desire, such as same-sex attraction or fetishism, were rooted in the brain. In turn, these problems were seen as developmental in nature; as Ashley states, “Scientists and social theorists associated normality with a predetermined step-by-step process of development and anomalies with falling short of or exceeding the usual end point” (p. 206). In many cases, the function that had failed to develop properly was the will, and criminality, vagrancy and many forms of insanity were attributed to failures of self-control and a weakness of the will. Scientists saw the faculty of the will as developmentally arriving late in humankind, and as a result not as deeply rooted in the psyche as other functions (such as reflexes or habits). This power of self-control was also understood as a requirement of modern civilization and experts conceived of it as less necessary in primitive, nomadic societies.

As can be seen in these notions of the will and its place in modern life, deviance was understood to be a mal-adaptation to the demands of civilization. As Ashley states, “In modern societies, normal meant leaving behind the nomadic, lawless, indolent, and volatile lives believed to characterize primitive people or children and displaying the self-control and compliance to social norms achieved by fully developed adults. Those biologically incapable of meeting these standards fell outside the civilized space enabled by nature and laid out by society” (p. 202). Thus, for instance, in Italy, a number of experts posited that vagrancy was a reversion to the primitive and occurred among those unable to adapt to the demands of modernity, which required discipline, impulse control, and hard work. Yet, as Ashley reveals, those who wrote on deviance could see modern life—and not the deviant individual—as the problem. For some on the left, the root cause of vagrancy was a capitalist economy that produced extreme poverty and economic dislocation. Neurasthenia, likewise, could arise out of the increasingly dizzying pace and extraordinary mental demands of modern life, one that required individuals (or at least those with suffrage) to choose who to vote for and adapt to constant political change. Technology, too, posed its own set of dangers and Ashley reconstructs the diagnosis of “railway brain,” or neurasthenia that was the result of trauma from a railway accident. Alternatively, some misfits were understood not as those who could not adapt to modern life, but as the next adaptation to it. At the end of the nineteenth century, certain forms of deviance (including genius, but also in some cases vagrancy, criminality and insanity) were regarded as evolutionary variations that would push humanity to its next stage.

In some of the more fascinating passages in her book, Ashley connects these questions of deviance to political issues. She begins her book with the triumph of liberal values in France and Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. If the adult male citizenry was capable of self-government because it was rational and self-controlled, how did thinkers understand and treat those who seemed to lack these faculties? This population included women and members of the lower classes, but also, as Ashley is keen to note, many middle-class men who suffered from mental illness or turned their backs on bourgeois values. Additionally, the mind was regarded as operating as a state did. Experts understood that it was divided into a number of separate functions that required complex coordination among all the elements in order to work properly. So, too, did society, as in liberal states individuals worked separately in ways that furthered the interests of society. If the will was central to the ability of the individual to function, governments served as the will of the collective, directing individuals to behave

properly, maintaining unity and harmony among the whole and coordinating action among them.

If deviance was a political problem, it also had political solutions, and *Misfits* examines the variety of responses that doctors and social scientists envisioned to solve what they saw as an epidemic of mental illness, vagrancy, crime and sexual misbehavior. Frequently, they did so on the basis of whether an individual was deemed a habitual deviant or merely abnormal due to circumstances. For instance, those whose criminality was seen as innate and rooted in organic causes were to be isolated and some criminologists argued for eugenic measures to prevent them from reproducing. But criminologists urged leniency for those seen as less dangerous to society and promoted social welfare measures as a solution to criminality due to poverty or lack of opportunity. Likewise, habitual vagrants were to be punished and subject to a regime of surveillance, but experts saw unemployment insurance, homes for the elderly, hospitals for the sick, and child welfare systems as key to preventing circumstantial vagrancy.

As Ashley describes it, experts often had considerable sympathy for those whose deviance arose out of circumstances, with the notable exception of sexual deviants. Here, those deemed invert (whose same-sex attraction was innate) seemed to provoke more sympathy than individuals who were considered pederasts (who might engage in sexual deviance for money), in part because inverts, unlike pederasts, were regarded as disinclined to act on their attraction to members of the same sex. Thus, while many historians have described the increasing emphasis on innate and biological notions of deviance in the late nineteenth century, Ashley's work calls attention to the fact that doctors and social scientists saw a range of misbehavior as arising out of circumstances, whether that was economic dislocation or the traumas of modern life.

Yet for all the ways that Ashley's book is illuminating, it also has notable lapses. *Misfits* is much more interested in exploring the works of the experts she discusses than engaging in the secondary literature. Indeed, there are a number of crucial works on deviance that she does not cite, including Vernon Rosario's *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity*, Ruth Harris's *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle*, Dominique Kalifa's *Les bas-fonds: histoire d'un imaginaire*, or Sander Gilman's *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*.^[2] These are all works that would have complemented Ashley's account of how forms of deviance were connected to both one another and to broader social and political phenomena. In particular, many of them have worked to link notions of abnormality to the categories of gender and race, something to which she pays only passing attention. For instance, she mentions the idea that Jews were more likely to be vagrants or neurasthenics (p. 118) or that women were seen as naturally lazy and lacking will power and so might turn to prostitution and/or vagrancy (p. 126), but does little to develop these claims about race and gender. As such, *Misfits* does a better job connecting deviance to the triumph of political liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century than to the social and cultural order of the time.

Despite these limitations, this work will be useful to scholars of the social, cultural, and intellectual history of the fin de siècle. It provides a wealth of information about and guides to the wide range of works on deviance and experts' responses to the question of abnormality – sometimes sympathetic, sometimes less so. In doing so, *Misfits* helps us understand the anxieties about civilization, whom it was leaving behind, and whom it was harming.

NOTES

[1] See for instance Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, tome 1: la volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds: histoire d'un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013); Dominique Kalifa, *Crime et culture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2005); Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Vernon Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[2] Rosario, *Erotic Imagination*; Harris, *Murders and Madness*; Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds*; Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*.

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