

13

FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT.

PETER H. BRYCE, M.A., M.D.

Distributed by the
Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene

Reprinted from AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, Vol. VIII, No. 9, pp. 656-660, 1918.



1918

FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT.

PETER H. BRYCE, M.A., M.D.

Distributed by the
Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene

Reprinted from AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, Vol. VIII, No. 9, pp. 656-660, 1918.



FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT.

PETER H. BRYCE, M.A., M.D.,

Chief Medical Officer, Dept. of Immigration and Colonization, Ottawa, Ont.

EVERYWHERE, from earliest pre-historic man up to our most complex international politics of today, the essence of our problem then was and is now biological, and if we adopt the inductive methods of psychology we can build on a solid foundation our social ethics, since as explicitly stated by A. F. Tredgold, consulting physician to the National Association for the Feeble-minded: "Whatever may be the relation of mind to brain it is now fully recognized that the manifestation of mental activity is indissolubly connected with the cells of the cerebral cortex. Mind develops *pari passu* with their growth and fails with their decay." When John Stuart Mill urged that "Every man is a part of nature and subject to its laws as causation," we can agree that morality becomes necessarily social and based on man's relations to his environment, both human and non-human, since he is subject to the law of causation the same as Nature around him, and that as man evolves socially it will mean the rhythmic activation of all his energies toward one common end, namely, the liberty to will and to do in the pursuit of the highest good.

Accepting for ourselves biology as the basis of our experimental psychology, there rests upon us the peculiar duty of becoming the apostles of a social ethics, which ought to determine men's activities from those of the mere individual up to the highest functions of the state, and yet: How many of us have consciously adopted any such social creed? How many are convinced for instance in our communities that the greatest good in an election is not associated necessarily with the party having the longest purse? How many parents

have such clear ideas of their duty to the state that they are prepared to be inconvenienced in their pleasure by rearing a normal number of children? How many are willing to sacrifice their personal comfort or profit, it may be, through living in a smaller community or even in the country in order that they may rear a robust family of children for the state? Or finally how many have ever given serious thought to the problem of how we can best conserve our energies with a view to transmitting to the coming generation those high physical, mental and moral traditions of the Anglo-Saxon race which have distinguished this continent for three centuries?

Much has been written about what statistics prove, especially for the last half of the nineteenth century, as regards the superior people, especially of the New England and Atlantic States, in the matter of a birth-rate decline, amounting to a positive lessening of the population equilibrium of the old Anglo-Saxon stock; while intellectual Brahmins and cultured blue-stockings have boasted rather of their superiority to biological laws, or perhaps even believed in their ability to create higher and superior ones, when as a matter of biological certainty the egotism that boasts itself thus betrays an egoism which Dr. Nordau cleverly demonstrates as being but an early evidence of degeneracy. I do not remember to have met anywhere a more vivid picture of the effects of certain social conditions amongst the old eastern people than that contained in a study by Miss E. H. Irwin regarding certain families in a westside school in New York City. The study states that this Fifty-third Street school was chosen "because it was largely composed of American born chil-

dren, many of whose parents are American born."

"This neighborhood of first, second and third generation Americans is in strong contrast to the more familiar eastside, where a foreign born population swarms the streets and a strange language meets the ear from every hand. On the eastside, teeming dirt and teeming life struggle for the uppermost. On Fifty-third Street, neither the dirt nor the people are so overpowering; life is more sluggish and poverty more gaping. The contrast is as between watching one race of human beings clambering up a hill that is hard and rocky and steep, yet ever making progress as against another slipping back into a quicksand, struggling without hope and ever losing ground. Ambition is replaced by indifference, expectation by despair. In an immigrant neighborhood one hears constantly of the future of children, their education, their already begun success; but here what glory there is exists as a left-over recollection of the past generation, of better conditions during the childhood of the parents, of wealth and power, growing brighter in the memory as this goes on. One hears too the constant echo of that sentiment of defeat that 'Times are not what they were' and that 'things grow worse every day.'"

I feel quite certain that many old physicians from different parts of America can recall in their experience similar groups out of which have come one or several families betraying more or less markedly the stigmata of degeneracy. We have no time to analyse such, but several characteristics seem to stand out most markedly in them and of these I shall put first *mimetism*. Mimesis we define as imitating or aping the gestures or voice of another, or of his manners or actions; while anyone who has studied the phenomena of hypnotic suggestion will see in its subjects various characteristics,

which remind us of perhaps what is most marked in feeble-mindedness, namely, the ease with which a person is influenced through suggestion or mimetism. The imbecile echoes immediately your suggestion that black is white or that two and three make four, and when we come to the higher type of moron we recognize the same dominating influence of some proximate suggestion, influence or example. Translated into exact terms it means that there is absent, or more or less permanently quiescent, the determining influence of conscious mind or "the will"—viz., the cultivated mind which instantly discriminates, determines or wills, and keeps in the background the activation of the emotional or automatic—that is the subconscious mind. We say feeble-mindedness is in effect marked by lack of comprehension, judgment, discrimination—in a word of ratiocination. As expressed by Nordau: "To this is added the unfailling weakness of will of the degenerate person, which makes it impossible for him to control his obsessions, to resist his impulses, to control his fundamental moods, to keep his higher centres to the attentive pursuit of objective phenomena."

Without analyzing further the psychological phenomena of feeble-mindedness we have after three generations under modern conditions an opportunity of judging somewhat of the influences of social conditions upon mental phenomena. The grandmothers of our race in America had a dozen children, labored hard, and often lived till ninety years. In the year 1790 but 131,472 persons in the United States lived in towns, or less than 4 per cent in 3,929,214 population. Thus we see that in a century the urban population increased over a 1,000 per cent, or over ten times from 4 per cent to 46 per cent of the total population of the United States, in cities of 2,500 or over.

As a result of this urbanity alone Dr.

Nordau says, "All these increased activities, however, even the simplest, involve an effort of the nervous system, a wearing of the tissues. Every line we read or write, every human face we see, every conversation we carry on, every scene we perceive through the window of the flying express sets in activity our sensory nerves and our brain centres." The logical outcome of this cerebration carried to an abnormal degree is neurasthenia, with which all observers associate the psychopathic basis of epilepsy and insanity and predominantly feeble-mindedness, since Tredgold expresses the absolute view that environment directly impresses itself upon germ plasma, affecting it in one or more determinants, which if increased by mal-environment in the first generation extended to the second or third is cumulative in a degeneracy, increasing till idiocy is the result. The anatomical basis is, as Tredgold states, that of an inherited instability, defective metabolism and tendency to premature degeneration of nerve cells, the actual exciting cause of disease being supplied by toxins or by any of the numerous forms of stress and strain incident to modern life. What some of these are is sufficiently indicated by subjects dealt with in the many papers presented in the different sections of this annual Public Health Congress. Reverting, however, to the question of the origin, education and development of the mind and will as growing out of its experiences it will be apparent that we have forces inimical to the evolution of mind operating from two opposite poles. The one is where external impressions are wholly wanting, and the other where their impulses succeed each other so rapidly upon the eye, the ear, the nose, skin and so on as to prevent any well defined and conscious image being stamped upon the central nerve cells and so result in an insensibility to impressions almost as unfortunate as where no impres-

sion, whatever is present. It is idle, indeed, to expect conscious perceptions, ideation or thought if either no distinct perceptions rise into consciousness or, even if developed, no time for linking up associated groups of ideas in thought is given owing to constantly fresh and new external impulses too rapidly impinging on some special sense. But oddly enough while on the one side these multiplied sensations too often result in an inattention and even an unconsciousness of them,—a necessity, indeed, to prevent the brain from absolute exhaustion through attempting too long to co-ordinate multiplied sensations—there results on the other hand through an abnormal hyperaesthesia often developed when such environment as just mentioned is maintained, an unhealthy, clamant demand for something to tickle or temporarily satisfy the irritable, unstable, automatic brain centres, often approaching the state of the exhaustion of dementia. This is illustrated in the case of many feeble-minded children, who move almost constantly when awake in a purposeless manner from one thing to another and whose attention it is impossible to fix for more than a moment.

When we consider the numerous variations of the mental objective or purpose in the millions of individuals in great cities it seems hopeless to analyze the activating forces at work in them; but they resolve themselves as a matter of fact, into a few main groups whose effects we may study. For instance the home environment of a purely physical character is much the same for hundreds of thousands, differing perhaps mostly in the size of rooms and the amount of air space, in the amount and extent of warmth and sunshine. To this we may add the degree of cleanliness and the amount and character of the food supply. The sights impressed on the eye are the same for most, being chiefly walls and rows of houses often in shadow, defect-

ive sunshine and street scenes of every sort with indeed much the same sounds, both in quality and amount. In the streets the means of locomotion are the same and at a little later age the objects which impress themselves, from the newsboy shouting his cries to the food vendors, become the chief mental impressions from this external world and are much the same for all people. Similarly at school, the kindergarten, the lessons in class, the mode of teaching, the drill and calisthenics are everywhere the same forming a type of education, common in fact to millions of minds in a great city like New York. Succeeding this a few leading papers continue the educative process for those who are old enough to read and from illustrations like "Buster Brown" to the last striking expression of the baseball reporter, the mind of the adolescent American is being padded out only to be completed by the transient presentation of an underworld, which has for many hitherto only been hinted at in newspapers, but is now visualized through concrete illustrations in the "Movies."

If I am right then it is inevitable that thought—the product of mind which groups through association individual impressions, repeated until they rise into consciousness and there become concepts, which through differentiation become well defined ideas—must primarily deal with those material issues which fit the city dweller to cope with his immediate environment and in the great mass of the people cannot receive adequate impressions and evolve ideas regarding affairs, foreign to city life and still more regarding problems which are world-wide or supra-mundane. Remembering that at least 80 per cent of the population of our cities are dependent upon a daily wage, utilized almost wholly for their immediate wants, and that they are influenced directly, physically, mentally and morally by their social environ-

ments, we need not wonder if a type of feeble-mindedness is the outcome, relatively common when compared with those in a population brought up in the open with Nature supplying daily her wholesome sensations in a normal environment.

Remembering, too, that the mind, made up of presentations from infancy of a city world around it, is incapable of displacing such readily and of receiving those from natural objects foreign to it, we can see how, where as in the United States 12,000,000 were added between 1900 and 1910 to a city population of 32,000,000, the difficulty of our problem increases enormously with every decade. How we are to check the degenerative process or antidote the tendency seems to me to be one of the problems toward which the chief energy of public health workers everywhere today must be specially directed. To illustrate, as I write this millions in New York City are shut within its walls with a plague almost as mysterious as that of Athens in the days of Pericles as described by Thucydides, while the strike of thousands of car men and the threatened strike of five hundred thousand railway employees are each so many assaults upon emotional nervous systems already overwrought and exhausted in the unprecedented high temperatures of long July days, productive of malign effects upon hundreds and thousands of individuals unequal to the strain. Multiply these conditions for the many millions of people of all our great cities and towns and we are forced to ask ourselves, *Cui bono?* For what good? Are all future generations to be ever and increasingly the creatures of such environment, where the individual personality becomes almost lost or is a pawn in the game where capitalistic knights and kings hold all the moves? I cannot believe that such a fate is either necessary or inevitable in a world whose ethical progress is or ought to be ever upward. Outward and laterally into fresh

air and sunshine by every conceivable means of transport,—instead of upward toward an uncertain heaven—where the hands can touch the kindly bosom of Mother Earth, plant roses in her garden and later gather fresh flowers and fruit seems to me the only solution to the problem of how we are to prevent the rapid

degeneration of a race, who once had Anglo-Saxon freemen for their ancestors and were something other than automata, ever drudging and rolling a Sisyphus stone up a mountain of struggle without a top, or exhausted through the thirst of hopeless labor seeking to drink from the golden cup of Tantalus always just beyond their reach!