

Article

Degeneration and Its Discontents: Rereading Nordau in Context

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Abstract

This article examines Max Nordau's *Entartung* (Degeneration) (1892/93) at the intersection of fin-de-siècle cultural critique and contemporary psychopathology. It argues that Nordau did not simply denounce modern art, but transferred an established psychiatric vocabulary—centred on degeneration, hysteria, and neurasthenia—into the sphere of aesthetic judgement. Interpreting a range of literary and cultural phenomena as symptoms of pathological degeneration, Nordau sought to diagnose the psychological condition of modern culture through the works of contemporary writers and intellectuals. Situating *Entartung* within the broader nineteenth-century degeneration paradigm and within contemporary evolutionary debates, the article analyses how scientific discourse was mobilised to authorise cultural evaluation. Rather than assessing the validity of Nordau's diagnoses, it reconstructs the epistemic logic through which psychiatric categories were transformed into instruments of cultural criticism. In doing so, it repositions Nordau within the history of the human sciences, highlighting his role in the consolidation of expert authority in late nineteenth-century cultural debates. By foregrounding the structural migration of psychiatric categories into cultural criticism, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the alliance between scientific knowledge and normativity at the fin de siècle.

Keywords: Max Nordau; degeneration theory; fin-de-siècle culture; social Darwinism; pathologisation of art; cultural criticism

1. Introduction

Ideas concerning the degeneration of humanity or of human civilisation gained significant traction in scientific, artistic, and political discourses from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The notion of degeneration drew upon the pessimistic worldview that came to dominate fin-de-siècle thought, characterised by a sense of general decline and decadence. Closely linked to these concerns were emerging theories of heredity, eugenics, and racial science.

Yet the concept of degeneration is far older than its modern formulations. Classical political philosophy already associated moral disorder with the decline of political communities. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, degeneration stems from a departure from the natural state of humanity. In his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau argued that civilisation had replaced an ideal and healthy original condition with one that introduced disease, vice, and moral decay, distancing humanity ever further from nature and its own inherently good character (Rousseau [1984] 2019).

Such deviation also manifested in social contexts—for instance, in the contrast between the overnourishment of the affluent and the undernourishment of the poor, or in the mental



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overburdening of the individual. The latter, known as *spleen*, was paradoxically valorised as a mark of refinement in eighteenth-century England. In the nineteenth century, however, the most pressing concerns centred on the consequences of rapid urbanisation: alcoholism, syphilis, nervous exhaustion caused by excessive and contradictory stimuli, as well as homosexuality, criminality, suicide, and general moral decline.

These phenomena increasingly attracted the attention of medical science, particularly psychiatry, which sought to trace the mental and psychological dimensions of degeneration. The most systematic and sustained investigations were carried out within the French institutional psychiatric tradition, where several generations of scholars engaged with the topic throughout the nineteenth century. Among them was Max Nordau (Nordau 1882), who studied under Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), one of the central figures of modern clinical neurology.

While Nordau's work is frequently read as an isolated polemic against modern art, it must be situated within a broader nineteenth-century degeneration paradigm. Interpreting a range of literary and cultural phenomena as symptoms of pathological degeneration, Nordau sought to diagnose the psychological condition of modern culture through the works of contemporary writers and intellectuals. The theory of hereditary degeneration, systematised by Bénédict-Augustin Morel and further developed by Valentin Magnan, provided a medical framework for interpreting moral and social deviation as pathological regression. In parallel, Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology extended degeneration theory into the realm of criminology, while evolutionary models derived from Darwin and Spencer supplied a developmental logic that framed cultural phenomena in biological terms.

It is important, however, to distinguish between Darwin's biological theory of evolution and the later ideological interpretations commonly described as Social Darwinism. While Darwin himself did not apply evolutionary theory directly to social or cultural development, later thinkers such as Herbert Spencer extended evolutionary concepts to the analysis of human society. The extension of evolutionary principles to society, politics, and culture was largely the work of later thinkers, most prominently Herbert Spencer. Nordau's intellectual framework reflects this broader fin-de-siècle reception of evolutionary thought rather than a direct application of Darwin's biological arguments. In this context, evolutionary language functions less as a strict scientific model than as a conceptual vocabulary through which processes of cultural development, decline, and degeneration could be interpreted.

As Daniel Pick has shown in his seminal study of European degeneration discourse, the concept functioned not merely as a medical diagnosis but as a flexible cultural metaphor capable of structuring debates about art, morality, and national identity (Pick 1989, 2005). Nordau's *Entartung* can be understood as emerging at the intersection of these discourses. His argument does not invent a medical language of decline; rather, it transfers an already established psychiatric vocabulary into the sphere of aesthetic judgement. Understanding this transfer is crucial for interpreting the epistemic structure of Nordau's critique. This broader medicalisation of cultural discourse has also been noted in studies of nineteenth-century scientific authority and identity formation (Gilman 1985).

Recent scholarship has emphasised the cultural and political dimensions of degeneration discourse (Pick 1989, 2005; Mosse 1996), as well as the role of medical language in constructing modern identities and hierarchies (Gilman 1985). Studies of fin-de-siècle pessimism have likewise demonstrated how scientific rhetoric functioned as a stabilising authority in periods of perceived cultural crisis. Nordau's work has most often been interpreted either through the lens of his later Zionist engagement or as a precursor to twentieth-century ideological appropriations.

This article advances a historiographically distinct perspective. It reads *Entartung* as a case study in the medicalisation of cultural judgement and as a symptom of late nineteenth-century epistemological insecurity. Rather than asking whether Nordau's diagnoses were "correct," the analysis investigates how psychiatric categories were structurally transferred into aesthetic discourse and how this transfer functioned to stabilise cultural hierarchies at a moment of perceived civilisational crisis.

Methodologically, the study adopts an intellectual-historical and discourse-analytical approach. Rather than evaluating Nordau's aesthetic judgements, it examines the epistemic structure of his argumentation and its reliance on contemporary psychiatric and evolutionary theory. The analysis proceeds through close reading of *Entartung* in dialogue with nineteenth-century degeneration theory (Morel, Lombroso, Magnan) and Social Darwinist thought. By situating Nordau within these overlapping scientific discourses, the article aims to disentangle his scientific rhetoric from later ideological reinterpretations.

Beyond reconstructing the intellectual context of *Entartung*, this article argues that Nordau transformed contemporary psychiatric and evolutionary concepts into a diagnostic framework for interpreting modern culture. By translating medical categories such as degeneration, hysteria, and neurasthenia into tools of aesthetic evaluation, Nordau's work exemplifies the broader late nineteenth-century tendency to medicalise cultural criticism and to interpret artistic production as a symptom of civilisational health or pathology.

2. Reading *Entartung*: Cultural Crisis and the Logic of Pathologisation

Any analysis of *Entartung* must begin with the text's own diagnostic self-understanding. Nordau does not present his work as a conventional contribution to literary criticism or aesthetic theory, but as a medically grounded intervention into the cultural crises of his age. This programmatic gesture is already evident in the dedicatory letter to Cesare Lombroso, where Nordau explicitly extends criminological and psychiatric diagnostic logic into the field of artistic production. The degenerate, he writes, is "not always a criminal, prostitute, anarchist, or pronounced madman; he is often a writer and artist." In the same context, he insists that the supposedly innovative tendencies of contemporary art and literature are to be understood as symptoms whose source lies in the pathological constitution of their creators. *Entartung* thus rests on a decisive epistemic move: it does not merely criticise works, styles, or schools, but interprets them as clinical evidence.

The work of art appears not as an autonomous object, but as the outward manifestation of an underlying psychic disorder. This is the point at which Nordau's medical vocabulary becomes more than metaphor. It becomes a method of cultural judgement, one that seeks to collapse the distinction between aesthetic production and pathological personality.

The first book, significantly entitled *Fin de Siècle*, frames the entire investigation as an analysis of the spiritual condition of contemporary civilisation. By choosing this title, Nordau adopts a widely circulating cultural keyword of the late nineteenth century and transforms it into a diagnostic concept. The "fin-de-siècle" becomes not merely a chronological marker but the name of a pathological cultural mood that allegedly manifests itself in contemporary literature and art (Ujvári 2007, pp. 187–88).

In Nordau's description, the dominant emotional tone of the age is characterised by exhaustion, pessimism, and a pervasive sense of decline. The period appears as a historical moment in which established norms of morality, taste, and intellectual authority seem to dissolve. Nordau therefore interprets the artistic experiments of the late nineteenth century not as legitimate aesthetic innovations but as symptomatic expressions of a broader civilisational crisis. The rhetoric of cultural twilight that structures the opening chapters thus prepares the ground for the central diagnostic claim of the book: modern artistic movements are not merely stylistic developments but visible manifestations of degeneration.

Nordau's diagnosis of cultural degeneration unfolds through a systematic classification of modern intellectual and artistic tendencies, and the structure of *Entartung* itself reflects this diagnostic ambition. After the introductory analysis of the *fin-de-siècle* mood, Nordau organises his critique into a series of thematic sections that examine what he considers the principal pathological tendencies of modern culture. These include mysticism, egomania, and realism, each of which is associated with specific authors and artistic movements. The case studies that follow are therefore not arbitrary. Writers and intellectual figures such as Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Émile Zola, and Henrik Ibsen appear as exemplary figures whose works allegedly reveal the psychological and moral disorders of the age. Nordau's method consists in interpreting aesthetic production as the external symptom of a pathological inner condition. The literary text, the musical composition, or the philosophical work becomes, in his account, a form of diagnostic evidence. In this way *Entartung* constructs a cultural pathology in which modern authors are treated not primarily as creators of artistic form but as clinical cases illustrating the broader crisis of civilisation.

The first major category through which Nordau interprets modern cultural phenomena is mysticism. In *Entartung*, mysticism does not refer simply to religious belief or spiritual reflection; rather, Nordau uses the term to describe a broader intellectual tendency that, in his view, abandons rational clarity in favour of obscure symbolism, emotional excess, and subjective intuition. Mystical thinking, as he defines it, dissolves the distinction between logical argument and imaginative association. Language becomes increasingly metaphorical, suggestive, and ambiguous, while argumentation gives way to impressionistic expression and symbolic imagery. For Nordau, such stylistic and conceptual tendencies are not merely aesthetic preferences but symptoms of psychological instability. He therefore interprets the fascination with symbols, visions, and metaphysical speculation in *fin-de-siècle* literature as evidence of nervous exhaustion and mental imbalance. Writers associated with symbolism and decadent literature thus appear, in his account, as representatives of a pathological intellectual climate in which rational control is gradually replaced by emotional and imaginative excess (Ujvári 2007, pp. 188–96).

A second key concept in Nordau's analysis is what he terms "ego-mania," a pathological intensification of subjectivity that he associates with modern individualism. Ego-mania describes the tendency of modern writers and artists to place their own personality, emotions, and psychological states at the centre of cultural production. In Nordau's interpretation, this development represents a profound transformation in the relationship between the creator and the work. Instead of striving for objective representation or universal themes, modern authors increasingly foreground their own inner life, turning literature and art into vehicles of self-expression. Nordau regards this shift with suspicion, interpreting it as a sign of psychological imbalance rather than artistic innovation. The exaggerated cult of individuality, he argues, leads to intellectual isolation, emotional volatility, and a loss of moral orientation. Authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Henrik Ibsen therefore appear in *Entartung* not merely as influential thinkers but as symptomatic figures whose works allegedly reflect an excessive preoccupation with the self and a corresponding withdrawal from shared cultural norms (Ujvári 2007, pp. 196–99).

The third category in Nordau's classificatory scheme is realism, which he interprets in a strikingly different way from many contemporary literary critics. While realism was often celebrated in the nineteenth century as a movement committed to accurate representation and social observation, Nordau views certain forms of literary realism as another manifestation of cultural degeneration. In his reading, the detailed depiction of social misery, illness, and moral corruption—particularly in the works of naturalist writers such as Émile Zola—reveals a pathological fascination with what he considers the

most disturbing aspects of human existence. Rather than illuminating social reality, such representations allegedly amplify sensations of decay and pessimism. For Nordau, the relentless focus on pathological conditions and marginal social environments reflects not objective analysis but the psychological disposition of the author. The literary text thus becomes, once again, a form of diagnostic evidence: the representation of social pathology is interpreted as the projection of the writer's own degenerative mental state. In this way realism, like mysticism and ego-mania, is integrated into Nordau's broader medical narrative of cultural decline (Ujvári 2007, pp. 199–200).

2.1. Max Nordau: Intellectual Context

Max Nordau (1849, Pest–1923, Paris)—physician, writer, journalist, cultural critic, and Zionist—rose to prominence at the age of thirty-four with his civilisational critique *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* (*The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*) (Ujvári 2003). A decade later, with the publication of *Entartung* (1892/93), he secured a lasting place in the intellectual history of the *fin de siècle* (Nordau 1883, 2013; Ujvári 2005). In this work, Nordau brought together two professional domains: as a trained physician, he sought to analyse contemporary culture through the conceptual apparatus of psychopathology. In doing so, he passed judgement on many of the most influential figures of his age—writers such as Baudelaire, Zola, Verlaine, and Tolstoy; composers such as Richard Wagner; and philosophers such as Nietzsche—denying their creative legitimacy by classifying them as mentally ill or degenerate. This sweeping pathologisation may help explain why, despite the breadth of his literary output, the numerous translations of his works, and the controversies they provoked, Nordau's oeuvre gradually receded from view over the course of the twentieth century (Schulte 1997; Zudrell 2003).

Over the past three decades, however, Nordau scholarship has expanded considerably, producing critical editions as well as thematic monographs (Bechtel et al. 1996; Dahmen 2006; Nordau 2018; Ujvári 2007, 2012, 2026). This renewed interest is hardly surprising. Nordau may justifiably be regarded as an important precursor of modern cultural criticism whose influence—among others on Georg Lukács—has repeatedly been noted. Although his body of work includes prose fiction, drama, correspondence, medical writings, and Zionist texts, it is above all his cultural treatises that define his intellectual legacy.

The central premise of *Entartung* is civilisational and normative at once: deviation from the cultural ideals embodied, for Nordau, by Goethe and Schiller appears as a sign of degeneration. One constant in Nordau's multifaceted career was his uncompromising identification with German culture, especially in its classical form. This commitment provides one of the normative foundations of *Entartung*. Anything that diverges from this model appears, in his view, as suspect, deficient, or worthy of rejection. The two volumes of *Entartung* therefore seek to expose the symptoms of cultural decline by pathologising much of contemporary European modernism. Nordau does not merely criticise particular tendencies within modern culture; he challenges its legitimacy at a more fundamental level. His diagnostic logic rests on the assumption that degenerate works are the products of degenerate minds, and that the work can be read as evidence of the creator's psychic condition.

For this reason, *Entartung* remains indispensable to any critical account of the *fin de siècle*. It is important not only because it surveys major artistic and intellectual developments of the late nineteenth century, but also because it is itself embedded in the epistemic structures of the period. Nordau's critique draws on several converging discourses: the interpenetration of medicine and morality, confidence in the authority of the exact sciences, the medicalisation of the nerves and the rise of neurasthenia, and the growing appeal of biological and psychological explanation. For Nordau, health and illness were not merely

physiological categories but conceptual instruments for interpreting culture. His writings repeatedly blur the boundary between medical analysis and moral judgement. Although he writes as a physician, the act of writing simultaneously transforms him into a cultural critic and moralist. These shifts between disciplinary registers and rhetorical positions are central to the argumentative force of *Entartung* and require sustained analytical attention (Kottow 2006; Kaiser 2007).

2.2. *Embodying Degeneration: The Cultural-Critical Work as Medical Treatise*

Nordau “did not wish to write literary history, nor to engage in popular aesthetic criticism, but rather to expose the unhealthy mental state of the authors of fashionable literary trends” (Nordau 2013, p. 495). The various manifestations of this condition, he argued, demonstrate “how degeneration and hysteria take shape in contemporary art, poetry, and philosophy” (Nordau 2013, p. 529). His central thesis is formulated at the very outset of his book, in the form of an open letter dedicated to Cesare Lombroso (born Ezechia Marco Lombroso, 1835–1909), the criminologist whose methods Nordau would apply to the domains of art and literature. Lombroso had written extensively on the relationship between madness and genius, as well as on the psychological traits of criminals. His main work, *Genio e follia* (Lombroso 1864), put forward the thesis that artistic genius was a form of hereditary insanity (Nordau 2013).

According to Lombroso’s criminological theory, criminality was an inherited trait, and criminals could be identified by physical and behavioural stigmata. He posited that criminals embodied a primitive, archaic human type and thus represented an atavistic regression to earlier stages of evolution. Although Lombroso did not deny the role of psychological and sociological factors in crime, he attributed little significance to them and distinguished only secondarily between “born criminals” and so-called “criminaloids,” who had been shaped by circumstance and were capable of remorse and reintegration into society. His work was shaped by the rapid rise in crime rates during the age of industrialisation, and he further argued that genius rested on pathological nervous excitability; artistic creation could therefore emerge from a degenerative form of psychosis akin to epilepsy.

Lombroso’s theory sparked international interest beyond medical circles. Writers and journalists gravitated toward these doctrines as the discourse of decadence gained wider relevance in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet Nordau’s dedication transcended admiration for his Italian colleague: *Entartung* was conceived as a contribution to modern critiques of civilisation. Nordau positioned himself not merely as a follower of Lombroso but as a peer who perfected his method. Whereas Lombroso focused on the degenerate psyche of criminals, Nordau applied the same diagnostic tools to the mental and moral health of artists and writers (Person 2005).

A significant distinction, however, separates Nordau from Lombroso. Although Lombroso applied his theory to artists, he restricted his analysis to their biographies and never subjected their works to clinical diagnosis. He did not seek to discredit artistic creation as such, nor did he consistently regard it as a symptom of disease. For Nordau, by contrast, genius could only be envisioned in a state of optimal mental and physical health. He upheld Goethe as the model and dismissed artists he labelled mentally or physically impaired—mystics such as Verlaine, Tolstoy, and Maeterlinck; Baudelaire; the aesthete Oscar Wilde; Nietzsche, whom he saw as a sadist and egomaniac; and Wagner, whom he characterised as a masochist. These figures, in Nordau’s view, lacked the capacity for genuine creation and were to be classified as mentally ill. In this respect, Nordau radicalised Lombroso’s procedure by transferring diagnostic judgement from the artist’s biography to the work itself.

Unlike Lombroso, who focused on individual cases, Nordau expanded his theory to encompass an entire cultural epoch. Before Freud, he was already combining literary erudition and knowledge of the arts with psychiatric training in order to interpret the cultural phenomena of the *fin de siècle*. He approached contemporary art through the lens of medical diagnosis, drawing on the latest scientific literature and applying it to literary, visual, and musical works. This medicalised perspective is what distinguishes *Entartung* from Nordau's earlier cultural-critical writings (*Conventional Lies, Paradoxes*). The viewpoint of the physician–psychiatrist goes beyond the rationalist and positivist foundations of his previous critiques and turns cultural criticism into a form of diagnostic intervention. In doing so, he transformed a method derived from criminal anthropology into a tool of cultural criticism.

In addition to Lombroso, the French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809–1873) also significantly influenced Nordau's thinking. In his influential 1857 treatise *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine* (Morel 1857), Morel introduced the term 'degeneration', which became foundational for successive generations of psychiatrists. Morel defined degeneration as a mental illness affecting not only intellectual but also moral faculties—an idea that would prove central to *Entartung*. The concept functioned as a diagnostic umbrella encompassing all deviations from the norm: ugliness, stupidity, immorality, and illegitimacy were all subsumed under this term. Since Morel, degeneration discourse has operated through the binary of normal versus abnormal, measuring all civilisational phenomena—lifestyles, ideologies, fashion, art—by this logic. As a result, the notion of civilisational illness became tautological: civilisation itself was held responsible for all forms of degeneration. (This idea had already appeared in Nordau's earlier works, *Conventional Lies* and *Paradoxes*).

Morel described degeneration as a progressive process in which hereditary influences cause successive generations of a population to deteriorate. His work built upon the findings of Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) and Jean-Étienne Esquirol (1772–1840). According to Morel, the causes of degeneration included poisoning (such as malaria, maternal alcohol consumption, opium use, food poisoning), social environment, pathological temperament, moral disease, congenital or acquired disorders, and hereditary factors (Nordau 2013).

Morel's concept of degeneration was grounded in a blend of religious, ethnological, and anthropological ideas. He postulated the existence of a *type primitif* or *type normal*—an original human being, identified with Adam, from whom the human species had developed (Nordau 2013, p. 558). His thought was shaped by pre-Darwinian ideas, particularly those of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), who argued that acquired characteristics—such as addictions or sexual perversions—could be inherited. Morel extended the principle of inheritability to a wide array of conditions, including leprosy. He believed that the diverse illnesses manifesting in a given generation could be traced back to pathological causes in the preceding one.

In this degenerative progression, symptoms would intensify with each successive generation. The first generation might exhibit nervous temperament and moral excesses; the second would manifest epilepsy, hysteria, apoplexy, and alcoholism; the third would be marked by suicide, psychosis, and mild forms of insanity; and the fourth would display congenital mental illness and physical malformations. The final stage of degeneration was always sterility. Degenerates, he asserted, bore numerous identifiable stigmata (Nordau 2013, pp. 266–67).

Morel's theories marked a major shift in civilisational discourse. Intellectual, moral, and aesthetic phenomena were now subject to the same diagnostic scrutiny as physical illness; physicians assessed them along a continuum from health to pathology. Nordau was the first to apply the scientifically formulated concept of degeneration—originally

introduced by Morel and popularised by Lombroso—to the fields of art and literature. While Lombroso is named in *Entartung*'s dedicatory preface as Nordau's "master," Morel likewise served to legitimise and authorise Nordau's cultural critique. He not only provided an intellectual framework, but situated *Entartung* within a recognised tradition of scientific discourse.

Yet Nordau departed from Morel in one essential point. Morel had forecast a steady expansion of degenerative traits throughout the population, transmitted from generation to generation. While Nordau did not question the heritability of degeneration or mental illness, he rejected the notion of their limitless spread, arguing that natural selection imposed boundaries on their dissemination. This idea—Nordau's belief in progress as a core principle of cultural critique—not only set him apart from Morel, but also distinguished him from the cultural pessimists of his time, such as Langbehn and Lagarde (Schulte 1997, pp. 215–16).

While natural selection may prevent the unlimited spread of hereditary degeneration, heredity alone does not explain the origin of illness. For this reason, an etiology is needed, and in Nordau's analysis, the emergence of degeneration is traced back to the unhealthy conditions of urban life. Although this causal link was already a commonplace in Nordau's time, it was a widely accepted and readily comprehensible notion: ever since Rousseau, the city—the modern metropolis—had represented the very civilisation that came under fire in modern cultural criticism. The city was no longer merely the locus of vice and crime; it now merged with the critical discourse of civilisation as a hotbed of both physical and psychological illness. Among the diseases afflicting the urban individual were physical debilities, syphilis, tuberculosis, alcoholism, drug addiction, and, among mental conditions, neurasthenia and hysteria.

Nervous disorders were a defining feature of the entire period. (Although Nordau does not cite them directly, it is likely that he was familiar with George Miller Beard's *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (Beard 1881) and Paolo Mantegazza's *Il secolo nevrosico* (Mantegazza 1879) [1879; German trans. *Das nervöse Jahrhundert*, 1888], both of which characterised the *fin de siècle* as an era marked by nervous ailments). In Nordau's time, post-Exposition Paris—emblematically crowned by the Eiffel Tower—stood as both a symbol of civilisation and progress, and as the embodiment of degeneracy. The degenerate and his admirers were always city dwellers. Yet this degenerate metropolis is also vividly depicted by those very writers Nordau classed as degenerates: Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Zola all contributed to a literary image of Paris as the city of evil, decay, filth, and decadence—in short, as the epitome of degeneration (Schulte 1997, pp. 216–17).

Alongside Morel, the other major French theorist of degeneration was Valentin Magnan (1835–1916), who, following Darwin, asserted that the ideal human type could never exist at the beginning of evolution, but only at its culmination. He identified disturbances and obstacles in human development that could not only hinder progress, but even reverse its direction, leading to collapse. Magnan introduced the concept of the "unstable individual" or *dégénéré supérieur*, whose most salient characteristic was disharmony. This figure bore all the signs of degeneration but was marked by high intelligence (Nordau 2013).

Prior to Morel, there were already connections between ideas of degeneration and critiques of civilisation, to which Nordau regularly referred (see the work of August Axenfeld, Richer, Gilles de la Tourette, and Paul Michaut). The latter, in particular, drew attention to the fact that hysteria was not an exclusively female affliction but possibly more prevalent among men. Despite its ancient origins, hysteria became a major topic of medical and cultural debate again at the end of the nineteenth century. It was treated as a symptom of the age, linked directly to the stresses of civilisation and modernity. Neurasthenia likewise flourished during this period and served to mask what was essentially a male form

of hysteria. Nordau, however, regarded such diagnostic refinements merely as variations of a single pathological condition. The emergence of the diagnosis was accompanied by an emerging etiology: civilisation, progress, modern technology, and industrial productivity imposed relentless performance pressures that negatively affected the nervous system (Nordau 2013).

In addition to the aforementioned scientists, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution had a profound impact on Nordau's scientific worldview. As early as his volume *Aus dem wahren Milliardenlande* (Paris Sketches) (1878), Nordau referred to the concepts of the "struggle for existence" (*Kampf ums Dasein*) and "selection" (*Zuchtwahl*), both rooted in Darwinian thought (Nordau 1878). In the essay *Paris im Schlafrock* (Paris in a Dressing Gown), he criticised the detrimental housing and sanitary conditions of the Parisian metropolis in a naturalistic style reminiscent of Émile Zola (Nordau 1878, pp. 20–33). The chapter *Der Alkoholismus in Paris* (Alcoholism in Paris) analysed the social consequences of addiction and provoked such controversy that Nordau felt compelled to defend his arguments in the second edition of the book (Nordau 1878, pp. 169–80). In *Väterchen Staat* (Little Father State) he described large parts of the Parisian population as being caught in a relentless struggle for survival in which selection favoured the strongest and most ruthless groups (Nordau 1878, pp. 204–14).

These ideas clearly recall Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 1859), in which the concept of the "struggle for existence" itself derives from Thomas Malthus's observations on population dynamics in early capitalism. Darwin extended Malthus's theory to the entire natural world, arguing that in a system governed by biological laws only those organisms survive that are best adapted to limited resources and environmental constraints. In this sense the struggle for existence functions as a natural regulatory mechanism affecting humans, animals, and plants alike (Schulte 1997, pp. 84–85).

Nordau adopted these ideas within a monistic worldview. For him, humans, animals, and nature formed a single reality governed by one comprehensive natural order (Nordau 2013). This perspective enabled him to transfer evolutionary principles to the analysis of social relations. In this context Darwinian selection became closely linked to competition: survival appeared as the victory of the stronger, the healthier, and the more adaptable. Those who survived did so because they were biologically fitter.

Within evolutionary theory adaptability thus became the decisive condition of survival (Nordau 2013, pp. 265–68). Nordau extended this biological logic to the cultural sphere. In *Entartung*, the argumentation consistently operates on several conceptual levels, yet its foundation remains biological: human beings are part of nature, and cultural phenomena ultimately derive from organic impulses. Degenerate individuals are therefore characterised above all by their inability to adapt, which condemns them to rapid disappearance.

When applied to society, evolutionary theory also reinforced Nordau's belief in progress. Evolution, in this view, guarantees continuous advancement in nature, society, and culture. In philosophical terms, Darwinian evolution offered a secular counterpart to religious concepts of creation by interpreting disease, decline, and death as necessary elements within the process of natural selection (Schulte 1997, pp. 85–86). Nordau explicitly aligned himself with this evolutionary worldview from his earliest writings.

At the same time, Nordau modified Darwin's theory in one crucial respect. Whereas Darwin attributed evolutionary change partly to random variation, Nordau rejected the role of chance. In his interpretation adaptation was not accidental but the result of conscious will. Will and attention functioned as organising forces within the healthy organism, enabling individuals to process external stimuli and maintain coherent perception. Among degenerates, however, these faculties were weakened. Their capacity for perception and representation disintegrated, producing distorted images of reality (Nordau 2013, pp. 313–14).

Nordau therefore applied biological concepts not only to the individual body but also to the “social body.” Society, like the organism, consisted of interconnected systems governed by natural laws. Within this framework biology provided the ultimate justification for the cultural critique advanced in *Entartung*. Progress was not merely a philosophical ideal but a biological principle rooted in evolutionary logic (Kottow 2006, p. 142).

From this perspective degeneration appeared as a temporary pathological phenomenon of the fin de siècle. Because degenerates lacked the ability to adapt, they could not contribute to evolutionary progress and would ultimately disappear in the struggle for existence. Darwinian selection thus guaranteed that degeneration itself had no future (Schulte 1997, pp. 213–15).

The scientific framework underlying *Entartung* is reflected not only in its theoretical premises but also in the structure of the work. The two-volume study is divided into five “books,” which resemble the stages of a medical case history. The opening section, *Fin de siècle*, presents a diagnosis of degeneration and analyses both its symptoms and its etiology. The final section, *The Twentieth Century*, offers a prognosis and proposes remedies for the cultural pathologies identified by Nordau. The three intervening books—*Mysticism*, *Ego-mania*, and *Realism*—contain detailed analyses of individual artistic phenomena. In these sections aesthetic criticism and psychiatric diagnosis merge into a single interpretative method.

2.3. *Entartung and Antisemitism*

Alongside Julius Langbehn’s *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (1890) and Otto Weininger’s *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), Max Nordau’s *Entartung* (1892–1893) stands among the key works that grapple with the neuroses and anxieties of the late nineteenth century (Langbehn 1890; Weininger 1903; Kottow 2006). Yet Nordau placed at the centre of his critique a concept—*degeneration*—that had been circulating in both cultural and biological discourses since the early decades of the century. In the twentieth century, however, the term’s meaning shifted dramatically, particularly under the regimes of the Third Reich and Stalin, becoming radically detached from Nordau’s original intention. Put differently: the term ‘degenerate’ became susceptible to biologically deterministic interpretations that replaced the notion of a socially conditioned human nature with the racially inflected fantasy of a *Volkskörper*, a racialised vision of the national body. Despite the grave misjudgements in *Entartung*, Nordau did not attach explicitly *völkisch* or racial meanings to the concept of degeneration. In this respect, one of the text’s merits lies in its refusal to align the critique of cultural pathology with any explicitly nationalist or racist agenda.

Already prior to *Entartung*, Wilhelm Schallmayer (1857–1919) had approached the question of racial hygiene (*Rassenhygiene*) through the lens of psychopathology in his 1891 work *Über die drohende körperliche Entartung der Kulturmenschheit*. Like Nordau, Schallmayer was deeply influenced by Darwinian principles, though his concern was not individual works or artists but rather the clear demarcation between health and disease for the sake of promoting *Volksgesundheit*—the health of the national population—through selective breeding. His work remained widely cited for decades. In contrast to Eugen Dühring (1833–1921), whose writings (Dühring 1865, 1881) were steeped in antisemitic and racist ideology, Schallmayer did not ascribe racial or antisemitic meanings to the concept of degeneration. Though there is no direct evidence that Nordau engaged with Schallmayer or Dühring, it is likely that he was aware of their publications (Schallmayer 1891).

Entartung can certainly be read through the lens of antisemitism, as a response to long-standing pejorative stereotypes that cast Jews as a physically and mentally degenerate people. In Nordau’s immediate context, the influence of antisemitic bestsellers such as Eugen Dühring’s *Die Judenfrage* (*The Jewish Question*) and Édouard Drumont’s *La France juive* (1886) (*Jewish France*), looms large. Drumont’s central argument held that Jews were

inherently degenerate and therefore intellectually and physically inferior. He portrayed neurasthenia as a specifically Jewish disease—a notion that gained currency across the fin-de-siècle period. Nordau, by contrast, also treats neurasthenia and hysteria as symptomatic of the age, but firmly locates their origin in the conditions of modern urban life, especially among intellectuals and artists (Drumont 1886–1889). While *Entartung* does diagnose degeneration, it does so in general civilizational terms and not in response to antisemitic clichés.

Indeed, Nordau turned the tools of his opponents against them. He characterized antisemitic attacks as themselves degenerate, even pathological, viewing antisemites as paranoiacs in need of treatment. That said, *Entartung* does not contain any explicit indication that Nordau wrote the work as a rebuttal to antisemitism. Its primary target is the avant-garde art of the day and the cultural milieu that sustained it (Schulte 1997, pp. 210–11).

3. Conclusions

Max Nordau's *Entartung* stands at the intersection of medicine, culture, and ideology—a unique hybrid of psychiatric taxonomy and cultural critique. While presenting itself as a sober medical diagnosis of the fin-de-siècle zeitgeist, the work articulates a deeply moralising vision of cultural health and degeneration. Nordau's core argument rests on the assumption that only a trained physician—armed with the latest insights from modern psychopathology—can accurately decode the pathological essence of modern art. In this sense, *Entartung* becomes more than a treatise: it is a performance of authority, in which Nordau adopts the role of the enlightened expert tasked with diagnosing, explaining, and morally judging his era. Such an expansion of medical authority into cultural domains reflects a broader nineteenth-century tendency to translate social and aesthetic deviation into pathological categories, as demonstrated in studies of medical discourse and cultural representation (Gilman 1985).

Central to Nordau's framework are the clinical categories of degeneration and hysteria, often articulated through the language of neurasthenia. These concepts function as diagnostic instruments for interpreting a wide range of artistic and intellectual phenomena—from Symbolist poetry and Impressionist painting to mystical religiosity and political radicalism. Yet although Nordau draws heavily on scientific vocabulary, he reconfigures evolutionary and psychiatric theory into a normative cultural programme. Scientific discourse in *Entartung* does not merely describe cultural decline; it legitimises cultural judgement.

Reconsidering *Entartung* from this perspective shifts its position within intellectual history. Rather than viewing Nordau primarily as a cultural reactionary or as a precursor to later ideological distortions, his work can be understood as a revealing instance of the medicalisation of aesthetic evaluation. The transfer of psychiatric categories into cultural criticism exemplifies a broader transformation in late nineteenth-century Europe: the consolidation of expert discourse as a regulatory force in public debates about art, morality, and civilisation.

This reinterpretation also clarifies the historiographical stakes. Nordau's degeneration theory was not simply an ideological weapon, nor merely an expression of conservative taste. It formed part of a wider epistemic configuration in which scientific authority sought to stabilise cultural hierarchies at a moment of perceived civilisational crisis. By analysing the structural migration of medical concepts into aesthetic judgement, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how the human sciences reshaped the boundaries between pathology and culture, knowledge and normativity, diagnosis and ideology.

Entartung, therefore, should be read not only as a document of fin-de-siècle pessimism, but as evidence of a broader epistemic transformation in which scientific authority entered

the domain of aesthetic judgement. Its significance lies less in the accuracy of its diagnoses than in the structural transfer it performs: the translation of psychiatric categories into cultural evaluation. By foregrounding this mechanism, the present study repositions Nordau within the history of the human sciences—not merely as a conservative critic of modernity, but as a formative participant in the consolidation of expert discourse as a regulatory force in cultural debates. In this sense, *Entartung* illuminates the unstable yet powerful alliance between knowledge and normativity at the threshold of modern thought.

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