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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Degeneration Theory and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

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| ABSTRACT

I am here interested in presenting a comparative analysis between the strand of thought known as 'Degeneration Theory' and Dostoevsky's last major novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. I will provide a brief contextualization about the influence of Degeneration Theory on Russian thought, postulating that the principal Russian preoccupation concerning degenerate attitudes – above all in Dostoevsky – consists in the disease of moral nihilism. I proceed by outlining the criminal type in *The Brothers Karamazov* by focalizing my inquiry around the figure of the illegitimate epileptic brother Smerdjakov. My main arguments around the question of social and physiological degeneration will be developed in the subsection devoted to the relationship between poverty and children, whose humility, it is argued, represents Dostoevsky's answer to the death of God and the moral bankruptcy enacted by nihilistic tendencies. In the third segment I will analyse the maddening outcomes of this disease in my discussion of Ivan Karamazov. Lastly, I will venture into a more unreserved discussion about the purported sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*. This study seeks to emphasize the importance in the relationship between characters and the God question, ultimately claiming that for Dostoevsky physical degeneration is deployed as a physiological counterpart for the chief concern of many degenerationist narratives: the spiritual degradation of the individual soul and of the integrity of civilization.

| KEYWORDS

Degeneration Theory; Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

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### 1. Degeneration Theory and Russia

Degeneration Theory emerged in the 19th century as an intellectual and (pseudo-)scientific concept, seeking to explain the perceived decline of society and the degenerative traits observed within certain individuals and populations. Its origin is associated with Bénédict-Augustin Morel's (1809-1873) *Treaty on Degeneration* of 1857, and under the impetus of the moral dumbfounding which sprung from the evolutionary ideas put forth in Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), Degeneration Theory gained traction as a response to the social, moral, and biological changes occurring within a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The theory aimed to shed light on the causes and consequences of societal decay by delving into the intertwined realms of biology, psychology, and sociology, and often indulged in psychiatric portraits of human or ethnic archetypes, as well as those of prominent figures within European society who were understood to bear, totally or in partiality, degenerate traits. The theory was characterized by a pathological concern for the fate of civilization and of the species, which was exacerbated by the wide armamentarium of physiological and psychological pathologies, in turn correlated to the developments of industrial society. New (or re-invigorated) 'disciplines' such as physiognomy and eugenics purported their explanatory power and their envisioned solutions as faithfully aligning with the observable symptoms of decadence in individuals and the harmful outcomes of modernization in nations. As far as degenerationist literature is concerned, its multidisciplinary character and its own overarching mission have included a wide variety of thinkers spanning from biologists to social critics and novelists.

Among the major contributions to Degeneration Theory, the theories of Austro-Hungarian physician Max Nordau were influential in detailing the variety of degenerate symptoms and in establishing the morbid fixation, eventually ubiquitous in Europe, on the

predisposition for genealogical and social infection. Within Nordau's sphere of influence, the theories of Russian ethnologist and ardent Fourierist Nikolay Danilevsky<sup>1</sup> would prefigure many themes developed in *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler, whose work "provided skeletal Nazi ideas and gave them a respectable pedigree"<sup>2</sup> as a forebearer to the National-Socialist ideology. While Morel's work was never translated into Russian, degenerationist ideology gained respectable popularity in Russia. Valentin Magnan and his colleagues, who all expanded and resized Morel's theory, were a great influence on cosmopolitan Russian psychiatrists such as Sergei Korsakov, founder of the Moscow School of Psychiatry.<sup>3</sup> With regards to Europe's intellectual climate, the ideological arms race toward a solution for societal decadence - once triggered by the fall of the Second French Empire (1870), as well as the gradual dispersal of the values of the Enlightenment - created a conjectural vacuum for the amalgamation of chameleonic and often contradictory discourses. However, the particular socio-economic state of Russia as a still heavily agrarian and structurally feudal society rendered Russian culture mostly immune to those physiological concerns of Degeneration Theory, which were instead more widely affiliated with the perceived correlation between rapid industrial development and neuropathies. More specifically, while authors involved in degenerationist themes acknowledged and extensively explored these pathologies, Russian concerns of decadence predominantly inhabited the moral sphere.

Russian thinkers who delved into the great questions of perversion and decay of their epoch were partly saved from the conflicting and unstable narratives that evolved within the umbrella term of Degeneration Theory,<sup>4</sup> cardinally due to the constrictions imposed by the inescapable *leitmotifs* of Russian history: God, the common people, and the State. This trifecta moulded Russia's cultural status as *Russia*, a nation and a people perceived to be dependent upon the historical centralization of autocratic (then Imperial) power and Christian Orthodox faith, with the tribulations of the lowlier populace, between labour and religion, as the common denominator for the preservation of the cultural identity and autonomy of Russia. A prolific historian of the time, Vasily Klyuchevsky, famously described the previous centuries of Russian history with the following epigram: "The state swelled, as the people grew thinner."<sup>5</sup> In this framework, the presence of Degeneration Theory within Russian borders was subdued and veered toward a critique of the State and of the Russian values of intellectual modernity. As Porolovev points out, Russian discourse sought to emphasize the role of the cultural and social milieu in ontogenetic and phylogenetic degeneracy, most often as an active critique of Russian autocracy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Russian conceptual frameworks, quite eminently in *The Brothers Karamazov*, often operated with a notion of near-inescapable hereditary degeneracy while simultaneously treading the Lamarckian paradigm, mirroring Emile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle (1871-1893). Three of the four Karamazov brothers inherit a particular degenerate trait of their father Fyodor: Dmitri possesses a passionate (carnal) and reckless nature; Ivan embodies the rationalistic embracer of moral nihilism; Smerdjakov is hubristic and 'rancid'. Lamarckism was in fact at the forefront of intellectual concerns insofar as heredity became a vehicle of preservation of environmentally acquirable perverted traits, but it further constituted a deliberate appeal to emphasize the functional role of the environment in sparking underlying corrupt tendencies. This is the assessment that Cesare Lombroso makes of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, "evidently a case of a crime of opportunity [delitto d'occasione] provoked by the misery, by the circumstances, in a temperament not wholly criminal."<sup>7</sup> As we will briefly touch upon later, so much emerges from Dmitri Karamazov, who subverts and deepens the connection between criminality and degeneration in his *factual* innocence but *spiritual* guilt of Fyodor's murder.

In order to ascertain the influence of Degeneration theory upon Russian thought and particularly upon that of Fyodor Karamazov, a man whose sensualism is continuously portrayed so rotten to the point of parody, we must contextualize the paramount question of the spectre of moral nihilism as a threat to Russian culture and Russian traditional values. This is epitomized earlier on in Ivan Turgenev's sketching of his character Bazarov in the novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), but is ever present in Russian literature which recognized it, concurrently with Nietzsche in Germany, as the real hazard for future generations. This is particularly true of two of the giants of Russian literature, Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy (chiefly in *Anna Karenina* and in *Kreutzer Sonata*) who often made their apprehensiveness about the consequences of nihilism as the topical subtext of some of their works. The nihilistic disease and the state of societal deterioration outline a cultural and national failure which pervades every layer of Russian society. Fusso envisions Dostoevsky's last three novels as being characteristically concerned with this subject matter, namely "the ways in which

<sup>1</sup> Danilevsky was a slavophile and major proponent of 'messianic Pan-Slavism' as a soteriological solution to the degeneration that pervaded the West. On Danilevsky, check out MacMaster (1954), p.154 and Martynuk (1999), ch.1.

<sup>2</sup> Dreher (1939), intro.

<sup>3</sup> Pogorolev (2016) p.6. Ibidem for a list of further Russian psychiatrists.

<sup>4</sup> On the impossible task of assessing Degeneration Theory as something unambiguous and possessing a specific unaltered paradigm in its varying discourses, see Pick (1989), p. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Socio-politically, the same assessment has been extended to the Russian condition to this day. Vladimir Putin's essay "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" adopts recurrent points in Degeneration Theory about "the gravest threat to Russia's future [being] internal decay." Graham (2000), p.371.

<sup>6</sup> Porolovev (2016), p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Lombroso (1893), p. 353. My translation.

the fathers of Russia have failed in their obligations to the sons, and therefore to the nation's future."<sup>8</sup> With specific regard to the case of the Karamazovs, Leatherbarrow describes their familial dynamics and relationships as "invested with a symbolism designed to imply a breakdown in the transmission of values and mutual responsibility between generations;"<sup>9</sup> culminating, not as subtly, in the abhorrent parricide of a somehow more loathsome man. Dostoevsky's portrayal of the Karamazov family, and their indulgence in proclivities, and in nihilism, and in overall moral bankruptcy, constitutes a psychologically vivid diagnosis of the causes and the symptoms of a peculiarly Russian calibre of degeneracy, capable of scrutinizing and delineating the very soul not only of the foulest decadent archetypes, but that of the men most afflicted with preoccupations of degeneracy.

## 2. Dostoevsky and the Criminal Type

Fyodor Dostoevsky operated both under the influence of degenerationist archetypes and themes, and, biographically, as a subject of degenerationist analyses. It is no secret, in fact, that Dostoevsky was often identified as a degenerate case, partly but not exclusively due to the severe attacks of epilepsy that afflicted him on average every three months from his exile in Semipalatinsk until his death.<sup>10</sup> The famous literary critique Georg Brandes, to whom Nietzsche briefly owed his popularity during his catatonic years, commented on Vasily Perov's famous portrait of Dostoevsky by remarking on his criminal qualities before acknowledging his genius as thinker and poet,<sup>11</sup> and then establishing a connection between his epilepsy and his genius.<sup>12</sup> Analogous sketches of Dostoevsky's appearance and nature can be found in Sigmund Freud, who found in Dostoevsky a "somasochist or a criminal"<sup>13</sup> type, or once again in Thomas Mann's juxtaposition of Dostoevsky's "genius of disease and the disease of genius."<sup>14</sup> Without fail, Nordau lists among the degenerate personalities that of Dostoevsky, whose degenerate mysticism was traced back to extreme forms of hysteria and delirium.<sup>15</sup> The staggering descriptions of the experiences of his characters often strengthened these alleged insights. The epilepsy of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* was perceived as a "disguised self-portrait" which "offers special insight into the psychology of the epileptic;" and reinforced, particularly in Lombroso, the tight relation between "epileptic seizure and creative rapture."<sup>16</sup>

The perverse alter ego of Prince Myshkin is embodied in the figure of Smerdjakov (literally, 'son of the reeking one'<sup>17</sup>), the epileptic bastard child of Fyodor Karamazov, whose disease, in Dostoevsky's detailed and morbid description, is portrayed as a plague that has cursed Smerdjakov since birth. His mother, a feeble-minded imbecile girl, was raped by Fyodor Karamazov and died of complications from childbirth shortly after. Smerdjakov's beginnings are entrenched in a diabolical act committed by a foul man against a mentally handicapped woman. He is found by Fyodor's house servant Grygory, the God-fearing loyal servant who takes pity on the boy and raises him as his own. Even he, at one point, inquires to Smerdjakov about his lack of humanity:

"He doesn't care for you or me, the monster. [...] He doesn't care for any one. Are you a human being? [...] You're not a human being. You grew from the mildew in the bath-house."<sup>18</sup>

Smerdjakov is portrayed as an unsavoury and shady figure, whose epilepsy only exacerbates a commonly palpable rancid undertone which pervades both his actions and his words, and which earns him the distrust of his brother Ivan. Above all, a simulated fit of epilepsy is employed by Smerdjakov as an escamotage to preserve his alibi for the murder of the father, Fyodor Karamazov, of whom Smerdjakov is the real perpetrator. There is a perpetual tension in the novel derived from the striking contrast between the biblical transposition of patricide onto deicide and the sheer despicable character of Fyodor Karamazov, "an egotistic, depraved, sensuous monster, who is a parasite, a cynic, a scoffer, a drunkard and a profligate, the synthesis of which, when combined with moral anaesthesia, constitutes degeneracy."<sup>19</sup> The importance of Smerdjakov and the other murderers of Dostoevsky's novels (Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, Stavrogin in *The Demons*) further lies in their embodiment of typically

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<sup>8</sup> Fusso (2002), pp.176-7.

<sup>9</sup> Leatherbarrow (1992), p.25.

<sup>10</sup> Lenz (2004), p.200.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Brandes: "Look at his countenance! Half the face of a Russian peasant, half the physiognomy of a criminal; [...] add to this the forehead of a thinker and poet [...] and the expressive mouth which speaks of tortures without number, of engulfing sadness, of unhealthy desires, enduring pity, sympathy, passionate envy, anxiety, torture!" Brandes (1889), p.301.

<sup>12</sup> "This exterior, at first sight plain and vulgar, on closer examination stamped with weird genius, thoroughly morbid and holly extraordinary, speaks of Dostoevsky's epileptic genius." Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> For this passage in Freud, see Wellek (1965), p.99.

<sup>14</sup> Mann (1945), vii-viii

<sup>15</sup> Nordau (1893), 1:400

<sup>16</sup> Dahlkvist (2015), p.595.

<sup>17</sup> The root \*smerd can signify "stink", but also "rabble" or "serf". Kantor (2001:201) writes: "the evaluative nuance of the word from which Dostoevsky produced the name Smerdyakov is easy enough to understand, and is linked with Russia's primary evil as most Russian writers saw it: the evil of serfdom." I will elaborate this point in the next subsection (3) on the discussion of poverty.

<sup>18</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov* (henceforth abbreviated in 'BK'), p.147.

<sup>19</sup> Collins (1922), p.76.

darker reflections of the other characters that orbit them. Ivan Karamazov recognizes in his illegitimate brother his same devilish streak, with the perhaps-not-so-significant difference<sup>20</sup> that the latter actualized his destruction. All of the brothers showcase some form of the *karamazovshchina*, the 'Karamazov imprint,' which denotes the "Karamazov way of muddling things so that no one could make head or tail of it,"<sup>21</sup> or in plainer terms, their capacity for proclivities, hypocrisy and evil. All the brothers share a fundamentally depraved tinge of character, certainly of the inherited kind, which renders the culmination of their familial distortions in the Karamazov parricide a roundabout demonstration of suicide, a nihilistic and self-destructive will to cleanse the corruption in their blood. While this is true of the bastard Smerdjakov, I will make a case that the *karamazovshchina*, the Karamazov taint, is both exhibited and loathed by each of the Karamazovs.

Straightforwardly, Smerdjakov hangs himself before admitting his responsibility in front of the mustered tribunal and having ultimately renounced God. The moral disease of nihilism brings Smerdjakov's actions to the extreme – they are unapologetic, tormented and socially reproached. His suicide originates from a cocktail of spite, fear, and a deeply perturbed atheism, finding its apogee in Ivan's internalized maxim that "all things are lawful."<sup>22</sup> He represents the incarnation of Ivan's nihilistic and rationalistic will brought to its moral and logical conclusion. Gazing into his profoundly depraved brother, Ivan is ultimately unable to withstand the ethical indifference that is warranted by the practice of his theories. On this matter, Robert Payne remarks that Dostoevsky's almost grotesque study of the psychology of criminals stemmed from the Russian precept that "crime was the visible sign of God's absence; and since crime [...] seemed indeed to be endemic, threatening the entire social structure, [Dostoevsky] determined to follow it to its hidden roots even if it meant following it through labyrinthine darkness."<sup>23</sup> While Prince Myshkin saw the value of his epileptic visions in the revelation of God's transcendence of time and the incoming Eternal Judgement,<sup>24</sup> Smerdjakov constitutes the *real* degenerate: a sickly man of tainted origins, whose own life was relegated to poverty by means of servitude to his crooked father, as he renounced God through parricide and embraced nihilism through the rope. The first point of departure between the two is found in the fact that Smerdjakov possesses none of the redeeming qualities of Myshkin, whose seizures become the conduit for the creation (or recognition) of a form of value, with the extraordinary epiphany that the moment before each epileptic episode may even "be worth a lifetime."<sup>25</sup> The second fundamental disparity is that Smerdjakov constitutes an idiosyncratically Russian brand of degenerate: he is conflict-ridden over the God question, he has been failed by the moral obligations of his nation (in the guise of Fyodor Karamazov's neglect and scorn), and inhabits a reality inescapably riddled with poverty. Meta-textually, the first clue of Dostoevsky's stance on the precepts of Degeneration Theory is precisely the bifurcation in the choices of these two characters: both are surface-level degenerates on account of their epilepsy, but only Smerdjakov can be truly sick because of his Godlessness.

### 3. Degeneracy in the Relation between Poverty and Children

With regards to the state of impoverishment, Korsakov remarked thus: "pauperism generally has the utmost importance in a functioning of mental illness — the children of persons living in dire poverty, have signs of degeneration, both physical and mental, much more than other children."<sup>26</sup> The ruthlessness of agrarian reality narrows the kinhood between human dignity and beasthood, tracing a careful thread between savage circumstances and criminality – Ivan quotes the national case of a Swiss murderer known as Richard, who was senselessly abused as cattle in childhood and finds God's grace only prior to his execution. Almost a century later, Italian novelist and poet Cesare Pavese has the narrative climax of *The Moon and the Bonfires* lie in a *metayer's* murder of his family in the late 1940s, sparked by a sudden outburst of fury from a life of backbreaking labour and misery. These spectres of peasantry and destitution inhabit Dmitri Karamazov's dream of revelation in the latter section of the novel. Inside the dream, a mother, with "her breasts [...] so dried up that there was not a drop of milk in them," is holding a sobbing infant. He suffers cold, and his clothes are frozen with him. It is explained: "they're poor people, burnt out. They've no bread. They're begging because they've been burnt out." To which Dmitri painfully cries out:

"Why are people poor? Why is the babe poor? Why is the steppe barren? Why don't they hug each other and kiss? [...] Why are they so dark from black misery? Why don't they feed the babe?"<sup>27</sup>

For Dmitri, it is the crude realities of peasant Russia synopsisized in his dream that provide the answer to Ivan's riddle of human suffering in God's presence. From his letters to his wife, we can be certain that Dostoevsky believed in the prophetic power of

<sup>20</sup> I elaborate upon this point in subsection 4.

<sup>21</sup> *BK*, p. 865.

<sup>22</sup> Smerdjakov to Ivan: "'All things are lawful.' That was quite right what you taught me, for you talked a lot to me about that. For if there's no everlasting God, there's no such thing as *virtue*, and there's no need of it." *BK*, p.768.

<sup>23</sup> Payne (1961), p.295.

<sup>24</sup> "At that moment [preceding an epileptic seizure], the extraordinary saying that 'there shall be time no longer' becomes, somehow, comprehensible to me." *The Idiot*, p.259.

<sup>25</sup> Quote from *The Idiot* found in Collins (1922), p.73.

<sup>26</sup> Korsakov (1901), p.417.

<sup>27</sup> *BK*, p.615.

dreams, and unsurprisingly, dreaming often and intensely is construed as a typical characteristic of criminals according to Lombroso.<sup>28</sup> Thus subverting the oneiric role, Dmitri experiences, through the raw destitution that characterizes his dream, a renewed inner strength which compels him to offer his life for the happiness of innocents and the convicts he will meet in the mines, following the judicial verdict of his guilt.

The opposite is true for Ivan, who is the true tragic character of the novel, for it is within the decadent circumstances of Russian poverty that Ivan finds the root for an ineradicable type of corruptness:

“a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only. It's just their defencelessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal, that sets his vile blood on fire.”<sup>29</sup>

Ivan takes the case of children because “in their case what [he means] is so unanswerably clear.”<sup>30</sup> Ivan quotes to his brother Alyosha a number of revolting stories about the depraved treatment of children, and expresses his sorrowful bewilderment over the question of suffering in the realm of God. In doing so, Ivan questions Alyosha's faith:

“Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her?”

The child has no choice but to silently bear the pain. It is useful to think of *The Demons*, where Stavrogin recounts his seduction and torment of 11-year-old Matryosha, who has metabolized the severe abuse of her mother into submissiveness. Her innocence and purity excite Stavrogin, who 'defiles' her and abandons her. Upon realizing the extent of her shame, she, too, commits suicide by hanging.<sup>31</sup> Anne Hruska hypothesizes that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “abused children reflect the historical and personal suffering so many serfs underwent, and the long-term results of that suffering.”<sup>32</sup> Certainly, degrading conditions become prominent in Dostoevsky insofar as they are the fuel for the internalization of degeneracy, on an individual sphere in the case of young children, and on a national level in the case of serfs.

Dostoevsky's treatment of children is as powerful as it is complex. The case of children is, according to Ivan, so “unanswerably clear” because the moral status of children is dubious. Doubtlessly, they are the paragon of innocence in virtue of their ignorance of the world - they are in some relevant sense 'unaltered' by its depravity because they fail to comprehend it. Conversely, children are most sensitive to outside influence and notoriously adopt qualities that they observe around them, in their parents, in their peers and in the world as a whole (we often repeat the mantra, somewhat deflectively, that “we are the product of our own environment!”). Children most often learn out of habit, and can display behaviours and agency whose moral implications they cannot fully appreciate. In their natural ambivalence, Dostoevsky presents children as moral agents who are fundamentally amoral, and who often suffer some despicable treatment which appears inexplicable in their eyes. Because of their ignorance, Ivan understands them as spontaneously embracing meekness as their place in their world. At the same time, this signifies that their suffering is amplified because to them it is unknowable, not merely because any meaning is fundamentally untraceable in the world, but because they naturally lack the appropriate faculties to seek it.<sup>33</sup>

Dostoevsky lays the foundations for the degenerative properties of poverty and its connection to children after Ivan's conversation with Alyosha, who upon exiting the tavern encounters and befriends a little boy named Ilyusha. Ilyusha is a physically feeble boy, dressed in ragged clothes and “poor little boots.”<sup>34</sup> The boy is of frail health, eventually forced into disease and an early death by the ruthless circumstances of his poverty. He is the son of Arina Petrovna, a crippled woman of humble origins, and Captain Snegiryov, who had been disgraced “for his vices”<sup>35</sup> and beaten and humiliated by Dmitri in a drunken rage - he is a downtrodden man “who had long been kept in subjection and had submitted to it.”<sup>36</sup> They inhabit “a decrepit little house [...] with a muddy

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<sup>28</sup> Lombroso (1902), 2:82.

<sup>29</sup> *BK*, pp.286-7.

<sup>30</sup> *BK*, p.290.

<sup>31</sup> This chapter, often included in modern editions under the title “At Tikhon”, was originally excluded from the main novel because Dostoevsky's editor deemed it excessively obscene. It appears somewhat anachronistic, since the chapter itself originally built the foundations for a different depiction of Stavrogin as the 'hero', thus prompting different rewrites in the direction of the novel.

<sup>32</sup> Hruska (2005), p.472.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Nietzsche in *GM III*, 28: “Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not negate suffering, he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a meaning for it, a to-this-end of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse thus far stretched over humanity.”

<sup>34</sup> From Alyosha's speech at Ilyusha's funeral. *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.939.

<sup>35</sup> *BK*, p.235. The room's décor suggests alcoholism.

<sup>36</sup> *BK*, p.234.

yard," constituted for the most part of an overcrowded and dimly lit "peasant's room,"<sup>37</sup> arranged to accommodate Ilyusha's crippled and hunchback sister. As the Captain himself admits, these are "surroundings impossible for the exercise of hospitality,"<sup>38</sup> which effectively render the host incapable of adhering to the basic social paradigm that shapes societal relations.

There are parallels throughout the novel between Smerdjakov and Ilyusha. They are both observed abusing animals in their early years, and are both shaped by the painful humiliation of their origins. This becomes exacerbated by the torments Ilyusha suffers at the hands of his peers, ostracized and first seen by Alyosha as he is pelted by his own schoolmates. This event seems to paint for Ilyusha the same hopeless path of Svidrigailov in his denial of God and his syllogistic endorsement of evil, which he famously explains thus:

"If there is a will beyond my own, it must be an evil will because pain exists. Therefore I must will evil to be in harmony with it. If there is no will beyond my own, then I must assert my own will until it is free of all check beyond itself. Therefore I must will evil."

The nature of these rationalizations staunchly echo those of Ivan's universal lawfulness of things, and Smerdjakov's beyond him. In his rabidness, Ilyusha is also likened to a wild beast, biting Alyosha's finger in their first encounter. Later on, the wealthy *Bazarovian* Madame Kokhlakova remarks upon the incident: "perhaps the boy was rabid. [...] Your boy might have been bitten by a mad dog and he would become mad and bite any one near him." Hruska draws an interesting parallel with the nonchalant assessment of Mme. Kokhlakova and the words of the Count of Monte Cristo in Dumas' homonymous novel, which Dostoevsky had read and which "hints at an important idea: that sin and violence can work like rabies, infecting the innocent from outside." The count, too, compares a miserable murderer, proximal to execution and unworthy of pity, with a rabid dog. There is a recurrent depiction that, to the paranoid mind of the 'pure', the perpetuation of degenerate traits assumes a physiological form of virality. Lastly, I suggest that the apparent gap between Ivan's treatment of children as the sublimation of humility and this first picture of Ilyusha, can only be bridged once we introduce Alyosha as the catalyst of real faith.

Hruska considers that: "in a novel where ideas of sin and grace play such important roles, the defense of a sinning outcast from stoning must carry an echo of the moment in the Gospel of John, when Christ defends the woman taken in adultery." In other words, "Alyosha, in protecting the sinning child, offers him a human embodiment of the love and forgiveness of God,"<sup>39</sup> which is actualized in Ilyusha's sufferings by means of his bodily illness and later finalized in his premature death. The kenosis of Ilyusha is engendered by his empathy toward the dog he had tormented in a vicious act of sin, a mere insignia of his destitute conditions. His physiological pathology allows a redemption of his spirit, wherein lies the true essence of corruptness, that is, not the pathology itself, but the criminal and Godless nihilism we clearly find in Smerdjakov. In this framework, Dostoevsky shares Nietzsche's vision of ennoblement through weakness, in which deviant characteristics can assume (or at least infuse) the productive form of one's kind. Dostoevsky's ideal of purity is conveyed and actualized by characters who are distinctly characterized by meekness and humility: Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Sonia Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment*, Liza in *Notes from the Underground*, and of course Alyosha. This crucial characteristic is functional in initiating positive change, both on the subjective level as well as on the broader societal scale. Later in the novel, Ilyusha's funeral becomes an occasion for Alyosha to remind the gathered men and children of:

"how good it was once here, when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us, for the time we were loving that poor boy, perhaps better than we are."<sup>40</sup>

It is crucial to reiterate that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the only important law is that of God. In rejecting justice as corrupt and dysfunctional, Ivan precipitates into nihilism, presumably because he is so troubled by the God question that he is unable to discern the human justice of our world from the justice of God, whose world we also inhabit. To the intellectual mind of Ivan, who takes the world in its wholeness, the two are fundamentally irreconcilable, but Ilyusha, in his instinctive humbleness only proper of children, is seen kissing Dmitri's hand to protect his father from the beatings at the beginning of the novel. The Captain says of his son that:

"at that moment in the square when he kissed his hand, at that moment my Ilyusha had grasped all that justice means. That truth entered into him and crushed him for ever."<sup>41</sup>

Humiliated and derided by his peers, Ilyusha allows the degraded conditions to proliferate and infiltrate his soul. Only Alyosha, understood as an emissary of faith, restores Ilyusha to a more profound state of religiousness. Dostoevsky's pervasive message is

<sup>37</sup> BK, p.233.

<sup>38</sup> BK, p.235.

<sup>39</sup> Hruska (2005), pp.483, 484.

<sup>40</sup> BK, p.938.

<sup>41</sup> BK, p.243.

that the only real antidote for degeneracy can be found in the faith in God. In analogy to Dostoevsky's solution, Zola outlines in *The Dream*, through the figure of young Angelique, a similar refuge in faith as the only power capable of dulling and ultimately relinquishing the more degenerate traits of one's tainted blood. However, both Angelique and Ilyusha are contaminated because of their poor and degenerate heritage, and must find God's deliverance in death.

In this regards, Dostoevsky attempts something novel: while degenerationist literature often sought to emphasize the kinship between women and children thwarted in the purpose of emphasizing the limits of the former, Dostoevsky subverts the narrative and places in children the role of spiritual and social redemption from corruption. It can be envisioned as a reversal of atavism: it identifies in the purity and suffering of children, the ontogenetic youth of the species, the medium for the attainment of moral value of a civilization, the phylogenesis. It is, fundamentally, the abstract for Dostoevsky's answer to the death of God. Ilyusha exemplifies the imperfect embodiment – insofar as he is rendered sinful and rabid by impoverishment, and predominantly as Smerdjakov's redeemed counterpart – of the transformative and redemptive power of perfect faith. An analogous treatment of faith as the sole remedy for social and individual degeneracy is hardly rare in Russian literature, and can be find in the late Tolstoy, in novels such as *Resurrection*, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. I will now turn precisely to this question, about the extent of the corruption instilled by nihilism, which we have prefigured, until now, as Dostoevsky's true catalyst for degeneracy.

#### **4. The Apogee of Degeneracy through Nihilism: Ivan's Devil**

Ivan Karamazov is the character of which we are supplied the most intense and articulate psychologization. We have touched upon his contempt of God for His promise of eternal harmony in a world of intense and senseless suffering of children. He is cynical, "constitutionally devoid of faith, and intellectually adverse to it and to morality."<sup>42</sup> Ivan is nuanced in his uncompromising rationalism, and a pessimist about man and the human condition. He is often described as 'crooked' throughout the novel, and in his frequent remarks about his own intelligence he is seen ruminating and conflicted over Fyodor's death: he recognizes his father's depravation and recognizes it as an integral part of the world, and yet he is tormented by guilt over his murder. At a first moment, Ivan wrestles with his awareness of Dmitri's homicidal intentions and his predispositions toward alcohol, thus assimilating his own complicity in the parricide, presumably because of their genetic brotherhood but more importantly because of their spiritual kinhood as degenerate individuals. Here, Ivan's true descent commences: he first realizes that in his nihilistic doctrine, facilitation is synonymous with participation. His access into the spiritual mirrors Ilyusha's – Ivan becomes afflicted with a fever from which he will never recover. In fact, he exhibits symptoms of psychosis and delirium, suffering from hallucinations in private as well as slurred speech and fatigue throughout Dmitri's trial. Whereas Ilyusha experiences the actualization of his redemption through his death in God, the consummation of Ivan's degenerate spirit occurs when he confronts his influence upon Smerdjakov, and the real outcome of nihilism in practice. Ivan's true guilt stems not from the traits he shares with the impulsive and alcoholic brother, but with the epileptic and bastard one. Uncoincidentally, the latter is the real culprit of the murder.

Ivan's rationalism deploys the full range of its hues in the early recital to Alyosha of "The Grand Inquisitor" poem, a fictional staging of the return of Christ to XV century Spain. His rationalism does not consist merely in the rejection of God, who Ivan is (at least on a superficial note) willing to accept. Ivan's nihilism is in some sense a deeply religious one, concerning "the love of God for his creation," for "if this world is the expression of the love of God for man, what hopes can one hold out for the love of man for man?"<sup>43</sup> In this, Ivan represents the archetypal exponent of Degeneration Theory who seeks the aetiology of decay somewhere in the environment, or in the natural predispositions present in the tainted blood<sup>44</sup> of certain men (if not mankind as a whole<sup>44</sup>). Through his Grand Inquisitor, Ivan postulates that the only figure to have understood man's nature has been, in fact, the Devil - that "wise and dreaded spirit of self-destruction and non-existence."<sup>45</sup> Molchusky explains that "the keenness of Ivan's reasoning lies in that he renounces God out of love for mankind."<sup>46</sup> In keeping with the Devil, Ivan sees man as weak and despicable, slave to his viler instincts and prone to tormenting and to bestowing suffering. The poem prefigures Ivan's delirium following his final conversation with Smerdjakov, in which he learns the truth about Fyodor's murder. Ivan descends into madness and hallucinates the Devil in the spiritual antipode to Ilyusha's funeral: this becomes the juxtaposed climax of degeneracy in the novel as Ivan comes to term with himself and the true aftermath of his beliefs.

It has been postulated that Dostoevsky's evil is an innate one.<sup>47</sup> My claim here is precisely the opposite: in *The Brothers Karamazov*, evil stems from a combination of degenerate elements of society and morals. Ivan is bewildered that his Devil appears not "in a

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<sup>42</sup> Collins (1922), p.77.

<sup>43</sup> Sutherland (1977), p.74.

<sup>44</sup> The influence of Augustine's doctrine of original sin has been extensive on Occidental theologians. While the Orthodox Church refutes the personal sin inherited from Adam's taint, Augustine's teachings would assume a more prominent role in Russia around the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, mostly because of the founding of theological schools, which bore Western curricular texts, around this time period.

<sup>45</sup> BK, p.298.

<sup>46</sup> Molchulsky (1967), p.616.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson (1991), pp.152-4.

red glow, with thunder and lightning, with scorched wings," but having assumed "such a modest form."<sup>48</sup> The Devil is "a Russian gentleman of a particular kind," who "belonged to that class of idle landowners who used to flourish in the times of serfdom," but whose worn attire betrays some manner of 'falling'. The Devil as a now destitute landowner references one of the stories about the senseless abuse of children which Ivan recounts to Alyosha. Ivan speaks of those men "who, retiring from the service into a life of leisure, are convinced that they've earned absolute power over the lives of their subjects."<sup>49</sup> These men see the lowliness of the poor as something as degrading as to render them dispensable and derisible. Here we are well to recall Hruska's earlier consideration on the relationship between the historical condition of serfdom and the humility of children,<sup>30</sup> whose meekness is for Dostoevsky the only Christ-like feature capable of redeeming degeneracy. In line with this, these degenerate men - perpetrators and proliferators of degeneracy - are fundamentally at odds with the purity of children, of whom they are the tormentors. The dialogue with the Devil is centred upon Ivan's delirious struggle to reveal the identity of the unforeseen visitor. Ivan's intellectualist epigrams and arguments fall in succession under the Devil's provocative mockery. Until at last, in a deep state of psychosis, Ivan declares:

"You are a lie, you are *my illness*, you are a phantom. It's only that I don't know how to destroy you and I see I must suffer for a time. You are *my hallucination*. You are the incarnation of *myself*, but only of one side of me ... of my thoughts and feelings, but only the *nastiest and stupidest of them*."<sup>50</sup>

The Devil argues back that he is, in fact, real. He has embodied the landowners, for his facilitation and persuasion of nihilistic wills has manifested in Smerdjakov's parricide – *Ivan's own* parricide. The senselessness of his morality (or lack thereof) has first physically manifested in the world and then reverberated back to his own soul. Ivan's case is one in which his precipitation into nihilism is so rotten that it precludes ennoblement. And thus, the Devil mocks Ivan for his soteriological, 'virtuous'<sup>51</sup> wish to declare his guilt in place of his brother Dmitri during the trial, that is, Ivan's last ditched effort to seek refuge in some sense of divine justice:

"Oh, you are going to perform an act of heroic virtue: to confess you murdered your father, that the valet murdered him at your instigation. [...] You are a little pig like Fyodor Pavlovitch and what do you want with virtue?"<sup>52</sup>

Strong motives of hereditary degeneracy come full circle as the Devil fades. Alyosha has entered the room, but it is too late. Ivan has fully succumbed to brain fever and lies beyond salvation, as Alyosha informs him that Smerdjakov has hanged himself.

##### 5. Final Remarks on The Trial, Alyosha and Revolution

In my reading the trial functions, on its own level, as a display and parody of the corruption of Russian society, from the witnesses to the lawyers and prosecutors, up to the attending public. In this landscape it is the 'realistic' layer, conceived in terms of Dostoevskian realism,<sup>53</sup> which delineates a crude portrayal of the dysfunctional products of moral anaesthesia. The trial is at first the talk of the town, and then becomes a matter of national curiosity. Dmitri becomes a public case study for parricide, but the interested participants gradually become theatrical in their choice of alignment, abandoning any regard for the trial as a forum of truth. Indeed, the Russian audiences are the same corrupt, gluttonous crowd that the Devil will both mock and elude in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Dmitri, while innocent, is found guilty; on a pragmatic level, truth and justice are powerless, insofar as these are, in fact, the human counterparts. At the same time, Fyodor's murder and the trial become the catalyst for the changes on the 'realistic' (spiritual) layer: through the dream of the 'babe', Dmitri embraces God and his incarceration; Ivan is forced to confront his moral bankruptcy and suffers a nervous breakdown, mocked by his own devilish personification; Smerdjakov, as the ultimate degenerate, commits the gravest sin of all and hangs himself to avoid it. The trial forces out those degenerate qualities which spiritually (even more so than physiologically) belong to the characters, and approximates them to their logical conclusion. The two layers operate in tandem, often mirroring or contradicting one another: if Ilyusha's short-lived precipitation into degeneracy is contoured by a lively hatred which seeped into his body and soul, it is only when he accepts Christ once more that he physically falls into illness.

In this discussion, Dmitri's trial has been operating in the background as an exemplification of the outcomes of the characters' struggles with the question of God, which, as we have seen with Ivan, consists in more than the metaphysical concern for His existence. Even Alyosha, who has not received any individual treatment in this article, enters a crisis of faith in the midst of things: after Father Zossima, Alyosha's beloved spiritual guide at the local monastery, passes away, his corpse starts to prematurely decompose. Alyosha's faith is deeply shaken by this occurrence, which produces a localized scandal purporting the dubious sanctity

<sup>48</sup> BK, p.786.

<sup>49</sup> BK, p.288.

<sup>50</sup> BK, p.775 (my emphasis).

<sup>51</sup> This echoes Smerdjakov words quote in note 21.

<sup>52</sup> BK, p.794-5.

<sup>53</sup> Dostoevsky writes: "I am only a realist in the highest sense of the word, that is I depict all the soul's depth. Arid observations of every-day trivialities I have long ceased to regard as realism – it is quite the reverse." Citation found in Collins (1922), p.81.



of Father Zossima, since, according to tradition, showing late signs of decomposition symbolized the holiness of the deceased. As a result of this, Alyosha heeds Father Zossima's advice and 'goes out into the world', wherein lies the degenerate tendency to leave "nothing sacred left." The unexpected early decomposition of Father Zossima's body ignites the fire of doubt in Alyosha's soul, who tests his spirit out in a world worse than sinful: one where men reject the idea of value. The most dangerous consequence of such a world is, of course, the degenerate psychosis that catches Ivan. With this in mind, we are now better equipped to understand Alyosha as a counterpart to Ivan. If Alyosha's journey is masterfully reflected in that of Ilyusha, who had become down-trodden by the reality of the world and who eventually found expiation through the warmth of true faith, which Alyosha himself bore, then we may assume that Alyosha too will be profoundly shaken by worldly reality, which must be understood as a necessary stepping-stone for the ultimate and true acceptance of Christ. It is in this reconciliation between the world of the human and that of the divine that we may find an answer to Ivan's riddle.

Certainly, we know that at the least Dostoevsky understood *The Brothers Karamazov* as the first of two parts of a major work, often conflated (but nonetheless intertwined with) a project titled "The Life of a Great Sinner," which shares the topical themes and characterization of a number of his eventually developed works from *The Demons* to *The Adolescent*, and most importantly *The Brothers Karamazov*, and of which we possess sketched notes and epistolary references. As to the validity of the sequel itself, by the seemingly provisional title of *The Sons*,<sup>54</sup> the question is more complex. Dostoevsky himself devotes an entire preface to the subject of this manuscript in the 1879 edition of the novel, teasing a unitary form to "one life story" in otherwise "two novels," in reference to the vicissitudes of Alyosha. It is no surprise that while the novel stands perfectly well on its own grounds, the story of Alyosha allows for some feelings of incompleteness within the wider spiritual subtexts of the story. While Ivan is arguably the main character of the novel, we have touched upon different ways in which Alyosha is the true pulsing heart of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

From the various sources<sup>55</sup> relating to the envisioned sequel to the novel, the recurring details concern the future of Alyosha in the guise of the village schoolmaster, wherein he eventually seeps into a revolutionary *Weltanschauung* and orchestrates a failed assassination on the tsar, for which he is captured and executed. Whatever psychological trauma (presumably related to his infidelity to Liza Khokhlakova, daughter of Mme. Kokhlakova) guides Alyosha in his radicalization, the attempted dispatching of the Russian emperor does befit a psychological development in a world in which nothing sacred is left. It would be erroneous, however, to understand the fall of Alyosha as the ineluctable fate of some downtrodden anarchist who despairs over the death of religious value (understood as Dostoevskian religiosity, by which God is foremost present in the nooks and crannies of mundanity<sup>56</sup>) and channels his will-for-a-better-world in a paroxysm of state violence. Alyosha is not Ivan, after all, and yet Ivan's spirited argumentations in *The Grand Inquisitor* are met with internalized apprehension by Alyosha. The spiritual Karamazov is not divorced from the contradictory and soul-crushing realities of peasant Russia. Different sources in fact suggest, far more plausibly, that Alyosha would assume the mantle of a "new type of Russian evangelical socialist."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Alyosha would presumably return to the monastery as a result of his trauma, while maintaining his role as mentor to those pupils imbued with revolutionary inclinations – quite possibly the same school peers who attend Ilyusha's funeral, which, we recall, is construed in the finale of the novel as the catalyst for positive change. Ivan discusses with Alyosha this single capacity for endurance and resilience in reference to the "strength" innate in their *karamazovshchina*, the Karamazov imprint:

"The strength of the Karamazovs—the strength of the Karamazov baseness."

"To sink into debauchery, to stifle your soul with corruption, yes?"

"Possibly even that ... only perhaps till I am thirty I shall escape it, and then—"

"How will you escape it? By what will you escape it? That's impossible with your ideas."

"In the Karamazov way, again."<sup>58</sup>

Alyosha's transition to revolutionary activist thus appears to reside in two quintessential elements of Degeneration Theory narratives. The first, as Ivan points out, is the Karamazov taint inherited by the father Fyodor. Although less surface-level than his siblings, Alyosha's moral feelings are also troubled and nuanced. He is not estranged from the depravity of the world, and the absurd necessities which arise from it. When Ivan illustrates the natural sadism of landowners, he recounts a horrible tale in which a peasant boy injures in play the paw of a general's favourite hound. As retribution, the general has the boy stripped and chased

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<sup>54</sup> Potentially echoing Turgenev's opus.

<sup>55</sup> A useful and brief overview of the varied sources can be found in Rice (2006).

<sup>56</sup> The interwoven nature of the religious side of man in everyday matters is best incarnated by the pelting of Ilyusha and Alyosha's quasi-epiphanic appearance.

<sup>57</sup> From the diary of I. F. Tiumentev, in Fonikova, *ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>58</sup> BK, p. 331.

by the hounds, which “tear him to pieces before his mother’s eyes.” On the subject of the general’s moral sentence, Alyosha concedes the point; the general merits:

“To be shot,” murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile.

“Bravo!” cried Ivan, delighted. “If even you say so.... You’re a pretty monk! So there is a little devil sitting in your heart, Alyosha Karamazov!”

“What I said was absurd, but—”

“That’s just the point, that ‘but!’” cried Ivan. “Let me tell you, novice, that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. We know what we know!”<sup>59</sup>

Alyosha is divided between his acceptance of the natural order of things and the absurdities which such a position warrants. He is often construed as a passive messenger in the events of the novel (at times literally, acting as a spokesperson for one character or the other), but is frequently depicted in his struggles to engage in a more grounded (‘earthly’) moral activism. It is not at all implausible that Alyosha would become a revolutionary. He, too, is in a perpetual quest to cleanse his blood, although he is conflicted about which path would yield the greatest harvest, whether a total embrace of monastic life or becoming a hand-on champion of moral change. A development of an idiosyncratically Russian “evangelical socialism” thus appears to cut the issue at its roots, as we see Alyosha’s devotion to a missionary work for God and for material change gradually climax into sedition and treason. Once more, this fuels the suggestion that the solution to Ivan’s riddle resides in the polychromatic synthesis between our world and the world of God.<sup>60</sup>

With regards to the second factor that accompanies Alyosha throughout the novel, the recurring motif of Alyosha’s presence in matters which do not directly require his involvement precisely concerns his inability to set aside people and their various tribulations, regardless of how superficial. Alyosha is pathologically empathetic, a characteristic which he appears to have inherited from his mother. Relevantly, Sofia Ivanovna mothered both Ivan and Alyosha, and is briefly described through her meekness and innocence, which excited the passions of Fyodor. Ivan and Alyosha are undoubtedly both moved by empathy in their understanding of the world, although the former attempts to make sense of it through bleak rationalizations whilst Alyosha full-heartedly adopts it as a guiding principle. Sofia Ivanovna suffers from some unelaborated nervous disease which leads to her premature death, but her connection to Alexei still persists, who “remembered his mother all his life, like a dream.”<sup>61</sup> Rice notes that “Alesha is a textbook case of male hysteria, who falls “as if cut down” by a seizure when his father drunkenly tells of sexually abusing his son’s mother. His approaches invariably induced in the unbalanced woman hysterical seizures which “extraordinarily resembled” Alesha’s attack. (Three, VIII) This suggests that Alesha’s proclivity to empathize suddenly and overwhelmingly with victims has an organic, pathological base not unusual in Dostoevsky’s art.”<sup>62</sup> Alyosha is no different from his brothers, insofar as he too is a product of inherited degenerate traits, for which he also seeks to repent.

In any case, if any credit can be consigned to the (at time speculative) sources relating to the major plot points of *The Sons*, Dostoevsky infuses his prophetic tellings with a note of hope. The tsar Alexander II would in fact be assassinated immediately after Dostoevsky’s own passing, and a revolutionary uprising would take place some two decades later. Perhaps Dostoevsky would have attributed some of the shortcomings of the October revolution to the anti-religious (excessively Ivan-like) party line, parading Ivan’s delirium as the guaranteed outcome for the proliferation of godlessness. Perhaps Dostoevsky’s evangelical socialism would have appeared out of place within the events at the turn of the century and was always burdened by a degree of fanciful impracticality. Of course, this is not a place for such discussion, but I have hopefully indicated the relevant meeting points between Degeneration Theory and Dostoevsky’s development of various themes in contemporary discourse. The implicit suggestion is that several talking points of degenerationist narratives must be understood in their moulding of the thought-spheres which interested Dostoevsky. A historical relation between the revolutionary events in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia and Degeneration Theory is certainly legitimate. While the connection between the pseudo-science of degenerationist thinkers and the tragic events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is well established, Degeneration Theory and its influences on the development of modern social sciences cannot be overstated.

The Russian revolution itself ignited a nation-wide discourse surrounding the causes and effects of the Russian uprising. Among the Russian scholarly intelligentsia who engaged with the subject, we may count Pitirim Sorokin, sociologist writer and founder of the sociology departments both at St. Petersburg University and at Harvard. Sorokin “theorized that the preceding cataclysmic

<sup>59</sup> BK, p. 304.

<sup>60</sup> If we understand Dostoevsky’s religiosity in plainer terms, rather than a synthesis between two seemingly contradictory and irreconcilable worlds, one may read this as a deeper appreciation of the realm of God.

<sup>61</sup> BK, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Rice, p. 50.

years of war, revolution, civil war, and famine had served to debase Russia's human material physically, morally, psychically, and even genetically," and further underlined that "the debilitating effect of war and famine, of violence and deprivation, had taken its toll not only on the population of Russia but also on its moral character." Analogously to Dostoevsky, Sorokin defended the possibility of material improvement in modernity, advocating for "science and 'scientifism,' which were not at all to blame for the crisis, would in fact be instrumental in rescuing it, and were not at all incompatible with a religious view of the world." Most importantly, Sorokin echoes various degenerationist archetypes: he understood the Bolshevik revolution and the later instalment of the soviets as the "collective social consciousness" which "became deformed in situations of great distress such as famine, favoring those elements that were concerned with matters of basic survival," later reinforcing the biological degradation of the remaining Russian people. In this passage from Sorokin's *Man and Society in Calamity*, published in the middle of the Second World War, we recall Ivan's projection of the devil:

"War and revolution, famine and pestilence, are again rampant on this planet. Again they exact their deadly toll from suffering humanity. Again they influence every moment of our existence: our mentality and behavior, our social life and cultural processes. *Like a fell demon, they cast their shadow upon every thought we think and every action we perform* (my emphasis)."<sup>63</sup>

As such, the advent of socialism (and later communism) was interpreted by Sorokin as a contingent byproduct of social degradation rather than a historical inevitability, insofar as "its redistributory goals and coercive methods resonated with the needs of the moment."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Alyosha's coming of age into an evangelical socialist would have been quite fitting, if not foretelling.

I have focalized this brief article around the chief preoccupation of Russian intellectuals in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is to say, the recent spike in degenerate subjects over the death of God; I have here tied this to the two other centrepieces of Russian culture: poverty and the State, in the respective guise of the humility of children and the failed moral responsibilities of the father and society. I have claimed that Dostoevsky's criminal archetype, embodied in Smerdjakov, fits into commonplace degenerationist narratives while highlighting Dostoevsky's prevalent concern about the inevitable outcomes of moral nihilism. This has been further explored in the figure of Ivan Karamazov and his inability to accept God's love in the face of the ruinous suffering of the most innocent, who are forced to bear the degenerate conditions and treatment of society. Finally, in the analysis of Ilyusha and of Alyosha, I have nonetheless proposed that Dostoevsky addresses both concerns about the death of God and the rabid effects of decadent conditions, by positing, through a subversion of normal atavistic tropes, an active return in faith exemplified in the meekness of children. This alone, according to Dostoevsky, possesses the required redemptive qualities capable of issuing true deliverance from the contamination of one's blood. This is merely a preliminary inquiry into the influence of degenerationist motifs on Dostoevsky's literary subject matters, but it has prompted an otherwise overlooked suggestion, concerning the often-speculative discourse surrounding Dostoevsky's envisioned sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*, about a foundational and pervasive *quid* of Dostoevsky's literary character. For the most part, I have abstained from biographical notations concerning Dostoevsky's personal vicissitudes with illness, politics and revolution, which have been documented at large but only seldom are they intertwined with the broader collective legacy of his time. If we are tempted to approach Dostoevsky as a *creator* (of a realistic psychology, or a new evangelical socialism), I propose that Dostoevsky's genius equally resides in his faculties of *innovator* and *subverter* of preexisting narratives, and that a fruitful analysis and appreciation of Dostoevsky's novels can only be actualized through a primary appreciation of their socio-historical milieu. Concurrently, I urge for a thorough critique of the root of certain permeating narratives which, as is the case for the pervasiveness of Degeneration Theory, have not been lost to time (they have merely been modernized!), but have simply been forgotten.

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<sup>63</sup> Sorokin (1942), 9.

<sup>64</sup> I have quoted sparsely from Finkel (2005). I thoroughly suggest Finkel's paper as a *ubi consistam* to explore Sorokin's interaction with Degeneration Theory.

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