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"Degeneration" in the 19th and early 20th Century Polish medical discourse and it’s cultural meaning.

The Polish „degeneracja“, originates from the Latin „degeneratio“ and consequently Romance „degeneration.” Similar words appearing in several languages or the literally texts were also translated as „zwyrodnienie“, a word with Slavic root, which function and slight difference may be compared to German “Entartung” or its archaic form “Ausartung”. Degeneration is one of the most important expressions in medically oriented discourse in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. It is understood as a result of biological decay is of course defined as a process that is contrary to any medical or social norm. The functional or moral aspects of degeneration have been widely disputed in academic literature. My is to inquire into the use and meanings of the “degeneration” and its synonyms in the Polish biological/medical literature and the use of the concept in the broader sense in the general culture, and compare it with similar phenomena in German speaking culture.

Polish-German relations in field of the “degeneration” are widely dispersed in whole scope of the problems. Firstly, the use of “zwyrodnienie” as a medical term dates back to the German-Polish Medical Dictionary of 1842. The following influences are also common in the Polish medically oriented cultural critique, which was inspired by M. Nordau Entartung (1892-93), to mention the M. Bornstein, Zwyrodnienie w świetle nauki współczesnej [Degeneration in terms of contemporary science], 1904.

Degeneration or decadence was one of the crucial concepts of the evolutionist biological and social thought. Firstly, one can hardly delimit the biological and social meaning of those words: due to the monist worldview of some thinkers and the popularization of the biologist metaphors in the social thought and the theory of culture. One can say, that the degeneration was a reversed evolution, a process of consecutive, mostly hereditary deterioration.

The term degeneration was also crucial to the Lamarckian evolutionary doctrine; of course as an exception from generally progressive way of thinking about the evolution of organisms, which inherit increasingly complex structures and function from their ancestors. In some cases, the inheritance of acquired characteristics may lead to the organisms’ devolution from the more complex forms to simpler. Degeneration can be seen also as a shadow of the Darwinian thought. Although, Darwin’s idea of the origin of species was based on the principle of the increasing undirected divergence and Darwin avoided teleology, he used the term degeneration with its various connotations. The main example of the deterioration in evolutionary terms were the parasites. According to Darwinism, once having a comfortable environment as parasite, the species will loose their more complex abilities. On the other hand, one can say, that the “degeneration” of parasites should not be described as such, because the transformation is only another way to achieve the proper fit to the circumstances.

The concepts of the evolution were known and widely disputed both in the circles of professional biologists, physicians and also the lay public in Poland. Several works of Darwin were translated to Polish shortly after the publication, the post-Darwinist evolutionary thought was also available to the public in the form of the translations of the major works of Ernst Häckel. Some of the major works on the degeneration itself such like French B.A. Morel Traité des Dégénérescences (1852) were considered more specialist, and thus not translated.

The social problems, which were associated with degeneracy, were also disputed in the medical journals and books, mostly in relation to texts on public-hygiene. The social problems were disputed using medical terms, and the medical publicists (mostly physicians-practitioners) felt competent and entitled to propose social reforms. This constituted a very important social change in itself, the doctors were interested not only in helping individuals, but in organizing the society to prevent real diseases, which are related to living conditions of the population, and subsequently to organize a “health” society in holistic approaches. The use of medicine or medical rhetoric as a significant tool in enforcing social policies is one of the most important issues in the history of the 20th Century with it’s crucial German-Polish facette.