

EMILE DURKHEIM

SUICIDE:

A STUDY IN SOCIOLOGY

TRANSLATED BY
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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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To Those Who, with Durkheim, Understand
the Life of Reason As Itself a Moral
Commitment, and Especially to Arthur
D. Gayer in Economics; Sol W. Gins-
burg in Psychiatry; Robert S. Lynd in
Sociology; and Arthur E. Murphy in
Philosophy

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

OF THE four major works of the renowned French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, only *Le Suicide* has remained to be translated. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was first published in English in 1915; the *Division of Labor in Society* in 1933 and *The Rules of Sociological Method* in 1938.¹ Over half a century has gone by since the first edition of *Le Suicide*, yet far more than antiquarian interest attaches to it in the sociological, statistical, philosophical, and psychological disciplines. But the historical significance of the volume in social thought would be enough reason for presenting it to readers in the English-speaking world. As a milestone in social science and an indispensable part in understanding the work of the man who founded and firmly established academic sociology in France and influenced many others outside of France, it should have long since been available in translation.

Though our statistical material today is more refined and broader, and our socio-psychological apparatus better established than was Durkheim's, his work on suicide remains the prototype of systematic, rigorous and unrelenting attack on the subject with the data, techniques, and accumulated knowledge available at any given period. Indeed, *Le Suicide* is among the very first modern examples of consistent and organized use of statistical method in social investigation. In the last decade of the nineteenth century when Durkheim was conducting the investigations incorporated in this work, repositories (governmental or private) of statistical information on this, or any

¹ All of these are now published by the *Free Press*.

other subject, were either rare, skimpy, or badly put together. With characteristic energy and the aid of some of his students, especially Marcel Mauss, Durkheim realigned the available statistics so as to answer the question posed by the general problem and its internal details. At the time, statistical techniques were little developed, and Durkheim was forced at given points to invent them as he went along. The elements of simple correlation were unknown except among the pathfinders in statistical techniques like Galton and Pearson, as were those of multiple and partial correlation, yet Durkheim establishes relationships between series of data by methodological perseverance and inference.

The tables which Durkheim drew up have been left in the translation in their somewhat quaint form, with no attempt to set them up according to present-day standards of statistical presentation. They have that way an historical value, as well as a character of their own. To embellish them would take away the atmosphere in which they were literally forged through necessity. Though more recent data are available, the kind of information Durkheim was trying to impart through them is still the kind that sociologists and actuarialists are interested in. Indeed, one table (on the effect of military life on suicide) has been taken over bodily in one of the best general, recent treatises on suicide.²

The maps which Durkheim placed in the text have been put in Appendices here, along with a special table which Durkheim drew up but could not use for reasons he gives in a footnote to it. The maps have been reproduced as they are with the French titles and statistical legends.

But in addition to its historical and methodological import, *Le Suicide* is of abiding significance because of the problem it treats and the sociological approach with which it is handled. For Durkheim is seeking to establish that what looks like a highly individual and personal phenomenon is explicable through the social structure and its ramifying functions. And even the revolutionary findings in psychiatry and the refinement and superior competence of contemporary actuarial statistics on this subject have yet to come fully to grips with this. We shall have more to say of it in the introduction.

² Dublin, Louis I, and Bunzel, Bessie, *To Be or Not To Be*, New York, 1933, p. 112-113.

There are those, moreover, who look upon *Le Suicide* as still an outstanding, if not the outstanding, work in what is called the study of social causation.³ And in what has come to be known as the sociology of knowledge, Durkheim's attempts to relate systems of thought to states of the collective conscience involved in the currents of egoism, altruism, and anomy, in this volume, have been of no little influence.⁴

Finally, *Le Suicide* shows Durkheim's fundamental principles of social interpretation in action. His social realism, which sees society as an entity greater than the sum of its parts, with its accompanying concepts of collective representations and the collective conscience, is here applied to a special problem-area, and the results are some of the richest it has ever borne. For Durkheim not only enunciated methodological and heuristic principles (as pre-eminently in *The Rules of Sociological Method*); he also tested them in research of no mean scope. That his work would have to be supplemented, added to, revised, and our knowledge advanced, he would be the first to admit, since he rightly saw scientific endeavor as a great collective undertaking whose findings are handed on from generation to generation and improved upon in the process.

The translation has been made from the edition which appeared in 1930, thirteen years after Durkheim's death and thirty-three years after the first edition in 1897. This edition was supervised by Marcel Mauss. Professor Mauss, in his brief introductory note there, tells us that it was not possible, because of the method of reprinting, to correct the few typographical and editorial errors. With the aid of Dr. John A. Spaulding, I have sought by textual and statistical query, to rectify them wherever they could be discovered.

No index appeared in the French text, and none has been prepared here. Instead, the detailed table of contents which Durkheim drew up has been translated and placed at the back of this book.

For the version of the translation here, I must take full responsibility. Dr. Spaulding and I worked over the first draft, then we both re-worked the second draft. But the final changes I made alone.

Mr. Jerome H. Skolnick, a student of mine, aided in checking

³ See especially, MacIver, R. M., *Social Causation*, New York, 1942.

⁴ See, for example, Parsons, Talcott, *The Structure of Social Action*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1949.

the typescript and in proof-reading. He did not confine his work to routine, and many of his suggestions proved to be of great value to me.

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THE AETIOLOGY OF SUICIDE

I

*T*HE range of Emile Durkheim's analysis of the interconnectedness of suicide with social and natural phenomena is so wide and varied as to preclude treatment of all its avenues and by-roads in the short space of this introduction. Within the confines of one not over-long volume, Durkheim has treated or touched on normal and abnormal psychology, social psychology, anthropology (especially the concept of race), meteorological and other "cosmic" factors, religion, marriage, the family, divorce, primitive rites and customs, social and economic crises, crime (especially homicide) and law and jurisprudence, history, education, and occupational groups. But a short appraisal is still possible because throughout Durkheim's work on each and all of these topics subsidiary to suicide, is the basic theme that suicide which appears to be a phenomenon relating to the individual is actually explicable aetiologically with reference to the social structure and its ramifying functions.

The early chapters in Durkheim's work are devoted to the negation of doctrines which ascribe suicide to extra-social factors, such as mental alienation, the characteristics of race as studied by anthropology, heredity, climate, temperature, and finally to a negation of the doctrine of "imitation," particularly as represented in the works of Gabriel Tarde whose social theory at the time in France had many followers and against whom Durkheim waged unrelenting warfare within the bounds of scholarly and academic amenities. Here in these early chapters Durkheim is involved in a process of elimination: all theses which require resort to individual or other extra-social causes

for suicide are dispatched, leaving only social causes to be considered. This is used as a foundation for reaffirming his thesis stated in his introduction that the suicide-rate is a phenomenon *sui generis*; that is, the *totality* of suicides in a society is a fact separate, distinct, and capable of study in its own terms.

Since, according to Durkheim, suicide cannot be explained by its individual forms, and since the suicide-rate is for him a distinct phenomenon in its own right, he proceeds to relate currents of suicide to social concomitants. It is these social concomitants of suicide which for Durkheim will serve to place any individual suicide in its proper aetiological setting.

From a study of religious affiliation, marriage and the family, and political and national communities, Durkheim is led to the first of his three categories of suicide: namely, egoistic suicide, which results from lack of integration of the individual into society. The stronger the forces throwing the individual onto his own resources, the greater the suicide-rate in the society in which this occurs. With respect to religious society, the suicide-rate is lowest among Catholics, the followers of a religion which closely integrates the individual into the collective life. Protestantism's rate is high and is correlate with the high state of individualism there. Indeed, the advancement of science and knowledge which is an accompaniment of the secularization process under Protestantism, while explaining the universe to man, nevertheless disintegrates the ties of the individual to the group and shows up in higher suicide-rates.

Egoistic suicide is also to be seen, according to Durkheim, where there is slight integration of the individual into family life. The greater the density of the family the greater the immunity of individuals to suicide. The individual characteristics of the spouses is unimportant in explaining the suicide-rate; it is dependent upon the structure of the family and the roles played by its members. In political and national communities, it is Durkheim's thesis that in great crises the suicide-rate falls because then society is more strongly integrated and the individual participates actively in social life. His egoism is restricted and his will to live strengthened.

Having established the variation of the suicide-rate with the degree of integration of social groups, Durkheim is led to consider the fact of suicide in social groups where there is comparatively great in-

tegration of the individual, as in lower societies. Here ~~where the~~ individual's life is rigorously governed by custom and habit, ~~suicide~~ is what he calls altruistic; that is, it results from the individual's ~~taking~~ his own life because of higher commandments, either those of religious sacrifice or unthinking political allegiance. This type of ~~suicide~~ Durkheim finds still existent in modern society in the army where ancient patterns of obedience are rife.

Egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide may be considered to be symptomatic of the way in which the individual is structured into the society; in the first case, inadequately, in the second case, over-adequately. But there is another form of suicide for Durkheim which results from lack of regulation of the individual by society. This he calls anomic suicide, and is in a chronic state in the modern economy. The individual's needs and their satisfaction have been regulated by society; the common beliefs and practices he has learned make him the embodiment of what Durkheim calls the collective conscience. When this regulation of the individual is upset so that his horizon is broadened beyond what he can endure, or contrariwise contracted unduly, conditions for anomic suicide tend toward a maximum. Thus, Durkheim instances sudden wealth as stimulative of suicide on the ground that the newly enriched individual is unable to cope with the new opportunities afforded him. The upper and lower limits of his desires, his scale of life, all are upset. The same type of situation occurs, according to Durkheim, in what he terms conjugal anomy exemplified by divorce. Here marital society no longer exercises its regulative influence upon the partners, and the suicide-rate for the divorced is comparatively high. This anomic situation is more severely reflected among divorced men than among divorced women, since it is the man, according to Durkheim, who has profited more from the regulative influence of marriage.

At this point in his analysis, Durkheim claims that the individual forms of suicide can be properly classified. Now that the three aetiological types—egoistic, altruistic, and anomic—have been established, it is possible, he says, to describe the individual behavior-patterns of those exemplifying these types. The other way around—seeking to find the causes of suicide by investigating the individual types—Durkheim had originally claimed to be fruitless. In addition to tabulating the individual forms of the three different types, Durkheim

seeks to establish that there are individual forms of suicide which display mixed types, such as the ego-anomic, the altruist-anomic, the ego-altruist.

Thus, the statistics available to Durkheim he finds not correlated with biological or cosmic phenomena, but with social phenomena, such as the family, political and economic society, religious groups. This correlation he claims indicates decisively that each society has a collective inclination towards suicide, a rate of self-homicide which is fairly constant for each society so long as the basic conditions of its existence remain the same. This collective inclination conforms, Durkheim believes, to his definition of a social fact given in his treatise, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. That is, this inclination is a reality in itself, exterior to the individual and exercising a coercive effect upon him. In short, the individual inclination to suicide is explicable scientifically only by relation to the collective inclination, and this collective inclination is itself a determined reflection of the structure of the society in which the individual lives.

The aggregate of individual views on life is more than the sum of the individual views to Durkheim. It is an existence in itself; what he calls the collective conscience, the totality of beliefs and practices, of folkways and *mores*. It is the repository of common sentiments, a well-spring from which each individual conscience draws its moral sustenance. Where these common sentiments rigorously guide the individual, as in Catholicism, and condemn the taking of one's own life, there the suicide-rate is low; where these common sentiments lay great stress on individualism, innovation and free thought, the hold over the individual slackens, he is tenuously bound to society, and can the more easily be led to suicide. The latter is the case with Protestantism. In lower societies, the collective conscience, according to Durkheim, holds individual life of little value, and self-immolation through suicide is the reflection of the society at work in the individual. And in higher societies where sudden crises upset the adjustment to which the individual has become habituated through the common sentiments and beliefs, anomy appears which shows itself in a rising suicide-rate.

Suicide, like crime, is for Durkheim no indication of immorality *per se*. In fact, a given number of suicides are to be expected in a given type of society. But where the rate increases rapidly, it is symp-