

É. Durkheim, *Suicide. A Study in Sociology*,
London - New York 1951.
Revue française Le suicide, Paris 1897.

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(which is not at all certain), it is probably from an automatic, unreflecting reaction. The motive energy aroused by his irritation is discharged by chance and at random; the creature happens to become its victim, though it cannot be said to have had a preconception of the result of its action. On the other hand, if some dogs refuse to take food on losing their masters, it is because the sadness into which they are thrown has automatically caused lack of hunger; death has resulted, but without having been foreseen. Neither fasting in this case nor the wound in the other have been used as means to a known effect. So the special characteristics of suicide as defined by us are lacking. Hence in the following we shall treat human suicide only.¹

But this definition not only forestalls erroneous combinations and arbitrary exclusions; it also gives us at once an idea of the place of suicide in moral life as a whole. It shows indeed that suicides do not form, as might be thought, a wholly distinct group, an isolated class of monstrous phenomena, unrelated to other forms of conduct, but rather are related to them by a continuous series of intermediate cases. They are merely the exaggerated form of common practices. Suicide, we say, exists indeed when the victim at the moment he commits the act destined to be fatal, knows the normal result of it with certainty. This certainty, however, may be greater or less. Introduce a few doubts, and you have a new fact, not suicide but closely akin to it, since only a difference of degree exists between them. Doubtless, a man exposing himself knowingly for another's sake but without the certainty of a fatal result is not a suicide, even if he should die, any more than the daredevil who intentionally toys with death while seeking to avoid it, or the man of apathetic temperament who, having no vital interest in anything, takes no care of health and so imperils it by neglect. Yet these different ways of acting are not radically distinct from true suicide. They result from similar states of mind, since they also entail mortal risks not unknown to the agent, and the prospect of these is no

¹ A very small but highly suspicious number of cases may not be explicable in this way. For instance as reported by Aristotle, that of a horse, who, realizing that he had been made to cover his dam without knowing the fact and after repeated refusals, flung himself intentionally from a cliff (*History of Animals*, IX, 47). Horse-breeders state that horses are by no means averse to incest. On this whole question see Westcott, *Suicide*, p. 174-179.

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deterrent; the sole difference is a lesser chance of death. Thus the scholar who dies from excessive devotion to study is currently and not wholly unreasonably said to have killed himself by his labor. All such facts form a sort of embryonic suicide, and though it is not methodologically sound to confuse them with complete and full suicide, their close relation to it must not be neglected. For suicide appears quite another matter, once its unbroken connection is recognized with acts, on the one hand, of courage and devotion, on the other of imprudence and clear neglect. The lesson of these connections will be better understood in what follows.

II

But is the fact thus defined of interest to the sociologist? Since suicide is an individual action affecting the individual only, it must seemingly depend exclusively on individual factors, thus belonging to psychology alone. Is not the suicide's resolve usually explained by his temperament, character, antecedents and private history?

The degree and conditions under which suicides may be legitimately studied in this way need not now be considered, but that they may be viewed in an entirely different light is certain. If, instead of seeing in them only separate occurrences, unrelated and to be separately studied, the suicides committed in a given society during a given period of time are taken as a whole, it appears that this total is not simply a sum of independent units, a collective total, but is itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature—a nature, furthermore, dominantly social. Indeed, provided too long a period is not considered, the statistics for one and the same society are almost invariable, as appears in Table I. This is because the environmental circumstances attending the life of peoples remain relatively unchanged from year to year. To be sure, more considerable variations occasionally occur; but they are quite exceptional. They are also clearly always contemporaneous with some passing crisis affecting the social state.² Thus, in 1848 there occurred an abrupt decline in all European states.

² The numbers applying to these exceptional years we have put in parentheses.

If a longer period of time is considered, more serious changes are observed. Then, however, they become chronic; they only prove that the structural characteristics of society have simultaneously suffered profound changes. It is interesting to note that they do not take place with the extreme slowness that quite a large number of observers has attributed to them, but are both abrupt and progressive. After a series of years, during which these figures have varied within very narrow limits, a rise suddenly appears which, after repeated vacillation, is confirmed, grows and is at last fixed. This is because every breach of social equilibrium, though sudden in its appearance, takes time to produce all its consequences. Thus, the evolution of suicide is composed of undulating movements, distinct and successive, which occur spasmodically, develop for a time, and then stop only to begin again. On Table I one of these waves is seen to have occurred almost throughout Europe in the wake of the events of 1848, or about the years 1850-1853 depending on the country; another began in Germany after the war of 1866, in France somewhat earlier, about 1860 at the height of the imperial government, in England about 1868, or after the commercial revolution caused by contemporary commercial treaties. Perhaps the same cause occasioned the new recrudescence observable in France about 1865. Finally, a new forward movement began after the war of 1870 which is still evident and fairly general throughout Europe.³

At each moment of its history, therefore, each society has a definite aptitude for suicide. The relative intensity of this aptitude is measured by taking the proportion between the total number of voluntary deaths and the population of every age and sex. We will call this numerical datum the rate of mortality through suicide, characteristic of the society under consideration. It is generally calculated in proportion to a million or a hundred thousand inhabitants.

Not only is this rate constant for long periods, but its invariability is even greater than that of leading demographic data. General mortality, especially, varies much more often from year to year and the variations

³ In the table, ordinary figures and heavy type figures represent respectively the series of numbers indicating these different waves of movement, to make each group stand out in its distinctiveness.

Table I Stability of suicide in the principal European countries (absolute figures)

Years	France	Prussia	England	Saxony	Bavaria	Denmark
1841	2,814	1,630		290		377
1842	2,866	1,598		318		317
1843	3,020	1,720		420		301
1844	2,973	1,575		335	244	285
1845	3,082	1,700		338	250	290
1846	3,102	1,707		373	220	376
1847	(3,647)	(1,852)		377	217	345
1848	(3,301)	(1,649)		398	215	(305)
1849	3,583	(1,527)		(328)	(189)	337
1850	3,596	1,736		390	250	340
1851	3,598	1,809		402	260	401
1852	3,676	2,073		530	226	426
1853	3,415	1,942		431	263	419
1854	3,700	2,198		547	318	363
1855	3,810	2,351		568	307	399
1856	4,189	2,377		550	318	426
1857	3,967	2,038	1,349	485	286	427
1858	3,903	2,126	1,275	491	329	457
1859	3,899	2,146	1,248	507	387	451
1860	4,050	2,105	1,365	548	339	468
1861	4,454	2,185	1,347	(643)		
1862	4,770	2,112	1,317	557		
1863	4,613	2,374	1,315	643		
1864	4,521	2,203	1,240	(545)		411
1865	4,946	2,361	1,392	619		451
1866	5,119	2,485	1,329	704	410	443
1867	5,011	3,625	1,316	752	471	469
1868	(5,547)	3,658	1,508	800	453	498
1869	5,114	3,544	1,588	710	425	462
1870		3,270	1,554			486
1871		3,135	1,495			
1872		3,467	1,514			

it undergoes are far greater. This is shown assuredly by comparing the way in which both phenomena vary in several periods. This we have done in Table II. To manifest the relationship, the rate for each year of both deaths and suicides, has been expressed as a proportion of the average rate of the period, in percentage form. Thus the differences of one year from another or with reference to the average rate are made comparable in the two columns. From this comparison it appears that at each period the degree of variation is much greater with respect to general mortality than to suicide; on the average, it is twice as great. Only the minimum difference between two successive years is perceptibly the same in each case during the last two periods. However, this minimum is exceptional in the column of mortality, whereas the annual variations of suicides differ from it rarely. This may be seen by a comparison of the average differences.⁴

To be sure, if we compare not the successive years of a single period but the averages of different periods, the variations observed in the rate of mortality become almost negligible. The changes in one or the other direction occurring from year to year and due to temporary and accidental causes neutralize one another if a more extended unit of time is made the basis of calculation; and thus disappear from the average figures which, because of this elimination, show much more invariability. For example, in France from 1841 to 1870, it was in each successive ten-year period 23.18; 23.72; 22.87. But, first, it is already remarkable that from one year to its successor suicide is at least as stable, if not more so, than general mortality taken only from period to period. The average rate of mortality, furthermore, achieves this regularity only by being general and impersonal, and can afford only a very imperfect description of a given society. It is in fact substantially the same for all peoples of approximately the same degree of civilization; at least, the differences are very slight. In France, for example, as we have just seen, it oscillates, from 1841 to 1870, around 23 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants; during the same period in Belgium it was successively 23.93, 22.5, 24.04; in England, 22.32, 22.21, 22.68; in Denmark, 22.65 (1845-49), 20.44 (1855-59), 20.4 (1861-68). With the

⁴ Wagner had already compared mortality and marriage in this way. (*Die Gesetzmässigkeit*, etc., p. 87.)

exception of Russia, which is still only geographically European, the only large European countries where the incidence of mortality differs somewhat more widely from the above figures are Italy, where even between 1861 and 1867 it rose to 30.6, and Austria, where it was yet greater (32.52).⁵ On the contrary, the suicide-rate, while showing only slight annual changes, varies according to society by doubling, tripling, quadrupling, and even more (Table III below). Accordingly, to a much higher degree than the death-rate, it is peculiar to each social group

Table II Comparative variations of the rate of mortality by suicide and the rate of general mortality

A. ABSOLUTE FIGURES									
Period	Suicides		Deaths		Period	Suicides		Deaths	
	per 100,000 inhabitants	per 1,000 inhabitants	per 100,000 inhabitants	per 1,000 inhabitants		per 100,000 inhabitants	per 1,000 inhabitants	per 100,000 inhabitants	per 1,000 inhabitants
1841-46					1849-55				
1841	8.2	23.2	1849	10.0	27.3	1856	11.6	23.1	
1842	8.3	24.0	1850	10.1	21.4	1857	10.9	23.7	
1843	8.7	23.1	1851	10.0	22.3	1858	10.7	24.1	
1844	8.5	22.1	1852	10.5	22.5	1859	11.1	26.8	
1845	8.8	21.2	1853	9.4	22.0	1860	11.9	21.4	
1846	8.7	23.2	1854	10.2	27.4				
			1855	10.5	25.9				
Averages	8.5	22.8	Averages	10.1	24.1	Averages	11.2	23.8	
B. ANNUAL RATE RELATED TO THE AVERAGE IN PERCENTAGE FORM									
1841	96	101.7	1849	98.9	113.2	1856	103.5	97	
1842	97	105.2	1850	100	88.7	1857	97.3	99.3	
1843	102	101.3	1851	98.9	92.5	1858	95.5	101.2	
1844	100	96.9	1852	103.8	93.3	1859	99.1	112.6	
1845	103.5	92.9	1853	93	91.2	1860	106.0	89.9	
1846	102.3	101.7	1854	100.9	113.6				
			1855	103	107.4				
Averages	100	100	Averages	100	100	Averages	100	100	

⁵ According to Bertillon, article *Mortalité* in the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, V. LXI, p. 738.

C. DEGREE OF DIFFERENCE

	Between two consecutive years			Above and below the average	
	Greatest difference	Least difference	Average difference	Greatest below	Greatest above
			Per. 1841-46		
General mortality	8.8	2.5	4.9	7.1	4.0
Suicide-rate	5.0	1	2.5	4	2.8
			Per. 1849-55		
General mortality	24.5	0.8	10.6	13.6	11.3
Suicide-rate	10.8	1.1	4.48	3.8	7.0
			Per. 1856-60		
General mortality	22.7	1.9	9.57	12.6	10.1
Suicide-rate	6.9	1.8	4.82	6.0	4.5

Table III Rate of suicides per million inhabitants in the different European countries

	Period			Numerical position in the		
	1866-70	1871-75	1874-78	1 period	2 period	3 period
Italy	30	35	38	1	1	1
Belgium	66	69	78	2	3	4
England	67	66	69	3	2	2
Norway	76	73	71	4	4	3
Austria	78	94	130	5	7	7
Sweden	85	81	91	6	5	5
Bavaria	90	91	100	7	6	6
France	135	150	160	8	9	9
Prussia	142	134	152	9	8	8
Denmark	277	258	255	10	10	10
Saxony	293	267	334	11	11	11

where it can be considered as a characteristic index. It is even so closely related to what is most deeply constitutional in each national temperament that the order in which the different societies appear in this respect remains almost exactly the same at very different periods. This

is proved by examining this same table. During the three periods there compared, suicide has everywhere increased, but in this advance the various peoples have retained their respective distances from one another. Each has its own peculiar coefficient of acceleration.

The suicide-rate is therefore a factual order, unified and definite, as is shown by both its permanence and its variability. For this permanence would be inexplicable if it were not the result of a group of distinct characteristics, solidary one with another, and simultaneously effective in spite of different attendant circumstances; and this variability proves the concrete and individual quality of these same characteristics, since they vary with the individual character of society itself. In short, these statistical data express the suicidal tendency with which each society is collectively afflicted. We need not state the actual nature of this tendency, whether it is a state *sui generis* of the collective mind,⁶ with its own reality, or represents merely a sum of individual states. Although the preceding considerations are hard to reconcile with the second hypothesis, we reserve this problem for treatment in the course of this work.⁷ Whatever one's opinion on this subject, such a tendency certainly exists under one heading or another. Each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths. This predisposition may therefore be the subject of a special study belonging to sociology. This is the study we are going to undertake.

We do not accordingly intend to make as nearly complete an inventory as possible of all the conditions affecting the origin of individual suicides, but merely to examine those on which the definite fact that we have called the social suicide-rate depends. The two questions are obviously quite distinct, whatever relation may nevertheless exist between them. Certainly many of the individual conditions are not general enough to affect the relation between the total number of voluntary deaths and the population. They may perhaps cause this or that separate individual to kill himself, but not give society as a whole a greater or lesser tendency to suicide. As they do not depend on a certain state of social organization, they have no social repercussions.

⁶ By the use of this expression we of course do not at all intend to hypostasize the collective conscience. We do not recognize any more substantial a soul in society than in the individual. But we shall revert to this point.

⁷ Bk. III, Chap. 1.

Thus they concern the psychologist, not the sociologist. The latter studies the causes capable of affecting not separate individuals but the group. Therefore among the factors of suicide the only ones which concern him are those whose action is felt by society as a whole. The suicide-rate is the product of these factors. This is why we must limit our attention to them.

Such is the subject of the present work, to contain three parts.

The phenomenon to be explained can depend only on extra-social causes of broad generality or on causes expressly social. We shall search first for the influence of the former and shall find it non-existent or very inconsiderable.

Next we shall determine the nature of the social causes, how they produce their effects, and their relations to the individual states associated with the different sorts of suicide.

After that, we shall be better able to state precisely what the social element of suicide consists of; that is, the collective tendency just referred to, its relations to other social facts, and the means that can be used to counteract it.⁸

⁸ Whenever necessary, the special bibliography of the particular questions treated will be found at the beginning of each chapter. Below are references on the general bibliography of suicide:

I. Official statistical publications forming our principal sources: Oesterreichische Statistik (Statistik des Sanitätswesens).—Annuaire statistique de la Belgique.—Zeitschrift des Koeniglich Bayerischen statistischen Bureau.—Preussische Statistik (Sterblichkeit nach Todesursachen und Altersklassen der Gestorbenen).—Wuerttembergische Jahrbücher für Statistik und Landeskunde.—Badische Statistik.—Tenth Census of the United States. Report on the mortality and vital statistics of the United States, 1880, 11th part.—Annuario statistico Italiano.—Statistica delle cause delle Morti in tutti i comuni del Regno.—Relazione medico-statistica sulle conditione sanitarie dell' Exercito Italiano.—Statistische Nachrichten des Grossherzogthums Oldenburg.—Compte-rendu general de l'administration de la justice criminelle en France.

Statistisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Berlin.—Statistik der Stadt Wien.—Statistisches Handbuch für den Hamburgischen Staat.—Jahrbuch für die amtliche Statistik der Bremischen Staaten.—Annuaire statistique de la ville de Paris.

Other useful information will be found in the following articles: Platter, *Ueber die Selbstmorde in Oesterreich in den Jahren 1819–1872*. In *Statist. Monatsh.*, 1876.—Brattassevic, *Die Selbstmorde in Oesterreich in den Jahren 1873–77*, in *Stat. Monatsh.*, 1878, p. 429.—Ogle, *Suicides in England and Wales in relation to Age, Sex, Season and Occupation*. In *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 1886.—Rossi, *Il Suicidio nella Spagna nel 1884*. *Arch. di psichiatria*, Turin, 1886.