

own, may yet be more active and important than that of today. The female sex will not again become more similar to the male; on the contrary, we may foresee that it will become more different. But these differences will become of greater social use than in the past. Why, for instance, should not aesthetic functions become woman's as man, more and more absorbed by functions of utility, has to renounce them? Both sexes would thus approximate each other by their very differences. They would be socially equalized, but in different ways.¹⁶ And evolution does seem to be taking place in this direction. Woman differs from man much more in cities than in the country; and yet her intellectual and moral constitution is most impregnated with social life in cities.

In any case, this is the only way to reduce the unhappy moral conflict actually dividing the sexes, definite proof of which the statistics of suicide have given us. Only when the difference between husband and wife becomes less, will marriage no longer be thought, so to speak, necessarily to favor one to the detriment of the other. As for the champions today of equal rights for woman with those of man, they forget that the work of centuries cannot be instantly abolished; that juridical equality cannot be legitimate so long as psychological inequality is so flagrant. Our efforts must be bent to reduce the latter. For man and woman to be equally protected by the same institution, they must first of all be creatures of the same nature. Only then will the indissolubility of the conjugal bond no longer be accused of serving only one of the two parties pleading.

IV

In resume, just as suicide does not proceed from man's difficulties in maintaining his existence, so the means of arresting its progress is not to make the struggle less difficult and life easier. If more suicides occur today than formerly, this is not because, to maintain ourselves, we have

¹⁶ It may be foreseen that this differentiation would probably no longer have the strictly regulative character that it has today. Woman would not be officially excluded from certain functions and relegated to others. She could choose more freely, but as her choice would be determined by her aptitudes it would generally bear on the same sort of occupations. It would be perceptibly uniform, though not obligatory.

to make more painful efforts, nor that our legitimate needs are less satisfied, but because we no longer know the limits of legitimate needs nor perceive the direction of our efforts. Competition is of course becoming keener every day, because the greater ease of communication sets a constantly increasing number of competitors at loggerheads. On the other hand, a more perfected division of labor and its accompanying more complex cooperation, by multiplying and infinitely varying the occupations by which men can make themselves useful to other men, multiplies the means of existence and places them within reach of a greater variety of persons. The most inferior aptitudes may find a place here. At the same time, the more intense production resulting from this subtler cooperation, by increasing humanity's total resources, assures each worker an ampler pay and so achieves a balance between the greater wear on vital strength and its recuperation. Indeed, it is certain that average comfort has increased on all levels of the social hierarchy, although perhaps not always in equal proportions. The maladjustment from which we suffer does not exist because the objective causes of suffering have increased in number or intensity; it bears witness not to greater economic poverty, but to an alarming poverty of morality.

We must not, however, mistake the meaning of the word. When an individual or social ill is said to be entirely moral, the usual meaning is that it does not respond to any actual treatment but can be cured only by repeated exhortations, methodical objurgations, in a word, by verbal influence. We reason as though a system of ideas had no reference to the rest of the universe and as if it were enough, consequently, to utter some particular formulae in a particular way in order to destroy or change it. We fail to see that this is applying to things of the spirit the beliefs and methods applied by primitive man to things of the physical world. Just as he believes in the existence of magical words capable of changing one being into another, we implicitly admit without seeing the grossness of our own conception that men's undertakings and characters can be transformed by appropriate words. Like the savage, who by vehement declaration of his will to see some cosmic phenomenon occur, believes he can make it happen through the use of sympathetic magic, we think that if we warmly state our wish to see such a change accomplished, it will spontaneously take place. In reality,

a people's mental system is a system of definite forces not to be disarranged or rearranged by simple injunctions. It depends really on the grouping and organization of social elements. Given a people composed of a certain number of individuals arranged in a certain way, we obtain a definite total of collective ideas and practices which remain constant so long as the conditions on which they depend are themselves the same. To be sure, the nature of the collective existence necessarily varies depending on whether its composite parts are more or less numerous, arranged on this or that plan, and so its ways of thinking and acting change; but the latter may be changed only by changing the collective existence itself and this cannot be done without modifying its anatomical constitution. By calling the evil of which the abnormal increase in suicides is symptomatic of a moral evil, we are far from thinking to reduce it to some superficial ill which may be conjured away by soft words. On the contrary, the change in moral temperament thus betrayed bears witness to a profound change in our social structure. To cure one, therefore, the other must be reformed.

We have explained what, it seems to us, this reform should be. But the final proof of its urgency is that it is forced on us not only by the actual state of suicide but by the whole of our historical development.

The latter's chief characteristic is to have swept cleanly away all the older social forms of organization. One after another, they have disappeared either through the slow usury of time or through great disturbances, but without being replaced. Society was originally organized on the family basis; it was formed by the union of a number of smaller societies, clans, all of whose members were or considered themselves kin. This organization seems not to have remained long in a pure state. The family quite soon ceases to be a political division and becomes the center of private life. Territorial grouping then succeeds the old family grouping. Individuals occupying the same area gradually, but independently of consanguinity, contract common ideas and customs which are not to the same extent those of their neighbors who live farther away. Thus, little aggregations come to exist with no other material foundation than neighborhood and its resultant relations, each one, however, with its own distinct physiognomy; we have the village, or better, the city-state and its dependent territory. Of course, they do not usually shut themselves off in savage isolation. They

become confederated, combine under various forms and thus develop more complex societies which they enter however without sacrificing their personalities. They remain the elemental segments of which the whole society is merely an enlarged reproduction. But bit by bit, as these confederations become tighter, the territorial surroundings blend with one another and lose their former moral individuality. From one city or district to another, the differences decrease.¹⁷ The great change brought about by the French Revolution was precisely to carry this levelling to a point hitherto unknown. Not that it improvised this change; the latter had long since been prepared by the progressive centralization to which the ancient regime had advanced. But the legal suppression of the former provinces and the creation of new, purely artificial and nominal divisions definitely made it permanent. Since then the development of means of communication, by mixing the populations, has almost eliminated the last traces of the old dispensation. And since what remained of occupational organization was violently destroyed at the same time, all secondary organs of social life were done away with.

Only one collective form survived the tempest: the State. By the nature of things this therefore tended to absorb all forms of activity which had a social character, and was henceforth confronted by nothing but an unstable flux of individuals. But then, by this very fact, it was compelled to assume functions for which it was unfitted and which it has not been able to discharge satisfactorily. It has often been said that the State is as intrusive as it is impotent. It makes a sickly attempt to extend itself over all sorts of things which do not belong to it, or which it grasps only by doing them violence. Thence the expenditure of energy with which the State is reproached and which is truly out of proportion with the results obtained. On the other hand, individuals are no longer subject to any other collective control but the State's, since it is the sole organized collectivity. Individuals are made aware of society and of their dependence upon it only through the State. But since this is far from them, it can exert only a distant, discontinuous

¹⁷ Of course, we can only show the chief stages of this evolution. We do not mean to imply that modern societies succeeded directly from the city-state; we omit intermediate stages.

influence over them; which is why this feeling has neither the necessary constancy nor strength. For most of their lives nothing about them draws them out of themselves and imposes restraint on them. Thus they inevitably lapse into egoism or anarchy. Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. To free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralize him. These are really the two characteristics of our moral situation. While the State becomes inflated and hypertrophied in order to obtain a firm enough grip upon individuals, but without succeeding, the latter, without mutual relationships, tumble over one another like so many liquid molecules, encountering no central energy to retain, fix and organize them.

To remedy this evil, the restitution to local groups of something of their old autonomy is periodically suggested. This is called decentralization. But the only really useful decentralization is one which would simultaneously produce a greater concentration of social energies. Without loosening the bonds uniting each part of society with the State, moral powers must be created with an influence, which the State cannot have, over the multitude of individuals. Today neither the commune, the department nor the province has enough ascendancy over us to exert this influence; we see in them only conventional labels without meaning. Of course, other things being equal, people usually prefer to live where they were born and have been reared. But local patriotisms no longer exist nor can they exist. The general life of the country, permanently unified, rebels at all dispersion of this sort. We may regret the past—but in vain. It is impossible to artificially resuscitate a particularist spirit which no longer has any foundation. Henceforth it will be possible to lighten somewhat the functioning of the machinery of government by various ingenious combinations; but the moral stability of society can never be affected in this way. By so doing the burden of overloaded ministries can be reduced or a little more scope given to the activity of regional authorities; but not in this way will so many moral environments be constructed from the different regions. For in addition to the fact that administrative measures would be inadequate to achieve such a result, the result itself is neither possible nor desirable.

The only decentralization which would make possible the multiplication of the centers of communal life without weakening national

unity is what might be called occupational decentralization. For, as each of these centers would be only the focus of a special, limited activity, they would be inseparable from one another and the individual could thus form attachments there without becoming less solidary with the whole. Social life can be divided, while retaining its unity, only if each of these divisions represents a function. This has been understood by the ever growing number¹⁸ of authors and statesmen, who wish to make the occupational group the base of our political organization, that is, divide the electoral college, not by sections of territory but by corporations. But first the corporation must be organized. It must be more than an assemblage of individuals who meet on election day without any common bond. It can fulfill its destined role only if, in place of being a creature of convention, it becomes a definite institution, a collective personality, with its customs and traditions, its rights and duties, its unity. The great difficulty is not to decree that the representatives shall be selected by occupation and what each occupation's share shall be, but to make each corporation become a moral individuality. Otherwise, only another external and artificial subdivision will be added to the existing ones which we wish to supplant.

Thus a monograph on suicide has a bearing beyond the special class of facts which it particularly embraces. The questions it raises are closely connected with the most serious practical problems of the present time. The abnormal development of suicide and the general unrest of contemporary societies spring from the same causes. The exceptionally high number of voluntary deaths manifests the state of deep disturbance from which civilized societies are suffering, and bears witness to its gravity. It may even be said that this measures it. When these sufferings are expressed by a theorist they may be considered exaggerated and unfaithfully interpreted. But in these statistics of suicide they speak for themselves, allowing no room for personal interpretation. The only possible way, then, to check this current of collective sadness is by at least lessening the collective malady of which it is a sign and a result. We have shown that it is not necessary, in order to accomplish this, to restore, artificially, social forms which are outworn and which could be endowed with only an appearance of life, or to create out of

¹⁸ See on this point Benoist, *L'organisation du suffrage universel*, in *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, 1886.

whole cloth entirely new forms without historical analogies. We must seek in the past the germs of new life which it contained, and hasten their development.

As for determining more exactly the special forms under which these germs are destined to develop from now on, that is, the details of the occupational organization that we shall need, this cannot be attempted within the compass of this work. Only after a special study of the corporative regime and the laws of its development would it be possible to make the above conclusions more precise. Nor must one exaggerate the importance of the too definite programs generally embraced by our political philosophers. They are imaginative flights, too far from the complexity of facts to be of much practical value; social reality is not neat enough and is too little understood as yet to be anticipated in detail. Only direct contact with things can give the teachings of science the definiteness they lack. Once the existence of the evil is proved, its nature and its source, and we consequently know the general features of the remedy and its point of application, the important thing is not to draw up in advance a plan anticipating everything, but rather to set resolutely to work.