

BOOK REVIEW

Suicide: A Study in Sociology

BY

EMILE DURKHEIM 1897

TRANSLATED BY

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ROUTLEDGE and KEGAN PAUL LTD., LONDON

NO. OF PAGES: 405

Cost: 2.95 DOLLAR

Suicide, the third major work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), is of great importance because it is the first serious effort to establish empiricism in sociology, an empiricism that would provide a sociological explanation for a phenomenon traditionally regarded as exclusively psychological and individualistic.

The masterpiece, which runs into over 400 pages, is divided into three parts, and addresses the phenomenon of suicide and its causes. While its first part delves into the "Extra-Social Factors", part two investigates the "Social Causes and Social Types", and part three looks into "General Nature of Suicide as a Social Phenomenon".

Written by one of the world's most influential sociologists—Emile Durkheim, the classic argues that suicide primarily results from a lack of integration of the individual into society. *Suicide* provides readers with an understanding of the impetus for suicide and its impact on the victim, family, and society.

Durkheim proposed this definition of suicide: "the term suicide is applied to

all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (excerpt from *Suicide*). Durkheim used this definition to separate true suicides from accidental deaths. He then collected several European nations' suicide rate statistics, which proved to be relatively constant among those nations and among smaller demographics within those nations. Thus, a collective tendency towards suicide was discovered.

To Durkheim, men were creatures whose desires were unlimited. Unlike other animals, they are not satiated when their biological needs are fulfilled. "The more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs." It follows from this natural insatiability of the human animal that his desires can only be held in check by external controls, that is, by societal control. Society imposes limits on human desires and constitutes "a regulative force [which] must play the same role for moral needs which the organism plays

for physical needs.” In well-regulated societies, social controls set limits on individual propensities so that each in his sphere vaguely realizes the extreme limits set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond . . . Thus, an end or a goal [is] set to the passions. When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. Such a state of affairs Durkheim calls *anomie*, a term that refers to a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups. Anomie does not refer to a state of mind, but to a property of the social structure. It characterises a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals. Although complete anomie, or total normlessness, is empirically impossible, societies may be characterised by greater or lesser degrees of normative regulations. Moreover, within any particular society, groups may differ in the degree of anomie that besets them. Social change may create anomie either in the whole society or in some parts of it. Business crises, for example, may have a far greater impact on those on the higher reaches of the social pyramid than on the underlying population. When depression leads to a sudden downward mobility, the men affected experience a de-regulation in their lives — a loss of moral certainty and customary expectations that are no longer sustained by the group to which these men once belonged. Similarly, the rapid onset of prosperity may lead some

people to a quick upward mobility and hence deprive them of the social support needed in their new styles of life. Any rapid movement in the social structure that upsets previous networks in which life styles are embedded carries with it a chance of anomie.

Durkheim argued that economic affluence, by stimulating human desires, carries with it dangers of anomic conditions because it “deceives us into believing that we depend on ourselves only,” while “poverty protects against suicide because it is a restraint in itself.” Since the realization of human desires depends upon the resources at hand, the poor are restrained, and hence less prone to suffer from anomie by virtue of the fact that they possess but limited resources. “The less one has the less he is tempted to extend the range of his needs indefinitely”.

By accounting for the different susceptibility to anomie in terms of the social process — that is, the relations between individuals rather than the biological propensities of individuals — Durkheim in effect proposed a specifically sociological theory of deviant behaviour even though he failed to point to the general implications of this crucial insight. In the words of Robert K. Merton, who was the first to ferret out in this respect the overall implications of Durkheim’s thought and to develop them methodically, “Social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct”.

Durkheim uses three proxies for social integration: religion, marital status and political upheavals. In his interpretation, the degree of integration of religious groups is associated with a

lower suicide rate. While suicide is at least common in tightly integrated Jewish communities, it appears more often amongst Catholics, while the highest suicide rate occurs amongst Protestants. Concerning the marital status, he finds that the suicide rate varies inversely with the integration of families. Married people are less likely to take their own lives, while this likelihood even decreases with the number of children they have. As to political upheavals, Durkheim finds that they lead, at least temporarily, to a more integrated society by stirring up collective sentiments.

Durkheim's programme of study, the overriding problems in all his work, concerns the sources of social order and disorder, the forces that make for regulation or de-regulation in the body social. His work on suicide — of which the discussion and analysis of anomie forms a part — must be read in this light. Once he discovered that certain types of suicide could be accounted for by anomie, he could then use anomie suicide as an index for the otherwise immeasurable degree of social integration. This was not circular reasoning, as could be argued, but a further application of his method of analysis. He reasoned as follows: There are no societies in which suicide does not occur, and many societies show roughly the same rates of suicide over long periods of time. This indicates that suicides may be considered a "normal", that is, a regular, occurrence. However, sudden spurts in the suicide rates of certain groups or total societies are "abnormal" and point to some perturbations not previously present. Hence, "abnormally" high rates in specific groups or social categories, or in total societies, can be taken as an index

of disintegrating forces at work in a social structure.

Durkheim distinguished between types of suicide according to the relation of the actor to his society. When men become "detached from society," when they are thrown upon their own devices and loosen the bonds that previously had tied them to their fellow, they are prone to **egoistic**, or individualistic, suicide. When the normative regulations surrounding individual conduct are relaxed and hence fail to curb and guide human propensities, men are susceptible to succumbing to anomie suicide. To put the matter differently, when the restraints of structural integration, as exemplified in the operation of organic solidarity, fail to operate, men become prone to egoistic suicide; when the collective conscience weakens, men fall victim to anomie suicide.

Anomie suicide was of particular interest to Durkheim, for he divided it into four categories: acute and chronic economic anomie, and acute and chronic domestic anomie. Each involved an imbalance of means and needs, where means were unable to fulfil needs. Each category of anomie suicide can be described briefly as follows:

- *Acute economic anomie*: Sporadic decreases in the ability of traditional institutions (such as religion, guilds, pre-industrial social systems, etc.) to regulate and fulfil social needs.
- *Chronic economic anomie*: Long term diminution of social regulation. Durkheim identified this type with the ongoing industrial revolution, which eroded traditional social regulators and often failed to replace them. Industrial goals of wealth and

property were insufficient in providing happiness, as was demonstrated by higher suicide rates among the wealthy than among the poor.

- *Acute domestic anomie*: Sudden changes on the micro social level resulted in an inability to adapt and therefore higher suicide rates. Widowhood is a prime example of this type of anomie.
- *Chronic domestic anomie*: Referred to the way marriage as an institution regulated the sexual and behavioural means—needs balance among men and women. Marriage provided different regulations for each, however. Bachelors tended to commit suicide at higher rates than married men because of a lack of regulation and established goals and expectations. On the other hand, marriage has traditionally served to over-regulate the lives of women by further restricting their already limited opportunities and goals. Unmarried women, therefore, do not experience chronic domestic anomie nearly as often as do unmarried men.

In addition to egoistic and anomic types of suicide, Durkheim refers to altruistic and fatalistic suicide. The latter is touched upon only briefly in his work, but the former is of great importance for an understanding of Durkheim's general approach.

Altruistic suicide refers to cases in which suicide can be accounted for by overly strong regulation of individuals, as opposed to lack of regulation. Durkheim argues in effect that the

relation of suicide rates to social regulation is curvilinear—high rates being associated with both excessive individuation and excessive regulation. In the case of excessive regulation, the demands of society are so great that suicide varies directly rather than inversely with the degree of integration. For example, in the instance of the Hindu normative requirement that widows commit ritual suicide upon the funeral pyre of their husbands, or in the case of *hara-kiri*, the individual is so strongly attuned to the demands of his society that he is willing to take his own life when the norms so demand. Arguing from statistical data, Durkheim shows that in modern societies the high rates of suicide among the military cannot be explained by the deprivations of military life suffered by the lower ranks, since the suicide rate happens to be higher for officers than for enlisted men. Rather, the high rate for officers can be accounted for by a military code of honour that enjoins a passive habit of obedience leading officers to undervalue their own lives. In such cases, Durkheim is led to refer to too feeble degrees of individuation and to counter pose these to the excesses of individuation or de-regulation, which account, in his view, for the other major forms of suicide.

Durkheim's discussion of altruistic suicide allows privileged access to some of the intricacies of his approach. He has often been accused of having an overly anti-individualistic philosophy, one that is mainly concerned with the taming of individual impulse and the harnessing of the energies of individuals for the purposes of society. Although it cannot be denied that there are such tendencies

in his work, Durkheim's treatment of altruistic suicide indicates that he was trying to establish a balance between the claims of individuals and those of society, rather than to suppress individual strivings. Acutely aware of the dangers of the breakdown of social order, he also realized that total control of component social actors by society would be as detrimental as anomie and deregulation. Throughout his life he attempted to establish a balance between societal and individual claims.

Durkheim was indeed a thinker in the conservative tradition to the extent that he reacted against the atomistic drift of most enlightenment philosophy and grounded his sociology in a concern for the maintenance of social order. As Robert Nisbet has shown convincingly, such key terms as *cohesion*, *solidarity*, *integration*, *authority*, *ritual*, and *regulation* indicate that his sociology is anchored upon an anti-atomistic set of premises. In this respect he was like his traditionalist forebears, yet it would be a mistake to classify Durkheim as a traditionalist social thinker. Politically he was a liberal—indeed, a defender of the rights of individuals against the state. He also was moved to warn against excesses of regulation over persons even though the major thrusts of his argument were against those who, by failing to recognize the requirements of the social order, were likely to foster anomic states of affairs. Anomie, he argued, was as detrimental to individuals as it was to the social order at large.

The final type of suicide is **Fatalistic suicide**, “at the high extreme of the regulation continuum”. This type Durkheim only briefly describes, seeing

it as a rare phenomena in the real world. Examples include those with over regulated, unrewarding lives such as slaves, childless married women, and young husbands. Durkheim never specifies why this type is generally unimportant in his study.

Durkheim felt that his empirical study of suicide had discovered the structural forces that caused anomie and egoism, and these forces were natural results of the decline of mechanical solidarity and the slow rise of organic solidarity due to the division of labour and industrialism. Also of importance was Durkheim's discovery that these forces affected *all* social classes.

This is where the true sociological value of *Suicide* emerges. Because social forces that affect human behaviour are the result of previous human actions, it is the role of sociology to expose and understand these actions as the foundations of societal structure. These structural phenomena are at the root of human society, and through scientific, statistical methods—integrated with informed theory and educated conjecture—the function of these structures can be comprehended.

Durkheim meant to show that a Spencerian approach to the social realm, an approach in which the social dimension is ultimately derived from the desire of individuals to increase the sum of their happiness, did not stand up before the court of evidence or the court of reason. Arguing against Spencer and the utilitarians, he maintained that society couldn't be derived from the propensity of individuals to trade and barter in order to maximise their own

happiness. This view fails to account for the fact that people do not trade and barter at random but follow a pattern that is normative. For men to make a contract and live up to it, they must have a prior commitment to the meaning of a contract in its own right. Such prior collective commitment, that is, such a non-contractual element of contracts, constitutes the framework of normative control. No trade or barter can take place without social regulation and some system of positive and negative sanctions.

Durkheim's main shafts against individualistic social theories notwithstanding, he was by no means oblivious of the dangers of over-regulation to which Spencer's social philosophy had been especially sensitive. Durkheim saw man as *Homo duplex*—as body, desire, and appetite and also as socialised personality. But man was specifically human only in the latter capacity, and he became fully human only in and through society. Hence, true moral action lies in the sacrifice of certain individual desires for the service of groups and society. But such sacrifices return in the last analysis to the benefit of individuals, as well as society, since unbridled desires lead to frustration and unhappiness rather than to bliss and fulfilment. Modern society seems to contain, for Durkheim, the potentialities for individualism within social regulation. In contrast to earlier types of social organization based on mechanical solidarity that demanded a

high degree of regimentation, modern types of organization rest on organic solidarity obtained through the functional interdependence of autonomous individuals. In modern societies, social solidarity is dependent upon, rather than repressive of, individual autonomy of conduct.

Though Durkheim stressed that in modern societies a measure of integration was achieved through the intermeshing and mutual dependence of differentiated roles, he came those that these societies nevertheless could not do without some common integration by a system of common beliefs. In earlier social formations built on mechanical solidarity, such common beliefs are not clearly distinct from the norms through which they are implemented in communal action; in the case of organic solidarity, the detailed norms have become relatively independent from overall beliefs, responding as they do to the exigencies of differentiated role requirements, but a general system of overall beliefs must still exist. Hence Durkheim turned, in the last period of his scholarly life, to the study of religious phenomena as core elements of systems of common beliefs.

In nutshell, *Suicide* is a path-breaking work that proposes a sociological basis to the phenomenon of suicide. Even though some of Durkheimian ideas may not today fit into the modern cultural landscape, the classic continues to illuminate the path for sociologists inquiring into suicide.

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