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One Hundred Years Advance on Durkheim

A review essay on Marzio Barbagli's "Congedarsi dal mondo"

by Randall Collins

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Marzio Barbagli [2009] has produced a comprehensive work on the theory of suicide which challenges and in many ways eclipses the classic work of Émile Durkheim. In 1897, Durkheim's *Le suicide* was the first major work in sociology to use statistical analysis systematically to test and decide among rival causal theories. Thus it has a methodological importance apart from its specific topic, suicide, and is treated as exemplary by sociologists in multivariate causal analysis. On the theoretical side, Durkheim used *Le suicide* as part of his multi-pronged attempt to demonstrate the power of supra-individual social forces, which he had done with other methods in his work on the division of labor, crime, and later on religion. Suicide rates, and above all rates of egoistic and anomic suicide (but not of altruistic suicide) were for Durkheim indices of the pathological moral condition of modern society at the end of the Nineteenth century, and he called for the same kind of remedies which he put forward in his earlier works, especially reconstituting occupational groups as intermediate bodies of social solidarity between the individual level and the state. Durkheim was not centrally interested in suicide *per se*, but in using it as a scalpel with which to lay bare the moral constitution of society.

For Barbagli, however, suicide is the main topic in its own right. He also broadens the range of empirical materials considerably. Durkheim drew virtually all his data from middle and late Nineteenth century in Western and Central Europe; Barbagli extends from medieval Christendom through the early Twentyfirst century, plus China and India from the medieval period to the present, as well as the contem-

porary Islamic world. Barbagli argues that his wider range of comparisons largely invalidate Durkheim's theory and show the need for a cultural explanation. European suicide was very low until a change in cultural consciousness began around 1590-1610, with suicide rates following upwards. Eventually in the late Twentieth century suicide rates have fallen again, especially egoistic suicide. But the onset of the wave of western suicide came too early to be explained by the structural changes of industrialization and urbanization which reduced social integration; and the decline of suicide in the last half-century surely cannot be attributed to an increase in social integration in our increasingly individualistic, unfamiliar society.

Barbagli illustrates his cultural explanation by a vivid examination of medieval Christian beliefs and practices towards suicides. Horrifying ritualistic punishments were carried out, including public torture and mutilation of the bodies, rejection of burial in consecrated cemeteries, and destruction of the suicide's property, even a sense of contamination of the entire family and neighbourhood. Suicide was treated as a form of palpable evil, like the violation of the strongest tribal taboo, and its causes attributed to the devil. It was this culture that began to change around 1590, with diabolical explanations – a reified external collective force – replaced by internal, psychological explanations in terms of the individual. This sounds to me like a change in Durkheimian collective consciousness, although the causes of the change are as yet not clear. Durkheim, Mauss, and later Goffman all held that modern individualism is not an individual attribute but itself a social construction, a cult of the individual which replaced the cult of the collective through certain historical changes.

The weakness of cultural explanations is that they describe more than they explain, especially in explaining change in the culture itself. Barbagli notes that early Christianity did not much concern itself with suicide; St. Augustine in the Fifth century, at the end of the Roman empire, began the theological condemnation of suicide. But why should one particular theologian's doctrine have had such powerful influence, especially since there were theological alternatives to Augustine, and its greatest influence was not immediately but more than 500 years later? Intellectual doctrines become popular only with supporting social conditions. One structural change was the triumph of the Christian church; martyrs – who were very close to suicides – were allowed when the church was still fighting for its existence, but became outmoded and even dangerous when the Church became the dominant institution. We might note that Augustine's condemnation of suicide was in the context of church politics, putting down the dissident African church of the Donatist heresy, which took an ultra-pure position on resistance through martyrdom and suicide vis-à-vis the more compromising and politically opportunistic Roman church.

Condemning suicide became an attractive ideology for medieval society during the disappearance of centralized state administration and the rise of feudalism. Already in Roman times, as Barbagli notes, suicide was prohibited to slaves and soldiers, because they were the property or servants of others of higher rank. Although the Roman elite might commit heroic suicide to preserve their honor when vanquished militarily or politically rather than undergo degrading ceremonies as a captive, only the elite were allowed an honorable death, and self-destruction of the lives of subordinates was regarded as theft or treason. The issue was somewhat in abeyance during the fluid warrior formations of the so-called Dark Ages, but the rise of stricter feudal hierarchies and serfdom around the Eleventh century coincided with the elaboration of ritualistic punishments for suicide. This was also the period when the church was politically and militarily most powerful, and had the greatest monopoly over the means of cultural production. From the Fourteenth century onwards, there was a tendency no longer to destroy the suicide's goods, as if they were contaminated by evil magic, but to confiscate them to the benefit of the overlord. The issue became more one of strategic and material maneuvering as the military aristocracy began to winnow into consolidated states. Not surprisingly, it was the upper classes who provided some exceptions to the medieval Christian horror of suicide; the heroic literature of chivalry and romance allowed classic-style suicides; and it was among the English aristocracy that a veritable cult of suicide emerged in the Seventeenth century. Prohibiting suicide fell largely on the lower classes to the advantage of the upper.

Another indicator of the structural shift is the flipping-over of the rates of homicide and suicide, with the predominance of murder before 1600, then its decline and surpassing by the rise in suicides by around 1700, first in Northern/Protestant Europe, and later in the Southern/Catholic countries. Under the period of weak state and religious control, Christianity regarded suicide as the most serious sin, along with heresy, blasphemy, and later witchcraft – all ritualistic offenses against church control. Murder was a relatively minor offense when vendettas were widespread, and feuds were more likely to be ended by local mediators, negotiations, and payment of blood money than by authoritative punishment. Murder became more serious a crime when the state began to claim a monopoly of justice, part of the effort to establish a monopoly over legitimate violence. Thus it was the growth of state power and its penetration into society that underlies the cultural change, making murder a grave moral fault, and shifting the focus away from self-destruction as the major form of morally condemned violence. The structural transformation is displayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: he considers suicide because he lacks the resolve to carry out vengeance in the medieval style, and in the end fights a duel – a new practice just then

coming into fashion. *Hamlet* was first performed in 1602 when the English crown was prohibiting the private armies of the great lords, and the state monopoly of violence was being established; dueling was a transitional device for limiting violence, since it excluded further vengeance by friends and relatives, and duels were reserved for the elite. The spirit of private honor in the duel, rather than collective vengeance by the group, goes along with the shift towards the vulnerable individual self which is expressed in the early cult of suicide, which later in the Seventeenth century came to be called “the English disease.”

Modernization was not merely a phenomenon of the Nineteenth century, and the crucial change was state penetration of society two or three centuries earlier. State penetration broke the power of the great aristocratic military alliances, bringing the aristocrats into the world of courtiers and officials scrambling for power not collectively but as individuals; hence it is not surprising that individualism and inwardness becomes first established in that social stratum. Over time, state penetration in the form of taxation, conscription, law enforcement, bureaucracy, education and eventually the welfare state increasingly broke down the autonomy of the patrimonial household, weakening the power of the family and loosening authority relations among masters and servants.

Industrialization and urbanization were among the later causes which added to loosening moral integration of the individual by the local group; but Durkheim’s general argument, that changing suicide rates are an index of structural transformation in the organization of society, is valid. Barbagli helps us to go beyond Durkheim in formulating the causes of changes in moral integration; but limits it too much by calling it a change in culture. Above all, it was the rise of state monopolization of violence and state penetration into society that changes the moral atmosphere, and gives individuals new options with their lives and deaths.

The very long-term trend in suicide rates is convergence and stabilization around a modern norm, as various societies undergo the transformation to modernization – especially the ongoing growth of state penetration. Since the initial phase involved taking away social and ritual power from the church and the patrimonial household, the restraints against egoistic suicide declined at the same time that individuals became more autonomous, more complex and self-conflicted subjectivities. Secularization was not merely a cultural change but a massive shift in the organization of the means of cultural and ritual production, and went along with a shift to distant and impersonal modes of social control via the state. But, as Barbagli points out, in the Twentieth century suicide rates fall again almost everywhere. His argument is that this is the result of the new culture of medicalization, the focus on psychological problems or diseases, and their treatment by a burgeoning medical profession. This is

a fruitful suggestion, but medicalization is not merely culture but a new form of social integration of the individual. The intimate forms of psychotherapy penetrate the privacy of the individual mind, making internal dialogue into external clinical dialogue; and more recently drug therapy penetrates the neuro-endocrinology of the individual body to control the most intimate bases of one's own emotions. Once again, suicide rates are a useful index for social changes, revealing new forms of social control and integration of the individual, which go beyond the impersonal and distant controls of the state in its classic period of penetration into society. A piece of evidence that psychotherapy itself acts as a form of intense social support is shown by what happens when it ends: suicides among patients peak within three to four weeks after the end of psychotherapy [p. 226].

Barbagli notes that the long-term trend in the decline of suicide rates worldwide is broken by exceptional periods of crisis. These are examples of what Durkheim called anomic suicide, such as suicide peaks in periods of financial crisis, and more generally periods of rapid social change when the individual does not know what to expect and his or her usual life-trajectories are dashed. Durkheim's formulation in terms of lack of social regulation of human goals and desires may not be the best explanatory mechanism. But Barbagli gives ample evidence that our theory must include an anomic pathway to suicide, that is to say a short-term, eventful pathway characterized by sudden shocks which upset human plans and plunge many individuals into the darkest desperation: slaves in transport are most likely to commit suicide in the first two or three months [p. 202]; immigrants have higher suicide rates than natives, above all at the beginning, because of their experience of culture shock, even though migrants are healthier and more youthful than non-migrants [p. 197]; prisoners are most likely to commit suicide in the first few days, during the shock of entry to prison [p. 181]; a huge rise took place in the suicide rate in the ex-Soviet societies in the 1990s, a period of structural collapse, imposition of an alien social system, and extreme anomie [p. 238].

On the whole, Barbagli's materials support the Durkheimian theme that there are both egoistic and anomic suicides, and that the rates of both are affected by changes in social conditions, although we need considerable modifications of the theory of social structures which limit or increase egoistic suicides. The second half of Barbagli's text is a vast elaboration of the types of altruistic suicide. In India, the historical anomaly is the predominance of female over male suicide, and especially the suicide of married women and widows – a very different pattern from the West, where male suicides have always predominated, and marriage was claimed by Durkheim to offer a special protection against suicide, especially for women. In fact, Durkheim did not have much of a theory of gender and tended to fall back upon naturalistic claims

about femininity. Barbagli's materials offer an opportunity to correct this. But the Europe/India comparison does more than shows the importance of arbitrary differences in culture, and helps reveal the structures and the practices which give culture its potency at particular historical moments. Suicide was not promoted by Indian cultural tradition aboriginally; ancient and early medieval Indian law and religion regarded nonreligiously-motivated suicide as a very grave sin; and until around 1000 A.D., suicide by Brahman widows was explicitly prohibited. The popularization of *sati* – the widow burning herself on her husband's funeral pyres – came not from long-standing religious traditions, but from the time of the popular salvation religions (especially the Fourteenth to Sixteenth centuries) which broke away from the ceremonial power of the Brahman priests and the idea of reincarnation, substituting direct emotional embrace of a savior-god. *Sati* was not a static cultural tradition but a growing movement, which reached its peak around 1650-1870, through the process of sanskritization or emulation by the lower castes of practices associated with the elite, as widow-burning appears to have begun in the caste of the kshatriya warriors. Hindu widow-suicide was culture-in-action, a successful striving for status during a time when the older caste hierarchy was made fluid by new ritual mobilization. The new *bhakti* religious cults with their ecstatic practices of love of god were similar to the ecstatic ceremony of female self-immolation out of love of the departed spouse.

One point insufficiently underlined by Barbagli is the importance of stratification in *sati*. It is implausible that all Indian widows committed *sati*; all the descriptions are of big ceremonies with many priests, festive processions and elaborate pyres, implying this was largely done in wealthy families. My calculations from available data [p. 265, p. 277] relative to population suggest that a maximum of 3-10% of widows underwent ceremonial suicide. It was not confined to high caste but very likely a way of claiming status when the family had more money than social rank. *Sati* was not simply a cultural imperative of this period, but a ritual resource in the struggle for social standing. Moreover, the historical pattern suggests an additional interpretation: it was precisely during the centuries when Muslim conquerors held Northern and Western India that *sati* was most popular. Muslim law and religion strongly forbade suicide; thus widow suicide was a flamboyant way of demonstrating cultural rebellion, evening claiming moral superiority, over the alien conquerors. The fact that *sati* was least practiced in non-Muslim areas of the Indian South and Center supports this interpretation [p. 266]. Widow suicide in India paralleled the cult of female footbinding in the Chinese upper classes during the period of alien Manchu domination, which was also a claim to superiority over the barbarians.

On the micro-interactional level, *sati* was a practice that gave a moment of high status to Indian women; she was the center of all attention, exalted as the focus point

of collective effervescence. In the terms of my analysis of Interaction Ritual Chains [Collins 2004], *sati* was a highly successful ritual, producing very strong collectively shared emotions in the crowd witnessing the spectacular drama of voluntary death. In this respect, *sati* was similar to women in medieval Christian Europe seeking sainthood by extreme bodily austerities; in both cases, religiously sanctioned self-abnegation in highly visible and widely publicized scenes was the one route to high status open to women in societies where they were otherwise confined to domestic roles. This path would be an especially attractive one to ambitious women of the wealthier classes given the lack of alternatives for widows in India, where they were forbidden to remarry or to have a career (whereas the main career open to younger widows in the non-elite classes was the degrading one of becoming a prostitute).

It is because of these structural conditions that suicide in India became a female province in late medieval centuries, and continued to be so into the early Twentieth century. But by 1970, without the special conditions that supported *sati*, the sex ratio of suicides reversed [p. 266]; and indeed in world perspective Twentieth century India has a relatively low suicide rate, as one might expect on Durkheimian grounds, given the degree of familistic social control.

China has also been a world anomaly in that female suicide outstripped male suicide, and especially by married women and widows. During the communist period, however, there were waves of male suicide: in the early 1950s in the Maoist campaign against corruption (i.e. destroying the old elite), and during the extreme authoritarianism and public humiliations of the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. These were no doubt anomic suicides of the losers during an extreme reversal of fortune; this may well have been the case in 1862, when the rate of suicide reached the highest recorded in world history (500 per 100,000, about 50 times the world average in the Twentieth century) [p. 285] – we should note that this was during the downfall of the Taiping rebellion, a huge military-religious movement that was defeated with enormous casualties and must have created a very high level of anomic chaos. Again, China in the 1990s had the world's highest suicide rate [p. 281], very understandable in Durkheimian terms, given that several generations of the one-child policy would have severely reduced the number of family ties both intergenerational and lateral, plus the highly anomic shift to a capitalist economy under ostensibly communist auspices.

Barbagli's chief focus is on the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, when there was a large growth of female suicide. One explanation is that the Ming and Ch'ing emperors officially honored widows who did not remarry but committed suicide to remain faithful to the memory of their spouse. Why the government took this course remains obscure, although it does show not so much a cultural tradition as an explicit government intervention. In addition, there was an earlier literary tra-

dition (not ancient but around the Thirteenth century) of young romantic heroines who committed suicide when their beloved was unable to marry them. Even more important than these apparently rather rare kinds of suicides, were women who committed suicide in order to bring shame and vengeance upon men who had molested them sexually: in some cases even as slight a contact as touching her hand and making an indecent proposal. In my view, this looks like a move for higher symbolic status on the part of women, otherwise in a weak position in the Chinese family and without extra-familiar opportunities. What conditions made this possible? One is that the extremely male-centered ancestral cult, ritually officiated by males within the household, would have created a higher degree of Durkheimian integration for males than for females; women were more free to commit suicide because of their lack of ritual importance. Another is the peculiarity of Chinese social structure, combining decentralized household ritualism with a centralized government bureaucracy which enforced Confucian practices under penalty of state coercion; this was a version of state penetration in which domestic morality was regarded as a matter of high state policy. It was in these circumstances that emperors could honor widows who committed suicide rather than remarry; and officials could order legal execution of men who had caused a woman to kill herself by sexual advances. Suicide as a weapon of the weak – to make the powerful tremble, as Barbagli puts it – was the product of a structure in which state power was very interested in regulating private morality.

Barbagli's analysis of female suicide in India and China, in contrast to the Christian West, can be taken further to show how family structure shaped women's tactics, both to resist authority and to raise one's status. Indian women could not remarry, and in China as well a married woman's status depended heavily upon her husband and her son. This may be traced to a structural cause: these were extremely strong patrilineal systems of inheritance (with some exceptions among the concubines at the level of the Chinese Imperial court, where women's families could sometimes manipulate power from behind the throne – occasions that usually provoked counter-movements of mandarins invoking ultra-strong Confucian controls to reinforce patrilineality). In Europe, on the contrary, there have been periodic strong trends towards bilateral inheritance, indeed since Roman times. Divorce, remarriage, and widow marriage were favored at various times because these made it possible to flexibly remake inter-familial political alliances; in the dynastic geopolitics of medieval and early modern Europe, claims for territory often were traced through female lines. At a more middle-class level, women's inheritance from husbands allowed businesses to be continued and consolidated, and marrying a rich widow was an important pathway for male success. (This was also true in the Moslem world, as Mohammed's own career illustrates.) Instead of regarding family structure as a matter of culture, it is

more sociologically useful to see the rules and practices that make up family structures as moves in political alliance-making and economic fortunes. And these in turn set the stage upon which women have their constraints and opportunities. European women survived and sometimes even prospered in widowhood better than Indian and Chinese women (only in Europe was there a popular image of a “merry widow”); but Asian women were more likely to use suicide as a tactic for at least momentary status advantage.

We see a striking extension of this process in Barbagli’s last topic, the outburst of suicide as a weapon in guerrilla war. Suicide bombings are an innovation of the past 35 years, and other uses of suicide to draw attention and sympathy to the underdog in political struggles are Twentieth century inventions, not rooted in any specific religious or ethnic tradition but spreading widely around the world. Islamic societies for instance have very low suicide rates and low approval of suicide; but militant groups like Hezbollah show how malleable culture is for finding grounds for justifying new practices. What breaks especially sharply with tradition is the rise of female suicide bombers, beginning with the Tamil Tigers, and becoming a majority of the Chechan and Kurdish users of suicide tactics. Women in fact are particularly good at this kind of clandestine violence, which depends on deception for its approach to the target; and since suicide missions aim at publicity in the era of mass communications, women bombers add shock value. Thus women are presented with an opportunity for upward status mobility, all the more so in societies where their freedom of action is otherwise very low.

Does suicide as a weapon of struggle break away entirely from the Durkheimian mode of explanation? In his analysis of Nineteenth century western Europe, group integration prevents suicide, unless it is a specially strong group – like the military – in which the individual is expected to sacrifice oneself for the unit, and honor is entirely in the eyes of the collective. But why should altruistic suicide increase in contemporary times, when modernization has eroded group structures everywhere? The answer appears to be the rise of new forms of groups, with very strong ritual intensity, but which are nevertheless not inherited but are voluntarily chosen. Durkheim hoped that new occupational groups could provide these intermediate structures of solidarity between the individual and the state. What has developed, instead, have been new ritual practices which create intense emotional experiences for their members; these may be temporary groups, like sports and entertainment fans; or they may have a somewhat more permanent structure, like social movements. The clandestine cell or terrorist group is a particularly intense form of social integration for its members; and the willingness of a few to undergo martyrdom for the group intensifies the emotional identification of all its members. Durkheim, in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie*

religieuse, called this the “negative cult,” when members underwent painful ordeals, which raised them above the level of ordinary persons precisely because normal life avoids pain. Modern terrorist groups provide high ritual intensity, strong solidarity strengthened by their clandestine boundary to outsiders, and a feeling of eliteness. Thus it has been the repeated invention of new forms of group structures over the past 400 years, in all parts of the world, that provides the social basis for ongoing changes in the forms of suicide.

I have one final suggestion about the micro-level of analysis. Suicide may be carried out in private, in isolation or withdrawal from social witnesses; and the social conditions which allow privacy are crucial for determining rates of egoistic and anomie suicide. On the other hand, suicide may be a public ritual, attended by emotionally rapt spectators or broadcast as a message. On the micro level, these public forms of suicide can be quite varied, and as Barbagli shows, there have been numerous innovations around the world over the centuries, and new ones may well be invented as the means of social communication and publicity change further. But rituals can be turned to various purposes, including against suicides; medieval Christendom was not lacking in rituals of suicide, but in fact elaborated them to an extreme level as rituals of prohibition. As Durkheim pointed out in his analysis of crime, punishment is not merely for the perpetrator, but is a ritual gathering of society to remind itself of its own solidarity – and we should add, its structures of power. These were weapons of struggle, but in this case from above.

Barbagli’s work is the most important on the sociology of suicide in 100 years. It lays out the grand picture of changes and variations in time and space, and gives the basis for a theory which is simultaneously cultural, structural, and dynamic.

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