

Framing Financial Crisis and Protest: North-West and South-East Europe

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Suicide-Rates and the Financial Crisis

Various papers have appeared on the relationship between rising suicide-rates and the 2008-onwards financial crisis. These are found principally in medical and psychiatric and public health journals. To confine ourselves to one instance, with a well-established academic reputation, *The BMJ* (*British Medical Journal* of the British Medical Association) has regularly carried research papers on crisis in relation to suicide-rates (Gunnell, Platt and Hawton 2009; Hawton and Haw 2013; Chang *et al* 2013; Godlee 2013; Fountoulakis *et al* 2013; Michas 2013; Branas *et al* 2015). Some of these have aroused significant interest in the news media. In particular, newspapers and broadcasters noted the evidence cited in Shu-Sen Chang *et al* (2013), presenting statistics on suicides in 54 countries, and finding “a clear rise in suicide after the 2008 global economic crisis; there were about 4900 excess suicides in the year 2009 alone compared with those expected based on previous trends (2000-07)”. The conclusions that all the papers cited above reach are two-fold: first, that crisis and austerity exacerbate suicide-rates; and second, that suicide needs to be prevented under these circumstances and the medical and health care establishment can do that. The second of these conclusions has two sides within it. On the one hand, the medical establishment should inform policy, and should be further enabled to gather information and data on public (especially mental) health for that end. On the other hand, given that crisis and austerity have already had

detrimental effects, the management thereof depends on further investment in public health and medical services at all levels (from screening of populations to dealing with disaffected individuals exhibiting suicidal tendencies). Such use of suicide-rate statistics is therefore not so much to analyse the anomic condition and its political dynamics in a general way, but to make a promotional claim on behalf of a particular sector of the establishment, in the public interest. Similar papers have been published in journals such as *Lancet*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *European Journal of Public Health*, *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

To be precise, such arguments are not concerned so much with the crisis itself, as with its principal fallout: a widespread convergence on enacting austerity policies among political states, or having such policies thrust upon them by international financial and governmental organizations. Under such austerity conditions, parts of the state's establishment – the public sector – find themselves having to make strenuous arguments for their survival or to push their privileges for increased governmental investment. It appears that, in various European countries and elsewhere, the health care establishment under the state sector has turned to the affective appeal of suicide-rates after 2008.

In contemplating suicide-rates in a less agenda-driven mode, it is significant that financial crisis has featured in sociological studies of suicide from the discipline's foundational stages. Emile Durkheim's (1952 [1897], Book 2 Ch.5) account of anomic suicide, key to his general concept of social anomie, was given mainly in terms of the effect of financial and political crises on suicide-rates. Briefly, his argument went as follows. Given the distribution of suicide-rates at his disposal, Durkheim found no straightforward proportional relationship between poverty and suicide (poorer collectives do not evidence higher suicide-rates than their affluent counterparts, in fact the contrary), though there was evidence that stressful conditions lead to increased suicide-rates (especially among the most vulnerable, such as the poverty-stricken or unemployed). It was clear that political (such as civil wars) or financial crises lead to significant rises in suicide-rates. However, insofar as financial crises went, Durkheim found that sudden impoverishment in the economy caused a rise in suicide-rates as well as sudden prosperity in the economy (a sudden economic boom) – Durkheim thought of both sudden impoverishment and sudden prosperity as financial crises. The inference follows:

If therefore industrial or financial crises increase suicides, that is not because they cause poverty, since crises of prosperity have the same result; it is because they are crises, that is, disturbances of the collective order. Every disturbance of equilibrium, even though it achieves greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality, is an impulse to voluntary death. Whenever serious readjustments take place in the social order, whether or not due to sudden growth or to an unexpected catastrophe, men are more inclined to self-destruction. (p.246)

And the explanation for this inference amounts to the concept of anomie in general:

Man's characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social. He is governed not by a material environment brutally imposed on him, but by a conscience superior to his own, the superiority of which he feels. Because, the greater, better part of his existence transcends the body, he escapes the body's yoke, but is subject to that of society.

But when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence; thence come the sudden rises in the curve of suicides which we have pointed out above. (p.252)

In his follow-up on Durkheim's project, Maurice Halbwachs (1978 [1930], especially in Chs.10 and 11) took into account further statistical data on suicide-rates in relation to political and financial crises to undermine some of the neat symmetry of Durkheim's figures (he found that Durkheim has been selective in interpreting his data). He also inserted an analysis of the impact of crises on the psyche instead of going along with Durkheim's abstruse account of anomie, and was more questioning of the "crisis of prosperity". In its fundamentals though, Halbwachs' inferences and analysis confirmed Durkheim's, concluding with a more feeling account of the anomic condition that financial crises bring, evidenced in rising suicide-rates:

The woes of unemployed workers, the bankruptcies, failures, and downfalls are not the immediate cause of many suicides. Rather, an obscure oppressive sentiment weighs on every soul because there is less general activity, because there is less participation by people in an economic life transcending them, and because their attention is no longer turned towards externals but dwells more, not merely on their distress or on their bare material competency, but on all the individual motives they may have for desiring death. (p.244)

This has a clear psychological and individually-grounded cast, but it is more a fleshing out than a departure from Durkheim's formulation.

Closer to the 2008-onwards financial crisis, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet's (2008 [2006]) analysis of wide-ranging data on suicide-rates updates the Durkheim-Halbwachs analysis with various further nuances, but without departing from the spirit thereof. Among other points of interest, this updates the terms of economic measurement. Instead of simply considering gauges of poverty they consider the relationship of inequality to suicide-rates, and find that that in itself (like poverty for Durkheim) does not correspond proportionally to suicide-rates. And instead of merely sudden financial crisis they consider slower and longer phases of growth (1900-1948, 1949-1978, 1979-1995) in relation to suicide-rates, and find that there the relationships are complex (in a wide drift, strong growth since 1949 has been attended by stable suicide-rates and slow growth by rising suicide rates). Data according to geopolitical territories and social strata (India and China in the late 20th century, the Soviet Union, according to class and gender) suggest that Durkheim and Halbwachs provide appropriate grids and points of departure for inference and analysis. Baudelot and Establet do not take their observations to an analysis of anomie in the present; that is left to the very general, somewhat oracular, formulations cited above.

Perhaps that is where a space of sociological theorizing opens up: suicide-rates in relation to aggregating factors (class, country, political system and policy, etc.) are indicative in a symptomatic way, but do not get to the political dynamics at ground level, at the level of specific environments, work and everyday life. Baudelot and Establet's conclusion says as much. It is unlikely that what Durkheim or Halbwachs understood as an anomic condition at their political moments could be the same as what's regarded as anomic in the present, though the general drift of social anomie and its statistical manifestations are coherent and represent a continuous relation. But the picture is incomplete without a bottom-up perspective from ground level to statistical aggregates, of the sort, for instance, that Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (2015, especially Ch.9) offers. In Berardi's book we find an account of suicide epidemics experienced in various industrial contexts among workers, which evidence, as Berardi sees it, the deployment of "Hierarchy, obedience, submission, humiliation and psychological violence [that] are the weapons employed by Neoliberal philosophy against the political solidarity of the workforce" (p.109). He points towards an ideological and political structure of the present as producing and reproducing the kind of anomie that politically resonant suicide now symptomatizes. The terms ("what is Neoliberal philosophy?"

we may ask) are there to be unpacked and argued with, but Berardi articulates that which, in some measure, is muted in global charts of suicide-rates and the generalization of (ahistorical) anomie. Insofar as suicide-rates and crisis in macroscopic sociological analysis go, it is the ground level which it contains but doesn't quite capture that is of particular interest. Some systematic attempt to draw together statistical analysis and ethnomethodologies in this respect seems to be called for.

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Suman Gupta, January 2016

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