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BOOK REVIEW

## Suicide and Disciplinarity

Marzio Barbagli. 2015, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt, Cambridge: Polity Press ISBN 9780745662459. RRP \$44.95 (pb)

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Originally published in Italian in 2009 and now translated into English, Marzio Barbagli's *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide* presents an important intervention into the contemporary understanding of suicide by providing an accessible and comprehensive account of the history of suicide as a socio-cultural, religious and political phenomenon. Interdisciplinarity is its foundation since, as Barbagli asserts, more than any other human action 'suicide depends on a vast number of psychosocial, cultural, political and even biological causes and must be analysed from different points of view'. (7)

Barbagli brings together a number of analytical perspectives to present an account of suicide that challenges the utility of Emile Durkheim's foundational work on the topic. This he understands, not always correctly, as continuing to present a spectral trace in the social, cultural and critical study of suicide, include those cultural scholarly perspectives that challenge the medico-psychological orthodoxies of suicidology. For Barbagli, both Durkheimian sociological approaches to suicide and medico-psychological models are problematic. He begins his lengthy text with a critique of Durkheim's taxonomy of suicide causality which determines variations in either the social integration of individuals or in the regulation of individuals. According to Barbagli, Durkheim's attribution of suicide to the principal causes of absence of regulation (*anomic suicide*), over-emphasised regulation (*altruistic suicide*) or lack of social integration (*egoistic suicide*) fails to take into account the cultural processes and meaning of regulation, integration and individuality which, though structural, are also always cultural and historical.

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Giving exclusively medico-psychological understandings of suicide equivalent short shrift, Barbaglia goes on to argue for a plurality of causes in individual suicides. Insisting on the determining role played by cultural and political factors alongside psychological-psychiatric disorder, genetic predisposition and, most importantly, historical setting, he asks whether a suicide cause might be recognised differently in another cultural-temporal framework. This conceptualisation of suicide drives the investigation into the social and cultural changes that govern understandings of life and self-activated death. Across the book Barbaglia builds the thesis that in its European instantiation suicide is not related to narrow historical instances of social change or shifts in regulation and the mechanics of social integration but to a wider and longer historical arc in which not just the regal and theological injunctions against suicide, but the social rules and moral valuations that governed a range of everyday and philosophic understandings of life and death slowly altered and thereby fostered 'the great rise' in the number of suicides. (29)

The book is divided in two parts: the first section examines Europe and Western regional discourses while the second considers suicidality in the context of Asia, particularly India, China and the Middle East. The first chapter explores suicide across the European *longue durée* from the Middle Ages to beginning of the twentieth century. It does so through focusing on the meaning of suicide being produced as a problem based on the known statistical rise in voluntary deaths and the social and administrative responsiveness to this rise that framed suicide within contexts of spiritual and moral degeneration and criminality. His chosen examples demonstrate the central thesis that the laws, rules and social conventions governing suicide change across time, such as the role of dishonourable burial as a 'punishment' imposed on suicides. Although this practice takes different forms in different countries and regions, it reflects a theological perspective framed by spatiality: the bodies of suicides were buried away from the normative sacred settings within cities and, instead, either interred outside city walls or, in some cases, abandoned. Over the course of several centuries such punishment lessened in some regions with the bodies of suicides being buried in set corners of church graveyards; a practice that brought them closer to the sanctified centre that marked death in connection with Christian afterlife. While Barbagli argues that the reduction in punishment for suicides resulted in an increase in suicides, the spatial dimension of this example is never quite fully explored. Space here is not only integral to religious punishment but intersects with other processes of social integration that centre on the liminality of the corpse as a distinct object neither living nor fully disconnected from subjectivity.

Later chapters in the European section look first at penal frameworks and the ways they positioned suicide in criminalised terms, and second at the relationship between homicide and suicide. Regarding the latter, Barbagli argues that a moral re-evaluation took place across Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages in which the balance between homicide and suicide shifted such that 'the act of killing others began to be regarded much more severely than the act of taking one's own life'. (118) Among the causes behind this shift, Barbagli cites the connection between the dichotomies of homicide/suicide and public/private, whereby homicide is produced through sovereign articulation as a public crime while suicide is systematically shifted away from a public to a private framework. According to the author, this differentiation resulted in a fall in homicide rates by the early 1700s whereas the rates of suicide increased across the same period.

For all its wealth of detail, the European-focused first half of the book deploys a conservative historical perspective. Barbagli's unwillingness to engage with Foucault's compelling account of crime and penal systems and their relation to knowledge production

more broadly speaking relegates his study of European suicidality to a world in which biopower does not exist. While the social is always present for Barbagli, the individual emerges as a figure that interacts with the social rather than as one who is constituted within it, which still leaves the way open for a critique of the discursive production of the concept of suicide.

The second half of the book, however, is of greater interest to scholars of suicide in that it provides substantial information on some of the ways suicide has been defined, governed and made pivotal to everyday cultural practice in certain Asian settings. The European/Oriental dichotomisation aside, the interpretation presented here is nuanced and pleasingly more than gestural. In his study of widow suicides by self-immolation in India, Barbagli begins with an internationally high-profile account from Rajasthan in the late 1980s. He revisits the governmental condemnation of the act as a 'national shame' (191) before working backwards through the history of the practice in India, rooted as it is in social formations that have radically shifted across time.

The sixth chapter focuses on China where, until the release of suicide statistics by the Chinese government in the 1990s, international speculation surmised that suicides had remained relatively rare. Barbagli's interpretation of Chinese suicide causality is more relational than his treatment of suicide knowledge in other national settings. Putative causes are related to specific practices and social problems, including the fatalism produced through the Maoist 'May Fourth paradigm' and the figuration of women's suicides in terms of patriarchal culture, the practice of arranged marriages and as a response to sexual assault.

The final chapter turns to the more controversial field of suicide bombing and terrorist-related acts of self-inflicted death. This focus is unusual in dominant studies of suicide, which have regularly, albeit problematically, separated the Western notion of suicide as an act produced through a failure in mental health on the one hand from the act of obedience that produces non-Western suicide terrorism on the other. Unfortunately, Barbagli does not provide an in-depth examination of the subjectivity of causality in suicide bombing beyond broadly invoking affiliation to political causes that demand violent actions in which individuals 'voluntarily use their bodies to carry the bombs or explosive materials in order to attack, kill or gravely maim others, in full knowledge that their own death is a necessary condition to the success of the operation'. (265) The author does, however, provide an account of the ways in which the utility of suicide bombing in political activism is rationalised in certain settings and a short consideration of the ways in which the act has become globalised.

Barbagli's book concludes with a short chapter that begins by reiterating the opposition to a Durkheimian framework for understanding suicide that is perhaps unnecessary, particularly given that Durkheim's account is no longer necessarily considered monolithic among Anglophone social scientists. The account of suicide causality presented in this book is problematic in its under-theorised approach to moral value as the key variable across history in relation to the prevention of individual acts of suicide. For all its historical and cultural breadth, *Farewell to the World* is limited by its refusal to engage the recent critical literature that has reappraised suicidality from other cultural and theoretical perspectives that consider how liveability is constituted in suicidality.

## About the author

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