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Book Review: From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe

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Book Reviews

Jeffrey R. Watt (ed.). **From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe**. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. 240. ISBN 0-8014-4278-8 (cloth).

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Western society has experienced eras of passive tolerance and active antipathy towards suicide. Roman Law was relatively lenient, even towards those who suicided after having been charged with other crimes. For the Romans, the crime (and the punishment) died with the criminal. Everything changed with Augustine, who, in the fifth century, articulated a harsh new interpretation of suicide as contrary to the 6th Biblical commandment that one shall not kill. Suicide was a double crime: murdering oneself and killing the 'image of god'. Thereafter, legal traditions in Europe denied canonical rights, desecrated the suicider's body and imposed penalties on his family. Such social practices sought to enforce ecclesiastical hegemony and deter future acts of self-murder.

By the fifteenth century, however, change was afoot. European jurisprudence slowly began to incorporate notions of intentionality: only those who *knowingly* committed suicide would be subject to religious, social and legal penalties. Thereafter, the principle of *felo de se* (self-murder) became distinguished from the conclusion of *non compos mentis* (lunacy). This, in effect, introduced the insanity clause to suicide verdicts; those who committed suicide in a state of unsound mind would be absolved of all of the harsher punishments. There still might be a quiet burial in the corner of a cemetery, but families were spared the public displays of humiliation and private forfeiture of property. Needless to say, the decision as to whether the person was or was not of sound mind was a contested one over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, it appears to have been applied inconsistently: gentlemen were more likely to have been considered to have committed the ultimate sin in a 'fit of distraction' than their pauper compatriots. Nevertheless, the *non compos mentis* option gave magistrates and juries a legal avenue through which to express softening attitudes towards this disturbingly common act.

Laws in most European jurisdictions compelled public investigations of suspicious, sudden or 'unnatural' deaths. In the case of suicides, decisions over whether the suicide occurred willingly, or under mental duress, were

made either by magistrates or lay juries. Depositions were taken; witnesses were interviewed; juries deliberated. The records extant from such inquests constitute the primary sources upon which many historians construct their quantitative and qualitative research. Where complete sets of records exist, some scholars have even taken a stab at reconstituting the historical demography of suicide. Here the data suggest a rise in suicide rates from the eighteenth century onwards, and the now all-too-familiar gender gap in completed suicides (men in almost every society and time period outnumber women by three or four to one). Such rising rates of self-murder would ultimately captivate the attention of Durkheim and others in the nineteenth century – authors who would suggest that, along with madness, suicide was one of the prices societies paid for advanced civilization.

From Sin to Insanity promotes itself as the ‘broadest treatment yet of suicide in Europe during the period 1500–1800’. Ten essays drawn from scholars working on various aspects of European history from the Renaissance to Napoleon explore social, cultural and legal perspectives on the history of ‘this rash act’. The essays span a good part of central, western and northern Europe, including chapters on Scandinavia, Hungary, France, northern Germany, England, Switzerland, Spain and Amsterdam. During this period, the turgid editorial introduction affirms, Western society witnessed the ‘birth of modern suicide’, by which is meant a decriminalized, secularized and mostly medicalized act that increased in apparent frequency. Suicide was no longer the province of the Church; it became a controversial social phenomenon that engaged the sociologist, the alienist and the lay public. Religious denunciations of suicide did not diminish necessarily; they were merely crowded out by more tolerant and sympathetic views from within and without the Church.

Although they work on disparate regions, the contributors reach similar conclusions. All reaffirm that, over the course of the early modern period, there was a gradual secularization of suicide, by which they mean diabolical explanations of suicide were gradually replaced by suspicions of mental maladies. Concurrent to this, magistrates and juries became reluctant to impose penalties on suiciders (and their families) through the traditional means of refusing Christian burials, desecrating bodies and/or penalizing estates. This evolution in social values predated the articulation of new treatises by the eighteenth-century *philosophes*; rather than breaking new ground these Enlightenment intellectuals gave articulate voice to ideas in currency at the popular level. By the late eighteenth century a ‘modern’ conception and treatment of suicide had come to dominate Europe, paving the way for the medicalization of suicide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The act of suicide highlighted and aggravated tensions throughout early-modern European society. The suicider’s body, as several chapters attest, was a ‘site of conflict’, the consequences of suicide a test of the relative powers of secular and ecclesiastical authority. In some national cultures, such as that of Hungary, suicide would also emerge as an important trope within

an ascendant national identity – a self-sacrifice for country and civil society that could be both honourable and noble. In other instances, as in the shocking suicide of the British Whig MP Sir Samuel Romilly, it might occasion a deep national discussion as to the social effects of rapid social and political change in early industrial society. Indeed, the perceived rise of suicide rates in most European communities in the eighteenth century provided fodder for those who felt that liberal thinking was leading inevitably to social anarchy.

Although individual chapters provide commentary on themes familiar to historians of suicide, there are also some unusual aspects of this history that have received less scholarly attention. More than one author, for example, examines the phenomenon of ‘suicidal murderers’. These individuals, who were mostly women, were so fearful of God’s wrath (if they killed themselves) that they purposefully murdered others. This resulted in their own execution for premeditated murder. Since their own death (their ultimate goal) would be achieved by an executioner’s hands, they would be spared eternal damnation. Children were often the chosen target of this tragic gambit, since, without sin, the victims would be guaranteed an entry into heaven. Those of less nerve might falsely confess to other murders or to bestiality, or recklessly expose themselves to danger. Early modern suicide, it would seem, occasioned a surprising degree of inventiveness.

Although the contributors to this book tend to reaffirm existing historiographical themes rather than to pose any radical new interpretations, the reach of authors rarely exceeds their grasp. Detailed archival work coupled with elegant writing reflects well on the editor, the contributors and Cornell University Press. Furthermore, the high quality of the scholarship legitimizes the value of adding historical perspectives to this troubling social phenomenon. While mental health professionals wrestle with the guilt of having done very little to dent suicide rates in the twentieth-century West, they can at least take some solace in historical perspectives on the subject, which suggest that suicide is a long-standing and robust phenomenon, seemingly impervious to most types of religious prohibition and medical intervention.

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Chris Philo. **A Geographical History of Institutional Provision for the Insane from Medieval Times to the 1860s in England and Wales: The Space Reserved for Insanity.** *Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004. Pp. 678. ISBN 0-7734-6509-X.*

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In this ambitious study Chris Philo reinvigorates a Foucauldian perspective on the history of provision for the mad. Philo’s chief concern is to reconsider the central arguments in Foucault’s *Historie de la Folie / Madness and Civilization*