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Title	Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe
Author(s)	Healy, Róisín
Publication Date	2006-09
Publication Information	Healy, Róisín. (2006). Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe. <i>The Historical Journal</i> , 49(3), 903-919. doi: 10.1017/S0018246X06005577
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Link to publisher's version	http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X06005577
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4115

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The Historical Journal / Volume 49 / Issue 03 / September 2006, pp 903 - 919

DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X06005577, Published online: 01 September 2006

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0018246X06005577

How to cite this article:

RÓISÍN HEALY (2006). Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe. The Historical Journal, 49, pp 903-919 doi:10.1017/S0018246X06005577

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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

SUICIDE IN EARLY MODERN AND MODERN EUROPE*

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ABSTRACT. *This is a review of recent English- and German-language publications on suicide, both as an act and a subject of discourse, in the early and late modern periods. It argues that, while publications on the theme have increased considerably in the past two decades, the problematic character of the evidence for suicide has led to a focus on attitudes to suicide at the expense of empirical investigations. The latter have largely confirmed the link between social isolation and suicide, posited by Durkheim, but have revealed differences in patterns across social groups. The growth of lenient attitudes to suicide has proven to be more protracted and contested than originally believed. The ambivalent role of clergy, the persistence of religious sanctions against suicide, and continued efforts by the state to curb suicide all suggest that the term ‘hybridization’ better characterizes the changes over this period than the older term ‘secularization’. Finally, this review recommends that historians undertake further empirical investigations of suicide, where possible, and that they broaden suicide research to include suicidal behaviours and alternative responses to despair in order to identify the specific allure of suicide.*

The author of a recent history of suicide, Ursula Baumann, reported a dismissive response to her chosen topic among her German colleagues. Many found it a marginal theme, suited only to those with an interest in the macabre.¹ While there is no reason to think that such attitudes extend beyond the historical profession in Germany, it is clear that the history of suicide has yet to make an impact on the mainstream. The hesitation of historians generally may rest less on the small proportion of any society who commit suicide or the unpleasantness of the subject, than on scepticism about the reliability of the evidence and the meaningfulness of conclusions based on intensely individual experiences. There is good reason for caution. Historians of suicide face the methodological challenges inherent in reconstructing the past in a particularly dramatic fashion. What better example is there of the limits of our knowledge of the past than the corpse of a drowned man? Did he

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* I wish to thank Simone Ameskamp and the anonymous reviewer for their comments.

¹ Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod: Die Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 2001), pp. v and 1. Vera Lind received a similar reaction from the same audience, although she acknowledged some sympathy, alongside surprise, suspicion, and cynicism, for the topic, Vera Lind, *Selbstmord in der frühen Neuzeit: Diskurs, Lebenswelt und kultureller Wandel am Beispiel der Herzogtümer Schleswig und Holstein* (Göttingen, 1999), p. 7.

fall or did he jump? In some cases, we will never know. What better example of the limits of our explanatory powers than a woman who kills herself without apparent cause? Was it some burden known only to herself, a physiological disorder, or a whim? We can only speculate.

Thankfully a small, but growing, number of historians view such challenges as a spur, rather than an obstacle. Developments within the profession, especially the emphasis that social history places on the lives of ordinary people and that cultural history places on the ways they interpret their own experiences, have provided encouragement. The study of suicide further advances our understanding of the lives of ordinary men and women in the past, by highlighting what they found problematic and the circumstances in which some chose death as an alternative to forbearance. The ways in which an individual staged his or her departure from this world, and the ways in which others responded to it, reveal much about attitudes to life and death and the individual's responsibilities to him or herself and others. In addition to changes in the practice of history, contemporary public discourse about suicide has lent urgency to the quest to understand the meanings of suicide in the past. Suicides of high-profile individuals, such as David Kelly in Britain, and Hannelore Kohl in Germany, the murderous acts of suicide bombers, and concerns about rising rates of suicide regularly make headlines.² The emergence of a 'right-to-die' lobby and the passage of legislation permitting voluntary euthanasia in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Oregon have pushed suicide on to the political agenda in many jurisdictions. The publication of books aimed at a popular audience, if only on suicides by the rich and famous, certainly indicates an appetite for the theme.³

This review considers recent English- and German-language publications on suicide, both the practice of suicide and the discourse about suicide, in Europe in the early and late modern periods. The first section describes the emergence of the history of suicide in the 1980s against the backdrop of criticism of Emile Durkheim's immensely influential sociological study, *Le suicide*. The second section examines literature on the early modern period, which dominated suicide research until very recently, and the third on the modern period, which is finally receiving the attention it deserves. The temporal division of the historiography of suicide is not meant to suggest that there were marked differences between these two phases and should rather be seen as an organizational device. The conclusion presents the major findings of the literature review and offers suggestions for further research.

I

Of the many disciplines attracted to suicidology, history is a recent arrival. The suicide's assertion of control over his death has long served theology and philosophy as a vehicle for discussing the individual's relationship to God and society at large; possible physiological causes allowed medicine to stake its claim in the nineteenth century; and suicide statistics provided Durkheim with the ammunition to found sociology at that century's

² For instance, 'Suicide reaching epidemic proportions, says coroner', *Irish Times*, 26 Apr. 2005, p. 1.

³ See, for instance, the collection of 300 brief biographies of famous suicides contained in Gerald Grote, Michael Völkel, and Karsten Weyershausen, eds., *Das Lexikon der prominenten Selbstmörder* (Berlin, 2000), and an anthology of texts dealing with suicide, including some suicide notes, in Roger Willemsen, ed., *Der Selbstmord: Briefe, Manifeste, literarische Texte* (Cologne, 2002).

end.⁴ These approaches based their findings on contemporary data, and, apart from tracing motifs established by classical suicides such as Cato and Socrates, showed little interest in the long-term evolution of the practice of and discourse about suicide. Historians, for their part, did little to make up the deficit. Despite running to over 600 pages, Philippe Ariès's seminal work on death, first published in 1977, scarcely mentioned suicide.⁵ Richard Cobb, by contrast, devoted considerable attention to the theme in a much shorter book published the following year, *Death in Paris, 1795–1801*. On the basis of the records of a morgue that received victims of violent death, the English historian reconstructed suicide patterns that he then explained in terms of the circumstances and habits of the city's poor. Firm in his conviction that suicide was 'the most private and impenetrable of human acts', however, he refrained from speculation about the motives of individual suicides.⁶ Writing nearly a decade after Cobb, in 1987, Olive Anderson could still justifiably characterize the history of suicide as a 'green field site'.⁷ Her own work on suicide in modern England, alongside that of Barbara Gates, a study of Zurich by Markus Schär, and short pieces on revolutionary France by Jeffrey Merrick and Dorinda Outram helped to lay the foundations for a new historical field in the second half of the 1980s.⁸ The beginning of the next decade saw the publication of probably the best-known book on suicide, *Sleepless souls: suicide in early modern England* by Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy.⁹ Additional articles on suicide, an edited volume on medieval and early modern suicide, and a survey of suicide from the middle ages to the twentieth century by Georges Minois in French, which was promptly translated into English and German, followed quickly on their heels.¹⁰ All addressed suicide in western Europe.

⁴ A recent medical approach to suicide that several historians have found useful is Howard Kushner, *American suicide: a psycho-cultural exploration* (New Brunswick and London, 1991).

⁵ Philippe Ariès, *The hour of our death* (Oxford, 1981, orig. Paris, 1977). The same is true of other works on death around the same time: Michel Vovelle, *La mort et l'occident: de 1200 à nos jours* (Paris, 1983); François Lebrun, *Les hommes et la mort en Anjou aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1971); Pierre Chaunu, *La mort à Paris: XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1977); John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: changing attitudes to death among Christians and unbelievers in eighteenth-century France* (Oxford, 1981).

⁶ Richard Cobb, *Death in Paris: the records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795–September 1801, Vendémiaire Year IV–Fructidor Year IX* (Oxford, 1978), p. 101.

⁷ Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1987), p. 425. That said, a handful of older historical works proved useful to some of Anderson's cohort: Albert Bayet, *Le suicide et la morale* (Paris, 1922); Louis Dublin, *To be or not to be* (New York, 1933); Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: a social and historical study* (New York, 1938); Lester Crocker, 'The discussion of suicide in the eighteenth century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 13 (1952), pp. 47–72.

⁸ Not mentioned by Anderson, but published earlier were Markus Schär, *Seelemlöte der Untertanen: Selbstmord, Melancholie und Religion im alten Zürich, 1500–1800* (Zurich, 1985), and a study by an Americanist, Roger Lane, *Violent death in the city: suicide, accident, and murder in nineteenth-century Philadelphia* (Cambridge, MA, 1979). Those that followed included Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian suicide: mad crimes and sad histories* (Princeton, 1988), Jeffrey Merrick, 'Patterns and prosecution of suicide in eighteenth-century Paris', *Historical Reflexions*, 16 (1989), pp. 1–53, and Dorinda Outram, *The body and the French Revolution* (New Haven and London, 1989), pp. 68–105.

⁹ Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless souls: suicide in early modern England* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁰ Patrice Higonnet, 'Du suicide sentimental au suicide politique', in Elisabeth Liris and Jean-Maurice Bizière, eds., *La révolution et la mort* (Toulouse, 1991), pp. 137–50, and by the same author, 'Joint suicide in eighteenth-century French literature and revolutionary politics', in Bernadette Fort, ed., *Fictions of the French Revolution* (Evanston, IL, 1991), pp. 87–110; Gabriele Signori, ed. *Trauer, Verzweiflung und Anfechtung: Selbstmord und Selbstmordversuch in mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Gesellschaften*

While operating in a historiographical vacuum, these historians faced a strong consensus about the causes and patterns of suicide established by sociologists working in the tradition of Durkheim. So central is this consensus to the historiography of suicide that it is worthwhile summarizing the claims of its founding text, *Le suicide*, which first appeared in 1897.¹¹ The message Durkheim delivered was that the roots of suicide were to be found in the individual's relationship with society rather than in physical factors, whether within the body or the immediate environment. While allowing a limited role for insanity, as in cases of hallucinations or an obsessive death wish, he insisted that there were real motives for the vast majority of suicides. Indeed the consistency of the data led him to posit laws governing suicide, thereby discounting the role of free will entirely. He noted the consistency of national differences in suicide rates, but rejected the notion of an inherited tendency to suicide by pointing to discrepancies in the suicide rates of particular racial groups that were present in more than one part of the Habsburg monarchy. He claimed that the hours and days of the week when greatest social activity took place were also those when suicide rates peaked. In the same way, Durkheim asserted that the increased exposure to society experienced by individuals as they grew from childhood to maturity was responsible for the concomitant rise in suicide rates over the life cycle.

Historians thus had at their disposal an explanation for suicide and a general model against which to test particular instances. But Durkheim's work was highly problematic. If it demonstrated a concern with the impact of contemporary socio-economic processes, its overall sensitivity to historical context was weak. The chronological span of the analysis was limited by the availability of what its author deemed reliable statistics – most of the data extended back just a few decades to the 1860s – and he made little attempt to link such data to events and developments in the societies from which they emanated. More seriously, he showed complete disinterest in the meaning of suicide, either in his own time or before. A fellow-sociologist, the American, Jack Douglas revealed these shortcomings in spectacular fashion in *The social meanings of suicide*, published in 1967.¹² Douglas completely discredited the statistics upon which Durkheim relied. According to Douglas, suicide statistics reflected the interests, assumptions, and capacities of those concerned, from the suicide's relatives and neighbours to the coroner and government officials responsible for gathering statistics. Their own opinions as to plausible, and even reasonable, circumstances under which one might end one's life, as well as the reputation of the deceased, swayed them in their classification of a death as suicide. The only solution, Douglas believed, was a case-by-case analysis of suicides.

By the time historians came to examine suicide seriously in the 1980s, therefore, the foundations of the Durkheimian tradition were shaky. Not surprisingly, historians – to varying degrees – shared Douglas's scepticism. As Anderson pointed out, they routinely dealt with problematic evidence and were well aware of the possibility of different definitions, variations in bureaucratic efficiency, and concealment in official statistics of every kind.¹³ At issue was whether any meaningful conclusions could be gained from suicide

(*Forum Psychohistorie*, ed., Hedwig Röckelein, vol. III) (Tübingen, 1994); Georges Minois, *Histoire du suicide: la société occidentale face à la mort volontaire* (Paris, 1995), which was translated into German in 1996 and into English three years later with the title, *History of suicide: voluntary death in western culture* (Baltimore and London, 1999).

¹¹ George Simpson, ed., Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (London and New York, 2002).

¹² Jack Douglas, *The social meanings of suicide* (Princeton, 1967).

¹³ Anderson, *Suicide in England*, pp. 13–14.

statistics. Anderson's own work illustrated the difficulties inherent in relying on such figures. Although she revealed the flaws in the processes by which suicide statistics were compiled for this period in England, she insisted that they could be trusted to demonstrate the relative frequency of suicide across different social groups and places. Yet the relative frequency of suicide can only be derived from the absolute numbers, which remain questionable. Plausible explanations for the distribution derived are not in themselves proof.

The unreliability of the data on suicide, together with the dearth of sources for the early modern period, led MacDonald and Murphy to take a very different approach. They decided not to attempt conclusions about actual rates of suicide or even variations across social groups and instead concentrated on attitudes to suicide. Their conclusion – that suicide became secularized in the early modern period – proved influential, if not entirely convincing. The authors noted that it had been normal in classical times to punish suicides by confiscating the goods of the deceased and denying their bodies the usual burial rites, and that only with St Augustine, and later Thomas Aquinas, had Christian attitudes become more uniformly hostile and punishments more severe. The Reformation and expansion of the state had led to harsh treatment of suicides under the Tudors and early Stuarts, but from 1660 juries in England were more likely to return verdicts of *non compos mentis*, whereby the usual penalties did not apply, than *felo de se*. Yet these decisions were taken at a time when suicide still appeared to clerics and many ordinary people as diabolical. MacDonald and Murphy argued that a combination of factors – Enlightenment explanations of suicide as a rational choice or product of insanity, concerns for the property of the deceased, and the rise of a sentimental view of suicide in the press – swayed the middling-men who comprised the juries.

Like Anderson's work, *Sleepless souls* had some source problems of its own. Even before its publication, the question of who was responsible for the new leniency and how far it had spread was under debate – Donna Andrew took Michael MacDonald to task for exaggerating the change by neglecting popular attitudes, for which sources were less plentiful, and overlooking evidence of opposition to leniency in the press.¹⁴ Ultimately, the claims made in *Sleepless souls* about the initial hardening of attitudes towards suicide rested on assumptions about medieval attitudes, which were not well investigated until the publication of the second volume of Alexander Murray's magisterial three-volume study, *Suicide in the middle ages*.¹⁵ While Murray did not challenge the rise of leniency in the early modern period, he showed that the harsh attitudes associated with the middle ages dated only from the late medieval period, so that the leniency identified by MacDonald and Murphy was less novel than they suggested. Neither was the medieval condemnation of suicide as absolute as previously thought. According to Murray, medieval writers did not advocate sanctions against attempted suicide, only successful suicides. They were concerned less with the immorality of suicide than the loss of life, he concluded.¹⁶

¹⁴ Donna T. Andrew, 'Debate: the secularization of suicide in England, 1660–1800', *Past and Present*, 119 (1988), pp. 158–65. This was a response to Michael MacDonald's article of the same title in volume 111 (1986) and was followed by his reply.

¹⁵ Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the middle ages*, 1: *The violent against themselves* (Oxford, 1999), and II: *The curse on self-murder* (Oxford, 2000). Vol. III, *The map of mental desolation*, has not yet appeared. On the same period, see Arno Borst et al., eds., *Tod im Mittelalter* (Constance, 1993).

¹⁶ Murray, *Curse on self-murder*, pp. 398–405.

II

For better or worse, many historians of suicide followed MacDonald and Murphy's lead in concentrating on the early modern period, especially the eighteenth century. Minois, for instance, devoted nearly three-quarters of his history of suicide to this period and relegated the two centuries after the French Revolution to an epilogue.¹⁷ Since 1998, there have been two monographs published on suicide in Germany in the early modern era, one on Geneva, an edited volume on western and central Europe, and two studies of the modern period that take the eighteenth century as their starting point.¹⁸ For the most part uninterested in the actual suicide rate, these works followed the agenda set by *Sleepless souls* in their attention to questions of religion, elite and popular opinion, and state interests, but refined the secularization thesis considerably. Newer research shows changes in religiosity to be more gradual and the implications of strong religious belief more ambiguous than MacDonald and Murphy allowed. There is increasing evidence to support Susan Morrissey's claim that the moral explanation of suicide did not simply fade away with the emergence of a medical model, which explained suicide as the product of physical, often psychological, problems. Rather a process of 'hybridization' took place, whereby both approaches existed together.¹⁹

MacDonald and Murphy's claim that harsh attitudes towards suicide developed in the Reformation has received little support from subsequent publications. While Schär drew a causal link between the Reformation and suicide rates in Zurich, of all the later authors, only Vera Lind demonstrated an intensification of penalties for suicide in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in this case in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, then under Denmark.²⁰ And although MacDonald and Murphy, and later Minois, suggested that Protestantism encouraged harsher penalties, others have shown that there was no appreciable change in attitudes in states that saw large-scale conversions, such as the Dutch Republic and Geneva, despite Calvin's strong aversion to suicide.²¹ Indeed, Paul Seaver has used the case of Richard Allen, who committed suicide in London in 1601, to argue that the church was a force for leniency in England. Although a court decreed Allen of sane mind, a friend interceded with the vicar-general and gained a licence for a Christian burial. Unlike the authors of *Sleepless souls*, Seaver found no social bias in the response to appeals of this sort. Religious criteria were far more significant – in this case, the fact that Allen had repented before his death – and resulted in leniency.²²

¹⁷ Minois, *History of suicide*.

¹⁸ Lind, *Selbstmord*; Andreas Bähr, *Der Richter im Ich: Die Semantik der Selbsttötung in der Aufklärung* (Göttingen, 2002); Jeffrey R. Watt, *Choosing death: suicide and Calvinism in early modern Geneva* (Kirksville, MS, 2001), and idem, ed., *From sin to insanity: suicide in early modern Europe* (Ithaca, 2004); Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*; Zilla Gabrielle Cahn, *Suicide in French thought from Montesquieu to Cioran* (New York, 1998).

¹⁹ Susan Morrissey, 'Drinking to death: vodka, suicide, and religious burial in Russia', *Past and Present*, 186 (2005), p. 145.

²⁰ For discussion of laws on suicide, see Lind, *Selbstmord*, pp. 31–9.

²¹ Machiel Bosman, 'The judicial treatment of suicide in Amsterdam', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, p. 20; Watt, *Choosing death*, p. 92, and on Calvin's views, pp. 67–76. See also Erik Midelfort, 'Selbstmord im Urteil von Reformation und Gegenreformation', in Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, eds., *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung* (Gütersloh, 1995), pp. 296–310.

²² Paul S. Seaver, 'Suicide and the vicar general in London: a mystery solved?', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, pp. 25–47.

The main argument of *Sleepless souls*, the growth of leniency in the eighteenth century, still appears reasonable, given the abundance of treatises and jury verdicts to this effect. But, as Seaver indicated, the clergy at times contributed to this development. On the basis of detailed reports on 120 cases between 1600 and 1820, Lind showed that this was the case in Schleswig and Holstein. As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, encounters with suicide encouraged sympathy among Protestant pastors, in some cases to the point of conspiring with relatives to disguise suicides. In fact, the shift in the perception of suicide as a sinful to an insane act occurred before responsibility for determining a suicide switched from the clergy to the medical profession in 1760.²³ Examinations of writings by theologians have also revealed liberal views towards suicide, even among Catholic clergy. French theologians divided along the usual Jesuit-Jansenist lines, with the Jansenists more tolerant of suicide because they believed that an early death precluded further sin.²⁴ The German theologian, Johann Michael Sailer, accepted medical explanations for suicide, while the German Jesuit, Johann Robeck, departed from his French brothers in calling for an end to the church's official condemnation of suicide.²⁵ Unfortunately, we still know little about Jewish attitudes to suicide, although brief references suggest that they were slightly more forgiving of it than Christians.²⁶

As well as providing examples of clerical tolerance of suicide, recent research has cautioned against overestimating the Enlightenment impulse towards tolerance. Andreas Bähr highlighted the ambivalence of Enlightened figures in his analysis of several well-known suicides from the second half of the eighteenth century, including Carl Wilhelm Jerusalem, whose experience Goethe used as a model for the character of Werther, against the background of writings by Lessing, Mendelssohn, Kant, and others.²⁷ The title, which translates as *The internal judge: the semantics of self-killing in the Enlightenment*, reflects the author's attachment to the linguistic turn, expressed in Foucauldian theory and a repeated, and unnecessary, insistence that the writings of suicidal individuals must be read not as the true state of their emotions but a code for their values. Bähr argued that these figures, all male intellectuals committed to Protestantism and the Enlightenment, felt the need to justify their planned suicides, while upholding the general condemnation of suicide as a violation of the duty of self-preservation. While endorsing the link between suicide and secularization, with a particular emphasis on individualism, he showed that, at an individual level, the process was far from smooth. His detailed analyses demonstrated that these intellectuals exploited the contemporary trope of melancholy, describing it as a symptom of a moral weakness, which was in turn responsible for them seeking to end their lives.²⁸

²³ Lind, *Selbstmord*, p. 413. For early modern Germany, see also David Lederer, 'The dishonourable dead: elite and popular perceptions of suicide in early modern Germany', in Sibylle Backmann et al., eds., *Das Konzept der Ehre in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Augsburg, 1997), pp. 347–63.

²⁴ Minois, *History of suicide*, pp. 116–47.

²⁵ Lind, *Selbstmord*, pp. 97–112.

²⁶ On Moses Mendelssohn, see Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, p. 55; for a brief comment on Jewish, Christian, and Islamic attitudes, see Elizabeth G. Dickenson and James M. Boyden, 'Ambivalence toward suicide in golden age Spain', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, pp. 100–15.

²⁷ Other suicides considered in Bähr, *Richter im ich*, are Christian Friedrich Illing, Gotthold Friedrich Stäudlin, Clooß. An earlier treatment of Jerusalem can be found in Roger Paulin, *Der Fall Jerusalem: Zum Selbstmordproblem zwischen Aufklärung und Empfindsamkeit* (Eine kleine Geschichte der Aufklärung) (Göttingen, 1999).

²⁸ Also on melancholy, see David Lederer, 'Melancholie und andere Krankheiten des Geistes: Plädoyer für eine Geschichte der frühmodernen Seelenarznei', in Reiner Jehl and Wolfgang Weber, eds., *Melancholie – Krankheit oder Lebenskunst?* (Sigmaringen, 2000), pp. 17–32.

Studies of national discourses on suicide suggest that Bähr's intellectuals had more qualms than their French and English counterparts. That is not to say that the latter approved of suicide. Even French writers who normally championed human freedom had reservations, and Zilla Gabrielle Cahn notes that all but Holbach laid down conditions under which suicide was permissible, for fear of encouraging suicide among those whom they deemed unworthy of it.²⁹ But although the German-speaking world was familiar with French and English views, it produced no counterpart of Holbach or David Hume, whose defence of suicide appeared in 1783.³⁰ Opposition to leniency in Germany came from both clergy and lay intellectuals such as the jurist, Justus Möser.³¹ For his part, Immanuel Kant was unequivocal in his condemnation of suicide, although he abjured religious arguments in favour of an emphasis on the individual's duty to promote morality.³² Why German discourse was more conservative has not been satisfactorily explained. National philosophical and political traditions probably played a part, but if, as many studies have suggested, elite opinion reflected, rather than led, opinion, the answer may ultimately lie in the immediate encounters with suicide by ordinary people in different parts of Europe, about which we still know little.³³

As Bähr's work demonstrates, using a small sample of cases, especially of literate figures for whom sources are plentiful, can yield insights into the meaning of suicide for those who chose it. Studies of the phenomenon of suicidal murder reveal that Christianity, despite its strong indictment of suicide, could, under certain circumstances, constitute a catalyst. Suicidal murder involved a murder, often of a child (whose innocence apparently hastened its path to heaven) belonging to someone else, which brought with it the penalty of capital punishment. In the intervening period, the murderer could repent for the great sin and thus die a good death. The practice appears to have thrived in northern Germany and Scandinavia in the early modern period because of a growing unorthodox belief that violent deaths, with the exception of suicide, marked the surest route to heaven.³⁴ It ended with the abolition of capital punishment in cases where the motive appeared to be suicide in this region from 1767 to 1787.³⁵ Others have pointed out that orthodox Christianity offered an ambiguous message on suicide that even Aquinas could not root out. The resignation with which Jesus met the martyrdom foretold in scripture could be contrived as suicidal, and a model for his followers to emulate, and (contrary to Marx) the promise of a better life after death might act as a lure to precipitate it.³⁶ Lind cites a case of a pastor who talked of Christ's blood when cutting his own throat as evidence of the link between suicide and religious sacrifice.³⁷

Christianity increasingly competed with other approaches to suicide, both old and new, in early modern Europe. Dorinda Outram documented the resurgence of classical models in an earlier work, *The body and the French Revolution*, which included an examination of a

²⁹ Cahn, *Suicide in French thought*, p. 109.

³⁰ David Hume, *Essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul* (London, 1783).

³¹ Lind, *Selbstmord*, p. 59, and on Möser, pp. 65–6.

³² Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 133–4.

³³ On transmission of popular opinion to the elite, see the study of Geneva, an important Enlightenment centre, Watt, *Choosing death*.

³⁴ Arne Jansson, 'Suicidal murders in Stockholm', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, pp. 81–99. See also his larger study, *From swords to sorrow: homicide and suicide in early modern Stockholm* (Stockholm, 1998).

³⁵ Jansson, 'Suicidal murders', p. 89; Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 76–9.

³⁶ Cahn, *Suicide in French thought*, p. 10; Murray, *Curse on self-murder*, pp. 86–121.

³⁷ Lind, *Selbstmord*, pp. 334–6.

number of prominent aristocratic and bourgeois revolutionaries who, inspired by neo-Stoicism, committed suicide in preference to execution by the guillotine. These viewed suicide as an honourable and dignified death that expressed their commitment to republicanism and human freedom. Suicide also differentiated them from their working-class fellow-prisoners, who preferred action to exit.³⁸ Subsequent historians have found literary, rather than classical, models to have been more influential in other contexts. It is now clear that Goethe's novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, whose protagonist killed himself out of unrequited love for a married woman, encouraged some real suicides after its publication in 1774. Recent work sees the impact of the novel not in a sudden wave of suicides, as is popularly believed, but a proclivity for the practice among its readers, whether immediately or long after reading it, even into 1830s.³⁹ Although *Werther* was available in French translation from 1776, the three young Genevans for whom it was a catalyst committed suicide over a fourteen-year period from 1779 to 1793. Copies of *Werther* were found beside two; the third, the only one with romantic problems, was reported by relatives to have read it alongside similar novels.⁴⁰ In the case of the German writer, Karoline von Günderrode, *Werther* formed one stage along a path that ended in her suicide in 1806. According to Lind, this extreme response reflected a general enthusiasm for the novel, especially among the young, who shared Werther's sense of being oppressed by bourgeois morality and, in the case of Günderrode, a reluctance to become old.⁴¹ As the above examples illustrate, however, *Werther* was normally just one of several factors that precipitated suicides. And the model of sentimental suicide that *Werther* represented was itself overlain with a Christian model, as evident in the title, which recalled Christ's passion.

The fact that Cato and Werther, along with most of their imitators, were male reminds us that gender was an important factor in shaping the act of suicide. Indeed Outram explained the popularity of neo-Stoicism in terms of contemporary notions of masculinity, and showed that women were subject to very different expectations.⁴² Ironically, despite the tradition of comparing male and female suicide rates, other historians have not compared male and female approaches to the act of suicide itself.⁴³ Lind is an exception. She made the interesting finding that, of her sample of 120 cases, only men chose suicide as recompense for their sins, although she failed to explain why. Did the habit of self-sacrifice derive from military service? Or perhaps from the model of Christ, albeit himself without sin? She also made the important point that access and ease of use do not always account for the different methods adopted by men and women. Alert to folkloric traditions as well as gender roles, she linked women's preference for drowning to the association of water with female deities in mythology and its use as a means of execution for women in the past.⁴⁴

The concentration on both attitudes towards suicide and the meanings that suicides themselves brought to the act, which predominate in recent works on suicide, are a far cry from Durkheim. But that is not to say that all historians have abandoned the quest to establish the real rate of suicide. Despite the dearth of sources for the medieval period and strong suspicions of concealment, Murray compiled statistical tables based on deaths that

³⁸ Outram, *Body and the French Revolution*, pp. 90–105. ³⁹ Cahn, *Suicide in French thought*, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Watt, *Choosing death*, pp. 228–9.

⁴¹ Lind, *Selbstmord*, pp. 128–30.

⁴² Outram, *Body and the French revolution*, pp. 85–7.

⁴³ For a literary perspective on gender and suicide see Margaret Higonnet, 'Speaking silences: women's suicide', in Susan Ribin Suleiman, ed., *The female body in western culture: contemporary perspectives* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 68–83.

⁴⁴ Lind, *Selbstmord*, p. 331.

appeared to be suicide in the first volume of his study. Although primarily concerned with the period from 1000 to 1500, he made a case for a dramatic rise in suicide in sixteenth-century England that could not be explained solely by the more efficient reporting methods of the Tudor administration, as MacDonald and Murphy had suggested.⁴⁵ Yet while Murray is adept in identifying suicides from his sources, lack of systematic reporting for earlier centuries means that we cannot draw any firm conclusions from his data. We simply do not know what the sources do not contain. Certain sources simply cannot provide the kind of answers that Durkheimians seek. Jeffrey Merrick's attempt to account for an apparent wave of suicides in Paris in 1775 is an example in point. Although he established twenty definite suicides, he was so wary about the record-keeping of the district police commissioners and the reliability of the *Nouvelles*, published collections of news and gossip that often suggested motives for particular suicides, that he drew only one conclusion from his analysis, at that a meagre one – that ordinary people were willing to judge suicides for themselves.⁴⁶

By contrast, Jeffrey Watt's work on Geneva should help restore historians' faith in Durkheim's approach and encourage them to reconsider his conclusions, however dubiously reached. Watt was fortunate enough to find a complete run of death records from 1549 to 1798, efficiently compiled by Genevan civil servants. Unlike Anderson, he established the suicide rate not by relying on the official tally, but by examining files on sudden or unnatural deaths for likely suicides, a method that helps to reduce the problem of concealment. This allowed Watt to demonstrate a link between suicide and social isolation, although not among the same groups identified by Durkheim. For instance, Watt argued that Protestants in Geneva were, in fact, fully integrated, with church bodies, like the Consistory, playing a huge role in the everyday life of its citizens. For the seventeenth century, when this was especially true, suicide was the preserve of the marginal, specifically suspected witches, prison inmates, and the violently insane. Reformed piety encouraged active participation in the church and strengthened resistance to suicidal impulses.⁴⁷

In explaining a sharp rise after 1750, Watt validated Durkheim's theory of 'anomic' suicides, which take place after a life-changing shock, such as a financial crisis, and rise in accordance with expectations and declining government regulation.⁴⁸ He showed that the suicides of this period included a greater proportion of people of comfortable means whose heightened economic expectations were unfulfilled. Wigmakers were a particular casualty of the revolutionary period. Three of these committed suicide, it seems, as a result of the impact of the falling demand for wigs on their businesses. On the other hand, the relatively low suicide rate of those employed in the factory-style manufacture of printed cotton fabric, known as *indiennes*, contradicted the link posited by Durkheim with industrialization. Unlike the wigmakers, they had invested little in acquiring skills and so lost less in economic downturns.⁴⁹ Watt's claims that the jump in suicides in Geneva was paralleled across Europe make these arguments appear more significant, until one remembers that the author, legitimately, upheld his own work as the only one that is based on reliable evidence on suicide rates for premodern Europe.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Murray, *Violent against themselves*, pp. 368–78.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Merrick, 'Suicide in Paris', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, pp. 158–69.

⁴⁷ Watt, *Choosing death*, pp. 263–4.

⁴⁸ Durkheim, *Suicide*, pp. 201–39.

⁴⁹ Watt, *Choosing death*, pp. 166–86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 66.

III

The dawn of the modern period does not provide a satisfactory marker for the history of suicide, although the fact that suicide was decriminalized in much of Europe in the three decades from 1790 to 1820 might suggest otherwise. The timing of this legal revolution owed much to chance. Decriminalization was primarily a French initiative, passed in 1790–1 as part of sweeping legislative changes designed to distance the revolutionary from the old regime. French expansion ensured its spread to much of the rest of the continent soon afterwards. Prussia constituted an exception in that Frederick the Great, persuaded by the arguments of Enlightenment writers, had already abolished penalties for suicide there in 1751. In states removed from French influence, decriminalization took place much later. Russia forbade bodily desecration in 1835, but continued dishonourable burial and the charging of attempted suicides with attempted murder until 1845.⁵¹ The decriminalization process was even more protracted in England, with bodily desecration coming to an end in 1823, confiscation of property in 1870, and the remaining penalties not until 1961.⁵²

Laws on suicide are not a good index of actual practice, in any case. Demands for decriminalization in the eighteenth century derived not from concerns about the impact of legal sanctions on actual suicides, but from desires for an institutionalization of the leniency already in operation.⁵³ Nor did laws on suicide always reflect majority opinion. As Baumann has demonstrated, few of Frederick the Great's subjects approved of his decision to decriminalize suicide, and the ban on dishonourable burial contained in Prussia's General Law Code (*Allgemeines Landrecht*) of 1794 also provoked protests. Despite these measures, clergy and local communities continued to discriminate against suicidal corpses to the point that the Prussian government felt it necessary to pass a law against the practice in 1873.⁵⁴ In a recent article on Russia, Susan Morrissey has shown that the burial of suicides also led to clashes between church and state authorities there in the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ The Orthodox Church had a tradition of condemning reckless behaviour, including excessive alcohol consumption, as sinful. Thus, when presented with cases of *opoitsa*, death through either alcohol poisoning or suicide committed in a state of intoxication, the church, with community support, refused to administer the usual burial rites. Influenced by medical opinion, which was inclined to view drunkenness as a temporary form of insanity, state officials insisted on normal burial. Morrissey thus showed that burial disputes provided a vehicle for the clergy to defend the concept of sinful behaviour, as well as to resist the encroachment of the state into their traditional jurisdiction. She also made the important point that popular contempt for *opoitsa* as a threat to the community did not represent a survival of folkloric belief, as is often supposed in the case of suicide, but an acceptance of a clerical view from the seventeenth century, when grain alcohol became more widely available and the church was asserting greater control of popular piety. The examples of Russia and Prussia thus support Morrissey's characterization of changes in attitudes to suicide as 'hybridization' rather than 'secularization'.

⁵¹ Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a cultural institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, 1997), pp. 57–8.

⁵² On the legal penalties, see Anderson, *Suicide in England*, pp. 263–311.

⁵³ Machiel Bosman has shown, for instance, that Cesare Beccaria's call for decriminalization in 1764 came long after legal penalties for suicide were widely disregarded, Bosman, 'Judicial treatment of suicides', p. 24.

⁵⁴ Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 19 and 31.

⁵⁵ Morrissey, 'Drinking to death'.

Those interested in the actual suicide rate of the nineteenth century will be disappointed by Baumann and Morrissey, but find succour in the temerity of Victor Bailey, who embraced 'refurbished Durkheimianism', in *This rash act*.⁵⁶ On the one hand, he defended Durkheim against Douglas by illustrating that the practice of concealment was significant for his sample. Examining mainly poor people in Kingston-upon-Hull in the second half of the nineteenth century, he argued reasonably that concealment was difficult given the shock of the person who found the body of a suicide and the close living quarters of most of the town's residents. On the other hand, he echoed Douglas's concerns about the mediating role of juries in determining suicides. He took account of the tendency to give open verdicts in ambiguous deaths and to declare suicides insane, even when the evidence suggested otherwise, and recategorized some of these as genuine suicides. In addition, he showed that the remaining penalties for suicide in England were rarely invoked, a finding that helps to explain the lack of urgency in reforming the laws there.⁵⁷

Bailey usefully refined Durkheim's approach to age and gender in suicide patterns. As the subtitle of the work indicates, *Suicide across the life cycle in the Victorian city*, Bailey argued that each age cohort has a typical set of work and family circumstances, which help to explain their different proclivities for suicide. The varying ratio of male to female suicides he ascribed to the gender-specific experience of these life phases. Throughout, Bailey emphasized the importance of work in the lives of Hull's inhabitants. Unemployment, or simply the fear of it, was a major cause of suicide for men who, unlike many women, even lower-middle-class women, expected to take part in the workforce consistently over their adult lives. Illness also played a big role, not least, he points out, because of the isolation from work colleagues associated with it. There are, however, occasional problems with Bailey's argument. Bailey accepts certain contemporary explanations uncritically, citing, for example, melancholy as a motive for some cases of early old age female suicides, without historicizing its meaning. He also took 'religious mania' and 'religious despondency' at face value as explanations for suicide, without considering the religious beliefs and prejudices of contemporaries. Indeed, in contrast to most authors on suicide, Bailey makes scant reference to religion, whether in terms of the confession of those committing suicide (the immigrant 'Little Ireland' community was presumably Catholic), the rates of religious practice, or the impact of clerical condemnations of suicide.⁵⁸ More importantly for his own thesis about social isolation, it seems odd that Bailey failed to explore the town's associational life: to what extent involvement in churches or the male preserves of trade unions (on which Bailey is an expert) and football clubs counter the suicidal impulse?

If Bailey's approach to Durkheim was to 'refurbish' his work, other historians chose to historicize it. The results have yielded fewer insights into suicide than the interests that animated nineteenth-century discourse about suicide. According to Cahn, Durkheim selected his statistics to fit his quest to prove that even a private event had its roots in society and thus justify the new discipline of sociology. Political motives played a role, too, albeit a less effective one. The French government commissioned *Le suicide* as part of a campaign to strengthen the nation against Germany, but Durkheim, an Alsatian, relied heavily on German scholars working over the border and denied a role for the state in suicide prevention.⁵⁹ Baumann argued, on the other hand, that Durkheim's social conservatism

⁵⁶ Victor Bailey, *This rash act: suicide across the life cycle in the Victorian city* (Stanford, 1998).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 43 and 60–84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 201 and 229–30.

⁵⁹ Cahn, *Suicide in French thought*, p. 228.

served government interests generally. He downplayed the well-publicized contribution of domestics and soldiers to contemporary suicide rates out of reluctance to criticize their superiors. Durkheim, she concludes, did not want to admit problems connected with modernity beyond anomie and egotism.⁶⁰

The most interesting work on the discourse about suicide in the nineteenth century has focused on the politicization of suicide. Recent studies of Russia, Germany, and Italy reveal that apparent increases in suicide popularized it as metaphor for social and cultural ills. As Baumann showed for nineteenth-century Germany, its appeal extended across the social spectrum. Conservatives used the rise in suicide rates as a means of decrying irreligion, whereas socialists used it to highlight working-class poverty.⁶¹ Its application was also vast. In the case of Imperial Russia, Irina Paperno identified the use of the term as an indictment of atheism, nihilism, civilization, and the dissolution of communal solidarity, as well as poverty. By tracing the rise and fall of the suicide metaphor, she showed that it helped to express anxiety about the political changes of the Great Reform era and the period from the revolution of 1905 to 1914. She was also able to show that the suicide metaphor reflected the changing concerns of the Russian intelligentsia, as deviant sexuality replaced atheism in explanations of suicide after 1905.⁶²

In his book, *Tired of living: suicide in Italy from national unification to World War I, 1860–1915*, Ty Geltmaker provides the most detailed account of the role of suicide in national political discourse, treating explanations that implicated sexual deviancy, rapid economic development, and secularism in turn. Italy appeared to be experiencing a suicide epidemic in this period, with as many Italian deaths caused by suicide as the invasion of Libya in the year 1911.⁶³ His examination of Italian scholarship on suicide is especially welcome, given its influence elsewhere – Enrico Morselli's 1878 work, *Suicide: an essay on comparative moral statistics*, served as an important source for Durkheim.⁶⁴ Remarkably, modern historians interested in the motives behind suicide have overlooked important insights of these scholars. Drawing on the work of the German sexologist, Richard Krafft-Ebbing, the Italian, Enrico Altavilla, for instance, argued that repressed sexual feelings were responsible for some suicides. Geltmaker is unique among historians in pursuing this possibility. He usefully suggested that the lack of alternatives to marriage, for homosexuals and others, might be responsible for the higher rate of suicides among single people in Italy as elsewhere.⁶⁵ And while historians have frequently pointed to economic hardship as a factor in suicide, they have not explored Enrico Ferri's suggestion that emigration might have functioned as an alternative to suicide. If economic despair led in both directions, we need to know under what circumstances emigration had greater appeal than suicide.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, Geltmaker's discussion of suicide rates takes place in a historiographical vacuum, where issues of statistical compilation and evaluation are ignored. He cannot, therefore, establish the relative importance of either repressed sexuality or economic despair as explanations for the apparent rise in suicide in Italy.

⁶⁰ Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 241–2 and 268–70.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 227 and 264.

⁶² Paperno, *Dostoevsky's Russia*, pp. 82 and 101.

⁶³ Ty Geltmaker, *Tired of living: suicide in Italy from national unification to World War I, 1860–1915* (New York, 2002).

⁶⁴ The original title was *Il suicidio: saggio di statistica morale comparata* (Milan, 1878). He also wrote *Le leggi statistiche del suicidio* (Milan, 1885).

⁶⁵ Geltmaker, *Tired of living*, pp. 17–29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

His own reading on contemporary Italy led Geltmaker to posit, in addition, a link between suicide and violence more generally. He argued that the attraction of suicide owed much to the culture's glorification of violence, which began with the Futurists and continued into the First World War.⁶⁷ Alexander Murray's recent claim that both the suicide and homicide rates in medieval society were substantially lower than in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that suicide might indeed be symptomatic of the level of violence in a given society.⁶⁸ Again Geltmaker fails to provide adequate evidence, however, and pushes his argument too far. While it is plausible to argue that the duel might have served some as indirect suicide, it is difficult to accept his theory that enthusiasm for war in 1915 was the result of a mass suicidal impulse. Elsewhere, David Lederer makes a similar point, but far more convincingly. According to Lederer, a penchant for violence was key to understanding the particular popularity of suicide in nineteenth-century Hungary. He argued that the many military struggles against the Turks prolonged the tradition of heroic self-sacrifice there and Romantics ensured its persistence into the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the state appears to have colluded with this tradition with its relatively lenient legislation on suicide. Accompanied by illustrations and literary extracts, Lederer's research enriches our understanding of nationalism as well as suicide.⁶⁹ One becomes sceptical when national peculiarities all lead in the same direction and when one remembers that a culture of heroic self-sacrifice could coincide with apparently low suicide rates, such as in Ireland, but the line of inquiry remains sufficiently promising to make further research on the links between suicide and violence worthwhile.

One of the characteristics of modern states is the monopoly they claim on violence, and much important work has been done on the ways in which they responded to the threat posed by suicide to this monopoly.⁷⁰ This work makes clear that decriminalization by no means spelled an end to states' interest in suicide. If anything, it encouraged them to explore new methods of protecting their populations from the drain of suicide. Thus, as Baumann has noted, shortly after decriminalization, Prussia passed decrees that banned its subjects from assisting someone to commit suicide and even obliged its subjects to help to prevent suicide on pain of imprisonment.⁷¹ Elsewhere, Morrissey has shown that Russian authorities went further by making the instigation of suicide, as well as suicide assistance, criminal offences in 1845. With the ending of legal sanctions against suicide the same year, the state now sought to combat suicide by penalizing those around the suicide, who were turned into murder suspects, rather than the suicide him or herself, who earned the status of victim.⁷² Yet Morrissey demonstrated that the offence of suicide instigation did not derive from an intensified desire to prevent suicide so much as to deter excessive cruelty on the part of masters towards their serfs and, after emancipation, between family members. The law was even applied in cases where there was evidence of cruelty, but no actual

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶⁸ Murray, *Violent against themselves*, pp. 359–62.

⁶⁹ David Lederer, 'Honfíbu: nationhood, manhood, and the culture of self-sacrifice in Hungary', in Watt, ed., *Sin to insanity*, pp. 116–37.

⁷⁰ For a chronology of suicide prevention, see Fred Cutter, *Art and the wish to die* (Chicago, 1983), pp. 54–8.

⁷¹ Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 44 and 85.

⁷² Susan Morrissey, 'Patriarchy on trial: suicide, discipline and governance in Imperial Russia', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), pp. 23–58, at p. 28. See also by the same author, 'In the name of freedom: autocracy, serfdom, and suicide in Russia', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 82 (2004), pp. 268–91.

suicide, and, in an echo of witch trials, more often against women than men. The fact that the prohibitions on suicide assistance and instigation survived the Revolution of 1917 indicates that the communist government also found them a useful means of limiting the violence employed by citizens against one another, as well as themselves.

Kenneth Pinnow argued that the Soviet government also used suicide as a means of ensuring that state and party institutions lived up to communist ideals. While official investigators of cases of suicide often concluded that the deceased had failed to internalize sufficiently communist ideals, in some cases they blamed those around the deceased, including commanders of the Red Army, for failing to notice the suicides' growing desperation or neglecting to take appropriate and timely action. It appears that the Soviet government, like many Russian peasants before them, viewed suicide as a betrayal of the community.⁷³ Thus, whereas in Germany citizens were expected only to thwart an actual suicide attempt, in Russia they had the greater responsibility of ensuring that no such attempt took place. Further analysis of the full range of state legislation on suicide in these countries and elsewhere should confirm Pinnow's claim that the history of suicide can elucidate how governments understood the relationship between the individual and society.

This applies especially to Nazi Germany, which despite a record of dramatic suicides, those of both Jews facing deportation and Nazi leaders facing Soviet capture, has not featured prominently in the historiography of suicide. The Cambridge dissertation, currently being completed by Christian Goeschel, on suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany, should thus prove an important addition to the historiography.⁷⁴ Until then we must rely on Baumann. Her brief discussion confirms the importance of racial ideology, insofar as it applied to ethnic Germans: healthy Germans had a duty to preserve their own lives, but those who were sick, including incapacitated war veterans, were welcome to commit suicide, thereby saving the national community much trouble and expense. Nazi attitudes to Jewish suicides, on the other hand, remain hidden in accounts of deportations and concentration camps. Even if no systematically applied policy existed, it would be interesting to know whether Nazi officials more often welcomed Jewish suicides as a means of accelerating the final solution or resented them as a usurpation of their own claims to decide how and when Jews should die.

While the catalysts to suicide in the cases of Jews and Nazi leaders are obvious, the meanings that each group invested in the act are not. While each group had been exposed to general discussions of suicide in the preceding decades, each also operated within distinct traditions with regard to suicide. In her discussion of nineteenth-century Germany, Baumann noted that Jews had smaller families and thus that their relative suicide rates were higher than most contemporaries realized. The Jewish community also had a greater proportion of doctors, who had easier access to poisons.⁷⁵ She does not explain, however, to what extent these factors played a role in later Jewish suicides, or indeed why some Jews chose suicide even before the Holocaust began, while others waited till the death camps.

⁷³ Kenneth Pinnow, 'Violence against the collective self and the problem of social integration in early Bolshevik Russia', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4 (2003), pp. 653–77.

⁷⁴ Two articles by Goeschel appeared too late for consideration in this review: 'Suicide at the end of the Third Reich', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), pp. 153–73, and 'Methodische Überlegungen zur Geschichte der Selbsttötung im Nationalsozialismus', in Andreas Bahr and Hans Medick, eds., *Sterben von eigener Hand: Selbsttötung als kulturelle Praxis* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna, 2005), pp. 169–90.

⁷⁵ Baumann, *Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, pp. 275–6.

Regrettably, Baumann has little to say about the most famous suicides of all, those of the Nazi leaders, meticulously reproduced in the recent film, *The downfall*. Should we attribute their suicides to the same effort to pre-empt physical torture or murder as those around them, especially in Germany's eastern provinces, or were these, alongside Wehrmacht officers, also invoking an older military code of honour? And to what extent did the suicide of Hitler serve as a model to the others or his death make life not worth living? Hopefully, Goeschel's work will provide some answers.

IV

The scholarship of the past twenty years, and, in particular, the last decade, have helped to construct walls on the green field site identified by Olive Anderson. Reservations about the reliability of sources have led to a concentration on attitudes towards suicide at the expense of the practice of suicide. Yet where substantial data was available and methodological rigour applied, studies of small samples within local settings have yielded significant results. These studies have confirmed the link posited by Durkheim between social isolation and suicide, but recorded quite different distributions of suicide. Insights from these studies, alongside speculation about the significance of sexuality and violence in causing suicide, provide direction to scholars interested in establishing the actual rate of suicide and the motives behind it, if only for a given society. It is not yet possible to chart with any certainty the suicide rate from the medieval to the early modern and modern periods. Longitudinal studies of particular places would help to identify chronological patterns, but so far scholars have not attempted to examine data for more than two to three centuries. The evidence points to a rise in the modern, especially late modern, period, but it seems that this rise was fitful and varied widely according to age, gender, confession, occupation, married status, and place of residence.

Our understanding of attitudes to suicide has progressed to a greater extent. Intellectual discourse on suicide is now well documented for France, Germany, Russia, and England, and popular attitudes are better known, thanks to several local studies from various parts of Europe. Recent research provides strong evidence for the growth of leniency, but describes it as a more complex development than MacDonald and Murphy admitted. The term 'hybridization', proposed by Morrissey to describe the gradual and contested growth of leniency, deserves to replace the older term 'secularization'. It is certainly clear that, despite the dominance of Christianity as a belief system in early modern and modern Europe, other traditions – older classical models, folkloric beliefs, new literary depictions, communist and fascist ideologies – competed with it to shape Europeans' understanding of suicide. But, sometimes, the orthodox Christian condemnation of suicide triumphed over more liberal views, leading, for instance, to denials of religious burials for suicides well into the modern period. Moreover, the traditions that competed with Christianity did not always offer a more liberal view of suicide. The ideologies of communism and fascism, for instance, viewed suicide as a challenge to the state's claim that it had provided a perfect society. Indeed, all modern states, far from withdrawing from the suicide question with decriminalization, found new ways to control it out of concern for the integrity of their populations. Even in the absence of religion, suicide remained a threat.

What directions should the history of suicide take in the future? Most obviously, more empirical work, especially on southern and eastern Europe, is required to provide a more

comprehensive picture of suicide throughout Europe. Only with the reliable data produced by local studies can we hope to build up a picture of suicide patterns in modern Europe as a whole. But, in examining suicide, historians should recognize that it was normally just one of several options available to people in difficulty. Activity, responsibility, exile (perhaps even disappearance), withdrawal from the world (most dramatically 'taking to the bed') have all served as alternatives. It might be that the appeal of these alternatives was stronger in places with apparently low suicide rates, such as Ireland.⁷⁶ To base a study of suicide solely on actual suicides is to miss this part of the picture. Only by examining whole communities, some of whose members chose suicide, whether in times of crisis or normality, can we hope to understand its lure. Such an approach would also allow for the investigation of what Morrissey has described as 'borderline phenomena' like *opoitza*, indirect suicide, and attempted suicide. The ways in which individuals responded to deadly situations reveal as much about their attitudes to death as successful suicides do. This approach would also help to illuminate the role of others, including the state, in precipitating or preventing suicide. If it is proven that an intellectual culture that defends suicide as a right and a society that views it as an understandable response to despair have contributed to the rise in suicides, great responsibility rests on the shoulders of all who discuss suicide, including historians. Baumann is exceptional in insisting on a morally neutral stance.

⁷⁶ There is no history of suicide in Ireland, although Mark Finnane discusses it briefly in a section on 'mania and melancholia' in *Insanity and the insane in post-famine Ireland* (London, 1981), pp. 50–61, and in connection with violence generally in 'A decline in violence in Ireland? Crime, policing and social relations, 1860–1914', *Crime, Histories et Sociétés*, 1 (1997), pp. 51–70.