

# **An Anarchist Perspective on Suicide, the Meaning of Death and the Preservation of Life**

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## Abstract

Presenting a critical examination of the way in which the Church, the State and medical institutions conceived the phenomenon of suicide in Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we intend to demonstrate the contradictions between the exploitation of life by the State and the preservation of life through the penalization of suicide, thereby masking its principle of maintaining productivity. If the sovereign, on the one hand, has the power to take their subjects and themselves to death, the subjects, on the other hand, have no power over their bodies and must not only produce wealth for the sovereign, but also remain alive, yet on the verge of death. We intend to demonstrate that these processes, despite having changed in form and justification, were driven by similar principles, guided by economic and political motivations.

**Keywords:** suicide; anarchism; sovereignty; death.

## Introduction

In his earliest piece, Camus<sup>1</sup> suggests that suicide is the great philosophical problem. From deciding to live to suppressing life, we encounter the ultimatum of philosophy. However, our focus does not turn to suicide in terms of the subjective aspects of existence, or the need for meaning, or anguish. Our focus here is not on the suicidal individual, but on what surrounds them. What draws our attention is the impact that suicide has on its witnesses, and not just any witnesses, much less in relation to any suicide.

Our aim in this study is to demonstrate the extent to which the responses of different European States to the phenomenon of suicide denounce the curtailment of freedom by their authoritarian institutions – in this case, the Church, the judiciary institutions and the medical authorities. The geography of our topic was chosen due to its imposing regency over governments in the most diverse Westernized territories, given that State organizations in other territories, such as Latin American regions, are direct heirs of modern European States – conceiving the birth of modernity from the perspective of Grosfoguel (2016), since 1492, with the conquest of Al-Andalus. In other words, the way in which certain European governments perceived the phenomenon of suicide influenced the production of societal imaginaries and legislations of other populations in other territories in relation to this same phenomenon.

By explaining the processes of condemning suicide, mainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in some European countries, we intend to verify that although their form and justification may have changed, they followed similar principles, guided by economic and political motivations. In doing so, we demonstrate the contradiction between the exploitation of life by the State and the preservation of life through the penalization of suicide, which masks its character of maintaining productivity.

Through an anarchist philosophy perspective, we seek to identify the ways in which suicide is marked as sinful<sup>2</sup>, criminalized and pathologized, pointing to the valuable significance of this phenomenon in the midst of the exercise of governmental authority. Before reviewing the history of suicide in the Western world, this introductory section will provide some central definitions: what is the theory on which we will rely? How do we propose to understand the processes that have made suicide an offense against the State, whether through the lens of sin, crime or pathology? What characterizes this offence, publicly concealed and torn apart under

the orders of the Church and the State? How does sovereignty act, differentiating between selfish suicide and altruistic suicide, handling the mechanisms of religious, legal and medical power and the social imaginaries of shame and obscurity regarding this phenomenon? The dynamics of power concerning the relations between sovereign/subject or dominus/colonus are essential to understanding the political and economic movements that determine the condemnation of suicide.

Introducing us to the classical theory of sovereignty, Foucault defines it fundamentally as the power over life and death, so that the sovereign, holder of the law and legitimized by it, has the right to produce death and ensure life. Life only exists for and from the sovereign, and their subjects, without the right to life and death, are neither alive nor dead before the sovereign, but only for and from them. Foucault (2003, p. 240) understands the subject as “neither dead nor alive. From the point of view of life and death, the subject is neutral, and it is thanks to the sovereign that the subject has the right to be alive or, possibly, the right to be dead”. Sovereigns, on the other hand, have both the right to kill their subjects and the right to kill themselves, a move that can be seen in the processes of sinning and the criminalization of suicide. It is recognized that sovereignty is the exercise of authority.

Although Bakunin refers to the generality of theology and metaphysics, his thinking is especially focused on Christianity. For this reason, the Church is the fundamental exponent of the power of the State. In summary, it is the institutionalization of authority and its ramification, capillarization, as Foucault would phrase it, within other institutions that exercise sovereign power over being.

Anarchy is based on the struggle against authority, with freedom and equality as complementary forces; and freedom could only be achieved through self-government. The freedom proclaimed by anarchism is not limited to the anarchist subject who claims it, but to all those around them. From this thought derives Bakunin’s (2021, p. 5) famous phrase “My personal freedom, confirmed by the liberty of all, extends to infinity”.

Suicide as a social phenomenon does not escape the reins of the State. If only sovereigns have power over life, then suicide is a genuine crime, as it not only attacks life – which belongs solely to the sovereign – but it also affects the wealth that this life could generate if it were not interrupted. In this sense, committing suicide can be interpreted as an act of revolt; it would mean fleeing the control and violence of the sovereign. However, in the same way that suicide revolts against the State – personified by the sovereign – this same State “suicides” neglected and socially excluded individuals by relegating them to unworthy living conditions. Suicide is mired in contradiction: while it is a response to the oppressions of the State, it is also provoked by it; while it goes against the transformation of individuals’ bodies into productive and subordinate tools or systematically neglected subjects, suicide furthermore has targets defined by the State apparatus. While it is the action of a State policy, people who attempt suicide and survive have a history of forced incarceration, stigmatization, medical tutelage, public defamation and social exclusion. Sometimes, in former times, the sentences for these individuals were not limited to imprisonment: they extended to death penalty. The penalty for self-murder was death, not at the hands of the individual, but by the repressive forces of the State.

Based on this scenario, we set out on a historical and anarchist review of the implications of suicide in the European context, especially from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To begin with, there are two aspects attributed to the phenomenon of suicide: the character of sin and the character of crime. The first section demonstrates the link between Church and State, the moralization of the

what is considered sacred and the sacralization of the law, and the religious, governmental and social treatment of those who committed suicide, those who attempted suicide and their families.

Next, we point out the process of decriminalizing suicide, which is now characterized as the result of mental disorders. By presenting the power dynamics directed at those who commit or attempt suicide, we raise concerns regarding the medical institutions that intend to prevent death and preserve life.

## **Suicide as sin and crime**

Of the three conceptions of suicide that are discussed throughout this paper, the one that manifests itself from a moral and legal point of view comes first. The concept of crime as such is established as soon as power and wealth are centralized for an elite. And it is furthermore clear that the definition of suicide as a crime follows the same path. Kropotkin (2009, p. 109) goes on to say: “That immense category of so-called ”crimes and misdemeanours” would disappear on the day private property ceased to exist.” In other words, criminalization processes are sustained and mutually supported by the political and economic regimes of the society in which they occur. In this way, investigating the criminal and, rather, sinful conception of suicide allows us to understand the role of this phenomenon in the dynamics of the context described here. These two categories — sin and crime — complement each other almost instantly, impacting on the way suicide was and is conceived in the Western world — and, by extension, in Westernized territories — strongly shaped by the dictates of Christianity, the “religion par excellence” (BAKUNIN, 1970, p. 24). The violent institutionalization of Christianity is, along with militarism and governance, a fundamental attribute of the State, with authority, hierarchy, discipline and obedience as its fundamental features.

In addition to being dispensable for social organization, authority stifles the development of a society and benefits one class to the detriment of the exploitation of others, which is reflected in the dominance of the Church, considering that members of high clerical hierarchies participated, with a strong impact, in the instances of maintaining order and exploitation. Exploitation can only be carried out to the extent that the lives of the exploited are maintained, albeit in execrable conditions, but with the certainty of their endurance. Hence the assertion that domination over life and the condemnation of suicide do not serve a moral purpose, but an economic one.

Although Georges Minois (1999) initially focuses on the Middle Ages, he points to the criminalization of suicide as early as Ancient Rome, as soldiers and enslaved people were not legally allowed to commit suicide, for their bodies had to serve the rise of the nation and the economy:

“For obvious economic and patriotic reasons, suicide was forbidden to two categories of ancient Romans, slaves and soldiers. The suicide of slaves was considered an affront to private property (a notion that was later essential in medieval serfdom); the army had specific penalties for soldiers who survived an attempted suicide.” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 48)

The suicidal acts of enslaved people constituted an offense against private property, and soldiers who committed suicide suffered penalties — although only their corpses were punished. Later on, the practice of extorting the assets of people who committed suicide or their families became widespread, benefiting the State economically. Families lost entire estates as punishment

for suicidal relatives, attributing sentiments of shame and disgust to suicide; every suicide — forbidden by the Senate — would be selfish, as the individual would not only fail to contribute economically to their family, but would also be responsible for promoting the confiscation of assets by the state. Their family would “pay” for their sin (MINOIS, 1999).

Control over the maintenance of life and regulation of death grew stronger in 15<sup>th</sup> century Rome. In the midst of economic and territorial crises, Rome strengthened its totalitarian system. Families lost their rights over their property and themselves to a dominus, a kind of mercantile sovereign (MINOIS, 1999). Although they remained on their land, they were the property of a ‘master’, or rather, they became his colonus. As a result, more incisive legislation turned to suicide, since, according to the rule, only the dominus could take the life of their colonus. No servant had any power over property or goods, and even less over the power to decide to be alive in such a way.

In a context of poverty and compulsory labor, the impossibility of being able to “choose” to take one’s own life meant that peasants could not not work for their sovereign, since only death could free them from this. Such domination gave the sovereign absolute control over the body of their colonus. For the free, sovereign population, there was no condemnation of suicide, since it was considered an exercise of free will. So in this political organization, which is reflected somewhat more or less in the stratifications of European societies, we identify the exercise of sovereignty. Minois (1999, p. 30) points out that “The servant who kills himself robs his master and owner; his suicide is an act of revolt, and he himself is ‘filled with diabolic fury’”; in other words, the colonus, the colonized individual, has no ownership over their own body, as it is owned by the dominus. Therefore, to commit suicide would be to violate the property of the sovereign master and to contradict the Christian forces that justify domination.

To the extent that sovereignty is conceived as the right to take one’s life, politics is understood as the distortion of the boundaries between life and death: politics is the maintenance of death (MBEMBE, 2016). The sovereign “evades” death by constantly provoking the death of the other, so that death only exists in the reality of the other; and this other, subject to sovereignty, has his subjection legitimized by the law through demographic and cultural discrepancies. Suicide, or attempted suicide, is not only a violation of the sovereign master’s property, but also, and above all, a revolt against their sovereignty. Death presents itself as an alternative to living in subjugation, considering that a life dedicated exclusively to producing wealth for the sovereign, at risk of punishment if production is insufficient, is an early death. Mbembe (2016) places suicide within the limits of resistance and liberation: before they kill me, I kill myself. In this context, suicide is seen as a way of responding to government oppression, thus representing a major problem for the maintenance of sovereign power. By condemning suicide, the right to die returns illusorily to the hands of the sovereign.

Referring suicide to the death of Judas, for example, 15<sup>th</sup> century Christians condemned it as a sin, in order to reduce the number of suicides due to the fear of the afterlife in hell. However, Christian arguments against suicide are paradoxical: on the one hand, one should hate life and long for the moment after death, rejecting carnal pleasures, detaching oneself from everything material; however, one should not desire death. It cannot be self-inflicted. At this point, the prohibition of suicide is not particularly strong, requiring complex arguments that have been dismantled and reassembled over the centuries. Despair, as the cause of suicide, would be cured by confession, which would relinquish the subject of their sins and reconcile them with God.

Confessional practices, developed mainly between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, were crucial for Christian argumentation and for its constitution as a political institution.

Later, in 16<sup>th</sup> century England, suicide was considered a strictly demonic act, requiring radical ritualistic practices to combat evil eeriness. These practices generally involved driving a stake through the corpse and placing it as a scarecrow on roadsides, with the aim of confusing the spirits and preventing them from returning to their hometown, as well as impressing anyone who saw the corpse, strengthening the horror of suicide and its sinful nature (MINOIS, 1999). These practices were not limited to protecting the living from the dead and demons; they constituted a second death.

However, not every suicide or attempted suicide was considered a sin or a crime. Class and caste determined how suicide was conceived publicly and in the eyes of government authorities, including the Church. Suicides of people who belonged to the elite, ranging from the upper social classes to the clerical classes, were usually indirect. For example, after losing a battle, a knight who begged someone else to kill them would be considered an “altruistic” suicide. We find this altruistic suicide in literature, in heroes who beg God or third parties to take their lives. Such characters elicit admiration, because death would occur as a result of their redemption before God, from the feeling of inferiority before the Almighty.

“Heroes make the supreme sacrifice when it is the only way to compensate for a shameful fault or to overcome an obstacle insurmountable by human means. Through suicide they surpass their mortal condition and rise above ordinary humanity.” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 16)

On the other hand, a peasant would commit suicide alone, mostly by hanging, by their own hand; a “selfish” suicide, with no possibility of redemption. It should be noted that in the Middle Ages the hands were usually separated from the corpse of the person who committed suicide, attributing to suicide the quality of “self-murder”.

When suicide occurred through another person, more specifically at the hands of another person, it was no longer penalized. As Minois shows us, these types of suicide were not all randomly arranged between social segments; on the contrary, their distribution was very well defined: “Medieval society, which was governed by a military and priestly caste, was consistent with itself when it established the chivalric ideal and the quest for Christian sacrifice as the moral norm” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 12).

In other words, suicide committed by the nobility, the clergy and the military, who together composed the State, could not be criminalized, much less demonized, for the subject who commits suicide is sovereign and therefore has the right to take one’s own life.

The criminal suicidal individual is not sovereign over themselves, as they belong to someone else, and the demonic character of suicide obeys a rigid hierarchy. Although all are subject to God, it inserts a hierarchy between individuals in terms of inspiration: the most inspired are in a position of prestige and pronouncement, the less inspired must listen to and obey them. Church and State, protected by military forces, are sustained by the authority founded on this bond, which legitimizes, through the divine word, the superiority of property-owning elites. The Church and the State are thus the fundamental institutions of exploitation.

If God is the master and man is its servant — “it” referring to God, as it is not a person -, those who proclaim themselves divine only do so through a divine revelation, experienced by

themselves or by others. Revelation requires individuals to interpret it and defend its veracity. In other words, divine sovereignty is incorporated by individuals who, based on their social position, hold the power of justice and salvation: absolute power. The institutions that do justice are those that proclaim to be the holders of the divine word, or interpreters of its truth. As State officials, there is nothing to stop their authority other than rejecting the divine word, and “against the justice of God no terrestrial justice holds” (BAKUNIN, 1970, p. 24).

Bakunin finds it simple to illustrate that the Church engaged massively in the economic exploitation of the masses, and the States, working in consonance with the Church and being legitimized by it, did nothing more than perpetuate domination over the peoples. Since it was customary to confiscate the property of people who committed suicide, it would make no sense to attribute “suicide” to the death of internal members of the Churches and the State, as they could not steal from themselves. In this sense, with regard to ecclesiastical suicide, Minois perceives a different scenario. The very few records of suicides by members of the clergy led the historian to assume that these records were either hidden or altered in such a way as to be recorded as natural or accidental deaths. In addition, the corpse of a cleric who committed suicide was not exposed to the penalties of justice.

Hidden, manipulated or ‘admired’, the suicides of the military, ecclesiastical elite and nobility were not conceived as crimes or sins. This perspective even affects the way in which the sovereign commits suicide: altruistically, with divine merit, whereas the vassal is selfish and penalized.

“Both in romance and in life, the peasant who hanged himself as a way out of his misery was a coward whose corpse deserved to be subjected to torture and whose soul was relegated to hell; the impetuous knight who chose death over surrender on the battlefield was a hero deserving of both civil and religious honors. We cannot find a single instance of judiciary punishment meted out to the corpse of a noble who died by his own hand during the Middle Ages.” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 15–16)

Could it be that the manner in which suicide occurred in fictional tragedies, attributing honorable status to the protagonist, was appropriated by the nobility, leaving the subaltern population without the possibility of honor or dignity? Was the type of suicide (altruistic or selfish) symbolically attributed to different social segments, according to their sovereign or subaltern status? The English tragedies of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries have a very specific aesthetic with regard to suicide: “lying on one’s sword” on the battlefield, for example, is a reason for honor, common to soldiers of the nobility; hanging and drowning are rare events in English literature of the time, as they denote cowardice and refer to the lower social classes (MINOIS, 1999).

Suicide affected people from all classes and social groups, but the way in which such deaths were recorded and therefore categorized depended precisely on the social position of prestige or servility of those who committed suicide (MINOIS, 1999). Wealthy families, with financial power and political influence, were able to change the cause of death of suicidal family members to “accidental death” or “natural death”, as was done by the clergy.

The elites’ efforts not to be listed in suicide registers were not only due to their status. In violation of the king’s and God’s property, families had to compensate the State and Church by handing over their wealth. In addition, Christian funeral ceremonies were forbidden for suicides, forcing families to bury their loved ones in unholy ground. With their property confiscated and a cursed relative, families found themselves in complete misery. But which families? The rich,



by changing the causes of death, didn't have their property confiscated; the poor, without the means or influence to do so, became even poorer. Property status refers to both the body and possessions. This practice of extorting property was perpetuated through the criminalization of suicide: as long as it was a crime, it was punished.

Significant changes regarding suicide occurred between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. During the Renaissance, the prevailing arguments against suicide focused on the idea that it is "an affront to Love of oneself, the state, and society; it offends the God who has given us life" (MINOIS, 1999, p. 71). Although signs of what we could call the 'medicalization' of suicide were already appearing during this time, the religious and sinful view predominated, contributing to the culpability and punishment — both legal and religious — of the individual attempting suicide or consummating it.

In terms of how the corpses of people who committed suicide were disposed of, the 17<sup>th</sup> century brought some innovations, especially in France. Firstly, the event would be properly judged, with the circumstances of the death described in detail. From the moment the body was found until the end of the trial and sentence, the body had to be chemically anointed to delay its decomposition. Once the verdict had been made, the corpse would be dragged through the streets, upside down, then hung by its feet and displayed in a public square, to then be dumped in a common gravesite containing rotten horse carcasses. With the Christian logic of demonizing suicide, it was still seen by legislation as a crime. As in the tortures, where the criminal was tortured alive in the public square, suicidal victims did not escape this demonstration of sovereign power. The spectacular and theatrical nature of public punishments showed the population where power was centralized. This period was marked by the combined efforts of religious and political authorities to oppose any attempt to make suicide a "legitimate" phenomenon, as a possible rational or moral choice.

Bakunin could not consider the existence of a State without religion. The existence of God demands human slavery, because religion is based on sacrifice. Distorting the benevolent appearance of the Divine, Bakunin (1970, p. 27) states that "a master, whoever he may be and however liberal he may desire to show himself, remains none the less always a master". However secular legal institutions may appear, the cross, the Bible or Christian verses are referenced as legitimizing justice, law and humanity. And even if it doesn't materially display these symbols, Christianity has become so intrinsically ingrained in Western or Westernized societies that, falsely devoid of spirituality, it has become morality, affirming a neutral secularity and turning sin into a crime.

To Bakunin, the oppression of the Church and the State dates back to their origins. The "error historically necessary" (BAKUNIN, 1970, p. 22), which Bakunin understands as belief in the Divine, served as the driving force behind the exploitation of the masses, enslavement and dehumanization. For this reason, both the criminalization and the sinning of suicide conferred profit on the State and the Church, and the targets of this profit — poor and economically exploited, underprivileged families — reveal the inseparability between the political regime — from which came the morality that justified the condemnation — and the economic regime of societies (KROPOTKIN, 2005).

Political organization is modeled on economic organization. Growth is economic, not social. No authority contributes to the development of the social structure as a whole, through reciprocal equality and freedom.

Politics, the centralization of power and authority are the maintenance and consecration of the economy, benefiting from legal and medical tools to make it expand, to the detriment of the

misery of many and under the justification of the divine power of the Church. Kropotkin also denounces, quite similarly to Minois, that a large proportion of crimes, especially “attacks on the person”, are caused by “the desire to lay hold of somebody’s wealth” (KROPOTKIN, 2009, p. 108). The law, sanctioned by the State and endorsed by the Church, serves only to guarantee the perpetuation of exploitation. For Kropotkin (2009, p. 103), it arises to “stabilize the customs that were advantageous to the dominant minority, and the military authority undertook to ensure obedience”. With the law, the sovereign rulers sacralize the right to the body and property, universalizing a rather selective theory in the practical field. It is forbidden to take one’s life, whilst the criminal murderer is hanged in the public square. It is forbidden to attempt suicide, whilst the suicidal individual, if they survive the attempt, is murdered, dismembered and buried in ditches, and if they don’t survive, their body is preserved, only to be exposed and torn apart in a public square – by the hands of the authorities:

“As the Church on one side and the gentry on the other succeeded in reducing the people to servitude, the right to make laws escaped from the hands of the nation and passed into those of the privileged. The Church extended its powers; sustained by the wealth which accumulated in its coffers, it interfered more and more in private life, and, under the pretext of saving souls, it exploited the soil of its serfs; it levied its dues from all classes and broadened its jurisdiction; it multiplied both crimes and punishments, and enriched itself in proportion to crimes committed, since it was into its strongboxes that the proceeds of the fines would flow.” (KROPOTKIN, 2009, p. 104)

Thus, through a critical approach to all forms of authority, an exploitative function of a sacralized law is identified, which is still widespread in common sense today. There are still notions of suicide as selfish or praiseworthy, or as a waste of productive force. Our aim was to point out that the jurisdictions condemning suicide did not derive from the intention to preserve life, but rather to guarantee productivity.

However, it is not only the law that has this exploitative function. As mentioned earlier, people with high social status who committed suicide/attempted to commit suicide had two alternatives: either to have the cause of death altered, or to be legally considered insane, incarcerated in hospitals instead of prisons, and exempt from the State’s extortion. Over time, and despite still being legally considered a crime, the non compos mentis verdict – which exempted the individual from responsibility for their actions due to insanity – rose to popularity, and suicide was increasingly explored in the scientific field.

## **The decriminalization of suicide and its hospitalization due to insanity**

In contrast to any demonic aspect, the concept of suicide as a mental imbalance gradually began to emerge in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Minois saw a movement towards the scientificization of suicide: while despair originated from moral sins, melancholy was the result of a psychic imbalance. At the end of the day, in some instance suicide presents itself as a paradox, with a constant demand for justification, whether by the Church, the State or the Hospital.

The transformation of suicide into the result of madness was a long-lasting process, as the very conceptions of madness underwent mutations. In the Middle Ages, for example, insanity encompassed vices, excesses and faults contrary to virtue. The madman's word was either annulled, discredited, ignored and rejected, or it was seen as revealing, prophetic and truer. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, medicine didn't bother to listen to the mentally ill. It didn't matter what they said, their speech didn't belong to them, as their word was signified before it was uttered.

As the mentally ill person's word was not conceived, the designation of insanity in someone could serve any purpose that took away their ability to defend, retract or justify themselves. At the same time as it deprived the person of themselves, so to speak, it also exempted them from total responsibility and lucidity about their actions by viewing them as the result of insanity, as in the verdict *non compos mentis*.

Returning to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this verdict would deprive the individual's family of their possessions and, curiously, it was mostly applied to wealthy individuals from noble families. Even the Church didn't consider rich people who committed suicide to be sinners, because their souls would be deprived of insanity, even though their minds were contaminated by it (MINOIS, 1999). On the other hand, people from subordinate social classes, or those considered criminals and sentenced to death, were doubly criminalized when they committed suicide: firstly, for sinning against God – because, despite the spread of medicalization, the Church did not cease to exert influence over political and legal decisions – and, secondly, for going against their sovereign, the representative of the State.

Understanding suicide as a result of insanity meant that insanity came to be seen as a social phenomenon, weakening the significance of “selfish”, exclusively individual, sinful and criminal suicides. This conception served as fuel for the proliferation of ‘internment homes’ (*maisons d'internement*), as Foucault shows us. The number of asylums more than doubled in Europe by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century: “To prevent suicide attempts, people who had tried to kill themselves had their hands bound and were locked up in wicker cages” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 139). In 1656, in Paris, the General Hospital was created, an institution that proposed the internment of everything that fell within the vast spectrum of what was understood as insanity. Through the General Hospital, to which many people who had tried to kill themselves were sent, the mechanisms of imprisonment and sovereignty over suicide are more clearly understood.

However, its duty of coercion is not akin to a medical, health duty, but rather to a juridical character, an agent of governmental authority. Foucault's mention of order, and a very specific order, is interesting. Order, for Kropotkin (2009, p. 55), is always “servitude, it is the shackling of thought, the brutalizing of the human race”, while disorder is configured as the abolition of authority, portrayed by the times when “popular genius took its free way and in a few years made gigantic steps forward [...]” (KROPOTKIN, 2009, p. 55). Whether through laws, science or the Church, authority manifests itself for the benefit of one class, to the detriment of the exploitation of others. In the case of the General Hospital, our findings include the actions of police and legal orders, under the command of the governor. As it does not belong directly to the legal field, nor directly to the religious field – although it is not exempt from church determinations – Foucault (1988, p. 40) highlights it as a “third order of repression”.

Initially, the General Hospital's primary function was to combat mendicancy, indolence and other social disorders, supposedly in order to combat unemployment. A contract was thus established: the unemployed person had the right to be fed, as long as they submitted to the hospital's orders. For a long time, the General Hospital and other “houses of correction” housed a consid-

erable number of unemployed and indigent people. Internment in times of crisis tended to grow dramatically, with both rewards and punishments: food and asylum in exchange for obedience. Hospitalized people were divided into good and bad according to their submission to ‘treatments’, ecclesiastical propositions and legal ones.

If hospital conduct were guided solely by the health of the human organism, the patient would be regarded only as unwell, not as immoral; confessional and prayer practices would not be determining factors in the course of treatment, nor in the diagnostic standard. Outside of the economic crisis, the function of internment was primarily economic. Internment holds an important place in the economy, as does the state’s confiscation of the assets of suicidal family members. If committing suicide was equivalent to a violation of State property — that is, of the productive, profitable body — then the suicide of a useless, unproductive body, even if it was a violation, would not have such importance and economic impact. When there was no economic crisis, it was as if suicide was a favor from the individual to the State: without the strength and health to contribute socially, leaving the scene and not being a ‘burden’ was the noblest path, rather than being unemployed.

One way or another, the sovereign authorities won: either the individual actually died and ceased to be a ‘burden’, or, in order to combat mendicancy and indolence, the unemployed individual was admitted and became a labor force. Or, ultimately, when the suicide was committed, their property was confiscated. The State enriched its assets.

By institutionalizing internment, whether for religious or economic reasons, or probably both, the State and the Church exercised their sovereignty by depriving the individual of control over their body. In England, for example, instead of internment houses, workhouses or houses of correction were built in each county, the former achieving greater numbers and success. Both models of ‘houses’ sought to correct deviant behavior, but the workhouses, as their name implies, proposed correction exclusively through work, contributing immensely to the economy.

Once admitted to a workhouse, one could not leave without permission, except in exceptions. However, the situation was far from asylum, as the jobs were low paid or unpaid, the living conditions were pitiful and the workforce was despised. It was not uncommon for parliamentary authorities to profit from the residents’ hard, unpaid labor. Foucault shows us how widespread this movement was — by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were 126 workhouses in England. Over the years, these spaces were also used for the violent treatment of individuals considered insane.

One could say, perhaps rather narrowly, that the dominance of insanity over suicide saved many people from death row; that medical tutelage, commonly confused with care, provided a minimum of comfort by offering asylums to homeless people, by guaranteeing a minimum subsistence to people who had attempted to take their own lives.

We are not fooled by this thinking. Although government and legal authorities are being advocated, to a greater or lesser extent, it is naive to claim that the great social “conquests” were entirely driven by a revolutionary spirit or by governmental and religious appeals. Freedom and equality easily become slogans, “inscribed on the walls of churches and prisons” (KROPOTKIN, 2005, p. 133) and, might we add, hospitals, when the ruling elites profit. As a sin and a crime, suicide enriches the ruling elites by extorting wealth. As a pathology, suicide produces labor.

Despite efforts to punish and correct people with suicidal behaviour, propaganda and the criminalization of suicide, suicide rates did not vary that much. With the growing concern of European governments about epidemics, especially the bubonic plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, smallpox

and cholera, lists of causes of death began to be published weekly to account for deaths and “casualties”. The way these lists were classified separated deaths caused by epidemic diseases from those caused by other diseases — such as endemics, less serious health problems, etc. — or by insanity, which brings us back to suicide.

Based on the definition of population and the statistics on deaths and their causes, Minois concludes that the clergy’s hellish condemnations and legal repression of suicide had little effect: people continued to kill themselves in one way or another. “What hold could threats of hell have when people thought life worse than hell?” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 154). The government sought to reduce the number of suicides through severe punishments, posthumous torture, and later, in the course of history, through hospitalization, treatment, pathologization and “more humane” trials. With regard to the torture of corpses, it was thought that if suicide were coupled with the posthumous dismemberment of the body, the confiscation of property and the condemnation of the soul to eternal damnation, perhaps people would reflect a little more before attempting suicide. As an example, Minois brings us the case of Marie Jaguelin:

“In Château-Gontier in 1718 Marie Jaguelin, a poor girl six months pregnant, poisoned herself out of shame. The unfortunate girl did not realize that only the nobility could kill themselves with impunity. Her cadaver was disinterred, brought to trial, sentenced, then dragged on a hurdle face down. When the group reached the town square, the executioner slit her womb and extracted what remained of the foetus, which was buried in the section of the cemetery reserved to the unbaptized. Marie’s lacerated body was hanged by the feet and left, ignominiously exposed to the public gaze, until it rotted. It was eventually burned, and the ashes were thrown to the winds.” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 202)

It is precisely by dismembering the corpse that the State reiterates its sovereignty and expresses its power as a “posthumous” death, punishing the body, tearing it apart and exposing it in the public square.

As stated in the previous section, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century suicide was universally condemned through religious and legal repression. With the rise of medicalization, the Church did not cease to exercise its power. Although the Church no longer considered suicide a sin, it was still quite active in the organization of medical institutions — if the threat of post-mortem damnation didn’t stop people from killing themselves, infiltrating hospitalization schemes could have been a less ineffective alternative. Both the General Hospital and other in-patient homes subjected in-patients to religious exercises.

For the Church, the aim of internment is to create a virtuous individual and an ideal city. To this end, a police force is required that is properly armed and “transparent to the principles of religion” (FOUCAULT, 1988, p. 63), which promotes the internment of those who are incongruous with the ordered landscape of the city; among these incongruous individuals are the unemployed, homeless people, the insane, people whose sexuality, gender identity and expression — in today’s terms — are characterized as sinful or criminal, people who “let go of themselves”. As well as inserting itself into legal “medical” institutions, the Church itself built congregations with functions similar to those of hospitals.

However, over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in France, there was a certain slackening of government authorities in terms of punishing and judging suicide. According to Minois,

the gaze directed at suicide became more compassionate than condemnatory, implying that it was difficult for the government to ‘control’ popular and media discourse on the issue. If suicide was an offense to the State and the Church, since the person’s life belonged to the sovereign and to God, how could one reconcile the imperative to control the body and popular ‘compassion’ over suicide?

The “wicker casket” emerges as an efficient solution to prevent a second suicide attempt, reiterating the sovereign power over the body alongside ‘curative’ proposals: the individual who attempted suicide would be locked in the cage. Compassion, in reality, masked the desire for correction; and correction masked the desire to punish those who opposed being part of the productive force belonging to the political and economic rulers.

The scenario at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after the French Revolution, was the separation of Church and State and the secularization of politics and education. The Church’s religious authorities, no longer able to legally condemn suicide as a sin or reiterate its criminal nature in the legal sphere, began to do so by adverse means, whether through hospital treatments or the ‘Houses of Charity’, which emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the churches’ initiative in some European countries. Thus, in the legal environment, in governmental administrative instances, condemnation for sin was no longer viable, just as condemnation for crime would not be from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as we will soon demonstrate through the process of decriminalization.

The government authorities’ stance on suicide should be based on science, which is seen as the only way to make neutral and factual judgments. But, as Foucault pointed out, scientific judgments are based on a long-established and sacralized morality, undermining the possibility of scientific neutrality. Obeying the dictates of modernity, of religious morality, scientific principles claim to be faithful to reason, and it is this same reason that is adopted by those who defend the State at all costs, regardless of the oppressive dynamics and political organizations that make it up.

Those who govern sustain their sovereignty not only by the tyranny of force, but by the tyranny of knowledge. As far as suicide is concerned, there must be a viable justification that deprives the suicidal person not only of their possessions, but also of their belonging to the realm of reason, since the only realm possible is that of obedience. Insanity, as conceived by medical and legal institutions, does not belong to this realm. The conception of suicide as the outcome of pathology does not exempt it from penalties, and its decriminalization process only shifts its place of incarceration and its punitive methods.

Given the popular sensitivity towards suicide, its occurrences began to denounce the government’s failure to provide social welfare, highlighting its shortcomings and generating popular revolts and demands. A solution was found to silence any discourse on suicide. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French press became a tomb: no reports of national or local suicides, no philosophical opinions on the subject. Books that appeared to defend choice over the act of suicide, or rather, that proposed its decriminalization and “decamination” were burned, as were other materials with a similar stance (MINOIS, 1999). There was a kind of agreement between the Church, the legal authorities and the families: the corpses of people who had committed suicide would no longer be dragged through the streets, hanged and displayed in public squares; in exchange, their families would promote burials in cemeteries, but discreetly and without ceremony. For Minois, the French government’s efforts to silence news and thoughts about suicide contributed to the perpetuation and growth of its taboo nature.

As the French attitude towards the phenomenon of suicide took shape, other European countries adhered to the same line of silencing, with the exception of England, which acted quite differently. In England, there was an increase in the reporting of suicides, resulting in their naturalization in the public eye. The newspapers of the time not only reported the suicides that took place in the country, but also the circumstances of the death, the possible causes and, if applicable, the farewell letters. By publishing the grief-stricken letters, popular opinion on suicide strengthened their feelings of compassion and mercy. In England, religious penalties were abolished in 1823 and criminal penalties in 1870. However, despite “normalizing” suicide in its press, England was the last European country to officially decriminalize it, in 1931. Up until the First World War, there are records of the verdict of *felo de se* being used in England. In other words, even though suicide was no longer considered a crime in the eyes of the public, the State did not relinquish its authority over the corpses of those who committed suicide. The nation that, from the popular perspective, judged suicide the least morally was the one that condemned it the longest legally.

These facts point to a certain “balance” between legal power and popular debates. The correlation between public opinion and the legal field was reversed. By silencing the topic of suicide and promoting its taboo, as happened in France, the legal decriminalization of suicide did not interfere with its moral criminalization by the population; now, in a population that considers suicide to be a normal event, and even an exercise in freedom, thinking back to the libertinism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the perpetuation of criminalization appears as a necessary counterpoint to maintaining the sovereignty of the State and the imperativeness of its laws.

In Europe, suicide gradually ceased to be a crime directly:

“At the end of the eighteenth century, suicide was being decriminalized nearly everywhere in Europe. That process was often accompanied by a conspiracy of silence, in France in particular, where those who held political and religious responsibility slowly but vaguely came to realize that the suicide rate reflected the health of the entire social group.” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 301)

The decriminalization movement was strengthened by the concept of suicide as a social phenomenon and one that concerns the health of the individual. Historically, then, suicide came to be seen legally as a pathological condition, or as the end result of mental disorders, and the individual who attempted suicide was referred to health institutions, which finally culminated in suicide being removed from the category of “crime”.

As a sin, suicide was violently condemned by the Church. As a crime, suicide, although immersed in legislation, carried the immorality of sin and the Church’s religious judgment. As a pathology, suicide was enclosed in workhouses and houses of correction, and still carried remnants of sin – under the dictates of the Church – and crime – in view of the enclosure. Even after the legal separation of Church and State, the houses of charity continued to be strong vehicles for the Church’s actions in relation to people considered insane and immoral, categories in which suicides fell. And, as a taboo, suicide returns to the three areas that formed it in the Western social imagination – sin, crime and madness. The way we understand suicide today, its transformation into a taboo, derives from sin, from the need to conceal the suicide of a family member for fear of the extortion of assets to enrich the elites, and from shame, from the idea that suicide is a selfish act; after all, we don’t belong to ourselves, but to the dominus.

Committing suicide or attempting suicide is no longer a crime. However, we can identify the remains of sin, criminalization, torture and confinement not only in the imaginary, but also in

the modern processes of forced internment, the development of psychiatry, shock therapies, the treatment of suicidal people as unworthy and undeserving of living, for being ungrateful to life – which is “granted” to them by God and “guaranteed” to them by the State.

## Conclusion

And yet, what do the responses of modern European states – which, although our targets for study, are reflected throughout the westernized world – reveal when it comes to the phenomenon of suicide? As already mentioned, suicide is divided into sin, crime and pathology. Whilst not denying the existence of a moral condemnation of suicide, both in the religious sense and in common sense, the majority of people no longer see suicide as a crime, something punishable, due to its pathological nature. As a sin, the influence of the Church has continued to be exerted, both “unofficially” in health institutions and in charitable homes. However, the character of crime and sin no longer has legal validity. What remains is pathology.

It is naïve to think that, as an illness, suicide no longer bothers the groups on which power rests. The scientific advances that have made suicide more of an illness than a crime are not without their political content. Kropotkin tells us: “For the scholar, like the poet or the artist, is always the product of the society in which he lives and teaches” (KROPOTKIN, 2009, p. 34); in other words, progress in science only occurs when success, academic and practical acceptance have already been predicted in the social imagination. The lens through which science is produced is used to value and improve the interests of certain groups, to the detriment of the annihilation of many others; and when scientific advances are aimed only at a specific group, or when the character of the advance only serves that same group, science becomes a luxury, guaranteeing the well-being of some and promoting or justifying the misery and imprisonment of others.

If, for Kropotkin, science served to benefit some to the detriment of others, today we understand that science is immersed in compulsory productivity, idolization of the State, hierarchization and the defense of authority as fundamental to social organization.

If the tools to do so are no longer accessible to those who aspire to overcome the aforementioned conceptions, how can we produce knowledge? If modernity was born out of the constitution of a racist, patriarchal and Christian state, knowledge that opposes such logics is faced with a barrier of authors who discredit and delegitimize its narratives. As a critique of modern states, the conception defended in this paper – that the way in which government and religious authorities have dealt with suicide is based on an economic bias that seeks to justify itself morally – comes up against intellectuals who defend the existence of the State at any cost and the maintenance of an economic regime that, despite pushing its own workforce to the verge of the abyss, could not cease to exist.

The approach taken by modern science emphasizes the defense of exploitation and the condemnation, whether moral, legal or pathological, of anyone who challenges the imperative of control over their body. This is not to say that science is worthless. Like Bakunin, “we recognize the absolute authority of science, but we reject the infallibility and universality of the savant” (BAKUNIN, 1970, p. 34). Insofar as the scientist is the product of an authoritarian society, as Kropotkin would say, science as we conceive it – Western science – is nothing more than the justification of that authority. Bakunin therefore proposes the revolt of life against the authority of science, putting it in its place of enlightening life by eliminating its governance. This was ex-



actly the opposite of what happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when insanity came to be confined to hospitals and boarding houses.

Through the rapid and exponential growth of hospitalizations, one can observe the vastness of insanity in behaviors and characteristics that are at odds with the universalized model of normality. Prior not only to the experience of illness, but to any human experience, the modern conception of nature is widely used to propagate determinisms, such as the dichotomization of normal and pathological. This conception of nature, prior to any human construction, does not appeal to us. Bakunin, on the other hand, understands nature and natural laws in a somewhat different way. For him, freedom consists solely of obedience to natural laws, but not just any laws. Not external laws, imposed by an earthly sovereign or a divinized being, but laws recognized as natural by the very individual who follows them.

The scenario in which the dominus subjected the colonus to miserable and undignified living conditions; the scenario in which workhouses and houses of correction appeared to be the only possibility of asylum, but in reality they enclosed morally condemned individuals; the scenario in which, legally, a person could not take their own life — nor actually live it — because it belonged to the State and the Church, and not because every life is worthy of being preserved; in which medicine acts to protect, regulate the person who deviates from the standards of productivity and conduct; these scenarios do not comply with the anarchist defense of equality and freedom.

Once the individual is incapable of determining their own laws, their perception of the world and their freedom are annihilated. Regardless of the ‘sides’ to which they belong, the imposition of a certain good is always an act of violence. It is not possible to do good to people against their will; if the process from which the “good” acts in our lives has any spark of non-consent, such a process is invariably authoritarian. Whether the good is imposed by a large number on a small number, or imposed by a small number of knowledge holders on a legion of abnormalized individuals, anarchism presents itself as averse to any kind of imposition. The imposed good is corrupted, “because when the good is decreed, it becomes evil from the standpoint of human morality and liberty” (BAKUNIN, 2021, p. 06).

In this sense, is it possible to defend institutions of guardianship and regulation that claim to cherish care, while being immersed in the same substance that forms the modern capitalist State and the authority of the few over the many? Authority is continually revealed, whether through sin, crime or pathology, and in none of these contexts is it possible to find self-governed individuals with full freedom over themselves.

By this, in no way do we imply that all suicide studies, attempts at prevention and care offered by medicine and psychology are invalid. The defense of self-government and self-determination; the rejection of any tutelary imposition, no matter how much it claims to promote care; the revolt against the exercise of religious, legal and medical authorities: none of this negates the need to welcome people in psychological distress, quite the contrary. Our critique is directed at authoritarian science, at the state of imminent death to which subalternized beings are constantly subjected, at the State’s own contradiction when it forbids death at the same time as it produces it.

From an anarchist perspective, we refute any attempts to universalize or essentialize thoughts about suicide and any production of knowledge. Therefore, our conception of this study is an analysis of the phenomenon of suicide and the dynamics that permeate it through the libertarian optics applied here, and our suggestion is to develop new optics through which health can serve as a tool for caring for and preserving human life and dignity.

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