

Plaut, Eric A., and Anderson, Kevin, Evanston, *Marx on Suicide ILL*: Northwestern University Press, 1999, pp. 147 (ISBN # 0-8101-1638-3, US \$14.95, Soft).

Reviewed by Diego De Leo, Griffith University, Australia.

This book is a real gem for suicidologists with an interest in history and sociology. It concerns the only known script from Karl Marx on the topic of suicide, and actually represents a very personalized translation of excerpts from Jacques Peuchet (1758–1830), a French statistician, police administrator and economist. Peuchet dedicated careful attention to suicidal behaviors, by examining and commenting on several years of deaths due to suicide as well as attempted suicide cases that happened in Paris at the beginning of nineteenth century.

The volume presents the original French version of Peuchet's writings (with his interesting tabled data), the original German elaboration from Marx, and a new translation in English of Marx's interpretation made by Eric Plaut, an Emeritus Professor of the Northwestern Medical School, and Kevin Anderson, an associate Professor of Sociology at Northern Illinois University.

Marx published this work in 1846, two years before the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. His intervention is not a simple translation, as said, but an edited version in which he alters the language, omits passages and makes several additions of his own, thus offering his personal position on the topic of suicide.

The result is truly interesting reading, in which it is possible to obtain insights on motives and methods of suicide and attempted suicide in post-revolutionary Paris. Some epidemiological aspects may also deserve consideration, although in his original version, Peuchet put together both attempted and completed suicide, *de facto* impeding a more rigorous evaluation of those events. However, the most illuminating passages of the book concern concepts about the nature of suicide, the gender issue, and—of course—the structure of the current society and its responsibility for suicidal behaviors. For example, the position on suicide of the famous *proto-feminist* Madame de Stael is strongly criticized

De Stael... was eager to demonstrate that suicide is contrary to nature and that it cannot be understood as an act of courage. [...] Such reasoning has little effect upon those souls who are overwhelmed by misfortune. If they are religious, they may be thinking about a better world: if they believe in nothing, they may be seeking the peace of nothingness. Philosophical tirades have little value in their eyes and are a poor refuge from suffering. Above all, it is absurd to claim that an act, which occurs so often, is an unnatural act. Suicide is no way unnatural, as we witness it

daily. What is contrary to our nature does not occur. It lies, on the contrary, in the nature of our society to cause so many suicides, while the Tartars do not commit suicide. Not all societies bring forth the same results. We must keep this in mind to reform our society to allow it to reach a higher level. [...]... the very existence of suicide is an open protest against [de Stael's] unsophisticated conclusions.

For what concerns gender differences in suicidal behavior, Marx suggests that the oppressiveness of the bourgeois family is responsible for many cases of female suicide, especially in young women. In trying to justify the disproportionately higher number of deaths due to suicide in men (two to one, at that time in Paris), he hypothesizes that women may have more courage in dealing with life's problems, have a greater degree of resignation or are supported by deeper religious sentiments, or "... their deep sorrow ... destroys their capacity to make a decision."

In their interesting introduction to the book, Plaut and Anderson make a

stimulating parallel between Durkheim and Marx's perspectives on suicide, particularly emphasizing the many differences in their approach to interpreting female suicides. Marx appears as much more equalitarian than the French sociologist, claiming the bourgeois marriage to be a major factor in women suicide, being such an "oppressive institution." Marx does not appear as affected as Durkheim was by that functionalism that brought the latter to write that in women "mental life is less developed because women's needs are more closely related to the organism."

The text drives the reader to pick up many of the views Marx developed concerning the historical materialism and alienated labor, introducing his critique of political economy and the state that rendered so influential the later work of the German thinker.

"Marx on Suicide" is very stimulating and enriching reading, a two-hundred-year-old landscape truly worth re-visiting.