

BOOK REVIEWS

Marx on Suicide. Edited and with introductions by Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson. Translated by Eric A. Plaut, Gabrielle Edgcomb and Kevin Anderson. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Murray E.G. Smith.

Marx on Suicide is an unusual work, with an arguably misleading title. The core of the book is an essay that Karl Marx published in 1846 entitled "Peuchet on Suicide," which consists of a four-paragraph introductory note by Marx and an edited and abridged translation of a discussion of suicide by the French police administrator, economist and statistician Jacques Peuchet (1758–1830). A comparison of Marx's German translation with the French original reveals that Marx took some considerable liberties with Peuchet's text. Not only did he add several thoughts of his own to the latter; he also altered the meaning of at least one passage written by Peuchet. While this raises questions about Marx's ethics as a translator, it also indicates that Marx sought to use the text as a vehicle for expounding his own ideas. Since Marx was never again to return to the subject, the editors seem justified in treating Marx's version of the Peuchet text as the closest thing we have to an exposition of Marx's own views on suicide.

The editors have done an exhaustive and exemplary job in presenting all of the materials required for a meticulous scholarly appraisal of the significance of Marx's "Peuchet on Suicide." The volume contains the editors' own annotated English translation of the latter (31 pages), as well as Marx's abridged and altered German translation of Peuchet (25 pages) and the original French text by Peuchet, "Du Suicide et de ses causes" (44 pages). In addition, the editors have provided two thoughtful and thought-provoking introductory essays which together pose most of the theoretical and scholarly issues that arise from a reading of "Peuchet on Suicide." Taken as a whole, the volume is an excellent piece of scholarship, even though for many English speakers it probably provides much more than is pedagogically useful (specifically, the German and French texts that comprise about half of the book).

The pedagogical utility of the book should be apparent to anyone who teaches social theory. Not only does it afford the opportunity to compare and contrast the theoretical and methodological commitments of Marx with other, more influential writers on suicide (in particular Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud), but it also opens a new window on Marx's views on gender. Of the four case studies of suicide that Marx highlights, three concern women. Moreover, all three of these cases depict the oppression of women within the bourgeois

family. Marx's interest in the social conditions that would compel three relatively privileged women to end their own lives is palpable in this work and refutes the ignorant, but widely-accepted notion that Marx was concerned only with issues pertaining directly to "class." In his introductory essay, Kevin Anderson reminds us that Marx's ultimate goal was human liberation and that his critique of bourgeois society was concerned with the alienating, oppressive and stultifying conditions visited upon all members of that society. To be sure, only the working class has the consistent historical interest, strategic location and politico-organizational capacity to dissolve capitalist society and end its many depredations. However, this did not mean that for Marx wage labourers were the only victims of bourgeois social relations and their attendant institutional forms. As Marx put it in his introductory note, Peuchet's discussion "may show the extent to which it is the conceit of the benevolent bourgeoisie that the only issues are providing bread and some education to the proletariat, as if only the workers suffer from present social conditions but that, in general, this is the best of all possible worlds" (p. 45).

Peuchet's text serves Marx's purpose well in exposing the dehumanization and gratuitous cruelties to which individuals are subjected by modern "family life" and the bourgeois morality that supports it. In the first case study, a young woman spends the night with her fiancé, whom she is to marry the following day. When her parents discover that she has lost her virginity, they berate her furiously and enlist their neighbours in publicly humiliating her. She drowns herself in the Seine on the very day she is to be married. Marx interjects his own comment into his translation, part of which reads: "Those who are most cowardly, who are least capable of resistance themselves, become unyielding as soon as they can exert absolute parental authority" (p. 53).

The second case study centres on spousal abuse. A mentally-unstable and physically deformed husband subjects his younger wife to daily jealous tirades and other forms of verbal abuse, sometimes leading to sexual assault. Before those sympathetic to her situation can intervene, the young woman drowns herself in the Seine. Marx remarks that the "unfortunate woman was condemned to unbearable slavery and [her husband] exercised his slaveholding rights, supported by the civil code and the right of property" (p. 57).

The third case study raises the issue of abortion rights. A young woman has an affair with her aunt's banker husband and becomes pregnant. She signals to a doctor that she will commit suicide unless she obtains an abortion. The doctor refuses to help her and later experiences guilt after the eighteen-year-old drowns herself.

In the final case study cited by Marx, a member of the Royal Guard is laid off suddenly from his job due to cutbacks. Unable to find other employment, he commits suicide so as to avoid living on as a "burden" to his now-destitute family.

Peuchet himself provides several comments that complement Marx's socialist conviction that only "a total reform of the organization of our current soci-

ety" (p. 50) could significantly reduce the incidence of suicide. These include: "The revolution did not topple all tyrannies. The evil which one blames on arbitrary forces exists in families, where it causes crises, analogous to those of revolutions" (pp. 50–51). And further: "Suicide is only one of the thousand and one symptoms of the general social struggle ever fought out on new ground" (p. 51).

Though interesting in its own right, Marx's "Peuchet on Suicide" provides only a few insights into the distinctive character of Marx's social theory. Fortunately, the editors have provided two excellent introductory essays that serve to render explicit what is only implicit in Marx's text. Sociologist Kevin Anderson offers a gem of an essay entitled "Marx on Suicide in the Context of his Other Writings on Alienation and Gender," in which he provides a highly readable and insightful introduction to Marx's "revolutionary humanism," some basic concepts of historical materialism, and Marx's treatment of gender issues ranging from his youthful writings to the *Ethnological Notebooks*. Even when he errs (for example, when he implies that Marx affirmed the "continuing importance of idealism for a revolutionary outlook"), Anderson's discussion is both instructive and provocative. His comparative discussion of Marx and Durkheim will be especially welcome to sociologists concerned with their different treatments of issues pertaining to gender and the family. Of particular interest is Anderson's point that Marx and Peuchet chose to focus on a form of suicide that Durkheim regarded as relatively unimportant, but which afflicts women disproportionately. This is the "fatalistic" form of suicide which Durkheim says derives from "excessive regulation" and which involves "persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline."

Eric A. Plaut offers a brief essay entitled "Marx on Suicide in the Context of Other Views of Suicide and of his Life," in which he addresses Marx's view of suicide from three standpoints: "its relationship to the literature on suicide, the issue of suicide in the Marx family, and the connection between these two and Marx's worldview." The most interesting part of this discussion, in my opinion, is his comparison of Marx's views to those of Freud and Durkheim. Plaut argues that in both content and form Marx's essay "stands halfway" between the psychologistic account of suicide offered by Freud and the sociologistic account given by Durkheim. Like Freud, Marx seems to be interested in the proximate *individual* motivations and experiences that result in suicides, and he uses case studies to reveal these. For Marx, alienation is something that is experienced subjectively by individuals, and, accordingly, it is a phenomenon with potent psychological implications. On the other hand, Marx draws close to Durkheim when he identifies the evils of existing society as the "causative factor" in suicide. Moreover, although he does not comment on it, Marx reproduces one of Peuchet's statistical tables on suicides in Paris for the year 1824, a table which foreshadows Durkheim's famous empirical analysis of suicide statistics later in the century.

What is perhaps contestable in Plaut's discussion is his suggestion that while alienation is caused by society, it is only a "characteristic of individuals." The implication is that human alienation finds no expression at the supraindividual level. But it is precisely the burden of Marx's value-theoretic critique of capitalist society that generalized commodity production results in the *collective alienation* of the human species from an authentic human praxis. Among the consequences of this collective alienation are the oppressive and alienating conditions that may lead, in certain individual cases, to the decision to take one's own life.