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The Life of Others. Marx and Durkheim on Suicide and Social Good(s).

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They always met for a special purpose of religious, festal or martial kind; and this purpose seemed to sanctify their state. A man attending a sermon honestly believed that it was the sermon which mattered to him, and he would have felt astonished or even indignant had it been explained to him that the large number of listeners present gave him more satisfaction than the sermon itself. All ceremonies and rules pertaining to such institutions are basically intent on capturing the crowd: they prefer a church-full secure to the whole world insecure.

Canetti (1978, p. 21)

Introduction. *The Great Chain of Goods. Sharing and the economic life of the community.*

Let's talk about the nature of sharing. Maybe is against our prompt first well-meant judgment, that not all malaises are to be held in contempt. If we are right in this, there are malaises and *there are* malaises consequently. The usual and the special occasion, so to speak. But usually to be sick, to be threatened by an ailment, is not a motive for joy. It is rather a matter of concern for everyone. These very days contagion is not amongst the words to tread on even lightly either. Notwithstanding, "some readers [maybe the boldest ones] may wonder if the term 'contagion' [can be] meant in [other] than a derogatory way. [And the response to them is that it can be. In fact,][...] laughter and joy can be contagious, and even beneficial microbes are still contagious" (Lynch 1996, p. viii).

First things first, it seems like we are facing a matter of character for the very illness. And we were only –and sadly– aware of one of its species. The good or ill character of the contagion obviously determines its lenient spread, as it is in the case of laughter and joy. They are welcome. As for the Holy Mass in a church-full, it depends eminently on our judgment of what is made to circulate. Thus, laughter, joy, merit with no doubt for social goods. Goods deeply appreciated. And their dissemination would end in a community afflicted by happiness. A sermon is intended apparently to be of the same kind of goods. To have an akin nature with laughter and joy regarding social esteem. Social expectancy. It is possible to have the sermon itself as that which truly

¹ This essay is a direct result and should be understood on the basis of its relationship to the individual research project *On the letter and spirit of imitation: Exemplum and Exemplarity* (2017-2020), a project ascribed to the Departamento de Lógica y Filosofía Teórica (Facultad de Filosofía, Universidad Complutense de Madrid - UCM) and under the tutelage and endorsement of Prof. Dr. Ricardo Parellada. Its academic outcomes are research additions to the scientific results already published in several formats in collaboration with two other national projects: *PAIDESOC – El desván de la razón: cultivo de las pasiones, identidades éticas y sociedades digitales* (FFI2017-82535-P), with Prof. Concha Roldán Panadero (Instituto de Filosofía – CSIC) as IP; and a second one, *Proyecto de INNOVA-Docente. Precariedad, exclusión y diversidad funcional (discapacidad)(II): lógicas y efectos subjetivos del sufrimiento social contemporáneo* (PIMCD-84), leaded as IP by Prof. Nuria Sánchez Madrid (Universidad Complutense de Madrid – UCM).

matters. All of them –laughter, joy and sermons– goods deemed welcome to be distributed with good reason. But when *a man attending a sermon honestly believes that it is only the sermon which matters to him*, he is mistaken. Honestly but wrongly mistaken –Canetti *dixit*. If festooned –secondly– with the mark and sign of the ritual, the ceremony, some customary rule or norm that vindicates social frequencies, there is though a main concern on the question of solidarity. *On the large number of those present. On who shares what*. For ritual, ceremony, rule, are –of course– the public and physical marks that lead the tempo of the distribution. But there has to be a paired tempo for the acquisition too. The positive moment of Religion, the material public aspects in the rite, within the relic, should be supported in the same representative move by highlightning the trait of its transitive and communicative nature. This last, not being a material aspect in reality at all. That is the real measure of goods in question here. At the end, it boils down to their commonality value. Astonishment and indignation would make their entrance then just in the fashion of a symbolic knot between the disputed value of the goods themselves involved and the yet unnoticed added value of the community of stakeholders to the equation. What really matters to the pious sermon-listener is to be sharing the experience, the shared presence of his fellows within the symbol the summoning-words of the homily embody. To discuss heresy in the indignant movement of the zealot is to project reversely the real standard of value. Not the sermon, but the faithful assembly is what matters to him. And so concealed, the treasured value of the homily hides its character as a mere symbolic substitute. *Had it been explained to them that the satisfaction felt was due to the crowds and not to the words themselves, they would have been astonished or even indignant*. The argument on solidarity turns surprisingly into one on desacralization. The attempt against the sanctity bestowed onto the community. It is to coin an absolute standard of value for *the special occasions in which we live with others*. And the suspected ripping off of all sanctity can be understood as the negative vicarious representation of a total judgment, a judgment on the real value of the dissolution of the social bond. A non-recognised standard where it is not *the honest belief that it is the item shared which matters, but having something to share at all*. Under this logic, *is all sharing to be judged as good?*

Like joy, like laughter, festal, religious, and martial spirits are highly regarded contagions. Spirits are transported and stitched together with ease. Community sprouts. Lord Shaftesbury knew it already better there in the far 1707:

One may with good reason call every passion ‘panic’ which is raised in a multitude and conveyed by aspect or, as it were, by contact or sympathy. Thus, popular fury may be called ‘panic’ when the rage of the people, as we have sometimes known, has put them beyond themselves, especially where religion has had to do. And in this state their very looks are infectious. The fury flies from face to face, and the disease is no sooner seen than caught [...] Such force has society in ill as well as in good passions, and so much stronger any affection is for being social and communicative” (Shaftesbury 2000, p. 10).

Pan’s influence flies on the wings of the conspicuous representation. Present to everyone and partaken by everyone. The emblem, the sign must be shown as much as it must be shared. We are told the concrete aspect of this special Eucharist involves some sort of

contact. Of passing from hand to hand, or from face to face. The public mark presented by Shaftesbury bonds all those present capturing them physically by means of its circulation. It is a matter of ascription by appropriation. *No sooner seen than caught*. The aspect, the looks work in the manner a catalyst would do towards the constitution of an assembly. *Looks are infectious*. But the alleged multiplier effect of passion –the threat of the *large numbers*, the pathological aspect of the disease– is not such a threat. It is a production. The production of an increased meaning. The numbers do not grow merely in quantity but in quality as well. The threat is nothing more and nothing less than the astonishment felt after the constitution of a shared newly emergent dimension accessible to the crowd who built it. A state, a communication structure, an in-between, a network ultimately.

Some “theories of social psychology [...] view social structure as a distribution system. Network approaches, for instance, see actors in a network as possessing varying amounts of valued resources that, in turn, set into motion a variety of exchange processes” (Turner 2006, p. 356). This approach in Social Psychology is fond of establishing basically four main principles in regard to social interactions: (i) actors are basically agents. They *put themselves beyond by their own actions*. So, their role is encrypted in their behavior. That is the piece of evidence we have to pay attention to. And behavior is stubbornly object-oriented. *In attending to the object the agent honestly believes that it is what really matters to him*. Items work more like nodes, crossroads of facilitated interactions, though. They redirect and expand the reach and sense of the agent’s action in a feedback. Following this, it can be said that we are bound to a *representational realism*, an onto-epistemological position that states all interactions are accomplished only with due intervention of such objects; (ii) metaphorically, these items give shelter to meanings. More properly said, it can be hold that they are in fact vicarious meanings. Sense-laden icons. They take in certain representational content as the item *flies from hand to hand, or face to face, within the distribution system*. The object is a focus for meaning and is thickened by it in the procedure. It is not just something in the place of something –*presentational*– but the ontological chance to tell the story of a process –*representational*. A process of gaining value. It is a fetish in relation to value, in short. This value stems from a chain of *symbolic interactions*, a chain in which distribution, administration and appropriation occur in due time around the related item, promoting its meaning. Be it laughter, joy, ceremony or ritual, there is an *economy of the symbol* in the works in which (iii) actors develop their own social identities as necessary –or complimentary– cooperators in the dynamic distribution of the system. They do it in the growing of the symbolic capital within the network. If representational items and actors are structural parts of the system then, it is only in the fashion of agents that are capable of starting a process and, with this move, they engage at the same time in constructing their own role within the system as the system acquires a new dynamic dimension giving rise to new possible nodes; (iv) actors entangled in this activity come to share a common reality. *A common life or life in common*. Contentwise, it is obviously an artificial one. Elaborated. Manufactured by them. That is a possible definition of *goods*, the economic one. *Goods* are non-natural resources in the context of a planned distribution chain. And under these circumstances, these goods

should be called accordingly *social goods*. Regarding its relative character it is a decentered reality, a social realism sustained by the intersubjective character of the exchange in which actors trade meanings –i. e. Representations (McCall 2006, pp. 1-ff.).

Deepening our inquiry into social goods, it seems like *solidarity, property* and *satisfaction* are social lines of force –or tension– we should count in. They bring us unadvertently near the territory of a most interesting three-way dialectics:

individuals as responding to the distribution of goods, bads, and other valued or devalued resources in terms of their perceived fairness or justness [...] [concoct] a comparison theory. Expectation-states theorizing and related approaches such as status characteristic and status construction theories all conceptualize status structures as both an effect and cause of the differential distribution of prestige, power, and evaluations; moreover, status itself is conceptualized as a distributional process whereby power and prestige are unequally distributed across a set of interacting individuals (Turner 2006, p. 356).

Individuals perceive their relative position in the chain of representational distribution, the distribution of representational goods and bads and its fairness or not, and have therefore the need to respond to it. And not all exchange preserve the equity momentum of the process. Their would-be response is a claim within rights for the fair share. Because some exchanges are deemed *unequal* by its very nature and meaning, status i.e. In its balance this explains partly the problem with dialectics as well, for if it is inherent to the idea of prestige or power as a resource that we would face an unequally distributed network position, it is not less evident that as communicative forces can have a natural inertia towards solidarity they can indulge in forgetting the subjective counterparts of the equilibrium. For, *is all sharing to be judged as good? Are we correspondingly bound to share in an absolute sense?* Some exchanges are deemed unequal, but not all. Nonetheless, it is not a moral claim. At least in principle. It is just a matter of discussed proportions. Sometimes the structure simply fails to balance adequately its distributive tensions. However, in the representational realm justice does not have to be commutative nor symmetric. An incipient theory of justice is so born and its regulative criterion is but comparison. First, a comparison of course with the fellow with whom we share. The subject of evaluation in the case referred –as an illustration for the argument– is the status *perceived*. Status is in itself an effective representation, definitely not a structurally neutral one –if unequal. Part of the *goods and bads, and other valued or devalued resources*. It is something worth trading then. Item and node at the same time once in the administration system. Thus, in the same move any effective structure can officiate *as both an effect and cause of the network differentials*. Furthermore, symbolic resources administration is made dependant of the weighing of a perception. Status is constructed. Built out of a combined representation: *what we can expect in the sharing*. Status, prestige, power, authority, would join the cause with joy and laughter concerning goods farmed in common. *Conveyed into the multitude, they have put it beyond itself*. Such performative force has a society. But the possibility of an argument on a just and fair distribution –as with the one presented above on the offence of desacralization– warns us about considering the restitution of the classical economic

categorization between *economic* and *free goods*. If the judgment of value –or disvalue– is able to engender indignation, then a measure to it is possible and a criterion for valid (non)distribution conceptually achievable. Some goods are off the system and should remain like that. *There is no positive evaluation for sharing in an absolute sense*. It is then understood that *not all sharing has to be good* –or that sharing in a restricted sense implies distribution of a limited resource and the expected threat of dissatisfaction in deprivation. Goods-sharing is now morally sensitive to the nature of the goods.

Free goods are intended to be off the economic system. For example, we are prone to think better under this light both of laughter and of joy, not disputed or scarce goods, but will find difficulties with the dialectics of status, prestige and power which is always controversial. Laughter, joy, would be candidates for a type of free goods. Not overseen ones. In conclusion, *is there any good that individuals should and could not share at all in accordance, a special one that we would unrelentingly avoid to cash out as common property?*

Let's move forward to the special case at issue. Allow us at this point to give Émile Durkheim space enough to make his proper entrance once the conversation is already that advanced: talking about goods and bads,

among the different species of death, some have the special quality of being the deed of the victim himself, resulting from an act whose author is also the sufferer; and this same characteristic, on the other hand, is certainly fundamental to the usual idea of suicide [...] The intrinsic nature of the acts so resulting is unimportant. Though suicide is commonly conceived as a positive, violent action involving some muscular energy, it may happen that a purely negative attitude or mere abstention will have the same consequence. Refusal to take food is as suicidal as self-destruction by a dagger or firearm [...] The causes of [such] deaths are outside rather than within us, and are effective only if we venture into their sphere of activity [...] Of course, in common terms, suicide is pre-eminently the desperate act of one who does not care to live. *But actually life is none the less abandoned because one desires it at the moment of renouncing it*; and there are common traits clearly essential to all *acts by which a living being thus renounces the possession presumably most precious of all* (Durkheim 2005, pp. xl-xlii).

1. *Life and the City*. Advantages and disadvantages of modern collective *maladies*.

Talking about goods and bads, valued and devalued resources, *life should be presumably the possession most precious of all*. But *is it a possession at all?* It is 1897 and Durkheim publishes the capital classical study on suicide –*Le Suicide. Étude de Sociologie*². Conceptualized there as a possession, one more property, the theorizing Durkheim points out at the negative dialectics brought by the inclusion of it without due care into the chain of distribution and exchange. Life is at times also ruled by the social regularities of trade and administration. *Possession is economic goods. And economic goods are to be distributed, partaken*. Since only in the act of management and administration of them –the act of making them to circulate– can the value and disvalue of goods change. Same with life if it is going to be so categorized by the indignant response of the suicidal. *The differential distribution is both cause and effect of an act*,

² The first edition was published in Paris in 1897 (Durkheim, É. (1897). *Le Suicide. Étude de Sociologie*, Paris: Félix Alcan – Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière et Cie.)

the deed of the agent shows a plausible representational connection between active – violent– and passive acts. There is an absolute structural difference –a relational one– between including or removing an item off the chain of distribution. But its removal if noticed can be measured *in comparison* with the effect of its former presence in the chain alone.

Supposing that life has some sort of representational status –and according to Durkheim it does– we could presume it has necessarily among other structural goods. *Hierarchy of value is the result of a distributive process.* It is in relation with other structure goods that life would reap its worth. It has it back again once into a communicative network. Durkheim underlines a contradiction in the dialectics just to enlighten and strengthen the underlying economic logic, and does it not with one but with two intertwined paradoxical cases which support each other: the first one presents the desperate act of one who does not care to live, a case in which he assigns apparently zero value to the goods in dispute, but referring suicide *the deed of the victim himself is an act whose author is also the sufferer.* Cause and effect. And the suffering in question is but the deprivation of the most precious possession. Something of worth. An absolute value, on the other hand. The value *perceived* of the supposed item should be off charts then. Should be not tradable. Zero value versus absolute value. A necessary connection in meaning comes in handy here to help us disentangle the connection between contradictions. Because in the second one *renouncing life and desiring it, renouncing the most precious possession of all and appreciating it as it is* it is solved in a comparison as soon as we realize that mirroring it, both the action and the omission – *deed and abstention*– of disposing of one’s life have the same absolute differential value within the network. It is a conceptual equivalent. As happens with life and death, appreciation and renounce, in the first contradiction. *When value is unequally distributed across a set of symbolically interacting goods, a claim to fairness must be represented inevitably by a renewed exchange.* In the case of the most valued goods along the distribution chain, presence and absence should matter the same and amount to the same regarding structure differentials. In the same sense, *deed and omission* are equals.

This is rounded up in one of the most insightful commentaries Durkheim displays in his monography on suicide: the Alsatian author has come at the last part of his work, the development of a succinct taxonomy for suicidals exclusively dependant of institutional factors. The taxonomy abounds in details of the social and communicative connections *across multiple sets of interacting individuals and groups.* Each group, each dynamic system of social interactions or network puts into circulation its own set of symbolic goods, of valued and devalued items, and these create consequently what we could call a *symbolic niche.* An environment in which –in Durkheim’s words– a *temperament* or representational and emotional profile is constituted for the group. A *moral constitution* or *fluid identity* that differs from group to group, from time to time (Durkheim 2005, p. 269). Unfortunately, identities are usually inclined to collide. Either in, between or against groups. Drawing in part on Spencer’s writings influence, the so-called *egoistic suicide* [*le suicide égoïste*] and the *anomic suicide* [*le suicide anémique*] are the assumed individual’s response to the (im)possible social economy of his own

symbolic capital within the network. That is, being the distribution *equally* unsatisfactory for types of suicidal, their position pushes to the limit the dialectics of *solidarity* and *property –intégration* and *régulation* according to Durkheim. In fact, their position challenges it. They are dependant of their perception of the fairness of the distribution structure –or of the presence of a distribution structure at all–, dependant of the compatibility or non-compatibility within the system of their own particular expectations-states. The egoistic expects too much, the anomic too little. The relation of ideas that binds an administered chain and the lot we can expect of its trade of goods is easily brought into the argument. Expectation-state is property prediction. Bargaining over deserved property.

Anomy indeed springs from the lack of collective forces [from the lack of expectations-states satisfied, of administration of any possible goods] at certain points in society; that is, of groups established for the regulation of social life [and its representational economy]. Anomy therefore partially results from the same state of disaggregation [or lack of symbolic economy] from which the egoistic current also springs. But this identical cause produces different effects (Durkheim 2005, p. 263).

The lack of any valuable exchange and the lack of any possible exchange at all are obviously tantamount. And they presumably have identical cause. It equates to the absence of any *expectations-state satisfaction*. These expectations of validity would be off charts by definition. Not classifiable inside the scope of what should merit as exchange in that group. One of them by falling short, the other by not finding any criterion. Suicide is a claim against current evaluation of goods. Durkheim's arguments trying to correct the utilitarian position on suicide tend to highlight this conclusion. To judge of the deed or the omission thereof in the manner of a projected benefit –the case of the suicidal *that renounces to life as it has not the value he expects*– is to surrender to the symbolic economic logic at stake here –maybe it could help at least to explain the cases of *partial* and *attempted suicide* (Fennichel 1945, p. 401). For Durkheim, *the suicidal recognizes the logic, but rejects it*. Symbolically, it is a transcendent act –an act on the verge of the group's limit– that confronts the group's value-frame in that case. It is a good moment to recall that there is a temperament profile to each group. *Is there any social interaction and distribution system that fosters more than other that extreme act of self-destruction?* “The fact that suicide, like insanity, is commoner in cities than in the country [...] [seems to indicate that] the social causes of suicide are, as we shall see, themselves closely related to urban civilization and are most intense in these great centers” (Durkheim 2005, p. 16). Cities promote the tendency, but why is it so?

For each group, a temperament. These temperaments present themselves in the form of tendencies. Urban civilization is depicted along the lines traced by industrialization and centralization. The city is the big industrial center of life. There is an urban life running through the processes modern civilization harbours. Quantitatively, it is obvious that in urban life the city-dwellers are freely exposed to a myriad of unexpected encounters in comparison with the country-men. It is a matter of *large numbers* and an ever-growing population is the mark *par excellence* of the big

city. Mobility, travels broaden the city's horizon. Citizens are open to a myriad of exchange opportunities with their fellows. Either desired or not... the social frequencies escalate. The chance? The nodes of interaction that public spaces like squares, main streets, avenues, theaters, cafés and markets provide, making social and communicative passions more easily infectious. They are modern mediation spots, hubs of transition, places to confront the difference in the encounter with others. To confront the difference and to allow it to pass the barrier of our privacy to intimacy. The history of Paris – biographical base camp of Durkheim– would never be the same without the *Palais-Royal*, *le Temple*, or the revolutionary *Place Vendôme* where Jacobin assemblies took place. Interactions qualitatively multiply too with a multifarious new universe of enticements and expectations due to new goods and roles, roles amplified by the nodes and tendencies in the distribution of the very symbolic goods. It is a complex system. Goods as status, prestige, authority and power, let alone the new ceremonies, rituals or rules accumulate with cultural products that expand expectations furthest. Cause and effect in the same move. Simultaneously, material abundance brought by the endless repetition praxis of industrialization indulges in conspicuous consumption (Sennett 2003; Veblen 2007). Merchandise is born. The distribution network is hypertrophied. More interactions around more goods. And so an exchange should be made efficiently. Easier and faster. Acceleration in life occurs. More quantity to juggle with. The city is the place for a new extended cosmos. Durkheim talks about the profound representational change –a new *Weltanschauung*, a brand new intuition of the World– that modern centralization played erasing administrative boundaries and frontiers. He calls it *hypercivilization* (Durkheim 2005, p. 287). In good positivist spirit, the analysis of the facts appears to indicate a place and a time for the start of such unintended sociological experiment: the 1789 Revolution and the bureaucratic compulsion that followed it through. Just to make things happen easier and faster. *Provinces, départements, quartiers*, were legally recomposed. At the end of the cosmic chain, *l'État [the State]*. Its dweller, a troubled cosmopolitan. For the global new dimension of facts puts into tension once more the old equation between *expectations-states, satisfaction and solidarity*.

L'étranger [the stranger], *l'immigré [the immigrant]*, *le dilettante [the dilettante]* or *le flâneur [the wanderer]* along with the shiny figure of the *dandy*, illustrate perfectly the city's general character. Its emotional and representational profile. What is of worth, valued and devalued to it. They are characters without roots, endlessly mobile but without certain direction nor expectation. Void both in desires and vocation, although involved into the exchange chain. *Narcissists* in short (Sennett 1980). Free and autonomous individuals, open to the adventure of writing for themselves the most interesting autobiography, but who are wary enough of possibilities as to avoid decidedly to begin the enterprise. Anomy, egoism are the *élan vital* of urban melancholy. *Le suicidaire* is another character in this civilized *Comédie Humaine*. Playing the antagonist role, those who are naturals to the environment, the equivalent figures of the *bureaucrat* and the *bourgeois*:

for a whole century, economic progress has mainly consisted in freeing industrial relations from

all regulation. Until very recently, it was the function of a whole system of moral [and institutional] forces to exert this discipline [...] Nations are declared to have the single or chief purpose of achieving industrial prosperity; such is the implication of the dogma of economic materialism, the basis of both apparently opposed systems [that is, freeing industrial and personal relations and exert at the same time the necessary discipline to achieve it in prosperity]. And as these theories merely express the state of opinion, *industry, instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike* (Durkheim 2005, pp. 215-216).

It is institutions that which give society its characteristic demeanor. Institutions are social devices that administer and discipline needs. A perfect example of a network or chain of distribution. In this sense, so the institutions, so the society. They are signs of expectations-states to be satisfied. Tendencies climb back to their cause. For Durkheim these causes cristallize in *social facts* susceptible to be measured, to be compared. It is social facts and not individual tendencies what should be traced back to their origins. The rest of the figures are but symptoms for a social etiology. There are constant collective inclinations in each society and group, the temperaments of which are a subject for a social physics. The data multiply and either collected in repositories, archives or public governmental statistics departments they are for sure the materials to the successful correlation of *social concomitants*. Sociology should concern itself exclusively with structural considerations. Should concern itself with a comparative and quantitative history of institutions, not with the motives and desires of particular individuals. If the trigger for suicide is mental illness, climate, race, heredity or imitation, *the intrinsic value of the acts so resulting is unimportant at the level we consider*³. It is strongly recommended not to put the cart before the horse. Moral and personal concerns come after, they are *extra-social*. Microcauses. Emergent traits in putting together the sketch of the semblance of society. It is the network and its differential distribution what really has importance sociologically speaking. *And suicide rates are a constant social fact defining the character of a society*. For Durkheim there is not enough emphasis put in the term '*constant*'. As society springs out of eased tensions between solidarity, property and expectations-satisfaction, suicidal tendencies are a trait intrinsic to all societies. There is no one without the tendency.

When we forgot the individual [...] [We] sought the causes of the suicidal aptitude of each society in the nature of the societies themselves. The relations of suicide to certain states of social environment *are as direct and constant as its relations to facts of a biological and physical character were seen to be uncertain and ambiguous*. Here at last we are face to face with real laws, allowing us to attempt a methodical classification (Durkheim 2005, p. 263. My emphasis).

Real laws for a real society. Laws that assembled will help to devise a portrait of the particular group and its special dynamics. Of what to expect –and predict– of it.

³ Durkheim had a direct addressee of his work in the figure of Gabriel Tarde (Jean-Gabriel De Tarde, 1843-1904), whose own work on imitation (*Les lois de l'imitation*, 1890) confronted some of Durkheim's thesis abounding in the mimetic element: there is a strong subjective cause comparably to social tendencies. It is in acquaintance and emulation that we can find an inner flow of worth which triggers comparison (Cf. con Abrutyn and Mueller 2014; Niezen 2015).

Durkheim is optimistic regarding the possibilities of a *social realism*. Advances in statistics methodology in France made him hope for the best, even when we know that it was a rudimentary progress in the field. But, *is it true that there are social inclinations that threaten constantly the existence of society? Is the very concept of society, the shared common paths of distribution in its nature, doomed to produce frictions? If talking about idealism against realism, is there a social structure that could honour the idea of an eternal motion machine for goods and expectations-states?*

2. Our Life for Others. Altruism, real socialism and suicide.

Das Leben der Anderen [*The life of others*] premiered in March 2006 in Berlin with great public acclaim⁴. The film depicted on detail what could be called one of this social contradictions we are talking about: the intricacies and stern duties in which *living under* the surveillance of the State Apparatus –and the political police in GDR, the *Stasi*– in the East Berlin-80s consisted of, and what *living could amount to* once time, body, thought and feelings –all elements that surely should be counted with when it comes to evaluate what life is made of– have to cope with those imposed social conditions. Once they have to enter the unendless chain of social goods. The conditions of the so-called *real socialism*. *Life under* or *according to* something, though legitimized, should be of a different species than *life itself*, or so it seems. A second-hand something. *Social realism* and *real socialism* double in structure. There is an inner logic all through the film that confronts *devotion* and *passion*, *altruism* and *egoism*, with its relative weight in the service (or not) to the Common Good. The common good represented obviously by the Party –that is, the SED, *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* [*Socialist Unity Party of Germany*]. Rephrasing again our fundamental question, *is it life –each ones life–, the lives of others*, as translation to English of the title of the film states, *some kind of goods we actually possess, an amenity? Is it sort of a merchandise that we can rearrange in order to cope with a fair and just distribution? At the end, would be fair to rate it –in time, body, thought and feelings– as other commonality to be shared, as an issue of social duty?*

In January 1846 a young Karl Marx was *avant la lettre* more than sure of the truth of Durkheim's approach to society. Not though with the scope of the elements to be counted in. *It is true that there are measurable social facts. And that they are descriptive of social life, but we have to decide well which ones are decisive enough to pick and important enough to decipher.* These facts cannot be circumscribed to social concomitants alone. If social life is to be properly depicted, it has to include *naturally* the intimate response of the interacting individuals to structural differentials. The subjective point of view as cause and effect of structure's recurrent dynamics. Between the pages 14 and 26 of the second volume of an obscure monthly-gazette edited by a friend, the *Gesellschaftsspiegel* [*Mirror of Society*], Marx published a concise scerpt of social analysis on a statistical study about suicides in France parting from the beginning of XVIIIth century. *Peuchet: vom Selbstmord* [*Peuchet: on Suicide*] is a unique piece of evidence on the intellectual development of Karl Marx (Marx 1971). Since his prior

⁴ <https://www.n-tv.de/archiv/Bejubelte-Premiere-in-Berlin-article175178.html>.
Webpage accessed and consulted on 1st of August 2020.

French stay in Paris, influenced by Engels, Marx had made good use of the terms *Klasse* [class] and *Stand* [estate]. They were inherited as conceptual synonyms and structural categories. Understood as a node of social worth, a point of convergence, a class is for actors always a constant focus of distribution tendencies for goods. A place for a certain crystallization. Individuals within the scope of a node have certain particular representational landscapes of their own in comparison to other *Klassen*. The estate-expectations is the *class consciousness* [*Klassenbewußtsein*]. The gazette was intended precisely to be *the organ for the representation of the dispossessed popular classes* [*zur Vertretung des besitzlosen Volksklassen*], but not only. Those classes that had a fair and just claim referring the (un)equal distribution of goods were more in numbers. A consciousness of the distribution differential regarding social goods, *suicide is one of these types of claim* in the same spirit as Durkheim defended. A claim essentially addressed to the nature of one special type of distribution and structure. Barely a brief account of the *memoirs* of a first-tier bureaucrat of the Restoration with Louis XVIII –Jacques Peuchet, Royal Archivist for the *Préfecture* of the Paris Police–, the text on suicide is for Marx the occasion to show “the contradictory and unnatural [*Unnatur*, monstrous] character of modern life –not only in regard to the reciprocal relations amongst particular classes, but *in all circuits and figures of the common everyday exchange. By the way, they are characterizations with the vital warmth of immediacy*” (Marx 1971, p. 14). To directly reach the pulse of those intimate social frequencies we should seek for evidence in “all sickness present to the social body; [the gazette] will publish general descriptions, monographies, statistical items and particular typical cases [...][It] shall include within the scope of its research the spiritual conditions of workers, moral and intellectual alike, and not only the physical ones”(Hess 1971, p.1). Characterizations that have to summon us as affected. The *maladie* permeates modern society in its entirety, and then the scope should be the whole of it. It goes through all estates, situations and material circumstances. Statistics are essential to the task, but bones have to be covered by flesh to move. Macrocauses need to add up microcauses and the particular example serves very well too to build on the tendency. If not, “critique of property relations [that leads to the major division in society between *possessed* and *dispossessed individuals*, apart from the critique] of familial relations, of the rest of private relations, in short” would be an incomplete and biased exercise in its aim (Marx 1971, p. 14). The end station of the critique of representational goods in circulation goes as deep as the sphere of social life reaches, goes deep into every nook and cranny of community. *Justness, fairness determine the reach. Social goods will include exchanges within the niche of private life, open to an economy of symbolic interactions as well.* For if not, do we dare to assert that “the only ones in bearing the present social conditions [of Modernity and industrialization] would be the workers [the *dispossessed classes*], as if in respect of the rest of society, the outer [and inner] standing reality was [judged] the best of all possible worlds”? (Marx 1971, p. 14). *Real laws for real societies.*

In accordance with Durkheim’s statistical narrative, the apple does not fall here far from the tree. In the inner *sanctum* of private life children and women are most eminent signs and figures, and the final proof for the sad argument:

Suicide is extremely rare among children [...] [None the less] the child too is influenced by social causes which may drive him to suicide. Even in this case their influence appears in the variations of child-suicide according to social environment. *They are most numerous in large cities. Nowhere else does social life commence so early for the child*, as is shown by the precocity of the little city-dweller. Introduced earlier and more completely than others to the current of civilization, *he undergoes its effects more completely and earlier*. This also causes the number of child-suicides to grow with pitiful regularity in civilized lands (Durkheim 2005, p. 49. My emphasis).

As for the women “with assistance of the *Code Civil* and property rights [...] *Women are part of the inventory*”. They are *Sklassen* (Marx 1971, p. 20). They are *the proletariat of the proletariat*. Surrounded by a double standard of social duties – demands on social goods. Inner and outer in relation to the core the family would be, it comes not as a surprise then that the leading role in the film *Das Leben der Anderen* is and should be the one played by Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Taking on the role of an actress in the film, she gathers around all the implications of the above-mentioned *comédie humaine* traits plus the one just referred: an actress is a character who makes a profession out of *not having roots, of being endlessly mobile in the chain of representations, her expectations are not really of her own, but those determined by the role*. Void both of her own desires and vocation – dutily deprived of them –, although totally involved into the exchange chain of communal possibilities. For, each position of the chain could be hers in an eventual moment like a possession. She is bestowed with *all possessions* and yet *dispossessed*. *But what social goods are here in trade?* As in the case of the poet, actors are *soul engineers* – states in a celebration party the spiteful Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), Minister of Culture and former Minister of National Security, quoting Stalin. Technicians of feelings. But technicians who have the duty to correct the possible tensions of those emotional goods within the distribution chain. Furthermore, *Christa-Marie Sieland is the pearl of the GDR* in his own words. A worth to protect, a worth to keep. A significant metaphor when we come to terms with it. A woman, Christa-Maria represents the paradigmatic case of someone who is *the representative organ of the allowed and forbidden transitions between inner and outer world, public, private and intimate spheres of existence*. The boundaries between *home* – family – and *labour* – State – blur. “It is *natural to our present society* to produce a lot of suicidals [...] *but not all societies have the same products, though*”, affirms Marx no matter what Durkheim says (Marx 1971, p. 15). A well designed society – by engineers of all sorts that could even indulge themselves in counting not only with *the physical conditions, but with the moral, intellectual and spiritual ones of interacting individuals in the community of sharing* – would solve rapidly without a doubt this urgent problem. Or so we think. *For, does not the unity in sharing of the socialist community produce voluntary deaths?*

At the peak of the movie suicide makes its entrance into the plot of the film in the form of a symbol. A *place of passage, a crossing point*. The omnipresence of the possibility of an all-goods porose chain of distribution is overwhelming. *All is in all*. *There is no right to keep anything out of the distribution cycle*. There should not be an

interest in an *outer* world. In the case it would be pointless. The GDR is *the best country in the World*. Comprehends all fulfillment possibilities at hand. Living in another one would be foolish, not an option –never a competing value. And yet, the references to trespassing the limits of the *democratic republic* in idea or in reality multiply. Become an obsession sanctifying a most desired *rite of passage*: references crystallize in *the very physical act of an escapee concealed in the back-seat of a golden Mercedes that reaches West-Berlin through the customs in Heinrich-Heine Straße (!)*, through the idea of *indulging in reading western literature as a moral weakness*, to stronger ones including the reference to the *otherness* as a passing by, a transition and a disappearance. The radical symbolism of detaching oneself of the system at all, in the flesh. *Not being at all in the GDR, not in body, not in thoughts*. Under a rattling floor board the typewriter with which the secret *manifesto –On someone that left to the other side–* on suicides in the GDR has been written in red ink, is hidden at plain sight. *Precisely on the threshold between apartment environments*. A forbidden secret. Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert), a good-old friend and stage director commits suicide as he can no longer bear the thought of not directing anymore, inducted as he is in a –allegedly– nonexistent black list. It is just an advance of the ending of the film, in which Christa-Maria redoubles the thesis with her own *self-assassination [Selbstmord]*. Both are pushed to this tragic end. More to the argument as she cannot even salvage her own intimacy –thoughts, feelings...– from the lewd interests of Minister Hempf, who takes Sieland for his private possession... as he represents the almighty State. Sieland, Jerska take maybe (*un*)justly their lives then.

Suicide represents all of these relations to life in their complex structure. *Vocation as property, the dispossession of expectations and aim, the presence and absence of ones own name in Party's Providence, the gratuitous character of this whimsical distribution...* The concept of suicide officiates as a dialectical reminder of the tensions amongst *private and public solidarity, property and fulfillment*, the functional substitute of satisfaction when in a socialist paradise.

At Athens a man who had killed himself was punished with 'atimia' for having committed an injustice to the city; the honors of regular burial were denied him [...] these punishments were applicable only when the person had killed himself without having previously asked permission of the proper authorities. At Athens, if he asked authority of the Senate before killing himself, stating the reasons which made life intolerable to him, and if his request was regularly granted, suicide was considered a legitimate act (Durkheim 2005, p. 295).

Life is a social goods. Not entirely of our own under this light. Only *if... if... if... is a right to life considered as legitimate*. Lost of intimacy in relation to public and private property is *to keep at least the right to detach oneself of the sharing within the unending distributional chain of social concomitance* (Foessel 2008). *ἀτιμία* is the deprivation of honour. It is a total judgment on the value of life: in comparison with status, prestige, power, all *social goods depending on structural differences of exchange*. Life is of social value under this logic. This special occasion for the exercise of *underworld ostracism* points to a social humiliation that would explain why the term for suicide in German is so descriptive in the movie. *Selbstmord –Suizid* is an alternative nowadays–

is the illicit act of assassination turn onto oneself. One can only unjustly take his own life. As it is a social goods the rest of society is the harmed party. It is society who is forced to renounce to a possession to which is somehow entitled.

Concluding our argument here, it would be helpful to add a corollary question to the ones already presented above. Each suicide is a direct accusation against the public sanity of a society. *Is Marx right over Durkheim in respect to the possible absence of this social product once the correct material and representational sharing conditions for the social structure would be achieved?* A plausible response extracted from an article by Udo Grasshof:

except for the period between 1956 and 1962 suicide statistics were not published in the statistical yearbooks [in the GDR]. However, the 'State Central Bureau for Statistics' recorded suicides with Prussian accuracy, but kept them a state secret [...] Although there was no public discussion of suicide, there was a limited, if diminishing, coverage of the issue in professional journals. *From 1977, even specialists could not access data.* [It is surprising though that] suicide rate of East Germany was, indeed, consistently 50 percent higher than in West Germany (about 6,000 suicide cases were registered every year in the GDR until the fall of the Wall). But East German suicide rates have to be viewed in a broader comparative context. European states like Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Hungary and Finland also had high suicide rates, despite variations in their political systems⁵.

Probably the majority of the film's audience, along with our own reading of Durkheim and Marx could would be tempted to make a fine correlation too between confinement, repression and suicide, *but according to what just have been stated, maybe is more of a matter of concealment. Of the bare negation of one social product whose existence could rise fair moral claims against just one more society among others.*

⁵ <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/2014/11/27/the-death-of-others-the-myth-and-reality-of-suicide-in-the-german-democratic-republic/#:~:text=The%20suicide%20rate%20of%20East,the%20fall%20of%20the%20Wall>
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Links.

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