

# Suicide and Civic Republicanism: Questioning Durkheim and Putnam

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is, to recast Jane Austen, a truth universally acknowledged that elevated suicide rates reflect social dysfunction. Riaz Hassan in his study of suicide in Singapore observes that what all sociological accounts of suicide have in common is: 'They explicitly or implicitly take suicide as symptomatic of what is wrong with society: the higher the suicide rate, the greater the social tension and lack of social cohesion' (Hassan 1983, p. 11). In this paper I wish to explore comparative data from three very diverse sources—Italy in the nineteenth century and Italy, India and the United States in the late twentieth century—which demonstrate unexpected relationships between high levels of civic sociability and suicide.<sup>2</sup> The data also suggest that the conventionally expected inverse relationship between social capital and suicide may be incorrect.<sup>3</sup>

The use of suicide rates as an index of social degeneration has its origins in pessimistic social commentary in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Authors in Italy, Spain, and especially France were preoccupied with the theme of social decadence (Swart 1964) There was widespread agreement that the forces of capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation were breaking up the solidarity of rural communities and leading to emergence of selfish individualism. Lukes observes of France that

The theme of social dissolution was a pervasive one in nineteenth-century French thought. Deriving from the counter-revolutionary reaction of the early nineteenth century, it was taken up, with differing emphases, by conservatives, Catholics, Saint-Simonians, Positivists, liberals, and socialists. All agreed in condemning l'odieux individualisme— the social and moral isolation of self-interested individuals, unattached to social ideals and unamenable to social control; and they saw it as spelling the breakdown of social solidarity....Almost all...agreed in seeing it as a threat to the social order— whether that order was conceived of in a traditionalist and hierarchical manner, or as an organized technocracy, or as essentially liberal and pluralist, or, as the socialists envisaged it, as an ideal co-operative order of 'association' and 'harmony' (Lukes 1996, pp. 195-6).

If there was general condemnation of the spirit of individualism, there was less agreement on what characterised the decline. Raudot in La décadence de la France in 1850 pointed to the declining rate of growth of the population of France in comparison to Austria, Russia and England (Swart 1964, p. 109). Others pointed to increasing rates of crime and divorce (Swart 1964, p. 158).

The rising trend of suicides was the subject of many studies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Originally the subject of concern on the grounds of morality, it became the subject of increasingly sophisticated investigation by investigators such as the Italian psychologist Morselli (1881; see also: Goldney and Schioldann 2000). As Giddens notes,

Most [of these] writers attributed the general rise of suicide rates to the dissolution of the traditional social order and the transition to industrial civilization, with its concomitants of increasing 'rationality' and individualism—an explanation close to that later elaborated by Durkheim (Giddens 1996, p. 53).

In his first published study of suicide Durkheim examined the causal relationship between the declining trend of birth rates in Europe and the rising incidence of suicide (Durkheim 1888). In this study, Durkheim proposed utilising suicide rates as a measure of the degree of unhappiness in society (Durkheim 1888, p. 447). 'Suicide is always...the index of social malaise and it cannot increase except when the malaise itself increases' (Durkheim 1888, p. 460 my translation).

The theme of social happiness was repeated in The Division of Labor in Society first published in 1893:

The only experimental fact proving that life is generally good is that the great mass of men prefer it to death...If, then, we possess an objective and measurable fact...we shall be able with one stroke to measure...the average unhappiness....This fact is the number of suicides. In the same way as the relative rarity of voluntary deaths is the best proof of the power and universality of this instinct [hope], the fact that they increase proves it is losing ground (Durkheim 1964, pp. 245-6).

In Durkheim's great opus, Suicide, first published in 1897, the focus of explanation changed slightly. He observed that different nations have characteristic tendencies to suicide which remain remarkably constant over the mid-term. Even over a longer period in which rates were increasing, the relative rankings of nations remained unchanged. Each society had, he concluded 'a definite aptitude for suicide....[which] can be considered as a characteristic index' (Durkheim 1951, p. 48-9). It was 'very possible and even probable that the rising tide of suicide originates in a pathological state just now accompanying the march of civilization....So grave and rapid an alteration as this must be morbid....what the rising flood of voluntary deaths denotes is not the increasing brilliancy of our civilization but a state of crisis and perturbation not to be prolonged with impunity.' (Durkheim 1951, pp. 368-9).<sup>4</sup> Suicide had been called, Durkheim noted in an uncharacteristically purple phrase, 'the ransom-money of civilization' (Durkheim 1951, p. 367)

The heart of Suicide is, of course, the elaboration in depth of his theories of the importance of individualism and greed arising out of industrialisation and urbanisation in promoting this social pathology.<sup>5</sup> In traditional societies where conventional religion holds sway and 'individual wills converge to one identical goal', he argued, there is strong social integration and therefore, tight control over individuals that makes suicide uncommon (Durkheim 1951, pp. 158-9).

When society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose wilfully of themselves....The bond that unites them with the common cause attaches them to life and the lofty goal they envisage prevents their feeling personal troubles so deeply. There is, in short, in a cohesive and animated society a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted (Durkheim 1951, pp. 209-10).<sup>6</sup>

In industrial society, by contrast, when social bonds disintegrate, the individual is also detached from social life, and suicide becomes more frequent (Durkheim 1951, p. 209). Durkheim distinguished between two types of social disintegration in industrial society: egoism, marked by excessive individualism, and anomie, a state of moral deregulation and unbounded material desires.<sup>7</sup> Egoism arises when individuals are detached from society; suicide increases when 'the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society itself is slack' (Durkheim 1951, pp. 214-15). Anomie, 'springs from the lack of collective forces at certain points in society; that is, of groups established for the regulation of social life' (quoted in Lukes 1996, p. 81 my emphasis).

Since elevated rates of suicide were caused by the extreme social isolation of individuals in industrialised societies, Durkheim proposed the creation of new intermediate groups in society which would unite workers and managers. 'The chief role' of these utopian corporations, which Lukes accurately labels as a form of 'centralized guild-socialism' (Lukes 1996, p. 87), would be to 'govern social

functions, especially economic functions, and thus extricate them from their present state of disorganization' (Durkheim 1951, pp. 382-3). In the atomised world of modern society, it would be necessary for the state to create and foster these rather unlikely organs of civil society to reform and strengthen the social bonds which the market and the modern division of labour had severed.

There are thus two enduring traditions of social interpretation which trace their roots to Durkheim's work. The first is the theme of isolated individuals in industrialised society who have few strong social bonds to others. And as we have seen, it is the absence of such intermediate social groups in industrial society which in Durkheim's interpretation is the principal cause of elevated suicide rates.

The other enduring theme is the unchallenged acceptance that increasing or elevated suicide rates indicate the presence of some form of deep-seated social crisis. Eckersley, for example, stated in 1997 his belief

that behind suicide and other youth problems also lies a profound and growing failure of the culture of western industrial societies—a failure to provide a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose in our lives, and a framework of values (cited in Barber 2001, p. 1).

### **social capital**

In the decade since Robert Putnam published Making Democracy Work (1993)—his path-breaking study of democracy and civic engagement in contemporary Italy—there has been a remarkable flowering of scholarly interest in the importance of membership in voluntary associations. Putnam found these civil society groupings to be major contributors to trust and other components of 'social capital' which in turn was a major determinant of successful democracy.

### **Social Capital and Democracy in Italy**

While one can summarise Putnam's findings and argument relatively tersely, subtlety and breadth are sacrificed in the compression. Putnam and his colleagues set out to study a great political experiment: the devolution of power in Italy in the 1970s from a highly centralised regime centred in Rome, to newly created provincial governments. After tracing the creation, consolidation and growing legitimisation of the new regional governments over the first twenty years of their existence, his analysis turned to an evaluation of the performance of the different regional governments.

Putnam assessed performance by looking at twelve indicators ranging from the stability of regional cabinets to legislative innovation to bureaucratic responsiveness. This Index of Institutional Performance showed that regional governments in north Italy, most notably that of Emilia Romagna, perform at far higher levels than do those in southern Italy such as Calabria and Campania. Significantly, the overall Index was strongly correlated with the levels of satisfaction which Italian citizens expressed with the work of their regional governments: citizens were most satisfied by good governance, most critical of ineffective institutional performance.

Since the best governance is found in northern Italy, it was natural to ask if the wealth of this region explained its high levels of institutional performance. Although there was a reasonably strong relationship between economic modernity and institutional performance, Putnam argued that it is better

understood as a joint result of another more potent causal factor: the strength of the institutions of civil society.

This, as we have seen, is one of Putnam's most significant findings and explains why his book ignited widespread interest in social capital when it appeared. What best explains the pattern of regional differences in institutional performance, Putnam argued, is the civic character of the citizens in different regions. These differences in citizens were measured by looking at 'civic sociability', the extent to which citizens belong to associations; the percentage of the population which reads a newspaper; voluntary electoral participation; and the extent of patron-client domination of society, as measured by preference voting in elections. These measures were summed in a single Civic Community Index. The geographical distribution of levels of civic community followed a pattern which is by now familiar: they were highest in northern Italy, and lowest in the south. When Putnam examined the relationship between levels of Civic Community and Institutional Performance, he found a nearly linear relationship: where civic community was weak, institutions performed badly; where civic community was strong, institutions were also effective. This relationship was so strong that levels of economic modernisation added no additional predictive power. High levels of civic community were also related to high levels of trust in others to obey the law and a belief that regional politics are largely free from corruption.

The significance of the potential explanatory power of the concept of 'social capital' is best indicated by the large number of studies in a widening range of disciplines which have explored the utility of the concept. It has, for example, been fruitfully applied to studies of developing countries (e.g. Bebbington 1997; Bhattacharya 2001; Brautigam 1997; Colletta and Cullen 2000; Harriss and Renzio 1997; Heller 1996; Jayal 2001; Mayer 2001; Mohapatra 2001; Morris 1998; Narayan and Pritchett 1997; Pai 2001; Serra 2001; Widner and Mundt 1998). Social capital has increasingly been used by epidemiologists to explore social aspects of health (e.g. Kawachi and Kennedy 1997; Kennedy, et al. 1998; Kahn, et al. 2000; Lynch, et al. 2001; Baum, et al. 2000; Baum and Palmer 2002). Significantly, none of these studies has reported on the relationship between social capital and suicide.

### **Bowling Alone**

In Bowling Alone (2000), Putnam extended his Italian findings to explore the impact of declining levels of social capital in the United States on education, crime, economic prosperity, happiness, health and suicide—among many, many other topics. Putnam marshals a massive body of evidence to validate his claim that there is an emerging deficit in social capital in the United States which finds its reflection in declining political participation, falling membership in voluntary organisations, religious attendance, trades union membership, socialising with friends and neighbours, charitable donations and levels of trust and belief in the honesty of people in general.

As part of his exploration of the declining levels of social capital among successive generations, Putnam briefly examines suicide trends over the past half century. He reports that the 'veritable epidemic of suicide among American youth in the last half of the twentieth century....coincided with an equally

remarkable decline in suicide among older groups' (Putnam 2000, p. 261).

Putnam attributes both effects to social capital levels in each group:

This is precisely the pattern we might have predicted as the well-integrated long civic generation aged (reducing the traditionally high rates among old people) at the same time that the less well-integrated boomers and X'ers entered the population (raising the traditionally low rates among young people). As the twentieth century ended, Americans born and raised in the 1920s and 1930s were about half as likely to commit suicide as people that age had been at midcentury, whereas Americans born and raised in the 1970s and 1980s were three or four times more likely to commit suicide as people that age had been at midcentury (Putnam 2000, p. 262)<sup>8</sup>

It should be emphasised that although Putnam demonstrates that violent crime is inversely related to his measure of social capital (Putnam 2000, p. 309), he does not demonstrate a similar effect for suicide. I will return to this question later in the paper.

Putnam also reports that survey data on happiness show a similar pattern. Whereas in the 1940s and 50s, young people had higher levels of happiness than older people, by the end of the century young people were less happy than old people (Putnam 2000 p. 263). What distinguishes the civic from the less-civic generations, Putnam argues, is television: 'the long civic generation was the last cohort of Americans to grow up without television. The more fully that any given generation was exposed to television in its formative years, the lower its civic engagement during adulthood' (Putnam 2000, p. 272).

Putnam's interpretation of these findings lies squarely in the tradition of Durkheim: 'one plausible explanation...is social isolation' (Putnam 2000, p. 264). He quotes Seligman who attributes the increased incidence of depression in American young people to 'rampant individualism' (Putnam 2000, p. 264).

### **19th century Italy revisited**

Let us turn now to the first of the comparative cases reported this study: 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy. To trace the historical roots of the sharp differences in civic sociability in the 1970s and 80s, Putnam constructed an index that measured Traditions of Civic Involvement, 1860-1920 (Putnam 1993, p. 149). To construct the index, he included membership in mutual aid societies, the incidence of co-operatives, the strength of mass-based political parties, electoral turnout in open elections held between 1919-1921 and membership in enduring cultural and recreational associations founded before 1860. Putnam reports 'an almost perfect correlation' ( $r = .93$ ) between this index and his Civic Community index for the 1970s and 80s (Putnam 1993, pp. 149 and 151). There was also a very strong correlation between the Civic Tradition Index and his Index of Institutional Performance ( $r = .86$ ).

Where Italians a century ago were most actively engaged in new forms of social solidarity and civic mobilization, exactly there Italians today are the most thoroughly civic in their political and social life....One could have predicted the success or failure of regional government in Italy in the 1980s with extraordinary accuracy from the patterns of civic engagement nearly a century earlier (Putnam 1993, pp. 149-50).

The historically civic regions of Italy were those with the densest networks of association, those richest in social capital.

Networks of civic engagement, [such as] neighborhood associations, choral societies, cooperatives, sports clubs, mass-based parties...represent intense horizontal interactions. Networks of civic engagement are an essential form of social capital. The denser such networks in a community, the more likely that its citizens will be able to cooperate for mutual benefit (Putnam 1993, p. 173).

Networks of civic engagement that cut across social cleavages nourish wider cooperation. This is another reason why networks of civic engagement are such an important part of a community's stock of social capital (Putnam 1993, p. 175).

Thus the northern provinces of turn-of-the-19<sup>th</sup>-century Italy were ones in which high proportions of the population were, at least in relative terms, highly integrated into group memberships and associations.<sup>9</sup> In terms of the conventional sociological wisdom these should have been regions in which suicide rates were low.

Morselli reported average annual suicide rates for the Italian provinces between 1864 and 1876.<sup>10</sup> These figures, he noted, 'show a regular diminution of suicide as we remove gradually from the North' (1881, p. 41). When we regress Putnam's Index of Institutional Performance onto these rates, the prediction of the conventional wisdom is confounded (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> We find a very high positive correlation ( $r = .91$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) between civic traditions and suicide. Northern areas highest in civic sociability and social capital, such as Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Tuscany and Piedmont also had the highest suicide rates. Southern provinces such as Sardinia, Molise, Calabria and Puglia with weak civic traditions also had low suicide rates.

There is abundant evidence which indicates that many parts of the low-suicide-low-social capital areas of southern Italy have been characterised by hierarchical domination, including by criminal societies such as the Mafia, and by paralytically low levels of trust and social integration. Banfield, in his classic study of Montegrano in Basilicata termed this extreme social isolation 'amoral familism', the 'first rule' of which he hypothesised to be: 'In a society of amoral familists, no one will further the interest of the group or community except as it is to his private advantage to do so' (Banfield 1958, pp. 83-4; see also: Graziano 1973; Tarrow 1967; Hess 1970; Arlacchi 1983; Gambetta 1988). Arlacchi says, for example, of the clan warfare that he found in the Gioia region of Calabria

The whole set-up of the social system resembled in many ways that described in *The Leviathan* of Hobbes without, however, the presence of the Leviathan itself. The Plain of Gioia was the zone of the *faida* [blood feud], of clans, of violent political and family feuds. The social aggregate there was formed of a multitude of monads without doors or windows. (Arlacchi 1983, p. 105).

The 'vertical networks' characteristic of much of southern Italy, Putnam argues, 'cannot sustain social trust and cooperation' (Putnam 1993, p. 174).

## Figure 1—Italy: Provincial Suicide rates 1864-76 vs Civic Tradition

### Index 1860-1920

Thus the results of our first comparative study indicates a very strong association between Putnam's measure of civic traditions in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy—which itself taps several dimensions of social capital—and provincial suicide rates.

### 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy

The relationship between civic engagement and suicide in contemporary Italy (Figure 2) is similar in nature to that of the preceding century, though the strength of the correlation is weaker ( $r = .76$  vs  $r = .91$ ). Levels of civic engagement have risen in many parts of Italy, and have thus tended to become more homogenous in northern Italy. Suicide rates in the North have risen

considerably over the century; in Umbria they have risen nearly 3 times and doubled in Liguria, for example. Southern suicide rates have tended to rise relatively more slowly.

## Figure 2—Italy: Provincial Suicide Rates 1999 vs Civic Community Index

### **20th century India**

Let us turn to our second comparative study, contemporary India. Like 19<sup>th</sup> (and 20<sup>th</sup>) century Italy, India is characterised by striking regional differences in economic development, achievements in human development and levels of human capital. Unlike Italy, where there was a pattern of increasing human development as one moved from south to north, in India, it is the South which has higher levels of human development and the North where levels are much lower. One southern state, Kerala, has quite exceptional levels of achievement on virtually all levels of developmental achievement—except per capita income (see Mayer 2001) and thus tends to exert a strong influence on correlations.

In a replication of Putnam's Italian study using Indian data, I found similar regional differences in institutional performance: southern states such as Kerala and Tamilnadu, as well as the more industrialised western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat had the highest scores on the Indian Institutional Performance Index, while northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan—a group of states often referred to by the acronym 'BIMARU', a pun on the Hindi word for 'sick'—had the lowest scores.

My replication also found a very strong relationship ( $r = .94$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) between a measure of civic community (Civic Community 4) and the Institutional Performance Index. As in Italy, there was also a strong positive correlation between levels of Civic Community and measures of human development. For example, the correlation with female literacy was  $.92$  ( $p < .0001$ ) and with an Indian replication of the United Nations Human Development Programme's Human Development Index was  $.82$  ( $p = .0001$ ).

When state suicide rates for 1997 are regressed on the civic community index, there is, as in the Italian study, a strong and positive correlation ( $r = .79$ ;  $p = .0004$ ) (Figure 3). Although the relationship is not as strong as that found in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, it is stronger than that found in Italy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still a striking one—allowing us to predict nearly two-thirds of the variance in suicide rates. Social capital, as measured by the percent of respondents expressing trust in local officials, is reasonably strongly correlated with the suicide rate in 1997 ( $r = .63$ ;  $p = .01$ ).<sup>13</sup> The northern states where suicide rates are lowest tend to be characterised by higher levels of hierarchical domination, though there is no evidence of 'amoral familism' comparable to that found in southern Italy.

## Figure 3—India: Civic Community Index 1990s vs Suicide Rate 1997

## **Discussion**

Though these findings are drawn from two quite dissimilar national settings, they suggest a common conclusion: in those Italian provinces and Indian states where civic sociability, trust and human development are highest, where social networks are most dense, where contemporary governments are most responsive and most effective, suicide rates are also highest. It is not conceivable that we would ordinarily consider regions such as Emilia Romagna or Kerala as pathological. On the contrary, they are widely recognised as models (see for example Jeffrey 1992). Where literacy is lowest, governments least effective and most corrupt, where trust is low and social networks most tenuous, suicide rates are lowest. If we were looking for regions to label as dysfunctional or pathological, we might apply those terms to Mafia-ridden regions of Italy such as Sicily and Calabria or to states where landlord armies terrorise Untouchable workers such as Bihar. These findings thus pose a profound challenge to the almost universal acceptance of Durkheim's proposition that higher suicide rates are a measure of social disintegration and pathology. Is it possible in the light of the findings presented here to accept that regions characterised by high trust, high levels of association and connection are also those in which egoism and anomie predominate? The findings reported here also raise another important question: why have political scientists and epidemiologists exploring the explanatory power of social capital in the United States not reported similar findings? The answer would appear to be (Figure 4) that there appears to be no association between the two variables. Unlike homicides, for which Putnam found a strong negative correlation, states such as North Dakota or Vermont which have high levels of social capital have moderate levels of suicide, while states with low levels of suicide, such as Massachusetts have moderate levels of social capital.

### **Figure 4—United States: Social Capital vs Suicide**

There is, however, another way in which we can analyse the data. Perhaps because the differences between the American states are not as stark as in Italy or India, it has been the practice of a number of earlier investigators (Hackney 1969; 1958) to analyse U.S. suicides as a percentage of deaths from intentional injuries, that is suicides plus homicides.<sup>14</sup> This method emphasises the relative importance of one or other cause of violent death in an individual state rather than ranks on the absolute scale of rates; in the United States suicides as a percentage of deaths from intentional injuries ranges over a gradient between .43 to .93. At one end of the scale there are a number of states (Louisiana, Mississippi and Illinois) in which suicides are less than half of all deaths from intentional injuries. There are others (South Dakota, North Dakota, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine) where suicide deaths form over 88 per cent of the total deaths from intentional injuries. When we regress suicides as a per cent of total deaths from intentional injuries onto Putnam's social capital index (Figure 5) we find that, as in our two earlier comparative cases, there is a strong, positive correlation ( $r = .75$ ;  $p < .0001$ ).<sup>15</sup> Where social capital is highest, it appears that violence is turned inward; where it is lowest, violence is turned against others.

## Figure 5—United States: Social Capital vs Suicides as per cent of Deaths from Intentional Injuries

### Conclusion

The finding of strong positive correlations between measures of civic association, social capital and suicide rates in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy, India and the United States must lead us to question the conventional wisdom which equates elevated suicide rates with social pathology.

We have seen that in his early writing on changes in the birth rate and the division of labour in society Durkheim viewed suicide as an unambiguous measure of the extent of unhappiness in society. In recent years the question of the levels of happiness in different societies has been the object of extensive research. Direct measurement of happiness contradicts the assumptions made by Durkheim. Barber studied adjustment to high school in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Germany, Canada, the United States and Australia. For young men he found a strong positive association ( $r = .87$ ;  $p = .01$ ) between a measure of self-esteem and national youth suicide rates. '[R]esults of this study', observes Barber, 'do not support the 'absolute misery hypothesis' [that 'the suicide rate...is a surrogate measure of...happiness']' (Barber 2001, pp. 49 and 52). Barber advances an alternative argument, striking similar to that proposed in this paper; his results demonstrate 'just the opposite: that the male suicide rate is a proxy for the level of psychological wellbeing within the general population' (Barber 2001, p. 55 emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

How might we understand the associations found in this paper between high levels of social capital and suicide rates using national-level data, and Barber's findings of similar associations with suicide and self-esteem among male high school students using individual-level data? Barber offers a plausible explanation. In a second study of high school students in Alberta, Canada, Barber found that 'suicidality was not directly related to depressed affect or social comparison on their own, but was significantly associated with the interaction between them' (Barber 2001, p. 54). Barber interprets this to mean that 'suicidality in the young male population is related to upward social comparison. More specifically, suicidality in males requires both a level of psychological maladjustment and the perception that one is worse off than one's peers' (Barber 2001, p. 55 emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

More broadly, Barber argues that the 'relative misery hypothesis' provides an elegant explanation for the paradox...that suicide rates rise during national jubilation and fall during national adversity...[W]hen national morale rises and falls, the relative misery of the community's unhappiest citizens moves in concert. Unlike Durkheim's celebrated theory of suicide...the relative misery hypothesis does not appeal to fluctuations in the overall level of social integration, but to fluctuations in the relative affective state of a small minority (Barber 2001, p. 56).

It seems plausible that a comparable process links social capital to suicide, through what might be termed 'outward social comparison'. Those who live in societies with high levels of social capital are likely to have better civic skills, spend more time socialising with friends, have wider networks of social support, and report higher levels of self-esteem. The traditional sociological view is that suicide rates should be low in these societies (Durkheim 1956, p. 209; Breault 1986,

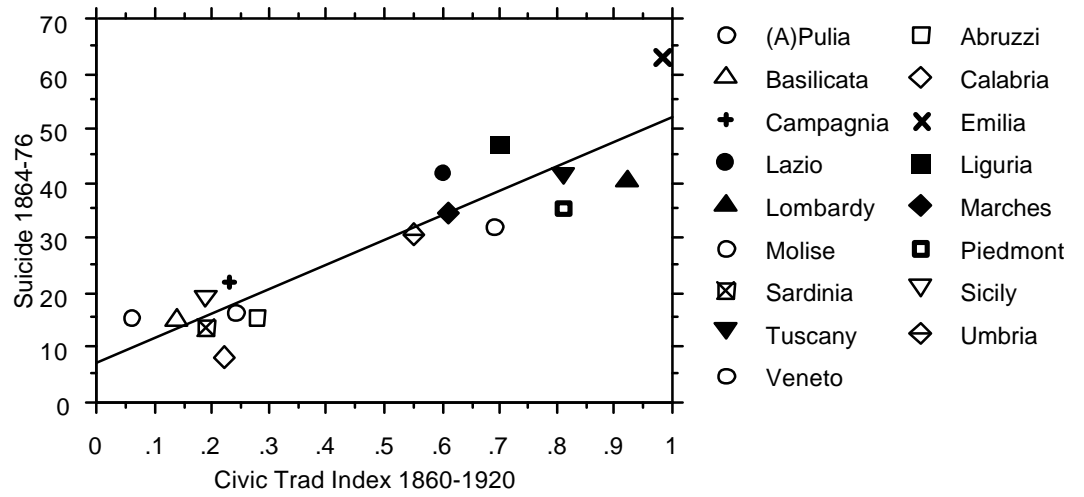
p.640). Adverse outward social comparison may help to explain the finding of this study that the rates in these societies are higher. The very small numbers of individuals who are not integrated into the webs of social connection which link those around them and who have some degree of depression may, as Barber suggests, perceive themselves to be relatively worse off and thus be at high risk of suicide. Thus, paradoxically, a society with many, happy, well-connected, civically-engaged peers, may nevertheless be a significant causal factor in suicide for that very small unhappy minority (c.f. Barber 2001 p. 8).

It is difficult to reconcile the results reported here with the canons of the sociology of suicide which rest on Durkheim's statement of an inverse relationship between integration and suicide. While earlier writers have noted the lack of clarity in Durkheim's own use of the concept integration (see especially Gibbs and Martin 1964, Chapter 1; and Pope 1976, Chapter 3), the essential features of social capital-'dense [social] networks of reciprocal social relations' and norms of trustworthiness (Putnam 2000, p. 19)-seem nevertheless identical with some core features of integration such as strong social ties, shared values and conformity to the expectations of others (Gibbs and Martin 1964, pp. 16-18; Breault 1986, p. 629; Kawachi and Berkman 2000, p. 175). In addition to the strong correspondences, there are also some distinctions which are worth noting. In a well-known passage, cited above in full, Durkheim maintained that "when society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose wilfully of themselves". This stronger form of social control appears to correspond broadly to what Putnam has called 'bonding' social capital, that found typically in "ethnic fraternal organizations and church-based women's reading groups" (Putnam 2000, pp. 22-3). Durkheim's early hypothesis that suicide rates were a reliable barometer of 'social malaise' seems to have formed an enduring bias which perhaps prevented him from recognising the existence of the modern outward looking and encompassing forms of social integration-'bridging' social capital-which are central to Putnam's work on 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy and the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If the argument made in this paper is sustained by subsequent investigation, then we must abandon a long-held and central sociological proposition concerning the inverse relationship between suicide and social cohesion. Increasing suicide rates must, of course, always be cause for deep concern. But we cannot equate those trends with social pathology. The evidence presented here suggests that, if anything, the opposite is more likely to be the case. Since the linkages between civic community, social capital and suicide are yet to be clarified, we cannot at this juncture be dogmatic about the relationships between them. If we wish to measure social cohesion, we should do so using other, direct, measures.

If we cannot use suicide to measure the lack of cohesion in society it does not mean that in relinquishing the more ambitious sociological project we must also abandon the individual aspect of Durkheim's insight into integration. We must not forget that the unhappiness felt by those who feel themselves outside the radius of sociability can be extreme. The sense of despair which may arise from adverse 'outward social comparison' made by one with little social capital is perhaps best captured by Shakespeare in Sonnet 29:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone beweep my outcast state....  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd

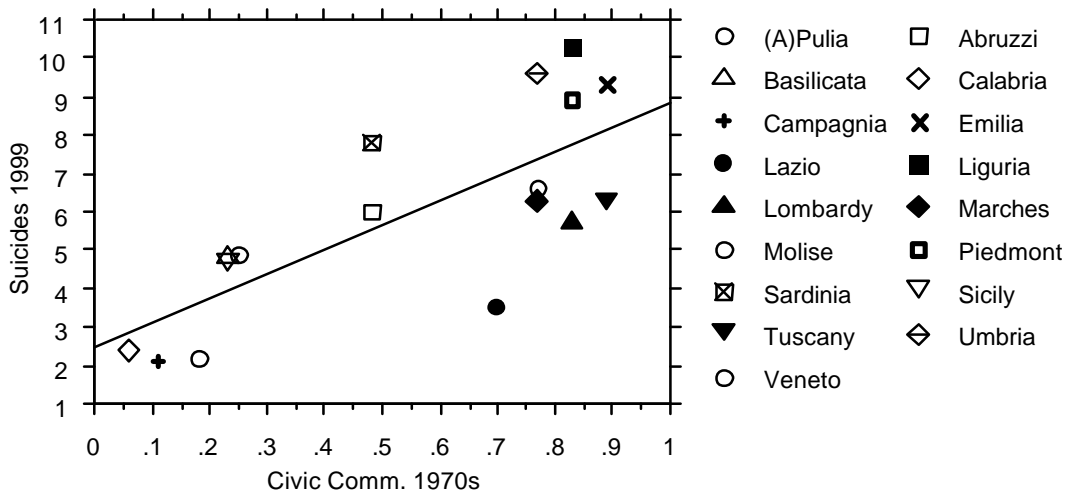
Figure 1—Italy: Provincial Suicide rates 1864-76 vs Civic Tradition  
Index 1860-1920



$$\text{Suicide 1864-76} = 7.293 + 44.619 * \text{Civic Trad Index 1860-1920}; R^2 = .827$$

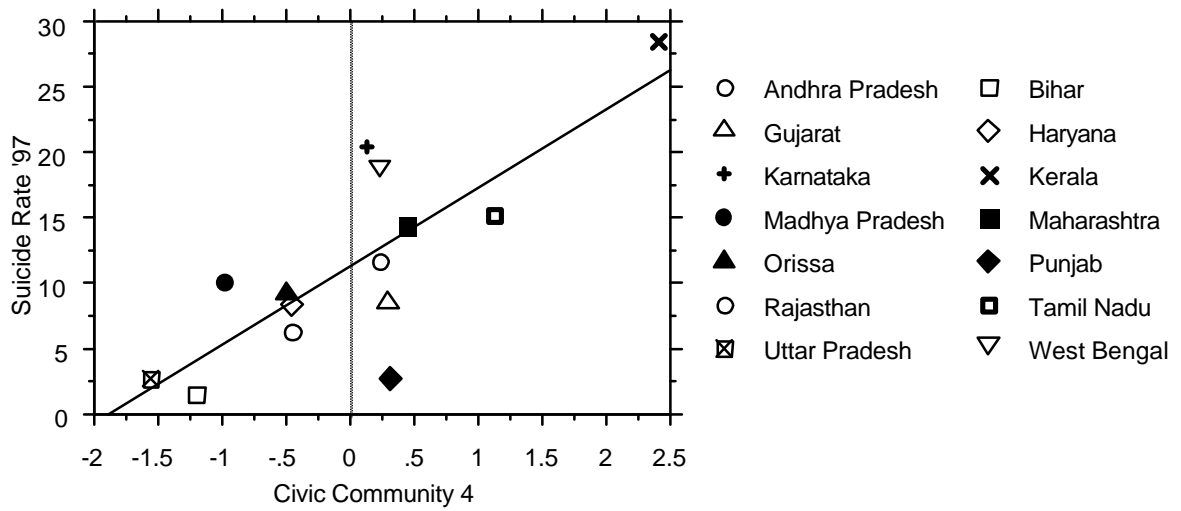
n.b. Morselli reports suicides per million.

Figure 2—Italy: Provincial Suicide Rates 1999 vs Civic Community  
Index



$$\text{Suicides 1999} = 2.452 + 6.399 * \text{Civic Comm. 1970s}; R^2 = .572$$

Figure 3— India: Civic Community Index 1990s vs Suicide Rate 1997



Suicide Rate '97 = 11.249 + 5.964 \* Civic Community 4; R<sup>2</sup> = .619

Figure 4—United States: Social Capital vs Suicide

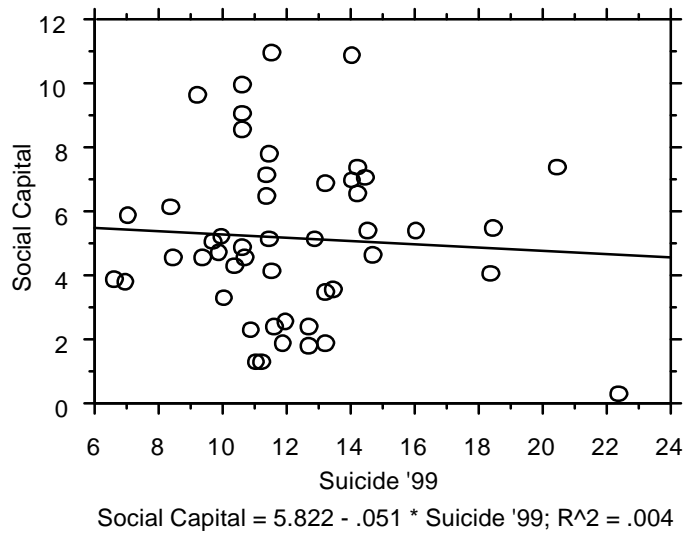
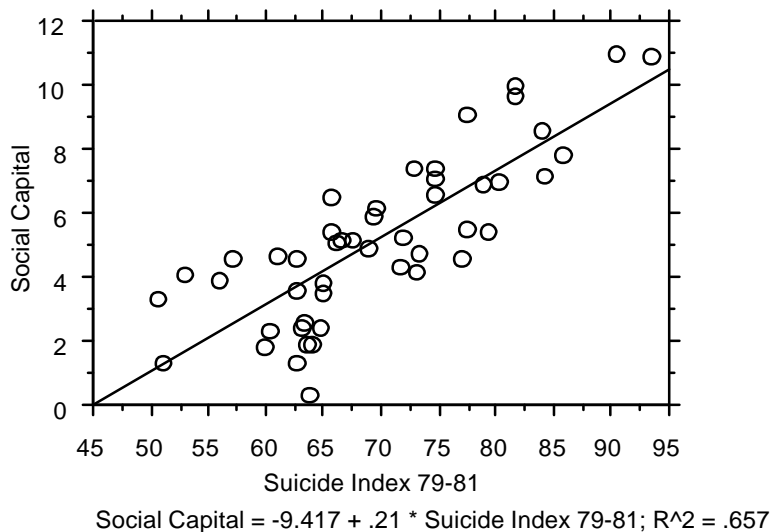


Figure 5—United States: Social Capital vs Suicides as per cent of Deaths from Intentional Injuries



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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> The choice of countries is admittedly idiosyncratic, arising out of my ongoing study of suicide in India and research building on Robert Putnam's studies of Italy and the United States. I am currently engaged in more systematic research which seeks to validate the findings reported in this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Putnam defines social capital as including 'trust, norms and networks' (Putnam 1993, p. 167)

<sup>4</sup> Halbwachs noted that the very fact that suicide rates had risen in virtually all European nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicated, in terms of the very rules Durkheim had enunciated in the Rules of Sociological Method, that this was 'a normal' and not a 'pathological' phenomenon (Halbwachs 1978, pp. 312-13).

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim identified two other social conditions which lead to elevated suicide rates in pre-industrial societies: Altruism and Fatalism. These represent extremes of integration and regulation, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Kawachi and Berkman (2000, p. 175) read this passage as a description of social capital along the lines described by Putnam. Breault (1986, p. 640) also understands social integration in terms which are very similar to those of social capital: it is 'the magnitude of people's ties or connections to one another (shared values being an important element of this)'.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson's helpful analysis of Durkheim suggests that, ultimately, egoism and anomie are identical (1965, p. 886).

<sup>8</sup> The force of Putnam's argument is somewhat weakened by data for the 1990s which show that youth suicide rates fell by 25 per cent over the decade (anon, 2004; Lubell et al., 2004 p.471).

<sup>9</sup> In this connection let us note the evidence of dense networks of association in 19<sup>th</sup> century France of which Durkheim was apparently unaware. Agulhon (1982) describes the 'great surge in popular sociability' which occurred around Toulon in the first half of the century. Zeldin notes that provincial academies and learned societies flourished during the second half of the century and that 'gardening emerges as the most popular [type of] society' (Zeldin 1977, pp. 38-9). Zeldin also summarises evidence of mass participation in organised sport (Zeldin 1977, pp. 682-696). Michelle Perrot summarises the relative weakness of trades union and political parties of the Left in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Perrot 1986). Harrison demonstrates a similar density of associational life in Mulhouse, Besançon and Lons-le-Saunier (1996). In Mulhouse in 1830, for example 'approximately fifteen percent of the adult male population belonged to one of the town's six associations' (Harrison 1996, p. 40). 'Contrary to Tocqueville's expectation, France enjoyed a flourishing spirit of civic association next to an almost complete absence of political association' (Harrison 1996, p. 46).

<sup>10</sup> Any study which utilises official statistics on suicide must accept the limitations of those data. I know of no study which has examined the reliability of Italian suicide statistics in either the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pescosolido and Mendelsohn (1986) conducted a detailed examination of U.S. suicide data and report no detectable evidence of bias arising from differences in coronial regime. My own unpublished investigation of Indian suicide data found no evidence of systematic distortion in those data.

<sup>11</sup> Putnam does not provide factor scores for each province. I have estimated these from his figures, a process which introduces a small amount of measurement error. At the risk of stating the elementary: there is, of course, a risk in an exercise such as this of engaging in the 'ecological fallacy' (Robinson 1950) which may arise from attempting to discern individual behaviour from aggregate data. Equally, though there are relatively strong associations between the variables I am exploring in this paper, correlation itself cannot establish causality.

<sup>12</sup> This relationship is explored in greater depth in my unpublished paper "An Italy of Asiatic Dimensions" What 19<sup>th</sup> Century Italy Can Tell Us About India in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.

<sup>13</sup> The data on trust in officials, which comes from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies National Election Study 1996 (Serra 2001, p. 696), is not an ideal proxy for the usual measures of trust in others, but is the best indicator which I have been able to find for India.

<sup>14</sup> Zehr used the same index to measure the relative incidence of homicide in his study of crime in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Zehr 1976). The theoretical justification for this approach rests on treating deaths from intentional injuries as poles in a single dimension of violence. Gold argues that the index allows one 'to test whether a difference in preference between [suicide and homicide] is statistically significant' (Gold 1958, p. 657). Hackney observes that 'violence in the South has three dimensions. Relative to the North, there are high rates of homicide and assault,

moderate rates of crime against property, and low rates of suicide. The relationship between homicide and suicide rates in a given group is best expressed by a suicide ratio ( $\text{SHR} = 100(\text{suicides}/(\text{suicides} + \text{homicides}))$ ) (Hackney 1969, p. 507). See also (Henry and Short 1954, Ch. VI).

There are reasonably strong associations between overall levels of total deaths from intentional injuries and civic engagement in each of the case studies. In Italy the correlation between the Index of Civic Traditions and the Total Intentional Deaths Index is very strong ( $r = .90$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). In India the correlation is also high ( $r = .74$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the USA the correlation is moderately strong—and negative ( $r = -.56$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). The positive correlations in the first two cases arise because suicide rates in those countries were/are much higher than homicide rates; the generally high level of homicide rates in the United States accounts for the negative sign in the correlation there.

Recent work on the association between low levels of serotonin in the cerebrospinal fluid and impulsive and aggressive behaviour helps explain the linkage between homicide and suicide. Nock and Marzuk conclude from their survey of the literature that 'Suicide and violence are not opposite and unrelated acts. They appear instead to be overlapping endpoints on a continuum of aggressive behaviour....Both behaviours seem to stem from a predisposition to impulsive, aggressive behaviour, which probably results from a combination of environmental, psychiatric and neurobiological factors. The relative importance of factors governing the 'vectors' of aggression (i.e. inward vs. outward) remains to be established...The data accumulating about the link between suicide and violence forces us to see suicide for what it really is, an act of aggression' (Nock and Marzuk 2000 pp. 449-450; see also Träskman-Bendz and Mann 2000).

<sup>15</sup> As in the case of the Index of Civic Tradition, I have estimated the factor scores from Putnam's figures.

<sup>16</sup> Despite its superficial resemblance to the familiar concept of 'relative deprivation' (Runciman 1966; Walker & Smith 2002), Barber's notion of 'relative misery' is actually the inverse of relative deprivation. The latter is a mechanism for describing the subjective component of collective social responses to deprivation, to explain, in Gurr's memorable title, *Why Men Rebel* (1970). Relative misery, by contrast, is a subjective individual comparison which may lead to the ultimate rejection of social life.

<sup>17</sup> Platt and Kreitman (1985) report a similar effect in their study of male suicide and unemployment in Edinburgh between 1968 and 1982. When unemployment rates first began to rise, suicide rates also increased. Later, as an increasing proportion of the population became unemployed, suicide rates fell. 'In other words, as the prevailing rate of unemployment increases, the risk of parasuicide among unemployed men, compared with their employed counterparts, decreases....We speculate that the unemployed individual considers himself less socially stigmatized and personally deviant in areas or times of high unemployment than in areas or times of low unemployment.' (Platt and Kreitman 1985, p. 121; see also Platt, et al. 1992, p. 1198). I am indebted to Bob Goldney for drawing Platt's work to my attention.

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